

## **On the Architecture of DAU: Capitalist Realism, Logical Conclusionism and Underpant Determinism**

In my trawl through a decade's worth of commentary, gossip, and news written about DAU in multiple languages, I have been guided and assisted by two factors.

First, by the fact that I am focusing on the architecture and set-design of the project, as conceived (in consultation with Ilya Khrzhanovskiy) by the otherwise almost entirely unknown artist Denis Shibarov. Shibarov designed every aspect of the set of the DAU project in Kharkiv, as well as the DAU project's 2018 and 2019 releases in Berlin and Paris, and some elements of the interiors of 100 Piccadilly,

the project's long-term HQ in London. To date, hardly anything has been written about Shibarov and his work on DAU in English – although a fair amount of information and some interviews are available in Russian.

Second, my reading is quite possibly overdetermined (if the Pavlovian / Marxian / Stanislavskian determinist environmental design of Khrzhanovskiy and Shibarov indeed functions as it is intended to function) by the impression I formed during my visits to 100 Piccadilly in the summer of 2019.

I have organised my notes and/or impressions about DAU into a tentative and overlapping typology of categories (Fig. 3). I won't go into the detail of each of these categories in my analysis, but I will refer to some of them, in particular: the terrain of toxic masculinity; underpant determinism; communist plenty; logical conclusionism; and capitalist realism.



A working typology of DAU

My visit to 100 Piccadilly was very underwhelming. This is the word I remember writing down at the time; and it is perhaps notable that Eugénie Zvonkine also used it in her description of the Paris exhibition (Zvonkine 2019). The underwhelmingness was compounded, I think, by the fact that this interior had clearly been in place already for a decade or so, and had not been refreshed. In fact, everything looked much as it did in the footage from the Paris event, but worse. The carpet exuded a slightly dank odour. The poor-quality wax figurines were faded and dirty. The frameless Soviet poster reproductions were dog-eared.

In keeping with Category 3 of my typology, there was also a tattered old hanging poster of the female internal sexual organs, which was not even Soviet and, for that reason, somehow all the more strikingly gratuitous. There were also taxidermy fragments of animals, mostly pigs. After I watched the pig getting killed by Maksim Martsinkevich and his neo-Nazi companions at the end of *DAU. Degeneration* (Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, Ilya Permyakov), I was treated to a meal at the in-house "stolovaia". I think it consisted of pelmeni, mors, and vodka. As I ate my pork dumplings, I stared at the disembodied roaring boar's head in the middle of the table and I think perhaps it was supposed to provoke some sort of unpleasant Pavlovian response. I lay out a few more observations and interpretations of the DAU films below, relating to the categories from Fig. 1.

### **Plenty: The Soviet Union without Shortages**

Throughout the DAU movies I have seen – for the record, these are *Novyi chelovek*, a shortened cut of *Degeneratsiia / Degeneration*, *Tri dnia / Three Days* (Ilya Khrzhanovskiy, Jekaterina Oertel), and *Smelye liudi / Brave People* (Ilya

Khrzhanovskiy, Aleksei Sliusarchuk) – there is a cornucopia of food and booze. Not just vodka and sausage, but also grapes and brandy and champagne. This plenty features at all levels of the hierarchy, from Landau's apartment to the buffet. So, why is there so much plenty in DAU? Why is there so much food and booze readily available, all the time, streams and streams of it? The food flows as easily as the blood and the semen.

This reminds me of a recurring quasi-ironic theme in contemporary Russian culture, which is about the reconstruction of the USSR, but better and cleaner, and more successful than it ever was before. This is the theme behind the ongoing 'blagoustroistvo' or reconstruction of VDNKh, the Stalin-era exhibition ground in north Moscow, which is currently being restored to a gentrified fantasy of Stalinist perfection (Schönle 2020). This is also the theme which – arguably – is satirised in the mass-market 2006 Lulii Gusman dark comedy *Park sovetskogo perioda / Park of the Soviet Period* (Russia), which has regularly been invoked, in name if not in substance, in discussions about DAU. And it brings to mind, most obviously for me at least, elements in the recently-opened Kremlin-adjacent Zaryadye Park – the main subject of my current research on Moscow.

This theme is most vividly embodied in the park's main restaurant, *Voskhod* (initially to be named *Soiuz*), whose proprietor (celebrity restaurateur Aleksandr Rappoport) and designers (the Sundukov sisters), describe its design ideology as being about creating a space which feels like "the Soviet Union, but without shortages" ["Sovetskii Soiuz no bez defitsitov"] (Murawski 2020a and 2020b).

