

AGNESE KUŠNERE

# Walking in Circles

*Post-Soviet transit spaces from the cinematic viewpoint  
of Chantal Akerman and Hans Van den Broeck*

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# Introduction

There are places in the world that are not really places. Although their coordinates are detectable and they are localizable, they are not particular, not unique or distinguishable from similar “nonplaces”. The term nonplace comes from the postmodern anthropology and was first conceived by the French anthropologist Marc Augé in his 1992 book “Non-Lieux.”<sup>1</sup>

Nonplaces are predominantly distinguished by their presence as a space between others, as a space that “only” connects. Nonplaces therefore can be seen as connections in a system or a network. Applying the example of a molecular structure, the places in such a system would be comparable to atoms bound by chemical bonds. The nonplace could thus be compared to the chemical bonds of a molecule. If we stick to the same example and look at the definition of chemical compounds, hoping to better understand the nonplace, we see that these bonds are usually described as physicochemical phenomenas, as the forces which hold the atoms together in a molecule.<sup>2</sup> Simplified,

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<sup>1</sup> Korstanje, Maximillano: “Non-places and Tourism: Towards an understanding of travel research” In: *ResearchGate* (2003, 12),  
retrieved from: [researchgate.net/publication/42437802\\_Non-Places\\_and\\_Tourism](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/42437802_Non-Places_and_Tourism)

<sup>2</sup> Hemond, Herold F. / Fecher, Elizabeth J: “Chemical Fate and Transport in the Enviroment” (2015) P. 21

interactions of the electrons are the basis of these bonds, the way how atoms donate, absorb, or share electrons. If we consider a place as a kind of atom with a certain attraction differing from other atoms, then the part in between is comparable to a bridge, a passage, in other words a transit space. That does not mean that the transit space is less important than the place itself. The transit space similar to the chemical bond is what holds the core of the world together. But unlike the place or the element it has no name. It is merely classified into species that define, just as in chemistry, either the length, the distance between two places or its binding energy. The energy that has to be applied to detach an electron from the atom. In the figurative sense, this means that the quality of the transit space can be determined by its conductivity. I.e. how fast or slow it conducts the electricity. In the case of the transit space, the electricity could be compared with the stream of people or the stream of vehicles. When a transit space is perceived, it is mostly because its main function collapses, meaning that the current can no longer flow properly. Only in such moments the importance of the transit space becomes apparent. If the flow comes to a standstill the bridge collapses and isolates in the worst case the individual places from one another.

## Definition of the post-Soviet

Already during the second half of the 1980s, a possible break-up of the fifteen countries forming the Soviet Union emerged. Events such as the Chernobyl disaster and the war in Afghanistan cost numerous human lives and resources. As a result, the Soviet people's confidence in political leadership has dwindled. Above all, these circumstances accelerated the collapse of the economy, which had begun already years before. In addition, the decline in oil prices, corruption and state regulations were further catalysts for the economic decline. The so called Perestroika (Russian: перестройка, restructuring), a reformation movement under the government of Leonid Gorbachev, which is often interpreted as the cause of the decay of the Soviet Union, slowed down the economic decline, which ultimately was already unstoppable.<sup>3 4</sup>

This attempt together with the Glasnost (Russian: гласность, openness, transparency) reform (an attempt to transform the

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<sup>3</sup> Kellerhoff, Sven Felix: "Die wahren Ursachen für den Untergang der Sowjetunion" In: *Die Welt* (2016, 05),  
retrieved from: [welt.de/geschichte/article155333355/Die-wahren-Ursachen-fuer-den-Untergang-der-Sowjetunion.html](http://welt.de/geschichte/article155333355/Die-wahren-Ursachen-fuer-den-Untergang-der-Sowjetunion.html)

<sup>4</sup> Ray, Michael: "Why Did the Soviet Union Collapse?"  
In: *Encyclopedia Britannica*  
retrieved from: [britannica.com/story/why-did-the-soviet-union-collapse](http://britannica.com/story/why-did-the-soviet-union-collapse)

old regime into an open one) in 1987 came too late.<sup>5</sup> The so-called Sinatra doctrine, allowed the states of the Warsaw Pact (an eastern counterpart to the Western NATO alliance) to regulate their internal affairs independently. The result of this policy, named after the singer Frank Sinatra, to allude to his song “My Way”, the Baltic states as the first declared their independence. Accordingly, in order not to lose all states entirely, a Union treaty should be signed on August 20, 1991, which, similar as in the US, declares the individual states to be independent republics, but still retains a common foreign policy, a joint president, and joint forces. However, the signing never took place because a group of Communist Party and military officials tried in vain to take control of the country. It was followed by large demonstrations against the rebels, led by Boris Yeltsin, the president of the Russian republic and joined by the majority of the troops. After the failure of this coup, the Soviet Union finally collapsed. The various republics began to declare their independence. Yeltsin became the first president of Russia.<sup>6</sup>

The consequences of the collapse were, albeit different, devastating for almost all former Soviet states. One of the deepest economic crises after World War II followed. An almost complete lack of public authorities, social benefits and a conditionally functioning healthcare system led to a rapid increase in poverty

