

Hannah Proctor

*Women on the Edge of Time: Representations of revolutionary motherhood in the NEP-era Soviet Union*

today is all grandiose domestic visions truly  
in St Petersburg now Leningrad we have communal kitchens  
the cooking is dreadful but we get to meet our friends.<sup>1</sup>

Denise Riley, *Marxism for Infants*, 1977

There can be no version of motherhood *as such* which can be  
deployed to construct a radical politics... great intricacies are wrapped  
up in the bland package labelled 'motherhood'; stubborn and delicate  
histories, wants and attributions are concealed in it.<sup>2</sup>

Denise Riley, *War in the Nursery*, 1983

**Precedents in History**

'There are no precedents in history for feminist revolution', Shulamith Firestone declared in *The Dialectic of Sex* (1970), '...there is not even a utopian feminist literature in existence'.<sup>3</sup> Firestone was explicit that the Russian revolution's failure to abolish class was linked to its failure to eliminate the family and sexual repression. Instead of looking to the past, Firestone looked to a future in which she imagined new reproductive technologies would liberate women from patriarchal oppression. But forty-five years later, despite the availability of many of the technological innovations, which Firestone foresaw, the attendant revolution in gender relations she anticipated has not come to pass. Indeed, as Nina Power argues,

[I]f contemporary capitalism had a say in it, it would probably wish that the dystopian reading of Firestone's hope for total mechanization would come true, that babies could be cheaply produced by machines and cared for by robots until such a time as they could be put to work in call centres.<sup>4</sup>

Although the failed Soviet experiment provides no precedent for feminist revolution, utopian feminist literature and artworks were produced in the post-revolutionary period that placed reproduction at the centre of the struggle to found a liberated society. As in Firestone's Promethean polemic, mechanization was celebrated in Soviet discourse, and it was hoped that machines might eventually take over many of the activities traditionally performed by women in the home. But machines were not enough: the tender care associated with maternal love was also integral to building the new communist world in the present and should persist in a reconfigured, collective form in the future. The abolition and redistribution of private property would be accompanied by an abolition and redistribution of

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private love. The revolutionary mother does not belong to a hazily imagined future but is situated in the imperfect present and as such provides a model for thinking radical social change through history. The dialectic of sex here becomes a dialectic of love whose staging ground is the maternal body.

### **Communist Coldness**

In the 1939 Hollywood film *Ninotchka*, Greta Garbo plays the eponymous heroine, a Communist Party delegate sent to Paris from Moscow to sell jewels confiscated from the Russian aristocracy. Ninotchka is rigid, serious and deeply committed to the revolution until she falls in love with a bourgeois Parisian and is gradually won over by the fashion, fun and frivolity of life in the West. This broad satire of Soviet views on sexuality and gender relations captures the pervasive Western stereotype of Soviet communism as a hyper-rationalized society devoid of pleasure, sensuality or emotional warmth. ‘Love’, Ninotchka says to her suitor matter-of-factly, ‘is a romantic designation for a most ordinary biological - or, shall we say, chemical – process’.<sup>5</sup> That such coolness, stoicism and fierce political commitment should reside in a woman is presented as particularly aberrant.

Although this satirical portrayal of Soviet attitudes to sexuality was not completely without foundation, this article will insist that love remained central to post-revolutionary discourse. A man is responsible for awakening tender feelings in Ninotchka, whereas in Soviet artworks such emotions are more likely to be stirred by a child. Representations of revolutionary motherhood provide a counterpoint to Garbo’s humourless ice maiden, suggesting that in an emancipated society love would not be destroyed but transformed.

### **Revolutionising Reproduction**

In the aftermath of the October revolution of 1917 sex was indeed reduced to a chemical act in much Soviet discourse, related to Taylorist understandings of physical energy as a quantifiable force.<sup>6</sup> A crudely materialistic understanding of libidinal economy emerged in the context of acute scarcity and privation - just as the natural resources of the earth were now in the hands of the state, so human energetic resources should be harnessed for the grand collective project of building communism. Excessive erotic exertion was thus depicted as a wasteful and selfish expenditure of energy that might be more usefully deployed in political agitation, dam building or Trade Union organisation.<sup>7</sup> Traditional romantic relationships were further condemned for their association with the oppression and objectification of women. A structurally unequal and proprietary model of love based on heterosexual lust and patriarchal

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domination could not form the basis of the new society. But though Soviet writers tended to advocate sexual abstinence in favour of chaste comradesly affection, the communist future still depended on sexual reproduction.

The two decades following the revolution witnessed huge shifts in the Soviet state's attitude to children yet, as Lisa Kirschenbaum argues, 'the happy child as icon of socialist transformation remained'.<sup>8</sup> Revolutionary baby names proliferated, accompanied by new atheistic naming ceremonies. Populating the world with 'humans called Spark, Joy, Will, Electric, Rebel and Barricade' or variations on Marx, Engels, Robespierre and Rosa Luxembourgh was an aspirational gesture, as if the very act of naming alone might bring a bright new world into being.<sup>9</sup> If children were necessary for the future of the revolution then motherhood too must be radically re-thought – but how to mother without recapitulating the oppressive gender relations of the bourgeois, patriarchal past?

Despite official proclamations of gender equality, in practice Soviet authorities and institutions were often wary to entrust women, who were associated with the superstitions and traditions of peasant life, with the task of carrying out the revolution's goals.<sup>10</sup> As Lynn Mally discusses: 'Women embodied all the problems of the past, but children were the hope of the future'.<sup>11</sup> But through state intervention in social relations and rigorous re-education, it was hoped that backward women could be dragged forwards to join the revolutionary vanguard. In the 1970s, socialist feminists campaigned for 'Wages for Housework',<sup>12</sup> whereas in the Soviet Union the dream was to abolish domestic labour almost entirely. Wendy Goldman glosses this in the following terms:

The labour that women traditionally performed in the home without monetary compensation – cooking, cleaning, washing, caring for children, the sick, and the elderly – would be transferred to the public sphere where it would be undertaken by waged workers.<sup>13</sup>

Bold utopians dreamt of the withering away of the family and the construction of a new collective existence. The institutions and relationships that form the basis for a child's upbringing were all subject to change – gender roles in the workplace, marital ceremonies, divorce laws, family structures, housing, dining, education, childcare – often contradictory ideas aimed at eviscerating old forms of everyday life challenged every aspect of quotidian existence.

