

Shifting Metropes: Social Order and Chaos on the Moscow Metro

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Dissident, émigré author Sinjavsky closes the story "Little Jinx" with a grim Metro image: Just imagine for the sake of clarity an escalator in Moscow's deep-se Metro. (They) were being taxed by conveyor from the world beyond to meet the bloodless party of exhibits, while we were plunging down the shaft, finding ourselves powerless to distance ourselves from or merge with the parallel flow, unconsciously scanning the hierarchy of wide-browed statues being erected from the bowels of the earth with their tensely propped profiles thrust forward, as if they shunned intersecting with or accidentally running into our sinister stream, which was slowly and inexorably dispatching us downward. And who knows? The next time we might have been able to swap places on the conveyor belt; but for some reason that didn't dawn on anyone. Each kept to his own little stair, avoiding the opposite stream. Exchanging glances or greeting with a nod seemed out of the question (1992(80):78).

Compare to this a joke sent by a Moscow reader to *Argumenty i Fakty* in July, 1996: A drunken "New Russian" boards a tram and says to the driver: "Let's go to Lesnaja, I'll give you ten thousand bucks!" "What? Sir, there are no rails!" "Well, lay them. I'll pay a lemon (a million)!" So the repair brigade lays rails. The tram moves slowly in the right direction. But when they approach the building there is a problem: the tram's way is completely blocked by mounds of earth, metal, and building materials. "Oh, I forgot!" The passenger slaps his brow, "Yesterday I rerouted the Metro this way!"

The Moscow Metro is a background for moral narratives about both social order and chaos. Like watching the news, riding public transit was how Moscow saw itself, where the masses each day encountered thousands of other faces, fellow citizen or alien. But the structures of the Metro alone did not *determine* the twists of their tales.¹ Public transit narratives may *seem* grounded in concrete spaces, but they achieve that appearance of forceful validity because they intersect other, familiar images of authority, culture, and belonging. In the 1990s, the Metro is an

obvious backdrop for talk about social order and disorder, for alongside symbols of the former state, signs of both trade and poverty have multiplied and become more visible there.

Rather than dwelling on iconography or iconoclasm in the Metro, I focus here on the Metro as a topo-trope, a figurative setting for various contesting ontologies of a society in "transition."² The Metro stands for, alternately, totalizing glory or uniform repression AND social chaos or freedom AND conformity or cultured sociability. Verbal, visual, and textual representations achieve these various aims by placing and "fitting" social activity within images of the Metro's infrastructure. Today, I draw from media, literature, and conversations inside the Metro, about it, and above it.³

The Metro is a figure for both social order and disorder; on the side of order, it stands for either political utopia or totalitarian repression, and actions in it are painted alternately as signs of conformity or culturedness.

Soviet descriptions pegged capitalist transport as having been built without order, "haphazardly" for profit; the communists would construct instead a well-planned passage to the future: "Before the Revolution, public transport in Moscow was very underdeveloped--there was hardly any tram service (Kiss, 1963)." In the present, a 1960's guide for Hungarian visitors adds, everything is "up-to-date" and "automatic," from laser-equipped turnstiles to the trains themselves ("an electronic machine drives the high speed train instead of a human driver," which remained a fantasy). A guide for English speakers promises the future will bring "pedestrian underpasses with moving sidewalks" (*Moskovskij Metropoliten*, 1978). These descriptions showcase socialist modernity, the building of an infrastructure for a future social order.

The Moscow Metro can still evoke both utopian dreams and irony about them--hammer-and-sickle coats of arms remain impressed into the light blue, metal siding of some cars. Moscow stations differ impressively from each other. Adorned by glowing marble, chrome, stained glass, intricate statuary, and mosaic work, each is a lived-in monument to socialism. The metro systems of socialist-bloc capitals such as Prague and Budapest can not evoke quite the same sense of memory. Central European metros assumed Soviet tunnel design and imported the cars from Moscow (*Mytischy*), sans hammer and sickle,⁴ but the stations are uniformly decorated, socialist iconography low-key or non-existent.

