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The Distorted Images and Realities of Andrei Bitov's Literary Photographs

José Vergara

In Andrei Bitov's short tale "Pushkin's Photograph (1799-2099)" (1987), a group of Pushkinists sends a young colleague, Igor' Odoevtsev, back in time armed with a camera and a singular goal: to succeed where history failed by capturing the father of Russian poetry Alexander Pushkin on film. "What do we objectively know about the external appearance of the great poet?" asks one of the scholars with "great regret."¹ They seek to validate their veneration of Pushkin through physical evidence of his existence for a post-Niépcian world.² While the time-traveler feels a special kinship with the national poet, Igor's plans quickly unravel upon his arrival in the nineteenth century. He can neither acclimate to the temporal-cultural shock, nor use his knowledge of the epoch to his advantage. Instead of returning with pristine photos of the inimitable poet, he brings back blurred images of famous scenes from Pushkin's art and life, thereby evoking the Pushkinian mythos but nothing more: "The storm that preceded the cloud that the poet observed when the line 'The last cloud dispersed by the storm...' came to him; [...] the wonderful portrait of the hare in the snow [...]; and all the rest [of the photos] were water and waves."³ Throughout Bitov's narrative, these so-called failed snapshots represent conflicting ideas. As Sven Spieker has noted, the items Igor' catalogues are "already canonized by official culture," processed and developed, as it were, by a system that prevents alternate readings of Pushkin and the past.⁴ They signify an externally imposed interpretation of the poet, one that clashes with Igor's idealized and personalized version. Moreover, as Igor's efforts paradoxically show, the images he catches on film symbolize the difficulty of pinning down reality. They can function as icons of the past, but they lose meaning when manipulated, and the past remains frustratingly ephemeral. Igor' cannot capture and convey the reality of Pushkin's era as the non-

concrete photos fail to serve as the tether in time he seeks. Read more generously, they still embody the fortuitous moments that inspired Pushkin. They may have been co-opted, but they retain a glimmer of their original “senseless beauty,” as the narrator suggests.⁵ Photography in Bitov’s work consistently evokes this rich tension between a desire to possess a person, place, or idea through images and a more positive, though seemingly impossible effort to recognize the inner substance of the photo’s subject by using it as a springboard for enlightenment.

Although his best-known exploration of the many uses, misuses, benefits, and limitations of photography is “Pushkin’s Photograph,” Bitov’s multifaceted photographic trope in fact appears in many of his works. T.L. Rybal'chenko has offered some valuable preliminary observations on this motif, particularly its literary heritage, both epistemological and ontological implications, and symbolic functions.⁶ Her short study addresses Bitov’s two principal photo-texts—“Pushkin’s Photograph” and “View of the Trojan Sky” (2008)—with some additional comments on his most well-known novel, *Pushkin House* (1964-71). Rybal'chenko concludes that Bitov’s conception of culture is “undoubtedly pessimistic, holding within itself an agnosticism in the representation of possibilities of understanding a living life and culture.”⁷ This pessimism, she argues, finds expression in Bitov’s deployment of photography as a key trope. Rybal'chenko details the ways in which his photographs highlight the human tendency to mistake familiarity for absolute knowledge.

The more thorough diachronic survey presented below will further elucidate Bitov’s complex stance on photography that he develops across several genres and decades. Rybal'chenko adeptly notes the ways in which photos are mishandled by his heroes, and yet, as the aforementioned diversity of interpretations regarding “Pushkin’s Photograph” reveals, the situation is far more complicated and covers greater ground in the author’s oeuvre. A photo’s

ability to freeze reality and time undoubtedly disturbs many of Bitov's narrators, particularly when it becomes a tool for manipulation or distortion. Such an approach reveals an inherently self-centered attitude that harms one's engagement with the world by substituting a two-dimensional simulation for a three-dimensional reality. In other words, it gives the photographer's perspective priority and implies that the subject of the photograph is brought into existence or is defined by the photographer/viewer, not in its own right. Another set of Bitov's characters recognizes the dissonance between the image and subject, the document and the documented. They initially fall into similar patterns as their egocentric counterparts, but eventually come to doubt the veracity of their vision, a point that Rybal'chenko downplays in her analysis. Bitov in this way continues to dismantle the idea that photos can be truly authentic representations. Finally, if photography frequently embodies the human tendency toward egocentrism, then the very rare positive example of photography in Bitov's work suggests a metaphoric alternative, namely that one must allow the outside world to make an imprint upon oneself as on a photographic plate, thereby bridging gaps in knowledge and mutual understanding. The analysis that follows explicates how Bitov uses ekphrastic depictions of photos and other related motifs as a key device to call for a connection to others, to the past, and to nature devoid of pretensions and self-centered falsifications. Tracing the many iterations of the photographic motif in Bitov's texts and placing it within the broader context of Russian culture's intersections with photography will furthermore deepen our understanding of this contemporary author's engagement with questions central to his generation.

Literary Precedents and Cultural Contexts

Before proceeding, it would be worth considering Bitov's precedents and contemporaneous uses

of photography in fiction of various kinds, both Russian and Western, and to contextualize his particular approach to the topic. In doing so we may see more clearly how Bitov's art takes up with numerous problems in Russian history. Many studies have examined how Russian authors use photography as a metaphor for memory, displacement of identity, or a link to the dead, to name only a handful of topics that resonate with Bitov's own engagement with photography.⁸ Some have paired image against text (e.g., Vladimir Nabokov, the Soviet satirist Il'ia Il'f, the dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn); others have forsaken the very word "photography" from their art even while making meaningful connections between the two (the modernist poet Marina Tsvetaeva). Where Bitov, who relies on actual images far less often, falls within this range remains to be investigated more fully.