But these sweeping transformations could come about neither immediately nor painlessly. The period of the New Economic Period or NEP (1921-1928) saw the reintroduction of certain forms of private enterprise into the Soviet economy following the

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Civil War (1917-1921). Capitalist forms chafed uncomfortably against communist ideals. NEP was a period of retreat from the bolder policies enacted under War Communism. Though visions of a radically different future continued to circulate, their full realisation was indefinitely deferred. The future still glowed but on an ever-receding horizon.

### **Giving Ideology a Collective Body**

In *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*, his far-reaching survey of Soviet sexual mores in the 1920s, Eric Naiman argues that the NEP period was characterized by anxiety. For Naiman, War Communism, despite its harsh realities, was retroactively envisaged as a period of political purity and unity, unsullied by corrupt bourgeois elements. In a reversal of the Marxist-Leninist trajectory of dialectical historical progression, Naiman's focus is on nostalgia for a lost past rather than yearning for a harmonized future. As such, he takes the anachronistic figure of the anorexic from a 1990s American context and inserts her into the NEP moment. The anorexic is a regressive figure, which Naiman deploys as an 'analytical tool' to personify a trope in NEP discourse in response to the early Soviet obsession with 'giving ideology a collective body'.<sup>14</sup> The archetypal anorexic Naiman discusses is an adolescent who desires to return to the innocence of childhood (War Communism), resisting development by intervening in the maturation processes of her own body.

But Soviet nostalgia for War Communism, though directed backwards into the recent past, was still addressed to an unrealised future. The figure of the revolutionary mother provides an alternative, more hopeful personification of the anxieties of the NEP-era identified by Naiman. Like the anorexic she too is poised between past and future, but she faces forwards rather than backwards. By collectively raising children outside of the nuclear family she intervenes in the existing state of things. For Naiman, the collective body of NEP society enacted an 'ascetic purge of its basic functions... The body was the staging ground for an assault against the temporal cycles of unexceptional, everyday life (*byt*)'.<sup>15</sup> But the maternal body staged this assault by harnessing the basic functions of the (female) body. Sexual reproduction, aided by shifts in social reproduction, was counter-intuitively re-imagined as a means of breaking with cyclical temporalities, inaugurating an exceptional new mode of everyday life.

If the image of the child functioned as a pure emblem of the future, then the position of the revolutionary mother was more ambivalent, reflecting what Elizabeth A. Wood describes as a 'rhetorical and institutional ambivalence as to whether female citizens were

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fundamentally the same as males or different from them'.<sup>16</sup> Jenny Kaminer analyses the abandoning mother who succeeds in abolishing 'maternal attachment to biological children' as a post-revolutionary role model.<sup>17</sup> Kaminer suggests that Soviet women would ideally cast off their 'feminine' attributes to become more like men. By framing 'motherly sentiment as an obstruction to socialist progress', Kaminer describes an attack on maternal sentiment as such.<sup>18</sup> But the elimination of motherly attachment to one's own children did not spell the total evisceration of all qualities traditionally associated with women's nurturing capacities. Revolutionary maternal love had a positive, affective dimension that provided an alternative to sexual love.

In her discussion of Soviet gender policy in the aftermath of the revolution, Elizabeth Waters argues that: 'In a society living under extraordinary pressure, in constant flux, the sense of continuity offered by the maternal image, its suggestion of intimacy and solace, had therapeutic possibilities'.<sup>19</sup> But, though intimacy and solace were still associated with mothering, the maternal image signalled rupture not continuity. Though connected to the past, the revolutionary mother is a radical figure. NEP-era representations of revolutionary motherhood suggest that the past was not only a site of lost opportunities to be mourned and corrupt traditions to be erased, but also emerged as a resource to be mined for explosive materials that would drive history forwards.

This article will follow Kaminer in considering the figure of the revolutionary mother as a recurring motif across genres, discussing four artworks of the NEP-period that depict revolutionary mothers: Alexandra Kollontai's propagandistic novella *Vasilisa Malygina* (1923), Abram Room's film *Bed and Sofa* (1927), Sergei Tret'iakov's modernist play *I Want a Baby!* (1926) and Fyodor Gladkov's seminal novel *Cement* (1925). These four works are frequently cited examples of NEP-era attitudes to gender relations but where most accounts of post-revolutionary motherhood discuss new forms of mothering, this paper will concentrate on its emotional content. By focusing on ambivalent depictions of a persistent maternal impulse, I hope to provide a new way of thinking the revolutionary mother as a dialectical figure whose link to the past paradoxically gave her privileged access to the communist future.

### **Single Mothers of the Collective Future**

Alexandra Kollontai was a prominent Bolshevik politician in the years immediately following the revolution. She was appointed People's Commissar for Social Welfare and was responsible for founding the Women's Section (*Zhenotdel*). In the early 1920s she had become

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active in the Workers' Opposition. By 1923 she had been appointed Soviet ambassador to Norway and remained a peripheral figure employed in diplomatic posts overseas until her death in 1952.