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<sup>5</sup> Cooper, Ann: “The death of glasnost: How Russia’s attempt at openness failed”

In: *Committee to Protect Journalists (2015, 4)*,

retrieved from: [cpj.org/2015/04/attacks-on-the-press-death-of-glasnost-russia-attempt-at-openness-failed.php](http://cpj.org/2015/04/attacks-on-the-press-death-of-glasnost-russia-attempt-at-openness-failed.php)

<sup>6</sup> Goldstone, Jack A.: “The Encyclopedia of Political Revolutions” p. 139.

retrieved from: [books.google.be](http://books.google.be)

and a simultaneous decline in life expectancy.<sup>7</sup>

The transformation process and thus the privatization programs of the young states helped a small group to benefit rapidly from the reforms. This group, the so-called “new Russians” or oligarchs, appropriated what once belonged to the state. In concrete terms, this means that one fifth of the total population owned 47 percent of the total revenue of Russia. The poorest fifth, on the other hand, owned only 6 percent. At least a quarter of the Russian population was affected by poverty.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the poverty, a number of other significant problems were generated, such as the rise in crime, corruption in everyday life and in politics. Even though the Russian Federation gained more democratic freedom and federalism, the discontent and nostalgia for the Soviet Union grew. Due to the economic situation of the majority of the citizens, the Soviet Union appeared like the smaller evil.<sup>9</sup>

Each of these aspects, that I attempt to give, are only fragmentary mentioned to give a basic understanding of the post-Soviet

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<sup>7</sup> Pleines Heiko: “Nach dem Ende der Sowjetunion”

In: *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (2014, 10),

retrieved from: [bpb.de/izpb/192802/nach-dem-ende-der-sowjetunion?p=all](http://bpb.de/izpb/192802/nach-dem-ende-der-sowjetunion?p=all)

<sup>8</sup> Schröder, Hans-Henning: “Aspekte der postsowjetischen Gesellschaft”

In: *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (2004, 02),

retrieved from: [bpb.de/izpb/9422/aspekte-der-postsowjetischen-gesellschaft?p=all](http://bpb.de/izpb/9422/aspekte-der-postsowjetischen-gesellschaft?p=all)

<sup>9</sup> Savenko, Yanina: “Death of Boris Yeltsin” In: *Human Rights House Foundation* (2007, 4)

retrieved from: [humanrightshouse.org/articles/death-of-boris-yeltsin/](http://humanrightshouse.org/articles/death-of-boris-yeltsin/)

society and situation. Within this devastating situation and widespread dissatisfaction, there was still just a little protest. The reasons for this can hardly be summarized in one paragraph. They are extensive because they are a result, or rather an interplay of many cultural, sociopolitical and historical factors. However, the majority of the population developed numerous survival strategies and achieved a degree of sovereignty that made it possible for most to survive despite the economic situation of the surrounding state, the food shortages or the lack of jobs.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Orlov, Dmitry: “How Russians survived the collapse of the Soviet Union”  
In: *Energysceptic* (2015, 08),  
retrieved from: [energyskeptic.com/2015/dmitry-orlov-how-russians-survived-collapse/](http://energyskeptic.com/2015/dmitry-orlov-how-russians-survived-collapse/)



# 1

## Post-Soviet transit spaces

The survival strategies of the post-Soviet population, mentioned in the last chapter, play a huge role when it comes to dealing with everyday situations. The collapse of the transit spaces can be regarded as a permanent condition with regard to post-Soviet everyday life. Already during the existence of the Soviet Union, the waiting was a part of the everyday life. People were waiting for almost every conceivable product. Up to 10 years for a car, for butter and bread, for flats and ultimately for the economic boom.<sup>11</sup> And when finally the collapse of the Soviet Union took place, they were still waiting in similar queues, for similar goods, for changes, or for everything to return to the old stand again. As already described in the previous paragraph, the economic situation in the first half of the 90s deteriorated rapidly. The food shortage reached a previously unseen climax. After the stores finally were filled with goods, they still were not affordable due to price increase rates, the destroyed money

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<sup>11</sup> Gatejel Luminita: "Warten, hoffen und endlich fahren: Auto und Sozialismus in der Sowjetunion, in Rumänien und der DDR" p. 274.

retrieved from: *books.google.be*

savings of the population and the lack of jobs.<sup>12</sup>

The queues and spaces that connect places became an almost natural habitat for the Soviet and post-Soviet citizens. The wait became a part of their identity. The state of waiting might have been a part of the Russian identity even before the Russian Revolution. In Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, the whole life consists of waiting for an end, although the revolution already begins the protagonists do not notice it. Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union seems to be similar to the Russian Revolution. Also after the 1990s most people did not notice much of a change or a progress. The waiting states did not initially get shorter, but rather worse.

Thus, shortened waiting times in general could be seen as a sign of prosperity. A “functioning” transit space, which leads the “electricity” could therefore be defined as a privilege, as an indication of an economic boom.

The transit space could be (as described before) categorized in a similar way to chemical bond by measuring their physical length and used energy. That would define and describe the nature of the place itself. At the same time, however, the place itself divides the passers-by into categories. The most privileged are those who leave the space as quickly as possible. Because of their higher income they can buy a faster access to the destination.