First of all, it is important to note that Bitov's generation experienced a massive growth in the popularity of cameras and photography with the onset of the Thaw, the era following Joseph Stalin's death during which various repressive political and cultural policies were relaxed for approximately ten years. As Jessica Werneke has recently established, this period witnessed the wide and rapid development of amateur photography and photo clubs across the country. Photographers were furthermore called upon to document "intimate everyday life at home" along with "foreign locales" in popular magazines such as *Ogonek* (Little Flame) as "images served to reinforce Soviet ideas of self during the cultural thaw."⁹ This explosion of photos during Bitov's development as a writer meant that they were ever-present for his generation, and they entailed a new way of relating to the world as Soviet citizens were able to see foreign lands.

Indeed, the presence of these magazines and clubs raised significant questions in the cultural sphere. From the very beginning of the Soviet state, as Leah Dickerman has argued, the Communist Party expressed a "desire to provide visual documentation of history, but only in the

‘correct’ narrative,” which produced the “paradox that defines the cultural position of photography in the Soviet Union.”¹⁰ Bitov’s literary photographs speak to these very same debates about photography as an art form and documentary tool. Does it simply record reality, truth, life itself? Alternatively, does it craft a reality through the photographer’s perspective and gaze or through the viewer’s reading of the photo? Bitov’s texts take on all these questions in various guises. As already mentioned, photographs were also used to construct an identity, particularly in relation to other nations, both within and without the Soviet Union. Much the same way, Bitov’s literary photos poke holes in the idea of stable identities or concepts.

As concerns photo-texts themselves, the case of Nabokov, whose encounters with photography have been widely studied, serves as a useful comparison in this regard. As one of Bitov’s self-identified predecessors, Nabokov engages with photography in ways not unlike his disciple. In his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, for example, Nabokov plays photography against text through a series of captions. He does so both to maintain control over his authorial image and to destabilize the reader’s perception of both the photos and their corresponding captions. Bitov, too, engages in such a project, even if his texts typically do not incorporate actual photos. His characters often wield photographs to fashion an identity, either for themselves or for those with whom they wish to associate. Nabokov elsewhere probes the limits of the photographic act in his fiction. *Invitation to a Beheading* features several such examples. For instance, the protagonist Cincinnatus C., condemned to death by the novel’s totalitarian regime, is introduced to his executioner’s invention, the photohoroscope. This device uses cheap tricks to simulate a young girl’s future life through photos, a technique that reduces life to an emblem by breaking it into meaningless parts that can be rearranged. Bitov, building upon his modernist forebear’s devices, will also imagine photographs from the future, suggesting in the process photography’s

contradistinction to real, lived experience.¹¹

W. G. Sebald's prose fiction, though written in German, also provides a useful contemporary parallel to that of Bitov. Littered with photographs that both affirm and repudiate their linguistic referents within the texts, his works express how photos can be used by characters to craft narratives that serve particular ends. In his article on the intersections between text and image in Sebald's novel *The Emigrants*, J. J. Long describes this process through the writings of Marianne Hirsch, who developed the concept of "postmemory." As he puts it, "Postmemory refers to the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, and whose own belated stories are 'evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.'" ¹² Photos charged with postmemory, in other words, depict a reality unknown to the viewer and which must be shaped by means of a narrative, a process that is quite familiar to some of Bitov's heroes who confront the Soviet past as it comes to light.¹³ It is in this intersection between memory, image, and narrative that Bitov and Sebald overlap most strongly.

In fact, Bitov occupies a position quite appropriate for a writer of his generation, which witnessed the end of both Stalinism and socialism and experienced radical developments in art and literature, often asynchronously relative to the West. Situated squarely between what is considered Modernism and what is called Postmodernism, Bitov uses photographs both to give an air of authenticity and to question reality. *The Symmetry Teacher's* (2008) title page, for instance, features a portrait of a man purported to be the text's original author, A. Tired Boffin. This same photo, however, has appeared in an edition of *Pushkin House* amid Bitov family portraits included in the book's paratextual apparatus.¹⁴ Most of his photographs, however, are entirely imagined. The indeterminate, even subversive, nature of Bitov's literary photographs

amplifies the disruptive nature of his fiction.

As will be shown below, such thematics speak to a number of concepts with which theorists of photography have also grappled. Soviet Russia's history, particularly its modernist connections, is of great concern to Bitov. His texts are replete with individuals obsessed with gaining mastery over a lost past, whether it be one's family history or elements of the modernist era suppressed by the Soviet regime.¹⁵ That is why, Susan Sontag maintains, people who have been "robbed of their past" believe that "a photograph is not only like its subject [...]. It is part of, an extension of that subject; and a potent means of acquiring it, of gaining control over it."¹⁶ Those like Igor' Odoevtsev use images to expand the scope of their dominion, for if they can photograph someone, they can claim possession over this subject as it is recovered from oblivion and subsequently inserted into their constructed narrative.