Kollontai's writings on love and gender relations proved extremely controversial. She was publicly attacked for advocating 'free love' and encouraging promiscuity, a slightly misleading accusation given that her ideal model of human interaction - 'winged Eros' - involving 'joyful unity and comradeship' with collective work taking the place of lust.<sup>20</sup> During the NEP period, she published various propagandistic novels and stories. Her communist heroine Vasilisa Malygina is introduced in the following manner:

Vasilisa was a working girl of twenty-eight, employed in a knitter's workshop. She was a real city girl, thin and under-nourished looking, with curly hair that had been cropped after a typhus attack. In her plain Russian blouse and with her flat chest you might, from a distance, have taken her for a boy. She wasn't exactly pretty but she did have the most wonderful, perceptive brown eyes: just to look into those tender eyes of hers made people feel more cheerful. Vasilisa was a communist.<sup>21</sup>

Vasilisa is an idealized revolutionary heroine whose abdication of food, sleep and comfort signifies her unwavering commitment to the revolution. Her energy seems to be drawn from her political convictions alone. Although Vasilisa has had a number of lovers, she is not particularly interested in sex and early in the novel infuriates her NEP-man lover by falling asleep while he is making love to her as she is so worn out from political activity. Her ragged masculine appearance and political commitment is in stark contrast to her bourgeois romantic rival whose voluptuous body is covered not only in jewels, perfume and silks but also sheathed in luxurious folds of fat; 'a beautiful woman with pouting lips and full breasts', who conforms to the gendered erotic stereotypes Vasilisa resists.<sup>22</sup> As the novel's introductory passage makes clear Vasilisa is not cold or emotionless but caring and gentle. She is not identical to Garbo's chilly Ninotchka but friendly, observant and thoughtful. Furthermore, though committed to the revolution's modernizing project Vasilisa retains a connection to the natural world, experiencing a political epiphany among the industrious 'worker bees' of her garden. Vasilisa forgoes individual love but far from signalling the destruction of her emotional life, the new collective love that emerges in its place represents a deeper and more meaningful form of emotional attachment.

At the end of the novel our spirited heroine, who has just recently chosen to divorce her husband, discovers that she is pregnant. When asked by a friend if she will have an abortion to avoid raising the child alone Vasilisa replies:

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- What do you mean I'm all on my own? Everything will be arranged perfectly, and we'll set up a crèche. In fact, I thought of asking you to help us run the crèche. I know how you love children. And soon there'll be a new baby, for all of us.
- A communist baby!
- Precisely so!
- They both laughed.<sup>23</sup>

Though sex itself is portrayed as both frivolous and oppressive, women are presented as being emancipated through bearing children. Beyond marriage and the family, bearing a child emerges as the ultimate contribution to the revolutionary future. It also affords new kinds of meaningful sociality in the present.

Abram Room's 1927 film *Bed and Sofa*, viewed by almost a million Soviet citizens upon its release, has a similar conclusion.<sup>24</sup> The film's Russian title *No. 3 Meshchanskaya Street* literally translates as *No. 3 Petty Bourgeois Street*, clearly establishing the class position of the film's protagonists. Room introduces Liuda and her husband Kolya in their cramped apartment in Moscow, the cluttered interior of which is almost a character in its own right. Kolya's friend Volodia arrives in Moscow and, unable to find accommodation due to the ongoing housing crisis, Kolya invites him to live on their sofa. Volodia treats Liuda with more respect than does her husband and they embark on an affair. Kolya is initially horrified but eventually reconciles with them, taking Volodia's place on the sofa. But now both men neglect her. She is shown sitting sullenly in a corner of the tiny apartment while the men play drafts and joke together, only addressed when they demand that she bring them tea.

Liuda eventually discovers that she is pregnant and unsure who the father is, the men insist that she have an abortion, legal in the Soviet Union since 1920. While waiting at the clinic she notices a baby below the window. Overcome with emotion, she rushes from the waiting room, scribbling a farewell note to the men before setting off alone on a train, presumably intending to raise the baby without them. The train – that archetypal symbol of progressive Soviet modernity – hurtles forwards and she gazes into the distance happily. The two men are shown in the domestic space left to perform the chores that she has undertaken for them throughout the film.

Liuda is associated throughout with the drudgery and tedium of the claustrophobic domestic interior. Kolya, meanwhile, works as a builder on the roof of the Bolshoi Theatre, at the geographic and symbolic heart of Moscow, overlooking Red Square. He is shown to participate in the most literal sense in the construction of the new Soviet polity. Volodya acts as Liuda's conduit to the swiftly transforming social world: first he brings a radio into

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apartment and later takes her on a trip in an aeroplane – the first time we see her outside the cramped confines of the apartment. The flight affords her a giddy, panoramic view of the city below, a glimpse of a modern, technologized and unfettered life outside the home.

Both Kollontai and Room's depictions of motherhood rely not only on assumptions about women's childbearing capacities but also about their emotional lives. The turning point in *Bed and Sofa* comes when Liuda sees the baby below the clinic's window. Her caring impulses were spurned by men but the child might give them another outlet. Love is not abolished but redirected, not only from man to child but from the private to the public – the individual child, who she will raise outside of a traditional family, functions as a conduit to the collective future.

The female protagonists of these narratives are poised between times; their children remain incorporeal, like communism itself. The physical experience of pregnancy and childbirth are similarly absent, detaching motherhood from the messy present-tense materiality of both the body and the domestic sphere. Although the desire to have a child is presented as a biologically rooted female yearning, pregnancy seems to occupy the mind rather than the womb, functioning as a kind of transcendent link to the future. *Bed and Sofa's* final shot pans up from the train tracks to the bright yet empty sky. It is not clear what awaits her.