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<sup>12</sup> Aron, Leon: “Everything you think you know about the collapse of the Soviet Union is wrong. \*And why it matters today in a new age of revolution.” In: *Foreignpolicy* (2011, 06),

retrieved from: [foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/everything-you-think-you-know-about-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-is-wrong/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/06/20/everything-you-think-you-know-about-the-collapse-of-the-soviet-union-is-wrong/)

This group often has an own queue, a door through which they reach their destination faster than the rest. This means that the physical length of the transit space does not play a significant role, because it can be passed faster or slower depending on the social status, or even completely be bypassed. The opposite would be those who are defenseless, at the mercy of the space, mostly because of their lower social status. As soon as the space can not fulfill its main function as a transit space, this group is affected most strongly by the collapse. In the case of the post Soviet Union, that is a significantly larger part of the total population and at the same time the visible part. Because those who can pass through or transit the spaces faster, due to their privileged position, will hardly be seen in them.

Another category consists of those people who work within the transit space, for example, cashiers at a counter in a train station. For this group, transit spaces are not non-places in the sense of the previous definition. These persons occupy a social function and have a place within the space in form of joint rooms or personal lockers. They can distinguish the place from others. In this space, they hierarchically occupy a higher position than the rest of those who pass. They are not anonymous, may even wear a name tag or a uniform, so they are distinguishable from the rest of the crowd. They are not dependent on the conductivity of the room, because they usually have equal working hours, which they spend in these rooms, regardless of whether it collapses or fulfills its main function.

In contrast to the workers, the less privileged group never has an own place within the space. Furthermore, they are constantly reminded that they should leave the space as soon as possible. A

concrete example of this are the limited seating options within airports or train stations. Not everyone can and not everyone should find a place within the space. In the best case, nobody has to find a place because the time spent in such a room is small enough. In addition, guidance systems are supposed to accelerate the transit of crowds. Directional arrows indicate the entrance and exit, letters and number systems define the destination. Prohibition signs prevent unorganized drifting away from the predefined path. Doors and escalators organize the crowds and subdivide them. Clocks do not let the crowds forget the time. Often the room itself prevents from a long attendance. The corridors between the stations are just wide enough to let people pass in both directions. And even if small life rafts appear on the sides, in the form of a cafe or a shop, they also make clear that they are not inviting you to linger. Bar stools dominate the rooms, as well as narrow alleys that make it difficult to park the suitcases. Just comfortable enough for the length of a coffee.

The majority of pictures from the inside of a train station or an airport, showed on Google's image search, are long-exposure photographs in which people wander like ghosts, or hazy shadows through corridors. They have no faces, no clear identification characteristics. These pictures captures something that should be understood as time. The time in these representations can be equated with the movement in space. And that's exactly what these types of spaces, the transit spaces, can be defined as. They are the duration of a movement in relation to the length of the space.

In the concrete example of the post-Soviet transit space, how-

ever, there are some differences compared to contemporary Western transit spaces. Due to the economic distress, restricted conditions during the planned economy and the extreme waiting times, the acquisition of a car was severely restricted. Accordingly, people were strongly dependent on public transport. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state transport company Mosgortrans, which operated the majority of public passenger transport in Moscow, entered a financial crisis.<sup>13</sup> From then on it was impossible to keep the quality of passenger transport at the same level as it was before. Similar things happened to other stately transport companies, which could only procure a few new vehicles, which in turn led to an obsolescence of the existing means of transport. Mosgortrans was only partially able to solve this situation at the end of the 1990s.<sup>14</sup>

Only from the year 2000 Mosgortrans began with the installation of turnstiles in order to fight against fare evaders. Thus, the previously mentioned examples of guidance systems, the organization of the transit areas can only be transferred to a limited extent on the post-Soviet transit spaces. The simultaneous increase in crime spread almost to all public spaces. The journalist Nikolay Shevchenko compares the life in Russia during the 90s with “a walk across a minefield.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “Mosgortrans” In: *Wikipedia* (2017, 9),  
retrieved from: [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosgortrans](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mosgortrans)

<sup>14</sup> Inosemzew, Wladislaw: “Der Traum vom großen Transitgeschäft. Putins Russland hat hochtrabende Pläne, aber noch enormen Nachholbedarf“ In: *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik e.V.* (2013, 3)  
retrieved from: [zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/23424](https://zeitschrift-ip.dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/23424)

<sup>15</sup> Schewtschenko, Nikolaj: “Warum war es in den russischen 90ern so gefährlich?”  
In: *Russia Beyond* (2018, 5),

Till this day, the term *lichije 90-ie* (Russian: лихие девяностые, dashing nineties) stands for the wild and stormy period less associated with freedom than with poverty and crime.<sup>16</sup>

Combining all these phenomena and bringing them together creates a unique interplay of survival strategies and codes of conduct. Looking at all these phenomena and circumstances at the same time, creates an idea of the dissatisfaction, discouragement and hopelessness of the persons affected. Also, it gives an idea why the survey of the Pew Research Center even 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union revealed that for exactly half the Russian citizen the decay of the Soviet Union still is “a great misfortune.”<sup>17</sup>