In this way, Bitov's photos function as emblems of simulation in his works, and they may be productively linked to the writings of Mikhail Epstein, one of Russia's leading contemporary cultural critics and theorists. According to Epstein, who adapts Jean Baudrillard's ideas for his own context, Russian history is plagued by a long-standing tendency toward simulation, that is, a habit of taking symbols for genuine reality: "Too much in this culture came from ideas, schemes, and conceptions, to which reality was subjugated."¹⁷ Under this rubric, images that "*appear* more real than does reality itself" take hold without any existent foundations.¹⁸ These, then, are the circumstances under which Bitov developed as a writer. The literary photographs that he inscribes into his texts quite frequently figure as symbols of his characters' desire to shape reality according to their preferences. By doing so, they disregard the authentic existence of others and, quite often simultaneously, imply that their perspective or their presence is what gives meaning to others' lives or to the natural world.

However, Bitov obliquely challenges such an egocentric view in his stories, oftentimes through the failed experiments and experiences of his characters. This line of thought aligns him with other writers who have used photography to probe the limits of one's grasp on reality. Among them is Marcel Proust who in *À la recherche du temps perdu* uses photography to symbolize the challenges involved in understanding another person.¹⁹ The numerous examples from Bitov's works that follow illustrate how he, too, is concerned with this dilemma. Photographs emblemize the divide between his characters and those with whom they wish to associate themselves. As art critic John Berger notes, "Every photograph is in fact a means of testing, confirming and constructing a total view of reality. [...] Hence the necessity of our understanding a weapon which we can use and which can be used against us."²⁰ Precisely this "weaponized" quality of photography allows the less scrupulous of Bitov's heroes to use it at the expense of others. Again, it would be wise to consider the context in the Soviet Union where the past and its players could be co-opted to support changing policies. Bitov understands well how the Soviet state manipulated history, in Rosalind Marsh's words, "not merely to establish the truth about the past, but for the purpose of social engineering in the present."²¹ More importantly, his texts, particularly *Pushkin House*, manifest a perceptive understanding of the experience of the psychological and physical harm inflicted upon generations of Soviet citizens through Stalin's reign. His characters recognize what Marsh calls "a lapse or rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question," and that "undermines cherished self-images."²² The heroes that populate his works must reconcile themselves to a hidden past (e.g., the Soviet purges) or the recognition that their past very much defines their future. For these reasons, Bitov's literary photographs act as potent symbols for shared historical traumas.

This rich tension between distortion and preservation, between possession and empathy, marks Bitov's engagement with photography. It furthermore contributes to a wider conversation held across the modern age regarding the ways art may contribute to a clearer engagement with the world or, alternatively, cloud one's ability to connect with others. At stake in Bitov's literary photographs are the very limits of understanding; he asks whether true knowledge comes from possessing a subject or instead from recognizing and accepting one's limits.

Realia Obscura: Photographs from the Past and the Future

Bitov's photographic motif first appeared in embryonic form in several early short works. Although here it plays a lesser role in delivering each story's message, it nonetheless demonstrates many of his recurrent concerns. In "The Bus" (1961), the daydreaming narrator imagines a group of women boarding the eponymous vehicle to be the same person, Yma Sumac, the renowned Peruvian-American singer. He declares that he "recognizes her by her photographs and advertisements."²³ In "The Garden" (1962-3), the protagonist Aleksei Monakhov finds a set of photographs in a desk that draw him to introspection: "The life of these drawers came to a stop far too long ago."²⁴ On the one hand, these references simply serve as scene-setting. On the other hand, they raise issues that will later be taken up with greater urgency and at greater depth. The Sumac photos in "The Bus" excite the narrator's overactive imagination, leading him to construct a fantastic scenario when he encounters a group of clones. A celebrity's photo clouds his engagement with reality, revealing both his flights of fancy and some inner discord, as he uses the image stuck in his mind to manufacture a new experience for himself that is ultimately hollow. In the latter story, Aleksei's rediscovered photographs represent a compressed past in which he no longer participates. The photos, he realizes, reflect

his break with a former life, perhaps one more positive than the life fraught with infidelities he now lives. The shock and awe of Bitov's literary photographs depicted in these stories come to play a greater role in his mature works where they are realized more fully. There, photography exposes the perilous delusions that his characters construct; for those willing to face these revelations directly, it instead might suggest a catalyst for growth.

Bitov's most recent novel, *The Symmetry Teacher*, repeatedly addresses photography throughout its labyrinthine plot.²⁵ For example, the story "View of the Trojan Sky," which is part of a novel-within-a-novel purportedly half-translated and half-recalled by Bitov years after a chance reading, playfully reverses the stakes of "Pushkin's Photograph": Here, a photograph from the *future* torments the protagonist, the novelist Urbino Vanoski.²⁶ Speaking with a journalist in his old age, he recalls how one day the Devil appeared to him, revealed a photograph of a woman he would allegedly meet in the future, and set him on a path to ruin. During their conversation, the Devil asks, "Why should historical fact appear more exact or attractive than what I have in my hands. History always takes place right in front of our eyes."²⁷ The picture from Vanoski's future, the Devil continues, represents "a random moment, not any sort of biographical fact."²⁸ Vanoski's chief error lies in mistaking it for reality and then structuring his life according to this image. He closes his eyes to the "history" that flows in front of him in favor of the encapsulated "random moment," believing the fossilized photograph to be dearer to him than the world around him. Instead of living out his life, he impulsively makes attempt after attempt to locate the vague future portrayed in the photo by traveling around the world, ignoring other commitments, and blinding himself to other opportunities that present themselves along the way.