In Moscow, only tourists spend much time peering curiously into the bronze gun barrels dangling from the oversized hands of *Revolution Square* heroes or up at the sparkling, mosaic

sky at *Majakovskaja*. Still, millions pass through these stations every day, and they are not immune to those carved and inlaid signs. On the contrary, their readings of them change: favorite stations fall from grace, as when rumors circulated that the delicate marble used to build the pillars of *Kropotkinskaja* (prided for softly intricate lighting) had been mined from the Bolshevik-destroyed Church of Christ the Savior, now being rebuilt across the street from the station.

Yet, in contrast with maps of former Soviet territory, Metro maps have hardly changed, though some include advertising.⁵ Nor is the iconoclasm much celebrated in the West what post-Soviets cite most--many say they "forget" the new names. Many station names that echo Soviet ideology and institutions, such as *Oktjabrskaja*, *Shosse Entuziastov*, and *Chkalovskaja*, remain untouched. Mocking or affectionately blasphemous nicknames existed all along, such as *boroda* for the former *Karl Marx* station, but the renamed stations were not actually endowed with those names--*Karl Marx* is now *Teatral'naja*.

The Metro, in fact, continues to regulate many *stable* social practices, as most people rely on public transit, remaining a reference for calibrating practice to time and place. People still direct visitors by Metro cars and platforms: "Take the radial line, not the circle line, sit in the first car from the center, and wait for me on the platform." The hour the Metro closes (1 a.m.) still regulates, though it does not end, nightly sociability.

Official Soviet discourse, of course, emphasized social stability and unity; the first stations were supposedly built by "thousands of volunteers" who kept up shifts even during the war (*Moskovskij Metropoliten*, 1978), the tunnels providing shelter during German air raids, a function memorialized in film.⁶ The meters added each year signified social enthusiasm, while the building of Metros in Prague, Budapest, Sofia, Zagreb, Warsaw, Calcutta, and Pyongyang, with Soviet advisors and plans, testified to friendship of the Peoples. The Metro harmonized with the city plan. As tour guides were instructed to inform: "The scheme of the Metro corresponds to the plan of the city, repeats its historically laid radial-ring surface plan (GKPIT)." According to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, socialist Metro design fit social needs better than did capitalist city trains--no rattling, above-ground structures, no gap, and the underground halls were designed according to "the method of socialist realism," so that the "impression of pressing weight" is absent and "pylons, columns and arcades emphasize lightness, freedom and spaciousness" (1954:331). The Metro was also cheap ("in the future," public transit was going to

be free) and the price of passage remained stable, the 5-kopeck fare not changing from 1935 until 1991.⁷

Many of these proud assertions were fair. Still, dissident and émigré writers disdained the Metro as a Stalinist imposition: "The skyscrapers and the Moscow metro, the canals and dams were constructed only for him" (Groys, 1987:122). The "enthusiasts" who built the Metro become, in their accounts, forced labor. The belief that the Metro was "for" father Stalin is reinforced by tales of a secret underground link to the Kremlin from his Moscow dacha (thus explaining the duplicate lines between *Arbatskaja* and *Kievskaja* Stations). Besides manifesting Stalin's personal mania for monumental building, the Metro, like the Soviet railway network joining all points to the Moscow center, is a trope for totalitarian ordering of modern space and motion.⁸ Svetlana Boym (1994:228) likens urban gridding under socialism to "official narratives that cut through the city like the Utopian lines of Stalin's Metro, the most efficient in the world." More recent accounts of key events at the break-up of the USSR parallel such denunciations of dictatorial, modernist gridding, even showing contempt for Metro passengers as themselves political automatons. Foreign or elite memoirs of the coup described public transport as a site of general apathy or reactionary politics, as did the then director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL):

Of course, all too many Muscovites kept their heads down, waiting to see which way the wind was blowing before voicing any opinion about events. And there were several in buses and the subway who even argued in favor of the junta, hoping for a return to the Brezhnev stagnation when at least there was something to buy in the shops (Elliot, in Bonnel et al., 1994:292). The evidential "of course" perhaps reveals more about faith in the RFE/RL mandate to propagate democracy as true representatives of a "free world" than it does individual lack of "democratic" conviction within the hearts of "all too many Muscovites," represented by anonymous public transit riders.