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retrieved from: [de.rbth.com/geschichte/80446-90er-jahren-russland-leben](http://de.rbth.com/geschichte/80446-90er-jahren-russland-leben)

<sup>16</sup> Klein, Eduard: “Die Wilden 1990er” In: *Dekoder* (2015, 10),  
retrieved from: [dekoder.org/de/gnose/die-wilden-90er](http://dekoder.org/de/gnose/die-wilden-90er)

<sup>17</sup> Pleines, Heiko: “Nach dem Ende der Sowjetunion”  
In: *Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung* (2014,10),  
retrieved from: [bpb.de/izpb/192802/nach-dem-ende-der-sowjetunion?p=all](http://bpb.de/izpb/192802/nach-dem-ende-der-sowjetunion?p=all)

## 2

### Cinematic witnesses

Both cinematic examples, I have described in the following, are a view from the outside. They are the result of an observation of circumstances that in no way resemble the conditions of the origin or residence of the two filmmakers. This is quite an aspect to keep in mind, because the view from the outside is more unbiased. It might be charged less with emotions than the view from the inside and therefore have an emotional distance. Perhaps a viewer from the outside can recognize the beauty in tremendousness. The observer from the outside is not affected by the circumstances. His primary goal is not to leave the place, nor the welfare of the own body. The observers are no transients, they are a hybrid, a separate own category. On the one hand, they are undoubtedly the privileged ones who can leave the space at any time. On the other hand, like the workers, they assume an individual, hierarchically different function. The film equipment owned by the observers privileges them immensely. They can tell the story, observe the rest and leave whenever they want. The waiting people, on the other hand, are not only helplessly exposed to the room, but usually also to the film crew

that wants to capture them in such a moment.

But apart from the outside view, which brings benefits as well as problems, the two filmmakers and films I want to present have few more similarities as well as differences, which makes them fascinating witnesses of time.

The Screenwriter and director Chantal Akerman was born 1950 in Brussels, Belgium. She briefly studied Theater Studies in Paris in 1968 and directed short and experimental films such as *La chambre*, in which a camera in the middle of the room turns on its own axis and observes the lying Akerman while she is eating an apple and falling asleep.<sup>18</sup> Akerman remains true to the capture of the little gestures in future films such as *Jeann* *Dielman* or *Les Rendez-vous d'Anna*. The way of peeling the potatoes or clinging to the coat define Akermans characters and make them unique. Akerman captures the choreographies of the everyday life, which we often overlook. And precisely these every day gestures the dancer, choreographer and video artist Hans Van den Broeck observes with similar intensity. Van den Broeck who studied psychologie in Leuven and film in New York deals in his works with group dynamic phenomena and describes his own work among other things as uncompromising, poetic and rough. Van den Broeck choreographed and danced in several artistic productions before he founded his own performing arts

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<sup>18</sup> Fowler, Catherine: "The films of Chantal Akerman: A cinema of displacements"

In: *University of Warwick* (1995,9)

retrieved from: [wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4048/1/WRAP\\_THE-SIS\\_Fowler\\_1995.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/4048/1/WRAP_THE-SIS_Fowler_1995.pdf)



company SOIT.<sup>19</sup>

The films *D'Est* by Akerman and *Our Circumscribed Days* by Van den Broeck are both dedicated to the post-Soviet Union. Both observe spaces which are not unique in their appearance and thereby both find unique moments of beauty and joy, of loneliness and tenderness, which represent the time period in an exceptional, but also accurate way.

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<sup>19</sup> In: SOIT

retrieved from: [soit.info/contact](http://soit.info/contact)

## D'Est by Chantal Akerman

The documentary *D'Est* by Akerman was made immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1993. With her team she traveled to the former GDR, Poland, Lithuania, the Ukraine and Russia.<sup>20</sup> Without prior knowledge and without being able to read Cyrillic, the viewer might only recognize the former Soviet Union but not a particular place. The first years after the collapse which did not look specifically different from the years before. The movie title *D'Est* is one of the rear written indicators for the location. *D'Est* translated into English means *from the east*. It is less decisive where exactly in the east the film was filmed because many of the spaces shown in *D'Est* are the so-called transit spaces, which resemble each other so much, that they become interchangeable. Already in 1975, the Soviet film classic “The Irony of Fate” directed by Eldar Braginsky deals with the interchangeability of places of residence in the Soviet Union. The film tells the story of a drunk man on New Year’s Eve, who is put on the plane to Leningrad by his friends.