### **Maternal Montage**

Room was also slated to direct a film version of Sergei Tret'iakov's 1926 play *I Want a Baby!*<sup>25</sup> *Vasilisa Malbygina* and *Bed and Sofa* suggest that the revolutionary mother travels in a straight line from the past into the future, whereas Tretia'kov's play stages the contradictions of the NEP-era without attempting to resolve them. The revolutionary mother here emerges as an over-determined figure;<sup>26</sup> she does not journey between times, times converge in and flow from her. This is consistent with the realities of NEP Russia, where the space of the present was occupied by past and future simultaneously. Dorothy Thompson, who visited the Soviet Union in the late 1920s described the confusing co-existence of the 'broad-hipped and strong shouldered' women depicted in propaganda images with delicate ballerinas on the stages of the Bolshoi and silk stocking clad young women imitating the latest Parisian fashions on the city's pavements.<sup>27</sup>

Tret'iakov, associated with the revolutionary avant-garde, was attentive to this hybrid environment, constructing his play according to the principles of montage.<sup>28</sup> *I Want a Baby!*

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Satirically presents an array of archetypal NEP-era figures embodying contrasting positions on gender, sexuality and procreation, with the intention of provoking discussion. The play was banned before its premiere but was set to open in Moscow in a production directed by Vsevolod Meyerhold. Tret'iakov proclaimed his intention was to 'place love on the operating table',<sup>29</sup> casting the audience in the active role of the surgeon dissecting, examining and operating on the open wounds of Soviet society. The play not only relied on the juxtaposition of disparate elements on stage but Tret'iakov also aimed to create a dialectical relation between artwork and audience: 'one that begins on the aesthetic trampoline of the stage and unfolds in a spiral, winding its way through the audience's arguments and through their extra-theatrical experience'.<sup>30</sup> El Lissitzky's set design included a spiral staircase, similarly referencing the dialectical intentions of the work.<sup>31</sup> As Vladimir Ilyich Lenin observed in his notes on dialectics, first published in the Soviet Union in 1925: 'Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral'.<sup>32</sup>

The play's protagonist is Milda, a Latvian Communist Party activist who, like Liuda, lives in an overcrowded block of flats in Moscow. Like Kollontai's Vasilisa Malygina, her masculine appearance and disdain for sexuality stands in stark contrast to the play's other female characters. Milda first enters upstage and is initially mistaken for a man. But though she is too preoccupied with political activities to be distracted by romance, she is suddenly overcome with the desire to have a baby. To avoid the trappings of married life she decides to find the perfect proletarian specimen to father her child.<sup>33</sup>

Tret'iakov's presentation of these provocative views is ambivalent, an ambivalence served by the play's modernist formal structure. Through dramatically juxtaposing the imperfect present with the imagined future, the play explores fears that communism might spell the end of romantic love, emotional attachment and sexual enjoyment whilst simultaneously pointing to the positive implications of a world in which women are liberated from male lechery and domestic drudgery, and children are cared for by all of society.

The play is addressed to the transitional reality of the NEP-era, a period of disjunction and paradox. Tret'iakov's committed communist characters' utopian visions are constantly undermined by the disorderly realities of the present. Although Milda presents sex as a rational enterprise that might one day be replaced by artificial insemination, when she does attempt to get herself impregnated the creaking springs of her old bed can be heard throughout the building. Her shocked neighbours press their ears against the door exclaiming:

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‘The Bolsheviks are copulating!’<sup>34</sup> Sweat, rust and heavy breathing – despite Milda’s cold and elaborate conceptual framework, it turns out that in practice Bolshevik copulation is not very easy to distinguish from any other kind.

The play suggests, however, that these collisions in the present might be necessary to propel history forwards. Milda, like Vasilisa, hopes to raise her baby collectively, and resolves to have no involvement with the father after conception. She foresees the complete transformation of domestic life: ‘Give it a few years...The days of primus stoves and poky little rooms will be long gone...The concept of the housewife will be outmoded. People will have relaxed. There’ll be a nursery’.<sup>35</sup> Her reference to relaxation here hints at the affective dimension of these transformations in social reproduction.

*I Want a Baby!* stages a dialectical tension between warmth and coldness, present and future, emotion and rationality. At first glance it might seem that Tret’iakov is hoping that the former will be straightforwardly succeeded by the latter but the play’s genuinely dialectical structure insists that the process of sublation (*Aufhebung*) transforms each previous stage without abolishing it. This is central to Tret’iakov’s theoretical approach. His ‘aesthetic machine’ is directed at the emotional experience of the audience. He insisted that a successful theatrical attraction would ‘charge’ the spectator’s feelings like a battery.<sup>36</sup> The form may be mechanical but the content remains affective.

The other major dichotomy in the play, one that the other binaries can be mapped on to, is, of course, between masculinity and femininity. The play opens with a group of workers rehearsing a play about the emancipation of women: a ‘plastic symphony’ set in a ‘dream grotto’ which climaxes with an image of a woman in a Bacchic pose clutching the ‘flowers of emancipation’ as they turn red.<sup>37</sup> But this mystical sylvan scene, aligning women with nature, is constantly interrupted by rough workmen discussing soldering irons and loudly dropping bits of the set. A conversation between Milda and a male comrade who has suggested that women enjoy receiving flowers demonstrates how the distinction between the mechanical and emotional is tied to the traditional gender roles that Milda is rejecting:

Snifter: You don’t like nature, then? Mountains, waterfalls, wild places?

Milda: I love it when there’s a turbine on the waterfall, mines in the mountains and sawmills in the wild woods, and regular plantations.

Snifter: But surely people’s solidarity grows out of people’s elemental affinity with each other. You can’t not be an egoist.

Milda: There’s no such thing as human solidarity. There are well-equipped factories. A correctly laid-out day. A network of military posts. A precise railway timetable and a truly charted course to socialism.

Snifter: And what about the soul? The tenderest, most intimate things in the human soul?

Milda: Aren't you ashamed of yourself, a biologist, to come out with such rose-tinted rubbish about the soul?<sup>38</sup>

Here Tret'iakov's presentation of Milda's worldview coincides almost exactly with the Hollywood script for *Ninotchka*. The concerns are similar: that communism might entail a crushing of meaningful human emotional connections, that the emancipation of women might drain them of the caring qualities traditionally associated with femininity. But Tret'iakov certainly does not suggest that capitalism is the solution. Instead, he proposes that the soul must somehow be collectivized.