The young Vanoski's interlocutor speaks in riddles, but he suggests that the mysterious

photo ultimately lacks the profundity that comes with everyday inspiration, much like the Pushkinian images that appear at the end of “Pushkin’s Photograph.” Perhaps for moments such as these ones, Lev Anninskii, echoing Epstein, writes that “Bitov’s main theme” concerns how “reality *wants* to disappear.”²⁹ Vanoski’s reality does in a sense disappear when he begins to take the hypothetical photo-image for truth, but it does so at his urging. When he locates his photographic dream-girl, all has already been lost: a runaway snake has killed his devoted girlfriend, and his obsession has led only to regrets. He says that he could “rip her to shreds, like a photograph.”³⁰ “View of the Trojan Sky” in this way offers another example of how Bitov’s characters frequently mistake simulation for reality and vice versa, therefore resisting the fact that their perspective is not totalizing. Upon finding the woman from the future, now directly before him in the present, he reduces her to a photographic avatar in an impotent expression of rage. The violence Vanoski wishes to inflict upon her moreover speaks to a erroneous belief in his control over others. By treating life as a photograph that can be so easily destroyed, his loose hold upon reality and his lack of respect for others are exposed to the reader. An encounter with reality is here turned into another photographic distortion, and Vanoski fails to recognize this serendipitous turn of events, much to his later chagrin. Nor does he even enact his rebellion and “rip her to shreds.” In short, he loses both women: real and imagined, physical and photographic.

This encounter with the mysterious woman is presaged by Vanoski’s description of the Devil: “He resembled the Devil as a photograph of an apple resembles an apple.”³¹ The story, a playful take on the Lapsarian myth, constantly highlights the divide between reality and simulation, particularly in the form of photographs, here a strange memory of the future. The real is imbedded in a photograph, but it in turn disrupts the subject’s authenticity if understood to be a mimetic reproduction. Interpreting the world through simulacra, as Vanoski and several other

heroes in Bitov's oeuvre do, results in the failure to engage with this same world. Indeed, A. O. Bol'shev calls the "inauthenticity [*neorganichnost'*] and ephemerality of contemporary life" Bitov's "primary [*magistral'naiia*] theme."³² In the case of Vanoski, the novelist realizes only too late that he has frequently—and all too willingly—believed the photograph of the apple to *be* the apple when he takes the Devil at his word.

Much in the same way as his novels and shorter pieces, Bitov's semi-autobiographical travelogues probe the complexities of photography. They do so, however, by flipping the script, as it were: here, a personal reality is turned into a fictional work in Bitov's ruminations on the power the tourist wields with his camera. Again, it would be worth considering the context in which these texts—*Armenia Lessons* (1967-69) and *Choice of Location: A Georgian Album* (1980)—were written. In the 1960s there was an explosion of travel literature and consequently a working through of what this genre entailed in the late Soviet era. As Marina Balina has shown, Nikita Khrushchev's call for writers to depict the lives of others abroad led to propagandistic literary responses that either fell in line with the demands of the Party or, more provocatively, that challenged the system by introducing authors' "subjective impressions" that, in turn, "served to lift the mask of the official representative from the face of the writer just a little bit, making him or her human again and showing that the writer had not yet fully learned how *not* to think, suffer, and doubt."³³ Anne Gorsuch puts this dilemma in similar terms: "The author of the typical Soviet travel account was like a camera, focused outwards to bring back images for armchair tourists and authorities at home rather than inwards in a risky exploration of the personal encounter with the other."³⁴ Like the aforementioned surge in photography and photo clubs of the Thaw, travel literature served as yet another outlet for writers such as Bitov to widen their perspectives. His travelogues do indeed describe and compare other peoples, places, languages,

and cultures, and yet they reflect a desire to penetrate the inner workings of the traveler's mind and his connections to the outside world. Perhaps for these reasons, *Armenia Lessons* was originally redacted by censors in its original publication, and *A Georgian Album* could not be published at all.

In these two texts photography functions as a key motif for analyzing how foreign lands or cultures can be appropriated. Bitov compares his observations of the foreign realia around him to a photographer's gaze in *Armenia Lessons*, a sketch-based travelogue. He suggests that his limited perception of the local people is like that of "a photographer invited to do a family portrait" who gains an understanding only of "frozen facial features and the make of the furniture."³⁵ Everything else that truly matters and exists beneath the surface escapes his comprehension. Such a superficial act for Bitov presupposes an inherent barrier to true knowledge of the subject. He may visit countless families and sites, but the ability to comprehend something requires a deeper connection, one that is often developed over time and through reflection, not the tourist's instantaneous flashbulb.³⁶ These images, and especially the attitudes that underlie them exemplify their taker's cavalier attitude toward the subject and a misguided belief that the past, whether personal or national, can be captured so effortlessly.