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<sup>20</sup> “D’est (Aus dem Osten)” In: *Kommunales Kino im alten Wiehrenbahnhof*  
retrieved from: [koki-freiburg.de/filme/5971/d'est\\_\(aus\\_dem\\_osten\)](http://koki-freiburg.de/filme/5971/d'est_(aus_dem_osten))

When he awakes there, he still believes to be in Moscow and, thus drives home. Not only the addresses are identical to each other, but also the new building blocks. His key to the door of the apartment seems to fit, therefore the apartment appears the same to the drunken man. What sounds like a bad joke is actually not a very unlikely situation. The living houses, built in the 60s and 70s, colloquially called Khrushchyovkas, (named after Nikita Khrushchev, the former head of government of the Soviet Union) were built in masses to solve the lack of housing. Characterized by a rather cheap construction, the houses were very much alike.<sup>21</sup>

Also in Akerman's *D'Est* you never really know if you have returned again to the same place, or whether it is a completely different street. The numerous people hidden in their winter clothes and having similar functions and therefore become an undefinable mass. And even the shops have all the same, constantly recurring names, because they all are named after the products they sell.

Some protagonists appearing in *D'Est* are selling products in a long queue at a metro station. These workers are different from the ones previously described. They do undeclared work, with no specific working hours, no uniforms and no defined places within the space. They depend on the crowds of people who are presumably in a similar financial situation. The goods they are selling at nights, while all the shops are already closed, they have previously bought on wholesale markets. Next to milk and sausages they are also selling Pepsi-Cola. The only brand next

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<sup>21</sup> "Khrushchyovka" In: *Wikipedia* (2018,08)  
retrieved from: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khrushchyovka](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khrushchyovka)

to the Warsteiner beer sign we see in the entire film. Maybe that's why the bottle stands out so much in this monotonous space. Pepsi-Cola was in fact the first capitalistic brand in the Soviet Union.<sup>22</sup>

Most of the post-Soviet transit spaces in Akerman's *D'Est* are marked by cold winters, by frost and blizzards, by the blue light of dusk or the flickering lights of the shops. While the camera is driving through this frost, one could wish to enter the apartments, whose warm lights are shining on us from afar. It should be mentioned that the film, next to the transit spaces which I mainly focus on, also shows the private spaces of some protagonists. In their private rooms we, the viewers, are sharing a table with them, watching them eat while they are watching us. Together we are watching television or watching their children play. Outside, however, the looks of the people waiting at the bus stops, are mostly as cool and repellent, as the weather surrounding them. In addition, the people in the queue are talking to the film team, saying: "If you would stand here yourself, you would understand how that feels." Or: "How much longer? Does it even come every hour? We are standing here already for two hours!" Most of the bus connections in the former Soviet Union did not have specified timetables. It was only written how often per hour the bus comes but not exactly when. Accordingly, it was not possible to know precisely how long one has to wait for the next bus to arrive. Furthermore, the coldness we see and nearly feel, is making the waiting time more unbearable, even for the viewers.

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<sup>22</sup> Zubacheva, Ksenia: "How did Pepsi become the first American brand to take root in the Soviet Union" In: *Russia Beyond* (2018, 2),  
retrieved from: [rbth.com/business/327568-pepsi-first-russia](http://rbth.com/business/327568-pepsi-first-russia)

Although we, the viewers, spend only a fraction of the time that the protagonist are spending in the transit spaces, Akerman creates a relatively decelerated cinematic experience. For nearly two hours, we observe the ones waiting, who simultaneously observe us. Furthermore, she creates the impression of a never ending circular movement, loop alike. A boy, standing at the beginning of a long camera movement, reappears at the end of the same shot again. It is not really clear when and how he could have managed to sneak past the camera. Minutes after driving along the street the camera seems to be back at the beginning. Akerman connects transit spaces with each other so that they do not seem to have a beginning or an end. They dissolve into a never-ending transit. But what is a transit space without a beginning or an end? Is there a kind of eternal waiting, without ever arriving anywhere? *D'Est* is the sum of all these transit spaces, a never-ending transition that reminds of the stairs in M. C. Escher's painting *Relativity*, of an endless walk without ever arriving.

The paths of the protagonists seem to be endless as well. The end of the snowy roads, passed by workers returning home from the fields, are never visible. When they wait by the side of the road, nobody is picking them up. Everything seems to move towards each other, past each other and additionally the camera is moving. Sometimes the camera even turns on its own axis. Around the camera people circulate. Everything is in motion. Everything is working. And if there had not been the collapse of the system, all the transit spaces would be probably characterized by the never resting ones as well. It is nearly impossible to precisely remember the individual spaces shown in the film, nevertheless, one remembers the collective and the

togetherness.

It becomes strangely clear why this specific space, the space without identity holds everything together and why its collapse carries such an indescribable beauty in it. On the beautiful marble floors of the metro stations, people sleep on potato sacks, between large bags, wrapped in their scarfs. The light enters through round windows and falls on the defenseless sleepers, lifting up the starkly beauty of the pure human gesture. The space, that surrounds the people, is not a place. It is merely a background or a backdrop, albeit a very beautiful one. It only keeps the masses, because they have no other choice. It is this hopelessness that reveals beauty. Beauty in the form of a touch and of mutual protection, like in the image of the mother protecting her newborn from the cold. We see beauty in form of peace and tranquility in the faces of the sleeping ones. A feeling of melancholy arises while observing them. Not only because of the empathy for the ones waiting in the cold. The melancholy in Akerman's *D'Est* arises from the culmination and connection of several human gestures which in turn arise from striving for safety and freedom, for warmth and affection, for security and protection. And through these gestures we connect with the people we observe. We enter moments that could not be of a more intimate nature. The moment of the defenseless sleep that can otherwise be only seen by the closest relatives.