During and after the August 1991 coup attempt, the Western media extolled itself for shaping events. Foreign correspondents emphasized the role of Radio Free Europe, the BBC, U.S. Embassy satellites, or CNN, while Russians highlighted Xeroxing and telephone-calling. Certainly foreign media affected the content of rumor and information, and enabled montages of local with faraway events (Boym, 1994:217-220). However, mass media accounts about mass media (made and preserved using these same media) remain the authoritative memory, over the

accounts of people walking the streets and Metro paths during those days. The media ignored the agency of people who lacked direct access to media or electronic communications, who instead acted on information they gleaned in the streets or on the Metro.

During August 1991, I was living five bus stops from the station farthest south, *Prazhskaja*. In that station's underpass, people gathered in small clusters, as they had throughout the Metro and on streets downtown that day. Late on the second day of the coup, just outside the turnstiles, a woman returning from the center informed listeners what had happened to Gorbachev. She, too, stressed foreign sources and how the "putsch" had shut down television--but she herself had heard this information by word of mouth, on the street. Likewise, multitudes learned to tune into the migrating frequencies of the single, independently broadcasting radio station *Ekho Moskvy* (Echo of Moscow) because the numbers had been pasted onto Metro walls and cars and in the streets, along with Yeltsin's declaration.⁹ People read these notices and discussed them on the spot, arguing and interrupting. Indeed, had the coup planners shut down the Metro, the people who poured from the station nearest the Parliament Building (appropriately already named *Barrikadnaja* (Barricade), in honor of wars past) could not have arrived to hedge it. Metro travelers may stand for political troglodytes or apathetic drones, but the Metro was in fact the single *reliable* vehicle for bringing the crowds to the site of the resistance.¹⁰

Some of the same people who denounce the Metro as an emblem of totalitarianism simultaneously insist that resistance and disrespect for order is Russian national character, bred by unjust and invasive rules. This nature is also represented through tropes of transit--scorn for traffic lights and transit fares are frequently cited as evidence: "The Russian person, from the very beginning, is raised to disrespect the law, to show contempt for the rules of traffic and to try to get out of paying the fine if the police stop him" (Kirpichnikov, 1996). Boym evokes a traffic light example in a vignette about the surprise of a Russian in the U.S. who saw an American stop at a crosswalk light moments after a Gulf War protest, and thus contrasts perceived American worship of law to Russian disdain for rules:

For the Russian accustomed to routine violations of everyday prohibitions and cynical about the laws because they were part and parcel of the official order, *this combination of simultaneous protesting and observing the rules is nearly inconceivable*. In Russia, driving through a red light when the police are not

watching is an acceptable practice; there, public opinion would be more critical of eating ice cream on the subway, *a practice classified as foreign or "uncultured"* behavior. (Boym, 1994:289; Italics added by author)

This example of resistant spirit opposes "culture" to "law". Most anthropologists might find such a distinction suspicious, perhaps motivated by ideology. Did prohibitions on eating ice cream in the Metro arise organically from Russian culture? More likely, social expectations about public decorum were in fact inculcated by the very socialist policies that people claim to scorn, the various liquidations of bad hygiene and illiteracy, among other civilizing projects.¹¹

Looking at a few more Metro "traffic rules," whether enforced or self-enforced, will illustrate the complexity. Upon entering any above-ground station, one faces a row of turnstiles operated by tokens or, since 1996, magnetic cards. The turnstiles have mechanical arms that open and shut like scissors. Every so often, if one passes through them too fast for the red laser eyes to register, they clamp shut, which is more frightening than painful. Once inside, there are no controllers--the men who appear suddenly on Moscow's busses or trams to check tickets punched by the honor system (as in many European undergrounds). On ground transport, fellow passengers can see who punches a ticket or not: in the popular 1970s comedy, *Gentlemen Udachi* (a pirate moniker), the pudgy hero rushes to his seat without punching his ticket, fumbles out his transit pass to wave "*Edinij, Edinij!*" The moment is familiar--for not everyone "rides rabbit," so-called because you have to keep jumping off when controllers approach. On Metro cars, however, there are no such dramas of conscience--if a person tries to use a counterfeit pass, it is at the turnstile.