Unlike Kollontai's earnest propagandistic presentation of Vasilisa Malygina, Milda's rationalism is satirised. When she explains matter-of-factly that she only wants her potential impregnator's 'spermatoza' and presents him with a contract, he is bewildered and politely declines her advances. Exasperated, she disappears behind a curtain and re-emerges in lipstick and other feminine attire: perfume, stockings, and a delicate dress. She reluctantly performs a perfunctory ritual of seduction, which proves immediately effective, a concession to the constraints of the situation that still demand some element of heteronormative arousal. The rituals might be entirely artificial and performative – as Milda states they can easily be procured 'at the perfume shop, at the hairdresser's' - but that does not mean they can be immediately disposed of.<sup>39</sup>

Art historian Christina Kiaer, whose *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* concludes with a detailed reading of the play, argues that Tret'iakov's presentation of Milda's desire to have a baby conforms with her rational attitudes to sex, that industrial production provides the model for her understanding of biological reproduction: 'her body a well-equipped factory, her breasts providing adequate raw materials'.<sup>40</sup> Kiaer declares that Tret'iakov 'does not resort to traditional gendered assumptions about women's natural longing for motherhood, but rather invokes the powerful rhetoric of production'.<sup>41</sup> But though Milda justifies her decision in these terms, the moment she decides to bear a child is more jarring. It is presented as a sudden emotional impulse: 'I can't bear it. I can't get on with my work. I want a baby!'<sup>42</sup> The declaration bursts through her steely façade almost like a religious epiphany, suggesting that she harbours a deep, visceral longing to bear children. As she remarks again later in the play: 'What can happen to a woman is that something seems to take her by the throat, so strongly that even the work she's supposed to be doing starts to go by the board'.<sup>43</sup> Milda may be able to rationalize and technologize the external world but her

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body still ties her to nature and the impulsive, though masculine in appearance and behaviour she is still emphatically female.<sup>44</sup>

But the intrusion of the past into the present has a revolutionary force here. Milda consciously performs her femininity to seduce a man but this is a means to an end, she quickly reverts to her previous mode of dress. The brief intrusion of a physical maternal impulse is similarly propulsive. Tret'iakov points to the radical transformation of gender roles and appearances in the future and this extends beyond cultural forms to natural drives. Gender does have a biological dimension for Tret'iakov but, in line with contemporary Soviet scientific understandings of nature as dialectical and historically contingent, it is not necessarily essential or immutable.

For Tret'iakov, the emancipation of women is two-fold: not only should oppressive gender relations be overthrown but the positive traits traditionally associated with women must be retained. Indeed, they are precisely what might liberate women from rigidly defined gender roles altogether. The mechanical should not replace the emotional but combine with it to form a qualitatively new humanity. In a world no longer governed by traditional patriarchal or capitalist relations positive 'feminine' traits would no longer be the preserve of one half of the population but, like all forms of property and wealth, be redistributed equally throughout society.

### **Dialectic within Herself**

Walter Benjamin spent the winter of 1926-27 in Moscow. His 1934 essay 'The Author as Producer' was indebted to Tret'iakov, who gave a series of lectures in Berlin in the early 1930s.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin witnessed the contradictions of the NEP-era on the snowy streets of the Soviet capital. He described 'time catastrophes, time collisions... [that] make each hour superabundant, each day exhausting, each life a moment'.<sup>46</sup> His impressions of the city describe bright posters on the sides of buses and avant-garde plays on the stages at the Moscow Arts Theatre at odds with a city cluttered with peasant wares, wooden dwellings and shabbily dressed inhabitants.<sup>47</sup>

During his stay, Benjamin wrote a review of Fyodor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925), which he praises for demonstrating the historical contingency of love and gender relations. The novel describes Civil War hero Gleb returning home to discover his wife Dasha transformed by her experiences of the revolution into a hardened red-kerchiefed Bolshevik activist, 'cold as crystal'.<sup>48</sup> Dasha refuses her husband's advances and insists he treat her as an equal, a

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comrade. But despite her strength and commitment, her steeliness comes at a cost. She retains a deep connection to her young daughter Nurka who now lives in a communal children's home. When Dasha visits her child, Gleb observes her old self return – ‘the same tenderness, the same tears in her eyes, the same musical voice with the wistful quaver in it’.<sup>49</sup> Again, a maternal instinct persists. Dasha struggles to leave Nurka in the home but does so for the revolutionary cause.

Drawing on Katerina Clark's seminal discussion of the socialist realist novel *History as Ritual*, Thea Margaret Durfee, Jenny Kaminer and Eric Laursen all analyse Dasha's transformation in the novel in terms of a transition from spontaneity to consciousness. According to Clark, the heroic protagonist of the archetypal socialist realist novel embodies the Marxist-Leninist account of history. Subjective transformation is central to the socialist realist master plot, which Clark aligns with the dialectic between spontaneity (*stikhiinost'*) and consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*) famously outlined by Lenin in *What is to be Done?*

The great historical drama of struggle between the forces of spontaneity and the forces of consciousness is unfolded in a tale of the way one individual mastered his wilful self, became disciplined, and attained to an extra personal identity... the hero achieved greater harmony within himself and in relation to his society.<sup>50</sup>

In Lenin's linear model the chaotic eruption (spontaneity) is eventually succeeded by organization, regularity and coherence (consciousness). Clark herself, focusing on the male protagonist of the novel, does not read *Cement* in these terms, declaring that the anarchic forces of spontaneity remain untamed at the novel's conclusion. The hero, she claims, ‘has not really resolved the dialectic within himself’.<sup>51</sup> Focusing on Dasha, however, Durfee, Kaminer and Laursen identify the characteristic features of Lenin's model of political transformation. They argue that by the end of the novel Dasha has banished her maternal and sexual instincts, completely relinquishing her former self.