## Our Circumscribed Days by Hans Van den Broeck

Six years later, in 1999, Van den Broeck and his team traveled to Moscow, the capital of the former Soviet Union. The chaos has been minimized, but the overall situation has not improved much. In his film *Our Circumscribed Days* Van den Broeck observes mainly public spaces but never remains visible. From far away he observes the events. The protagonists seem not to perceive the camera unlike the protagonists in Akerman's *D'est*. In addition, Van den Broeck films during the summer, capturing a completely different attitude towards life than what Akerman previously found during the winter months. The public places are busier. The outdoor living is less marked by the pragmatic moving from place to place. In addition, Van den Broeck combines the images with poems by the Russian writer Daniil Kharms. Although Kharms wrote during the 1920s, his poems and writings were only published during the Perestroika, accordingly they only played a bigger role during or even after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Kharms was born in 1905 in the year of the revolution. As a 17-year-old he actively

experienced the revolution, the upheaval of the Tsarist past and the beginning of the Soviet era. During this time futurism and especially the work of Kazimir Malevich had a strong affect and influence on Kharms.<sup>23</sup> In the following years of the Soviet regime, the paintings of Malevich were banned from the public and only in the years of the collapse of the Soviet Union again accessible to a wider audience.<sup>24</sup> After almost 80 years of Socialist realism, the rediscovery of the Russian avant-garde thus resembled a second silver age (an exceptionally creative period in the history of Russia during the last decade of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century).<sup>25</sup> It is important to mention that Kharms absurd and post-futuristic works were drawn from his protest against the dictatorship of the Bolsheviks. As a consequence of the suppression of his writings Kharms started to write children's literature as a basis for existence.<sup>26</sup> The anecdotal poems, often titled as nonsense literature, are reminiscent of his adult literature. Shortly before his death, caused by the malnutrition during the siege of Leningrad, in a psychiatry, Kharms wrote in his diary: "I am interested only in "nonsense"; only in that which makes no practical sense. I am interested in life only in its absurd

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<sup>23</sup> Schwarz, Wolfgang: "Wer war Daniil Charms" In: *Umsu* (2000, 04)  
retrieved from: [umsu.de/charms/texte/lebwe.htm](http://umsu.de/charms/texte/lebwe.htm)

<sup>24</sup> Spalding, Frances: "Kazimir Malevich: the man who liberated painting"  
In: *The Guardian* (2014, 07),  
retrieved from: [theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/04/kazimir-malevich-liberated-painting-tate](http://theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/jul/04/kazimir-malevich-liberated-painting-tate)

<sup>25</sup> : "Silver Age of Russian Poetry" In: *Wikipedia* (2017, 04)  
retrieved from: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver\\_Age\\_of\\_Russian\\_Poetry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_Age_of_Russian_Poetry)

<sup>26</sup> In: *Perlentaucher.de das Kulturmagazin*  
retrieved from: [perlentaucher.de/autor/daniil-charms.html](http://perlentaucher.de/autor/daniil-charms.html)



manifestations.”<sup>27</sup> Exactly this sentence builds the wonderful bridge to Hans Van den Broeck’s film *Our Circumscribed Days*, in which he captures randomness and arbitrariness. On the use of Kharms poetry in his film, Van den Broeck writes: “The only intuition we had, was that even today the tone of his absurd short stories still expressed the subterranean mentality of this enormous, modest and exuberant, tragic and comic, decrepit and courageous city, still expressed its heady poetry.”<sup>28</sup>

A never-ending flow of traffic flows along a road. Next to it a man standing and waiting, or just looking into the distance. Behind him, a bush covering the lower part of his body. He is standing with his back to us. It is one of those interchangeable roads, connecting two places. One of those interchangeable waiting persons standing on the road. It is not clear what he waits for, we do not see the end of the street and do not know his destination. That kind of questions do not seem to be important to Van den Broeck. Just as Kharms does not seem to be interested in the practical meaning of human actions, but rather in what happens in between, in the nuance. While Van den Broeck observes the waiting man in his film, a poem by Kharm’s is recited by an off-voice: “One day a man walked to his office. On his way he passed another man who had just bought some Polish bread on his way home. And that’s all.”

In this connection of the poem with the image of the standing man, a homage to the insignificant, the supposedly insignifi-

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<sup>27</sup> Quote by: Kharms, Daniil in: *Goodreads*  
retrieved from: [goodreads.com/author/quotes/4152890.Daniil\\_Kharms](https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/4152890.Daniil_Kharms)

<sup>28</sup> In: *SOIT*  
retrieved from: [soit.info/works-projects/our-circumscribed-days](https://soit.info/works-projects/our-circumscribed-days)

cant, arises. A homage to all what happens in between, what rarely plays a matter, what does not seem worth being mentioned or does not seem noteworthy. Van den Broeck captures moments that are usually cut out in films or do not even emerge and if they are shown, it is only to represent the transit, to enable the rapid passage from one scene of action to another. But this entire film consists almost only of such transit spaces.