Near the turnstiles, in a glass booth, sits an elderly metro worker wearing a red armband; she checks monthly passes (though perhaps not so thoroughly, as people do slip by with counterfeit or incorrectly subsidized discount passes) and watches the vestibule for suspicious activity. Few actually try to cheat the system--plenty wait in line to buy tokens. By 1996, after a rash of bombings on Russian transport, special OMON forces in bullet proof vests stood near the turnstiles, as well.¹² Another worker, armed with two telephones and a microphone, sits in a glass booth at the bottom of the escalators. She regulates the direction of the escalators and behavior on them: when delinquent teenagers roll coins down the banisters or sit on the stairs, she chastises them over the intercom or warns, "Comrades, clear the space to the left" if people

are blocking that side. At least she used to--by the mid-1990s, she hardly can be heard over tape-recorded advertising of vacation trips to Egypt. Still, the passing lane remains clear--hardly anyone needs to be told the rule, and if they transgress, those around will loudly tell them to clear the left.

There are no such booths at the bottom of Metro escalators in Prague or Budapest (they sit elsewhere), and the rule to leave the left clear, written in several languages near the escalators in Budapest, is neither enforced nor much valued there. While working in Prague in 1995-96, I was visited by Russian friends who, seeing this behavior, declared Czechs to be "*dikie ljudi!*" (savage, wild people). Thus, what people see as valid "traffic rules," written or unwritten, differs, and Russians do not have a monopoly on transgressing them. Conversely, just as that American stopped for a red light after a protest,¹³ the Russians who came to the parliament building during the 1991 coup by Metro refrained from eating ice cream, but did not ride escalator banisters or clog the left aisle. They, too, combined resistance with observing traffic rules. The case for a peculiarly Russian (or peculiarly post-socialist) distrust of authority and structure seems not to hold, any more than the case for their backward conformism. "Even" in Russia, Metro pedestrians can simultaneously protest some rules and observe others.

This discussion of resistance and complacency allows us to analyze statements about social order or disorder that are set in the Metro as strategic rather than descriptive. While some use public transit to stand for good old--or bad old --order, it also can be a backdrop for social chaos.

In 1995-96, the media frequently depicted the Metro as a setting not of conformity and order, but for the chaos of transition. The mushrooming of commerce around the Metro had indeed changed social rhythms of transit: hawkers filled transfer tunnels and underground crosswalks, Metro pedestrians hesitated over bubble gum or extremist newspapers,¹⁴ combining tactics of shopping and commuting.

The rise of commerce was most visible at Metro stations. Of course, well before 1991, one could purchase official maps pinpointing state shops next to Metros. Informally, certain stations were long known for what was speculated near them. Near the stations, there always had been newspaper kiosks, ice cream stands, and ticket booths (along with the occasional woman semi-illicitly peddling flowers). A few opened onto large, semi-official produce markets. Still,

most commerce in the Metro was prohibited until the 1990s, when the underground transfer tunnels became incredibly more dense with small-time hawkers.

One factor that set Metro trade apart from commerce in other venues--and makes it more available for political rhetoric--was its stark visibility. Even by the 1990s, space for shops in prominent or central buildings was limited and expensive. Many that existed had draped windows or were off the common paths connecting public transport. Only locals knew them. Not so the newer shops in the metro underpasses and streets just above them; they are both on the way and made almost entirely of glass. Everything inside them is immediately visible; it all "throws itself into the eyes," as a Russian phrase goes. At first, non-state kiosks were made of plywood, and trade at the subway entrances or in underpasses was conducted on precarious folding tables or cardboard boxes. Some of these remain, but more permanent structures have edged closer to the metro proper, transparent materials being the favorite medium.