The death of Dasha's child Nurka is crucial to this process of transition. Witnessing the escalating illness of her dying child, Dasha ‘suffered intolerable anguish, but she hid it deep within herself’.<sup>52</sup> When Nurka finally dies Dasha's ties to the past die with her:

Then Nurka disappeared, dissolved into her blood with the rest of the past; and when one day Dasha was being marched up to the noose of death, it was without thinking of Nurka, who appeared at the last moment like a faraway ghost... Nurka was her life's sacrifice’.<sup>53</sup>

For Durfee, this represents Dasha's shift in role from mother to an individual child to ‘mother to all children, even to the cosmos itself’.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Laursen claims that it is only

after Nurka's death that Dasha is able to overcome her own personal desires: 'Now Dasha carries "within herself", not a physical child, but words that will give birth to a new world for all children'.<sup>55</sup> By the end of the novel Dasha berates a female comrade for showing too much emotion – 'our hearts must be of stone' - implying that her soft and warm maternal self has indeed been superseded.<sup>56</sup>

Benjamin is also critical of the novel's neat and forced utopian resolution: 'The vision of the sea and mountains closes off the horizon in a false idyll'.<sup>57</sup> But he discerns in the portrayal of the relationship between Gleb and Dasha the glimpse of a 'great work of literature' with genuine political potential.<sup>58</sup> For Benjamin, the dialectic of the novel should not be falsely resolved in the manner implied by the Leninist model; spontaneity and consciousness continue to coexist. This tension can be discerned even in Gladkov's text. When Dasha informs Gleb that their daughter has died, Gladkov writes that 'she looked at him with bright, profound eyes, in which he saw fever and a tortured cry. She stood before him, calm as usual, tranquil and preoccupied'.<sup>59</sup> Though calm, Dasha is not like a stone; flickers of emotion persist. The narrative culminates with the triumphant reopening of a factory destroyed by the war. Dasha turns to her husband-comrade and says:

The old life has perished and will not return. We must build up a new life... Love will always be love, Gleb, but it requires a new form. Everything will come through and attain new forms, and then we shall know how to forge new links.<sup>60</sup>

Love has not been eradicated but transformed. This transformation may be dialectical but it does not conform to the neatly reconciled resolution identified by Durfee, Kaminer and Laursen.

Benjamin discerned in *Cement* the outlines of a society of emancipated women, which would have dramatic implications for the meaning of gender:

If the forces of command and domination really become feminine, this will bring about change in those forces, in the age, and even in the Feminine itself. Moreover, it does not mean a change into a vague humanity in general, but will present us with a new, more mysterious countenance, a political enigma, a sphinx-like expression, compared to which all the old secrets of the boudoir are no more than outworn riddles.<sup>61</sup>

As threshold creatures like the sphinx, which guards the gates of the city, the revolutionary mother prefigures the 'mysterious countenance' Benjamin describes. Benjamin detaches femininity from particular human bodies and then transforms its very definition.

What we are left with is unclear, but like those fictional Soviet women venturing into the unknown future, pregnant with hope.

### Conclusion

Unlike the orthodox Marxist-Leninist understanding of the dialectic, for Benjamin, a dialectical materialist approach to history intends to ‘overcome the ideology of progress’.<sup>62</sup> The Benjaminian dialectic is aligned with spontaneity; it is sudden and eruptive: ‘The compelling - the drastic experience, which refutes everything “gradual” about becoming and shows all seeming “development” to be dialectical reversal’.<sup>63</sup> He describes the dialectical image or ‘object constructed in the materialist presentation of history’ as a ‘constellation saturated with tensions’<sup>64</sup> which one translator renders as ‘pregnant with tensions’.<sup>65</sup> The NEP-era revolutionary mother could be considered as such a dialectical image –she embodies the contradictory realities and ‘time collisions’ of the NEP-era and complicates the dominant Soviet understanding of linear historical progression towards a moment of final reconciliation.

Benjamin claims that detecting oppositions in the past is only the beginning for the historian committed to political transformation in the present:

It is very easy to establish oppositions, according to determinate points of view, within the various “fields” of any epoch, such that on one side lies the “productive”, “forward-looking,” “lively,” “positive” part of the epoch, and on the other side the abortive, retrograde, and obsolescent.<sup>66</sup>

The dialectical materialist must also transform these elements through negation:

It is therefore of decisive importance that anew partition be applied to this initially excluded, negative component so that, by a displacement of the angle of vision (but not of the criteria!), a positive element emerges anew in it too—something different from that previously signified.<sup>67</sup>

The NEP-era representations of revolutionary motherhood discussed here demonstrate that the easily detected oppositions of the period can only be understood dialectically. Though women were assumed to be a retrograde force, it was hoped that their supposedly counter-revolutionary tendencies could be dialectically converted to form the basis of a new emancipated society.

Of course, such a society did not come to pass. By the time *Ninotchka* was released in 1939 the Soviet image of woman had shifted. Garbo’s thin, austere, independent and childless Ninotchka was anachronistic, as Stalin consolidated his power in the 1930s, traditional family

structures were celebrated once more, and many of the country's more radical legal reforms were reversed. The child returned to the bosom of the family (and pendulous bosoms returned to the torsos of Soviet representations of women). Women remained integral to the industrial workforce but were also expected to perform the bulk of domestic duties in the home. Vera Mukhina's iconic steel statue *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* topped the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris. The man grasps the nation's hammer, the woman holds the sickle, clearly aligning men with industry and women with agriculture and upholding a neat culture/nature binary that would dominate Soviet socialist realist imagery for decades to come.

History provides no blueprints for the future. But the figure of the revolutionary mother suggests that radical social transformation can occur through engaging with and transforming the past. For Benjamin, the historian is responsible for fanning the spark of hope in the past. The scattered embers of hope that glow faintly in history might burn anew - the world would be infused with a new kind of warmth and the fire would burn so brightly that it would not only illuminate the oppressive structures around us but burn them to the ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, D. 1977. *Marxism for Infants*. Cambridge; Street Editions, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Riley, D. 1983. *War in the Nursery: Theories of the Child and Mother*. London; Virago, p.196.