### **Capitalist Realism**

The above also calls to a mind a kind of twisted version of socialist realism, which can be called "capitalist realism", in a merger of the concepts proposed by the philosopher Mark Fisher (Fisher 2009); and, some years before Fisher, by the architectural critics Bart Goldhoorn and Philip Meuser in their book about post-Soviet architecture (Goldhoorn, Meuser 2006) whereby the bombastic aesthetic of socialist realism is retained but repurposed for functioning in a commodity economy, reinforcing in the process the sense of the current order's eternity and immutability.

This also pertains to the next category:

### **Logical Conclusionism**

DAU has been much ridiculed for the way in which it allegedly attempts to create a conceit of authenticity, by making extras and visitors wear Soviet underwear and eat Soviet food and spend replica Soviet money, and so on.<sup>14</sup> It is curious, then,

that – when it comes to the set design, interior too but exterior especially – this concern with authenticity dissipates; or at least morphs into something else. The grand set of DAU – created by Shibarov in the defunct open-air swimming pool of Dynamo Kharkiv, as well as in various other locations throughout the city and beyond – adds up to an absurd parody of Stalinist architecture. It all feels a bit like a Terry Gilliam movie; and – in its more thoughtful (but no less derivative) moments – like a Soviet-inspired monumental postmodern edifice of the sort built by the Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill in the 1980s.

It certainly does not look like anything in the Soviet Union; and it does not look like it is trying to be realistic. The set-design has been variously characterised – the BBC Russian service, for example, describes it as “exaggerated constructivism” (Kan 2019). Shibarov himself has also made numerous claims about his inspirations. In our interview, he referred to buildings in the style of what has been called “post-constructivism” – a 1930s bridging style between Constructivism and Stalinist socialist realism – as his primary inspiration.<sup>15</sup> Elsewhere, he has referred to a sort of undead Stalinism, or Stalinism taken to its logical conclusion. As he told *Kommersant* journalist Oleg Kashin: “after the death of Stalin, there was a campaign against excesses in architecture [...] but here, I wanted [instead] to bring superfluity to its absolute fucking limits” (Kashin 2010).

In fact, a further, unrealised film, *Gorod na vysote* [The City on the Heights], was to be set in a Moscow in which the Palace of the Soviets had actually been built. As Shibarov tells *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*: “I thought it would be really glorious, if we imagined that Stalin never died in 1953, and his favourite style in architecture had reached its apogee” (Anon. 2011).

### **Terrain of Toxic Masculinity**

Which brings us back again to the question of the sort of relationship to sexuality and gender DAU exudes. The violence of the DAU project's troublesome masculinity is certainly discernible, on a very explicit level, in its design ideology. The entire Institute – perhaps in some sort of crass reference to Landau's interest in polyamory – is built, apparently, as an embodiment of the female sexual organs. One side of the Institute – the one with the long vertical openings, on the left – was named (by Shibarov himself) “vagina”; the opposite side, with rounded porthole-like openings, was known as “nipples”. Shibarov told Kashin how he longed endlessly and desirously for design inspiration, until “suddenly, in the course of one night, all of this was born in my head: first one wall, and then other wall, they formed a whole, and all the remaining buildings and structures” (Kashin 2010). Kashin adds: “Denis asked that I remove from the text his recollection of two nights of uninterrupted sex which preceded this epiphany; but without this

recollection, it would be impossible for the reader to understand why the walls of the Institute have these physiological names” (ibid.).

I think it’s fair to say that a repeated tendency for male demiurges to name bits of architecture after parts of the female sexual anatomy is definitely a thing in DAU. The substance of Shibarov’s statement to Kashin is seconded by the above-mentioned anatomical chart hanging in the ‘stolovaia’ at 100 Piccadilly; and, further, by the naming conventions of the bar/stolovaia in the Paris DAU exhibition. In the words of what appears to be a male French DAU staffer, as rendered on the BBC Russian service website: “There is a secret room here, it is called ‘the vagina’, and there is like a really cool floor, a really soft floor, and you can visit it” (Kan 2019).

As the subtitles to the BBC film suggest, however, another name for the “vagina” (perhaps the official one) is “Sranaia dyra” (literally – the shithole). Quite what this double naming convention is supposed to indicate is left unexplored. Probably it is supposed to be some sort of ironic joke. But its consequences are rather disturbing, all the more so when one calls to mind the social-psychological impulse at the heart of DAU. Given the numerous rumours and accusations of sexual violence plaguing the deterministic planet of DAU, all of the above monikers and utterances take on rather unsettling resonances.