This visibility of shopping is only somewhat comparable to the calmer, more institutionalized commerce inside the Prague or Budapest Metros. There, one sees display cases for aboveground shops, closed-in newspaper or flower stands, shops set fully *into* the underpass walls rather than built like barnacles along the sides, even full-scale chain boutiques. In fact, most well-trafficked shops there are located safely overhead, within stone walls, and not alongside transport. In Moscow, ever more merchants line the underpass walls with glass casings wide enough for a few goods, a stool and a sales person. These glittering surfaces narrow the pedestrian walk space.

What is more, these surfaces potentially contrast with the glowing social realism farther down. While the walls of metros in other post-socialist states are covered by advertisements, those down inside the Moscow Metro are not--there is no room for them among the statuary, built into the very architecture of the columns. *Both* communists and democrats, reformists and conservatives express surprise or outrage that Stalin's metro is precisely the setting for the most visible new sites of commerce *and* signs of class division, merchants above and beggars below, sitting under those happy, marble socialist maidens and heroes. Perhaps the platforms housing the monumental murals seem less profane than the transfer passageways, and, as at churches, merchants are not allowed on the platforms, while beggars are not driven off so quickly and work even in the cars.

Even liberal authors call the juxtaposition shocking, though preferable to the previous order:

We always said we had no homeless, but they were hidden from the public's view. Now we have beggars in the Metro. This is terrible, but normal. But to collect war invalids and expel them to a place to die--this is not normal. I prefer terrible freedom to clean totalitarianism (Alexander A. Kabakov, quoted in Williams, 1996).

More extreme writers read the transgressions of refugees, hawkers, or homeless as unlawful, inappropriate, and foreign. The Metro is place where unrestrained migrations sit side by side with the litter and leavings of commerce, where order has degraded:

Most comfortable for the "businessmen" with outstretched hands is the Circle Line. . . The Metro, stinking foulness nowadays, piled with trash. . . attracts them with large numbers of people (you always find kind ones), warmth (especially winter), and protection (though order here is not what it used to be, it still holds up). (Modestov, 1996)

Social disorders are imagined as human waste--people out of place. The above excerpt framed a journalistic piece calling for the return of movement restrictions, laws prosecuting begging and "leading a parasitic life" that were rescinded in 1993, although the *propiska* system is still in effect.

Economic liberals in Russia and some Western sociologists have argued that constraining population movement is incompatible with market reforms,¹⁵ while advocates of restrictions claim that the return of harsher punishments for "leading a parasitic life" would return a lost economic and social order.¹⁶ Such debates recall emigre scholar Paperny's (1975(93)) depiction of oscillation between movement/fluidity ("Culture One") and stasis/repression ("Culture Two"). While Paperny's metaphoric schema may be overly binary, so too are the equally figurative 1990s calls for social order and return of restriction of movement and population. Paperny's essay was, in fact, re-published in Russian in 1996 in *Itogi* (the joint venture with Newsweek).

Conclusion

Those interested in depicting the current state as stable use images of public transit as a backdrop to depict a benign order that *combines* new and old. Consider a video clip that aired repeatedly throughout 1996 in a series of shorts made for television, titled *Russkij Projekt*, which varied humor and nostalgia with soft social propaganda: Early morning darkness. A famous aging actor plays a tram driver; there are no passengers. A happy golden light fills his tram and lights his features. A beautiful, young, jean-jacketed actress emerges from a doorway on rollerblades as the tram passes and, catching a hook on the back of the tram with an umbrella, lets it pull her, the wind blowing her pale, blond hair. She releases her hold as the tram approaches the main building of Moscow State University, and skates off into that Stalinist birthday cake structure. The title of the clip appears under the tram: "This is My City." Here, sexy traffic rule-breaking is *combined* with a working infrastructural transit order inherited from the past, as embodied by the elder driver and the Stalinist skyscraper, to produce a patriotic and cozy statement about belonging in the capital.¹⁷