<sup>3</sup> Firestone, S. 1970. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York, NY; William Morrow and Co., pp.226-227.

<sup>4</sup> Power, N. 2010. 'Toward a Cybernetic Communism: The Technology of the Anti-Family'. In: Merck, M. and Sandford, S. eds. *Further Adventures of the Dialectic of Sex: Critical Essays on Shulamith Firestone*. London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.143-162, p.158

<sup>5</sup> Ninochka. 1939. Film. Directed by Ernst Lubisch. USA, MGM.

<sup>6</sup> I discuss this in detail in the essay Reason Displaces All Love: Libidinal Economizing in the NEP-era Soviet Union, *The New Inquiry*, February 2014 - <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/reason-displaces-all-love/> (Accessed January 23<sup>rd</sup> 2015). For discussions of Soviet sexuality in the NEP-era see: Bernstein, F. L. 2007. *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses*. DeKalb, IL; Northern Illinois University Press; Healey, D. 2009. *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and Courtroom, 1917-1939*. DeKalb, IL; Northern Illinois University Press; and Naiman, E. 1997. *Sex in Public: the Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Zalkind, A. 1925. *Revolutsiia i molodezh': sbornik statei* [Revolution and Youth: Collection of Articles] Moscow; Izdanie Kommunisticheskogo universiteta imeni Sverdlova.

<sup>8</sup> Kirschenbaum, L. A. 2001. *Small Comrades: Revolutionizing Childhood in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932*. London: Routledge Falmer, p.163.

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<sup>9</sup> Stites, R. 1989. *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*. Oxford; Oxford University Press, pp.111-112.

<sup>10</sup> According to Elizabeth A. Wood in the immediate aftermath there was ‘a widespread belief that women were more backward, more religious and more superstitious than men and hence in need of particular tutelage’. Wood, E. A. 1978. *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p.5. On Soviet legislation and rhetoric and its impact on women, see: Stites, R. 1978. *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press.

<sup>11</sup> Mally, L. 1990. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Berkeley, CA; University of California Press, p.180. In her analysis of the gender attitudes of the Young Communist League (*Komsomol*) Anne E. Gorusch similarly claims: ‘women were thought to embody the dangers of a reactionary past’, Gorusch, A. E. 1996. “A Woman is Not a Man”: The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921-1928, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Autumn, 1996), 636-660.

<sup>12</sup> Western European and American second wave feminists were well aware of these early experiments and of the eventual failure of state socialism to liberate women in practice. See, for example: Rich, A. 1976. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York, NY; WW Norton, pp.54-55 and Rowbotham, S. 1973. Alexandra Kollontai: Women’s Liberation and Revolutionary Love, *Spokesman Offprints*, No. 1, 27-32.

<sup>13</sup> Goldman, W. Z. 2002. *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin’s Russia*. Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, p. 272. My understanding of social reproduction in this essay is drawn primarily from the work of Lise Vogel, who builds on Marx’s fleeting use of the term and also offers a detailed theoretical appraisal of early Soviet discussions on the question of women’s liberation. See: Vogel, L. 1983. *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*. New Brunswick, N.J.; Rutgers University Press.

<sup>14</sup> Naiman, E. 1997. *Sex in Public: the Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology*. Princeton, NJ; Princeton University Press, p.221.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p.224.

<sup>16</sup> Wood, E. A. 1978. *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p.5.

<sup>17</sup> Kaminer, J. 2014. *Women with a Thirst for Destruction: The Bad Mother in Russian Culture*. Evanston, IL; Northwestern University Press, p.73.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.64. Kaminer does declare that ‘maternal sentiment must be eliminated or enlightened, redirected or reimagined’ (2014, p.65) but in practice her argument assumes that redirection and re-imagination are synonymous with elimination.

<sup>19</sup> Waters, E. 1992. The Modernisation of Russian Motherhood, 1917-1937, *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (1992), 123-135, 124.

<sup>20</sup> Kollontai, A. 1980. Make Way for Winged Eros: A Letter to Working Youth. In: *Selected Writings*, trans by Alix Holt, New York, NY; WW Norton & Co, pp. 276-292.

<sup>21</sup> Kollontai, 1977. Vasilisa Malygina. In: *Love of the Worker Bees*, trans by Cathy Porter, Virago; London, pp. 21-181, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 53

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p. 181.

<sup>24</sup> On the film's ambivalent reception see: Attwood, L. 1993. Women, Cinema and Society. In: Attwood, L. ed., *Red Women on the Silver Screen: Soviet Women and Cinema from the Beginning to the End of the Communist Era*. London; Pandora Press, pp. 19-132, pp. 46-49.

<sup>25</sup> Kiaer, C. 2005. *Imagine No Possessions: the Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, p.304.

<sup>26</sup> I am here relying on Louis Althusser's discussion of over determination (which he borrows from Freud) as a dialectical concept that surpasses the Hegelian, Marxist and Leninist versions of the dialectic in its capacity for accommodating simultaneous contradictions. See: Althusser, L. 1969. *For Marx*. New York Pantheon Books.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, D. 1928. *The New Russia*. New York, Henry Holt, p.264.

<sup>28</sup> Tret'iakov collaborated with the Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein in 1923 at the First People's Theatre of the Moscow Protokul't. They developed some of the techniques that would have formed the basis of the performance of *I Want a Baby!* A useful theoretical outline of his approach is given in this 1924 essay: Tret'iakov, S. 2006. The Theater of Attractions, trans. by Kristin Romberg, *October*, Vol. 118, Soviet Factography (Fall), 19-26. For a discussion of the play's aesthetics see: Fore, D. 2012. *Realism After Modernism*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, pp. 141-147.