Bitov picks up this same thread again in a more explicit vein following his visit to the medieval Armenian monastery, Geghard: "And now it seems to me that I understand what compels a tourist to scratch his name, to litter, to sing songs, and to photograph himself in the most inappropriate places — to desecrate, so to speak, the monuments of history and nature. [...] this monument stands tall in comparison with his ignorant soul!"³⁷ He offers a similar situation in *A Georgian Album*, the companion piece to *Armenia Lessons* that documents his travels around Georgia to select a location for a film: "I don't know why precisely here at Arkhangelsk I

was bothered so much by the Japanese [...] maybe I got mad at their unobtainable photo equipment with which they kept flashing and clicking, capturing themselves.”³⁸ Much as Igor' would have his photographs link him to Pushkin, Bitov's tourist uses the photographic image as a mnemonic tool to equate himself with something awesome, to make something incomprehensible graspable. Whether carving his name into a memorial or simply producing a photographic record of his being at a location, the tourist manipulates history in an act tantamount to blasphemy for Bitov. These actions are attempts to inscribe oneself violently into the past or nature. To do so means to supplant the prominence of the photograph's subject with one's limited perception, to hoist one's worldview upon something much larger. More generally, as Ellen Chances writes, “For Bitov, the uncultured person is a glutton. [...] he will never be free of the insatiable craving for more.”³⁹ The photographer-tourists of *Armenia Lessons* and *A Georgian Album* are defined by their tendency toward such unrestrained consumption of culture and nature.

Bitov's novel *Pushkin House* features photographic distortions similar to those found in these travelogues. Here, however, his photo-trope takes on political tones. The novel's young protagonist and scholar, Leva Odoevtsev, who happens to be the grandfather of Igor' from “Pushkin's Photograph,” experiences a great shock when he discovers that *his* own grandfather, Modest Platonovich, is actually a recently rehabilitated labor camp survivor. A series of recovered photographs accompanies this revelation: “Where had all these marvelous faces gone? They no longer existed physically in nature, Leva had not once met them, neither on the streets nor even in his own home... Where had his parents put their faces? [...] they laid them face up, as if in a coffin.”⁴⁰ Here, too, the photographic simulation stands for the real people who were excised from the historical record through will and whim. The narrator emphasizes the unnatural,

sepulchral aura that surrounds these snapshots with the casual comparison to a coffin, a narrative move that both asserts Roland Barthes's and Susan Sontag's belief in the violence and the specter of death that haunt photography *and* moves it a step further through the implicit reference to Stalin's purges in the 1930s.⁴¹ Leva's private discomfort is compounded when he later finds that "photographs hung on the walls with greater confidence and size."⁴² They become symbols of changing public attitudes toward historical events. Bitov is careful never to mention Stalin by name, and here he obliquely alludes to the process of political rehabilitation that followed the dictator's death in 1953. Victims of repression and imprisonment, including many writers and cultural figures, were eventually permitted to return home. The case of Modest Platonovich illustrates how these prisoners' ideas were likewise allowed to grow—within reason. Leva and his father gradually publish their patriarch's scholarly work and popularize his school of thought. Consequently, as those in power refashion the past, the photos can appear suddenly and grow just as quickly. This act, in turn, reveals a lack of a stable historical base for Leva's generation. Thanks to something as simple as family portraits, the young hero learns that even a fact as seemingly certain as filial relations, buttressed by memory, may shift.

Leva continues the family tradition of manipulating history through photos in an analogous fashion. Wishing to overcome his father's influence, he tries to discern his own visage in photos of Uncle Dickens, a family friend who is also figuratively unearthed when he returns to Leningrad around the same time as Modest Platonovich: "Leva stood before the mirror with the photograph, made a face, and became totally convinced."⁴³ This twin image—a mirror reflection and a photograph—reveals the lengths to which Leva will go to deceive himself in the search for a substitute father. When it comes to disowning his resemblance to his real father Nikolai Modestovich, Leva rejects physical similarities. Nonetheless, in his mind he uses the same

evidence to prove paternity in Uncle Dickens's favor. According to Natal'ia Ivanova, Leva "cannot in any way [...] unite the real with the ideal for himself."⁴⁴ The mirror suggests Leva's inability to view himself from an outsider's point-of-view; he cannot truly achieve this externalized vantage point and must employ mental acrobatics to produce the desired result. Leva changes the terms of his argument when convenient by alternately championing or disavowing physical characteristics, and this scene reveals his limited perspective, one which throughout most of the novel is based almost entirely upon his self-absorption and self-deception. His efforts recall Lisa Saltzman's comments on Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, another work concerned with simulation and reality. In the 1982 film, a cyborg looks to a photo as "evidence of a past, a lineage, and an identity," but ultimately she realizes that a photograph cannot "shore up identity" when she discovers that the girl depicted within it is actually her inventor's niece.⁴⁵ Leva also turns to a photograph for evidentiary value but comes up short.

Once he has used up Uncle Dickens's potential as a paternal substitute, as it were, Leva trains his gaze elsewhere. He engages in parallel distortions when he examines photographs of Modest Platonovich: "Leva scrutinized his excellent photofeatures and quarreled with his father, proudly and silently turning away his own elongated face, which seemed to bear the same features."⁴⁶ As part of his so-called "Grandfather Hypothesis," he suggests that these "photofeatures" allow him to draw a direct connection to his grandfather, cutting his father from the lineage. Again, his actions imply an exclusionary gesture; Leva digs deeper into the past to eliminate his father from his heritage, symbolically taking on his grandfather in the image Leva devises for him. By raising the stakes, Leva will simultaneously circumvent his father and bring himself closer to his grandfather's generation. Merging himself with a representative of the past, Leva believes, will strengthen his self-image and will make him less burdened as a latecomer.