In *Our Circumscribed Days* the everlasting observation of the spaces and people illustrate and demonstrate their post-Soviet specifications. A wooden door is wide open. Two tall potted plants prevent the ones waiting in front of the door from entering. But not for long, because soon when the first of the waiting ones squeezes past the plant, the rest starts to follow. The camera pans to the right. The door seems to be an entrance to a supermarket. Only after all the waiting ones have entered the store, a woman comes out in work clothes and pushes the potted plants aside. A man comes out short after her and pushes the plants a little further apart. Only now an unhindered passage would be possible. Van den Broeck has speeded up the sequence and added music to it, which gives the impression of an old slapstick movie à la Chaplin. In fact, the situation is curious, because apparently the waiting people seem to trust their feelings more than the ambiguous signs of the supermarket. A Russian solution in colloquial speech is used to describe an uncomplicated and simple repair<sup>29</sup>. These often pragmatic, quick and straightforward solutions to problems, can

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<sup>29</sup> Ehrlich, Axel: ““Russische Lösung” verhindert Großbrand” In: *Volksstimme.de* (2018, 11)  
 retrieved from: [volksstimme.de/deutschland-welt/vermishtes/aufgespiesst-russische-loesung-verhindert-grossbrand](https://www.volksstimme.de/deutschland-welt/vermishtes/aufgespiesst-russische-loesung-verhindert-grossbrand)

be seen as a result of the survival strategies, which former Soviet citizens adopted during their life under economical insecurities. What can be observed in the described sequence is the lack of trust in the transit space as a permeable and stable bridge between two places.

The 1990s were also marked by a rapid increase in alcohol abuse, influenced by the daily struggle for survival, the substantial loss of money and the consequent stress. Although the situation began to improve around 1998, Russia was still one of the leading consumers of alcohol worldwide.<sup>30</sup> In a sense, the state of being drunk resembles being in a nonplace. Excessive use of alcohol restricts the memory and blurs situations and places to an indefinable mass. In *Our Circumscribed Days* the nonplace meets the drunken person. Where a person is supposed to be a passer-by, the drunk person begins to create his own place within the transit space. An apparently drunk man in a suit leans against a wall and tries in vain to keep his balance. Soon he falls to the ground and involuntarily uses the corner, that is available to him, as a place to sleep. The waiting room becomes a living space.

The transit space can be a potential. At least the one that leaves a range of opportunities and is not deliberately made homogeneous and makes the rule break nearly impossible. Like an airport terminal or a fast-food chain. Another example for the conversion of the transit space is the sequence of two men

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<sup>30</sup> Steiner, Eduard: "Alkohol ist die Tragödie unserer Wirtschaft" In: *Die Welt* (2014, 10)

retrieved from: [welt.de/wirtschaft/article133566870/Alkohol-ist-die-Tragoedie-unserer-Wirtschaft.html](http://welt.de/wirtschaft/article133566870/Alkohol-ist-die-Tragoedie-unserer-Wirtschaft.html)

practicing car driving between a water bottle, an oil can and the leg of a mannequin, on a square, behind the back of an indefinable building. The loneliness of the place becomes a potential. This conversion of places which develops a performative character runs through the entire film. A man uses the remote end of a street to sort the contents of his suitcase. The big stone on the floor serves him as a footrest, sometimes as a shelf for his bag. In the concealment, he can read undisturbed, free from the gaze of others, free from expectations.

This nearly performative convention of the space reminiscent of the One Minute Sculptures of Erwin Wurm, in which he or other pose with everyday objects creating a dynamic act rather than a static sculpture.<sup>31</sup> And so does Van den Broeck. But instead of creating them within an art space he finds them in everyday moments and places. Only the body of a person in a white coat is visible, the head is leaning into a kiosk window. The architecture seems to wrap around the person, and they seem to become an entity. As well as the outside spectators of a music festival, who are leaning against the birches, in the surrounding forest and seem to become a formation of dancers, who are just waiting for their turn to perform.

As already seen in *D'Est*, also in *Our Circumscribed Days* some use the transit space as a potential source of income. In the case of this film, however, no goods are sold. Instead, songs are sung in an underground tunnel. The daily music played in such a tunnel transforms it into something different from a nonplace. Assuming that the performance is happening

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<sup>31</sup> "Erwin Wurm's One Minute Sculptures are refreshing" In: *Public Delivery* retrieved from: [publicdelivery.org/erwin-wurm-one-minute-sculptures/](http://publicdelivery.org/erwin-wurm-one-minute-sculptures/)

there regularly, it distinguishes the place from similar ones. Moreover, such a place causes an interaction between the musicians and the pedestrians. Even if the pedestrians will try to avoid the interaction by all costs, their gestures and actions are determined by the musician's presence.

And finally similar to *D'Est* one of the last sequences of *Our Circumscribed Days* is a ride through nocturnal spaces on nocturnal streets, that resemble each other. The only difference are the many billboards that still were not present during the shooting of Akerman's *D'Est*. But even those did not really give more individuality to these homogeneous spaces.