### **DAU Determines?**

In her recent essay, Sophie Pinkham has commented on what she calls the “reductive Pavlovianism” of DAU – the filmmakers’ expectation that “the unmediated experience of ‘authentic’ Soviet commodities and brutalized personal relationships will trigger examinable reactions” (Pinkham 2020). Khrzhanovskiy’s repeated, rather banal references to the Stanford prison experiment, and to his desire to use the film to “extract” what he calls the “genotype” of the Soviet person do, I think, bolster Pinkham’s characterisation; so, too, do numerous statements by Shibarov, made in many of his Russian-language interviews and – especially vociferously – in our interview.

Pinkham also points out that the chief financier of the project is the oligarch Sergei Adonyev, co-founder (with Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and others) of Strelka, a cutting-edge architecture and design institute. Strelka has, since its foundation in 2009, spawned a vast “consulting bureau”, carrying out (state-financed) projects of ‘blagoustroistvo’ – urban improvement or prettification – in cities all over Russia and the former USSR. The chief exemplars of the ongoing ‘blagoustroistvo’ campaign are Moscow’s Gor’kii Park (Strelka’s revival of the paradigmatic ‘park sovetskogo perioda’ was completed in 2012); and the Kremlin-abutting Zaryadye

Park, opened with great fanfare by Vladimir Putin in 2017 (Murawski and Shevchenko 2017).

Now, 'blagoustroistvo' also has a deeply deterministic ideology at its core. This determinism manifests itself in myriad ways – one aspect of the rhetoric of 'blagoustroistvo' worth commenting on in this context is the use of what I call, following Anna Kruglova (2017, see also Murawski 2018), "vernacular Marxist" ideas about the relationship between human consciousness and material conditions. In particular, I have in mind the phrase "being determines consciousness" ("bytie opredeliaet soznanie") – a quotation from Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – which is routinely deployed in everyday discussions about 'blagoustroistvo'.

So what is the significance of the fact that DAU (and the post-Soviet world beyond) is so peppered with these reductive cod-determinisms – Stanislavskian, Pavlovian, and Marxist? I am not going to provide a conclusive answer to this question here; and some possible routes of insight are formulated by Shibanov himself in the course of our conversation. In any case, the process of researching and writing this text has convinced me that looking more closely at the architecture of DAU allows us to make sense of some of the seeming puzzles and contradictions in the project's ideology, and of what these puzzles and contradictions say about the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and deterministic techno-political ideologies – not only in Russia but also in the world beyond – during the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Michał Murawski  
School of Slavonic and East European Studies  
University College London  
[m.murawski@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:m.murawski@ucl.ac.uk)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The DAU project started as a biopic, but was developed into an expanded multimedia project.

<sup>2</sup> In his lecture *On the New Processuality* at the National Centre for Contemporary Art (26.04.2016), the head of the Stanislavskii Electro-theatre, director Boris Iukhananov touched upon the "new" theatre, one that could exceed merely acting and directing, and reach the dimension of "a perpetual time of culture". In such time-space there is no teleology, since in such a theatre there would be no end of the process of acting and directing, and no "violence of one ontology over the other".  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVBzHRxZT1Q> (accessed: 31.05.2021).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zO-e8F08cBE> (accessed: 31.05.2021).

<sup>4</sup> For a broader discussion of the link between ethics and unwatchability, see Grønstad's analysis of Claire Denis's *Trouble Every Day* (2001) in Grønstad 2014: 111.

<sup>5</sup> 15 января 2021 года в Европейском университете в Санкт-Петербурге состоялась дискуссия, посвященная проекту ДАУ, в которой приняли участие Вадим Волков (ЕУСПБ), Елена Костылева (аспирантка ЕУСПБ), Артемий Магун (ЕУСПБ), Йоэль Регев (ЕУСПБ), Серое Фиолетовое (журнал *Нож*), Жюли Реше (ШПИ ТГУ), Виктория Смирнова-Майзель (Институт кино и телевидения), Олег Хархордин (ЕУСПБ) и режиссер фильма ДАУ Илья Хржановский. Видеозапись дискуссии доступна по ссылке: <https://eusp.org/news/v-evropeyskom-universitete-sostoyalos-obsuzhdenie-kinoproekta-dau-i-ego-rezonansa>

<sup>6</sup> Адрес сайта: <https://kkbbd.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Оригинал письма: <https://kkbbd.com/2020/02/29/an-open-letter-to-carlo-chatrian-and-mariette-rissenbeek-from-accredited-russian-members-of-the-berlinale-press/>

<sup>8</sup> “Божественное Шребера неотделимо от дизъюнкций, в которых он разделяет самого себя: предыдущие империи, последующие империи; по следующие империи высшего Бога или низшего Бога” ( Делёз, Гваттари 2007: 63).