However, Leva fails to create his own body of work when he begins to publish Modest Platonovich's previously suppressed papers. In seeking out a resemblance in the photos, too, Leva on the one hand only mimics his elder and tries to subsume his accomplishments with his solipsistic worldview and on the other hand creates distance between himself and his dishonest father who denounced Modest Platonovich years ago.

Leva here takes two false steps: He adopts the same tactics as the Soviet state in abusing images for the sake of rewriting historical memory and, like Vanoski, he views an image as reality, believing that the similarities, whether real or illusory, can bring his desires to life.⁴⁷ These kinds of manipulations, anxieties, and distortions largely define Bitov's characters' relationships with photographs. His attempts to reshape reality, or to transform it according to his own ideals, only result in his being consumed by the images to which he turns: photographs of his predecessors. In doing so, he limits his potential for personal growth. That is, he claims primacy over these images and the past they represent; however, he becomes inextricably bound to this past age, unable to chart his own course as he obsesses over something only seemingly real and simultaneously both old and new in this era of rehabilitation. Epstein has termed this phenomenon "past-shock," which was felt immediately after the fall of the Soviet Union but began as early as the 1950s with more frequent exchanges between the East and the West: "The present may be chaotic, unstable, and unreal, but we have finally come into possession of the past, or, more precisely, it has come forward to possess us."⁴⁸ Leva's attempts to take hold of the past reveal a peculiar historical relativity inherent to the Soviet context that unravels his plans. The photos stand as a stark reminder of the fact that Leva's grip on the past and, therefore, reality in the present moment has been shaped by forces outside of his control.⁴⁹ Bitov, through his narrator and with firm ironic distance, therefore expresses his doubt that a photograph can

provide epistemological certainty. If photographs can be manipulated like any other cultural artifact, then why should they be read as pure fact? If they can shift, grow, or remain buried, what prevents them from being resurrected? Perhaps most importantly, should reality be truly as malleable as an image, are there ways to counteract this deception?

Truth in Photographs, Freedom in Limitations

Bitov's responses to these questions may be found throughout many of the same works just analyzed. For all the latent abuses inherent to the photographic act that Bitov details, his texts simultaneously offer a few cautious alternatives. While they may distort the past when paired with a desire to create inorganic links between individuals or historical periods not based on reality, blood, mutual affiliation, and so on, photographs can on occasion suggest at the very least a transformative power even if they appear in the forms of negative examples.⁵⁰

A Georgian Album, whose very title alerts the reader to Bitov's play with photographic motifs, provides models of this somewhat more affirmative outlook on photography's ability to sustain memory and create lasting bonds by highlighting Bitov's recognition of photographic images' inherent subjectivity. While visiting the filmmaker Otar Iosseliani, Bitov happens across a family album and draws attention to a woman's photo: "She looks at you with nonjudgmental non-recognition, and you might imperceptibly become embarrassed under the gaze of those young eyes in a face as old and wise as the earth. [...] Where did these faces go? No one will look so directly into the camera any longer, taking delight in everything, becoming embarrassed by nothing."⁵¹ Bitov repeats a key phrase from *Pushkin House*—cf. "Where did these faces go?" and "Where had all these marvelous faces gone?"—but without the political implications. Instead, his surprise is derived from this encounter with the past concentrated in the woman's

gaze, the *punctum* of the photograph to follow Barthes's formulation.⁵² He recognizes in her stare the preservation of an instant that is now lost in some ways to the present but no less potent to its viewers. Just as photography saved for posterity a beautiful moment in the life of the woman, her perpetual gaze now ensures the camera's role in creating history. This family album lacks the persecutions, distortions, and manipulations found in the Odoevtsev household. Open to the wonders of a private moment preserved in time, Bitov may not entirely avoid the tourist's gaze and the family-photographer's voyeurism, but he attempts to respect the private world of the woman by admitting to the limitations of his knowledge.

Elsewhere, Bitov realizes that he cannot help but compare Georgia with the images he has imbibed from Iosseliani's films.⁵³ He wonders whether there nature finds a true reflection:

“Have I always seen Tbilisi the way Otar shot [*otsnial'*] it, or do I now see it that way after Otar showed it to me? [...] Is his world a reflection or an expression? [...] The world with which the artist will astonish us is an arm's length away. Comparing the world he has expressed with the world that surrounds him, I found that Otar did not seek anything out, and that means everything turned up on its own, fell into his hands, was always there.”⁵⁴