## Conclusion

The big queues that we saw in Akerman's *D'Est* have gradually dissolved. The collective waiting has decreased. The melancholy that permeates *D'Est* for almost two hours, is only slightly felt in *Our Circumscribed Days*. Van den Broeck carries a lightness through his film, consisting of curious, performative moments. Likewise, the late 1990s were marked by an economic boom and a decline in alcoholism. Both filmmakers have managed to capture a mood that was symptomatic for the particular time period of the Soviet Union. Both have found these moods and atmospheres in anonymous places that do not tell a clear story, such as the Kremlin or the Red Square. But precisely there, things happen that can not be found anywhere else. Marc Augé described the nonplaces as a phenomenon of motion, which again is similar to the definition of a chemical compound that I described in the introduction chapter.<sup>32</sup> This would mean that within the nonplaces, the movement can be observed as such, in its most varied form, including the motionless standstill. Precisely these pragmatic spaces, that are merely intended to serve the movement, have no intention of representing or demonstrating something. Nevertheless, in a way, these spaces

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<sup>32</sup> Däumer, Matthias / Gerok-Reiter, Annette / (Hg.) Kreuder Friedmann: "Unorte: Spielarten einer verlorenen Verortung. Kulturwissenschaftliche Perspektiven." P. 17. In: *Transcript-Verlag*  
retrieved from: [transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/39/01/cb/ts1406\\_1.pdf](http://transcript-verlag.de/media/pdf/39/01/cb/ts1406_1.pdf)

are representative for the surrounding system. The transit space illustrates the attitude of the system towards the respective inhabitants. It can provide information about how and if the surrounding system works, and what kind of conception of dealing with such a space, the residents might have. Accordingly, both films can certainly be regarded as an important cinematic witness of that specific time period.

Significantly, both filmmakers built circular movements into their films: The streets and people in Akerman's *D'Est* who seem to recur regularly. The camera that turns around its own axis observing the supposedly never ending crowds, coming out of the station. As well as the title of Van den Broeck's film *Our Circumscribed Days* or the poems of Kharmis that often seem to return to the beginning, or have the ending already anchored in their beginning. And of course the end of *Our Circumscribed Days*, showing a group of people rotating a table until everything falls to the ground. Finally, even the kitchen cupboard collapses under the weight of a protagonist lying on it. The looping and circling goes on until everything falls apart. And yet somehow this collapse is beautiful, sad and humorous at the same time. Almost like the never-ending loops of the Soviet Union and modern-day Russia, which tear everything apart but never completely destroy.

The collapse of the Romanov Dynasty was followed by the Soviet Union. The freedom and the Silver Ages of Russian Culture were followed by Stalin and his state repressions. After Stalin's death under the government of Khrushchev the period of de-Stalinization, the so called Khrushchev Thaw, brought back a little bit of freedom. With Khrushchev's death, this freedom

disappeared again. Under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev, the Re-stalinization (promotion of the positive views of Stalin) began.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand the standard of living of the population was raised. With Breschnev's death and the following term of Gorbachev, reforms were introduced. The time of Glasnost and Perestroika had begun. But the increasing corruption was depriving the state economy of its important resources. The collapse of the Soviet Union followed, as well as an economic crisis and ongoing political tensions under the government of Boris Yeltsin.<sup>34</sup> And even a year after the Van den Broeck's film was created and Putin came to power, these endless loops continued in a similar way. The initial economic rise kept barely ten years. From 2011, the economic performance of Russia declined again.<sup>35</sup> The young democracy increasingly took over authoritarian characteristics.

This endless circular movement going on since a little more than a hundred years, rotates between an ascent and a descent on different levels. Like a never-ending loop that leads directly back to the opposite after a brief period of freedom or economic ascent. Under such circumstances the entire life can seem to be like a single circular movement. The moments and situations showed by Akerman and Van den Broek are demonstrating this

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<sup>33</sup> : "Neo-Stalinism" In: *Wikipedia* (2018, 9)  
retrieved from: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Stalinism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Stalinism)

<sup>34</sup> Wood, Tony: "The crisis that created Putin" In: *Jacobin* (2018, 08)  
retrieved from: [jacobinmag.com/2018/08/rouble-crash-yeltsin-putin-free-market](https://jacobinmag.com/2018/08/rouble-crash-yeltsin-putin-free-market)

<sup>35</sup> "Wladimir Wladimirowitsch Putin" In: *Wikipedia* (2018,11)  
retrieved from: [de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wladimir\\_Wladimirowitsch\\_Putin#Dritte\\_Amtszeit\\_als\\_Pr%C3%A4sident\\_\(2012%E2%80%932018\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wladimir_Wladimirowitsch_Putin#Dritte_Amtszeit_als_Pr%C3%A4sident_(2012%E2%80%932018))



## CONCLUSION

phenomenon based on transit spaces. Between the significance and meaninglessness, between the placement and misplacement, situations emerge that tell stories of fears and worries, of survival and outlast. But above all, the captured situations tell stories of human proximity and the beauty of the in-between. Of what humans do when they do not do anything. Both movies are full of optimism. Even if life in the post-Soviet trait space seems to be like a permanent loop, there is beauty and tenderness, poetry and harmony between the morbid spaces of a collapsing system.