<sup>9</sup> <http://partizaning.org/?p=12015>

<sup>10</sup> Любовь Аркус, запись в Facebook от 30 мая 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/lyubovarkus/posts/3430362576978370>.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.nashuatelegraph.com/opinion/2019/01/02/malcolm-x-our-problems-will-never-be-solved-by-the-white-man/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.artprotest.org/cgi-bin/news.pl?&id=3476> (дата доступа: 11.09.2021)

<sup>13</sup> In a personal conversation.

<sup>14</sup> In my interview with Shibanov (“[Pearls before Swine](#)”, this issue of *Apparatus*), however, he denied that the creation of such a sense of authenticity was ever an intention of the authors.

<sup>15</sup> See my interview with Shibanov “[Pearls before Swine](#)”. The term “post-constructivism” was coined by Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Arkhitektura sovetskogo svangarda* (1996); and the expansive monograph by Aleksandra Selivanova, *Postkonstruktivizm: Vlast' i arhitektura v 1930-e gody v SSSR* (2020).

## Bio

**Keti Chukhrov** is ScD in philosophy, an associate professor at the School of Philosophy & Cultural Studies at the Higher School of Economics (Moscow). In 2012-2017 she was the head of the Theory and Research department at the National Center of Contemporary Art, Moscow. In 2017-2019 she has been a Marie Curie-Sklodowska Fellow in the UK, Wolverhampton University. Her latest book, *Practicing the Good: Desire and Boredom in Soviet Socialism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2020), deals with the impact of the socialist political economy on the

epistemologies of historical socialism. Her full-length books include: *To Be – To Perform: Theatre’ in Philosophic Critique of Art* (European University, 2011); *Pound & £* (Logos, 1999); and a volume of dramatic writing: *Merely Humans* (2010). Her research interests and publications deal with philosophy of performativity, Soviet Marxist philosophy and communist epistemologies, and art as the institute of global contemporaneity.

**Daria V. Ezerova** is a Postdoctoral Research Scholar at the Harriman Institute at Columbia University. She specializes in post-Soviet and contemporary Russian cinema, and has published in the *Slavic Review*, *Senses of Cinema*, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*, *SEANS*, and *KinoKultura*. She received her PhD from Yale University in 2018.

**Philip Cavendish** is a Reader in Russian and Soviet Film Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. His main research interests lie in the relationship between film technology and visual aesthetics. He has published on the poetics of the camera in pre-Revolutionary Russian cinema, the visual aesthetics of Soviet avant-garde and mainstream cinema in the 1920s and '30s, the archival history and reconstructions of Sergei Eizenshtein's first film (*Glumov's Diary*), the genre of the photo-film in contemporary Russian cinema, and experiments in Soviet colour film and animation during the 1930s and 1940s. Along with Dr Rachel Morley, he is co-Chair of the Russian Cinema Research Group at UCL SSEES.

**Elena Kostyleva (Елена Костылева)** – поэт, писатель, философ, психоаналитик, аспирантка Центра практической философии «Стасис». Статьи и рецензии Елены Костылевой публикуются с 2000-х годов, в том числе в журналах *Стасис*, *Новое литературное обозрение*, *Сеанс*, на сайте *colta.ru* и в нескольких десятках популярных изданий. Стихотворения Костылевой переведены на английский, французский, итальянский, греческий, китайский языки. Книги *Легко досталось* (2000) и *Лидия* (2009) попали в шорт-листы Всероссийской премии «Дебют» (2000) и Премии Андрея Белого (2009), стихотворение «Советская женщина» номинировано на премию «Поэзия» в 2019 году.

**Grey Violet (Серое Фиолетовое)**, anarchist\*, text, gesture.

**Svetlana Dragaeva** is an Executive Producer of DAU and the Founder and CEO of Fountain Digital Labs, as well as creator of the BAFTA-winning Virry app and Virry VR series. She has degrees in cognitive linguistics, politics, cultural studies, narratology, and psychology. She has also taught film at Ohio State University.



**Michał Murawski** is an anthropologist of architecture and Lecturer (Assistant Professor) in Critical Area Studies at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London. His first book, *The Palace Complex: A Stalinist Skyscraper, Capitalist Warsaw and a City Transfixed*, was published by Indiana University Press in 2019. More information about Michał's research and writing can be found on his website: [www.michalmurawski.net](http://www.michalmurawski.net)

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