The examples at hand offer varied oppositions--of past utopia to present chaos, of past dictatorship to present opportunity, of wealth to need, of Russia to the West, of patriots to refugees to terrorists. None of these are generated by some sum of individual encounters with spaces or strangers within the Metro; immediate spatial experience underdetermines the construction of ideologies about social order. The oppositions are reproduced by interlocutors who cite from many arenas--accounts from which their own even come to resemble.

Thus, pictures of the social order in public transit related to political and social concerns about movement, money, and people. What talk about transit is really about is who should be included in the city, in the nation.

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explicate connections between visual and discursive constructions of racial and economic categories, the connections between “*vnezhnij vid*” (external appearance) and ostensibly ethnic proclivities.

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Notes

1. See Foucault (1984), for instance, who argues that architectural structure do not not *determine* social relations or subjectivity, but that they are "rigorously indivisible."
2. I use the term with the usual caveats (to avoid assuming a transition "from" something "to" something else) but preserve it here as a term used by Muscovites.
3. See Basso, 1988: "[S]tatements about the landscape may be employed strategically to convey indexical messages about the organization of face-to-face relationships and the normative footings on which these relationships are currently being negotiated." (223)
4. The oldest line of the Budapest metro recently was refurbished, and the non-Soviet style cars that operate on it were used as stages for the 1995 opening. It is worth observing how diplomatic changes will affect public transport infrastructures in the former socialist bloc, the old division of labor in production: Hungary's *Ikarusz* plant made the buses. Prague made the tram cars, and Moscow made the subway cars. While Budapest sports shiny new *Ikarusz* buses, many of their counterparts in Russia are decades old, and newer buses there are second-hand *Mercedes* (in some cities, such as in the Urals town of Perm, these buses still bear German-language ads).
5. Until the 1950s the Metro was actually named in honor of Kaganovich.
6. Such as *Cranes Are Flying* (1959).
7. In 1984, average salaries ranged from 150-300 rubles a month. As of 1996, one Metro token cost 1500 rubles (an average salary was about 700,000 rubles a month at the beginning of the year).
8. De Certeau devotes a short chapter to comparing train compartments to prison cells. See also Spivak (citing Kierney, cited also in Boyarin, 1994): "[the train] is a widely current metonym for the unifying project of territorial imperialism" (1989,284).
9. The radio station changed frequencies several times a day to escape jamming.
10. Not only that, but pieces of the Metro itself (sections of escalator) and of other transport (entire tram cars) were important barricade material during the coup attempt.
11. See, for instance, Fitzpatrick (1993).
12. OMON was a special "swat" unit of the police, heavily armed and armored.
13. Muscovites rarely face the choice to ignore a "don't walk" sign in any case, since most pedestrian crosswalks pass under the streets, not above them. Moreover, drivers weigh transgression against possible fines--pedestrians against serious injury.

14. Several authors have focused on the contents of hawkers' tables in the 1990s, on the fascinating jumble of contradictory, formerly banned stuff for sale, some with comparisons to Benjamin's observations of NEP-era commercial license (Boym, 1994; Condee, 1995). Here, I focus on the location of commerce, rather than the arrays of things sold or their origin (cf. Humphrey, 1995).

15. See Buckley (1995:896).

16. In effect, lack of *propiska* stopped movement less than it "prevented migrants from integrating themselves into distribution networks in restricted cities" (Buckley, 1995:896).

17. Metro building also continues apace in the capital and in the provinces. In May of 1996, Yeltsin laid the first ceremonial stone for the first Metro station in Ufa, capital of Bashkirya. Meanwhile, in the capital, metro construction (costing 4 trillion dollars a year in 1996) and architectural renovation projects are at the center of Chicago-style debates linking corruption, waste, and the Mayor's office.