He seems to suggest that Iosseliani's approach recognizes that the photograph (or cinematic frame) does not create a reality, but simply allows the essence of that which is “in front of our eyes” to be imprinted upon the photo-image and passed on. At the same time, he introduces an element of doubt when he questions whether his perception of the landscape has been shaped by Iosseliani's images, whether the simulation has supplanted the reality.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that Bitov himself is not always successful in following Iosseliani's alleged model of taking in the world without tampering with it. With shock, he realizes that he has mixed up the generations when mentally assessing the women's images preserved in the Georgian photo album, and his description of his local guide Gogi is remarkably

romanticized: “And thus [Gogi] had already stepped out from Pirosmani’s painting *The Feast of [Five] Princes*.”⁵⁵ While this is not the place to provide an extended analysis of Bitov’s approach to travel writing as a genre or questions of empire, some consideration of key tropes in these fields is apropos and will, in turn, help illuminate his use of the photographic trope. His position, particularly in light of other Western models, is a curious one. An imperial subject visiting a Soviet satellite, Bitov uses his travel experience to better understand himself and his relationship to his homeland. While Turoma argues that these two travel accounts are replete with “examples of the ‘gentleman-colonizer’s’ authoritative gaze, of which the author is painfully aware, but does not want to, or makes the appearance of not being able to, rid himself of,” Bitov nonetheless subverts the limits of his own vision throughout this section.⁵⁶ If in his travel writings he frequently deploys the “monarch-of-all-I-survey” trope, so elegantly deconstructed by Mary Louise Pratt in her study of western travel literature, then the text continually critiques any sense of a privileged position he may claim to possess. According to Pratt, the rhetoric of such travelogues involves three primary techniques: aestheticization of nature, density of meaning, and mastery of the seen/scene.⁵⁷ The references to photos challenge Bitov’s perspective with their suggestions of a limited or compromised perspective. They prove that his grasp on the reality of the situation may be more faulty than he realizes. In particular, the fact that he wonders whether his vision has been tampered by unreal images produced by Iosseliani suggests an inability both to dictate the scene and to trust his perception. Bitov once again shows the erosion of the myth of authenticity offered by a photographic image.

If his depictions of Armenia and Georgia sometimes evince a tourist’s questionable, perhaps even domineering gaze, his writings reflect at least an effort to overcome the pull toward solipsism, which Richard Borden has termed “one of Bitov’s foremost concerns.”⁵⁸ In their

imperfection, they still aim to treat their subjects on their own terms. Their presence acts as a profound challenge, but what comes *after* Bitov or his stand-ins engage with the photographs is just as crucial. Bitov asks of the reader, as of himself, the open-mindedness to imagine an alternative to the dominant egocentrism, that is, a move beyond a solipsistic worldview that excludes others' perspectives. In this way, despite the inevitable slips, the photographs he describes and creates can provoke moments of insight or grace, if only for the reader.

Several such near-revelations appear in *The Monkey Link*, Bitov's loose trilogy made up of three novellas: *Birds*, *Man in the Landscape* (1983), and *Awaiting Monkeys* (1993). At least the first two portions of this triptych include vivid references to photography that connect to the theme of knowledge. The first and shortest novella, *Birds*, describes the narrator's visit to a research station at which biologists study bird migration patterns. The narrator interweaves his conversations with a doctor about the animals and his ruminations on the nature of man. Near the opening, he considers a photograph of an ecologist depicted on a magazine cover:

The priest of science is illuminated by fluorescent light; he looks profoundly at something he supposedly has some knowledge of, while we have no clue. [...] And really, why does he make such a knowing expression in the photo on the universal cover? A true scientist's expression (according to my naïve conception) should be frightened, shocked, confused. For he knows everything in his field that was known until now, until this day, until this second—but he knows nothing further. [...] So why did he stand frozen in the photograph with that face, as if he has some clue about what's there, beyond, in the next moment? [...] for he is in the dark, he should have the inspired face of a blind man, a Bruegelsesque blind man falling into a hole...⁵⁹

Bitov's narrator contrasts the stereotypical, staged representation of the scientist at work with his contrasting conception of the same figure: two photographs—one real, the other imagined—that denote opposing conceptions of knowledge, expertise, and the paradox of discovery. The

individual in the former evidently embodies all the arrogance of man. His face lit up by the various equipment surrounding him masks a recognition of the unknown that Bitov clearly appreciates. Bitov's proposed photograph, on the other hand, highlights precisely the divide between man's perceived knowledge and the true depths of his deficient perspective. The ability to recognize one's limitations, rather than to impose one's values and delusions upon the world (an inner drive that motivates many Bitovian characters), should be the driving force in life, as in scientific inquiry, according to Bitov. By first recognizing the limits of knowledge, he implies, one may transcend them. By instead veiling them under the guise of "a knowing expression," one misses the potential to discover new ground in any given field.⁶⁰ While photographs in Bitov's literary world frequently denote precisely this sort of overbearing self-confidence, the author can imagine alternatives. Bitov rejects the clichéd face of the scientist's photograph in favor of the unknown, the moments of panicked uncertainty that position man in an entirely new arena. Nevertheless, the fact that this image only exists in his imagination speaks to the crippling subjectivity of the photographic image. It is something unrealizable, for the photo captures time and space without consideration of its subject's perspective and essence.

The trilogy's second novella *Man in the Landscape* concerns the narrator's encounter with the verbose painter Pavel Petrovich and an attempt to reach a kind of enlightenment.⁶¹ The narrator spends two days drinking with Pavel Petrovich before breaking free of the artist's hold. At one point in their bizarre conversation, they discuss painting and photography. When the narrator responds condescendingly to Pavel Petrovich's argument that "[p]hotography was conquering" the Impressionists, the latter counters, "Photography identified that with which painting should not concern itself. Because it can be achieved mechanically, by a device. Photography itself spawned the Impressionists."⁶² Here, he has in mind photography's ability to

isolate a single passing moment. They continue:

“[...] I wanted to say that the landscape painter merely individualizes the view. He’s incapable of mirroring it; he’s only capable of being mirrored in it. ‘View’ [*vid*] and ‘individual’ [*individ*] — is that the same root?”