<sup>29</sup> Tret'iakov, 'Chto pishat dramaturgii' (1929) cited in Kiaer, C. 2005. *Imagine No Possessions: the Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, p. 246.

<sup>30</sup> From a 1927 interview quoted by A Fevral'skii in 'S.M. Tret'iakov v teatre Meierkhol'da' in S Tret'iakov, Slyshish', Moskva?! (Moscow; Issustvo, 1966), p. 198, pp. 186-206, cited in Naiman, pp. 110-111.

<sup>31</sup> Kiaer, C. 2005. *Imagine No Possessions: the Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, p. 261.

<sup>32</sup> Lenin, V. I. 1925. On the Question of Dialectics <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1914/cons-logic/summary.htm> (Accessed January 20th 2015).

<sup>33</sup> A detailed consideration of the eugenic discourses mobilized in the play is beyond the scope of this essay. For further discussion of this important theme see: Kiaer, C. 2006. Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tret'iakov's *I Want a Child!* In: Kiaer, C. and Naiman, E. eds. *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, pp. 183-216; and Smith, A. 2011. Reconfiguring Utopian Vision: Tret'iakov's Play *I Want a Baby!* (1926) as a Response to the Revolutionary Restructuring of Everyday Life', *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, Vol. 25, Nos. 1-2. On the fate of eugenics in the Soviet Union see: Kevles, D. J. 1985. *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity*, New York, NY; Alfred A Knopf. For a useful comparative discussion of eugenics, see: Graham, L. R. 1977. Science and Values: The Eugenics Movement in Germany and Russia in the 1920s, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 82, No. 5, 1133-1164.

<sup>34</sup> Tret'iakov, S. M. 1995. *I Want a Baby!* trans. by Holland, S. Ed. by Leach, R. Birmingham; University of Birmingham Press, p. 78.

<sup>35</sup> Tret'iakov, *I Want a Baby!* p. 63.

<sup>36</sup> Tret'iakov, 'Theatre of Attractions', p. 24.

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- <sup>37</sup> Tret'iakov, *I Want a Baby!* p. 8.
- <sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 20.
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid, p. 77.
- <sup>40</sup> Kiaer, C. 2005. *Imagine No Possessions: the Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*. Cambridge, MA; MIT Press, p. 249.
- <sup>41</sup> Kiaer, C. 2006. Delivered from Capitalism: Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of Reproduction in Tret'iakov's *I Want a Child!* In: Kiaer, C. and Naiman, E. eds. *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, p. 195.
- <sup>42</sup> Tret'iakov, *I Want a Baby!* p. 54
- <sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 74
- <sup>44</sup> Another female character who has had fifteen abortions expresses her desire for a son in the following terms: 'My son will say to my bones, make way. And I will lie down and scream... I'm not in pain. It's not pain. I'm not screaming with pain. I'm screaming with joy. My belly. It's here. A son is coming. A son is coming?'. Tret'iakov *I Want a Baby!* p. 31.
- <sup>45</sup> See, Clark, K. 2011. *Moscow, The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941*. Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press, p. 42.
- <sup>46</sup> Benjamin, W. 1999. Moscow, *Selected Writings, Volume 2*. Ed. Jennings, M. W. Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press of Harvard University, p. 32.
- <sup>47</sup> Benjamin, W. 1986. *Moscow Diary*. Trans. by Smith, G. Cambridge, MA; Harvard University Press.
- <sup>48</sup> Gladkov, F. V. 1929. *Cement*, trans. by A.S. Arthur and C. Ashleigh. New York, NY; International Publishers, p.163. This English translation is based on the first edition of the Russian text. The novel was to undergo numerous revisions over the decades, which saw the presentation of gender issues become increasingly conservative. See: Veselá, P. 2003. The Hardening of "Cement": Russian Women and Modernization. *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 104-123.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 36.
- <sup>50</sup> Clark, K. 1981. *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Chicago; University of Chicago Press, pp.16-17.
- <sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 86.
- <sup>52</sup> Gladkov, F. V. 1929. *Cement*, trans. by A.S. Arthur and C. Ashleigh. New York, NY; International Publishers, p. 244.
- <sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 245
- <sup>54</sup> Durfee, T. M. 1995. Cement and How the Steel Was Tempered: Variations on the New Soviet Woman. pp. 89-101 In: *A Plot of Her Own: the Female Protagonist in Russian Literature*, Sona Stephan Hoisington ed., Evanston, IL; Northwestern University Press, p. 95.
- <sup>55</sup> Laursen, E. 2006. A New Enigmatic Language: The Spontaneity-Consciousness Paradigm and the Case of Gladkov's Cement, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 65, No. 1 (Spring, 2006), 66-89, 81.
- <sup>56</sup> Gladkov, F. V. 1929. *Cement*, trans. by A.S. Arthur and C. Ashleigh. New York, NY; International Publishers, p. 266.
- <sup>57</sup> Benjamin, W. 1999. Review of Gladkov's Cement. In: *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, ed. Jennings, M. W. Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press of Harvard University, pp. 47-49, p. 48.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> Gladkov, F. V. 1929. *Cement*, trans. by A.S. Arthur and C. Ashleigh. New York, NY; International Publishers, p. 262.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 308.

<sup>61</sup> Benjamin, W. 1999. Review of Gladkov's *Cement*. In: *Selected Writings, Volume 2*, ed. Jennings, M. W. Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press of Harvard University, p.48.

<sup>62</sup> Benjamin, W. 1999. *The Arcades Project*, trans. and ed. by Tiedemann, R. Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press, p.392.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 389.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 475.

<sup>65</sup> Benjamin, W. 1969. *Theses on the Philosophy of History*. Illuminations, trans. Harry Zorn. New York, NY; Schocken, p. 265.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin, W. 1999. *The Arcades Project*, trans. and ed. by Tiedemann, R. Cambridge, MA; Belknap Press, p.489.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p. 459.