“No,” I replied, placing Shishkin and Teniers and photography in my firm grip.”⁶³

Pavel Petrovich’s arguments are rooted in the belief that, firstly, the landscape painter places his perspective into his subject (thus objectivizing it) and, secondly, freezes something that is not static (thus transforming it). The interlocutors reason that photography prompted the Impressionists to master a style that would challenge this artistic process. The perennial struggle, then, is finding a balance between man’s tendency to impose himself, intentionally or not, upon his subject of study or art. As a tool, photography allows one to render a landscape (or person) in its entirety, but it fails to capture the life-essence of the same subject. In other words, it produces a semblance rather than a true resemblance by mechanical means.⁶⁴

Following his drinking binge with Pavel Petrovich, the narrator reflects on his experiences. He is surprised to discover that he is now “writing directly from nature.”⁶⁵ The narrator, to put it differently, feels in tune with life and reality. This change in Bitov’s pilgrim begins somewhat earlier when he realizes that his “sensitivity was like that of a photographic plate” in another scene involving a policeman and Pavel Petrovich catching him with their gaze.⁶⁶ He now reflects or, to maintain the photographic metaphor, absorbs the world around him, rather than painting himself into the landscape as before. Describing *Pushkin House*’s Leva and his character arc, Irina Rodnianskaia writes that the author aimed to “detonate the irreducible unity, the direct combination of oneself with the world, to experience and behold ‘full consciousness’ of one’s soul as separate and special, to survive the ‘hard-hitting confrontation of one’s own experience,’ and, finally, if successful, to open up to existence once again, but now

with a grateful unselfishness alien to childish illusions.”⁶⁷ The narrator’s “photographic” experience and discussions in *Man in the Landscape* lead to precisely this brand of epiphany. If he, like Pavel Petrovich, formerly interacted with the world through a filter—that of his self-absorbed persona—he now believes that he accepts the world without any kind of screen. Opening himself up in this manner allows for a more authentic, if sometimes painful, engagement with reality. It brings him at least one step closer to true understanding.

“Selfies” vs. “Truthies”

Bitov repeatedly exposes the manner in which people deceive themselves regarding their pretensions, delusions, and failures to change. His texts serve as explorations of his characters’ psyches; his tools are manifold, but photographs occupy a significant, if understudied, position. The idea of exposure built into these efforts is crucial, for that is largely what his photographic trope does: It discloses the inner states of characters who often adopt roles only to feel their incongruous, double-exposed quality at some later point when they face undesired consequences.⁶⁸ The cases analyzed above establish how Bitov’s photographic exposés range from his early short stories to key sections of longer later texts.

Such wide-ranging application of this motif speaks to its centrality in Bitov’s exploration of how people either possess or appreciate the world around them. Much as *Armenia Lessons* represent Bitov’s working through his relationship to the world, to others, and to his poetics, his photography lessons say much about his major themes. They range from the personal to the outlandish, and Bitov employs them according to the circumstances of the text at hand. Vividly aware of the subjective state of affairs engendered by the twentieth-century Soviet experience, Bitov furthermore uses his literary photographs to probe the tension between containment and

perversion. When his characters attempt to enclose the environment and individuals around them by reformulating them in their image, they pervert the reality of things, crafting simulacra in the process. In this way, Leva misreads his grandfather's feelings for his son, assuming a hatred that only angers Modest Platonovich. The tourists in Bitov's travelogues, too, inscribe themselves into the landscapes they visit and the people they encounter, and by doing so, they distort the original.

On the other hand, as shown by the cases above, the photographs that almost manage to meet Bitov's goals are most often those from which the viewer has some kind of detachment. This distance takes many forms throughout Bitov's writings: temporal, personal, and so forth. The discussions regarding photography in the first two sections of *The Monkey Link* require the reader to imagine unreal photographs, that is, images that do not and therefore *cannot* exist. They represent an idealized relationship to knowledge that then factors into man's functions in the world. The more positive examples of photographs in Bitov's work are also typically made not by the viewer, emphasizing yet another kind of distance. For example, the narrator in *A Georgian Album* feels a sense of intimacy with the women on the pages of the photobook through which he leafs. His knowledge of their true identities may be faulty, and yet he does not manipulate their stories in quite the same way as Leva distorts his grandfather's in *Pushkin House*. They, along with his reflections on Georgia, serve as a means of re-framing of the self. Those photographers or photograph-viewers who cannot attain such a perspective fail to develop precisely this self-awareness. They believe that the image before them, in a sense, exists because *they* exist; they propose that the photographs can either tell them more about themselves than about the actual subject of the photo or can be used to serve a personal agenda. Those characters who instead accept, recognize, and appreciate the space between themselves and what the photographs

represent, on the contrary, come closer to accessing insights and an intimacy with their subjects of study.

This is not to suggest that their interactions with photographs cannot be extremely personal. After all, the attitude regarding photos that Bitov champions in the end does change the individual. Whereas Leva looks to his grandfather's and Uncle Dickens's photos in order to transform their identities, Bitov believes that the so-called good—and therefore *imagined*—photograph (or, rather, one's approach to it) should produce a reconceptualization of a person's identity in relation to the Other. What change they ultimately do enact depends largely on the circumstances. By highlighting this tendency to misread a photography shared by his heroes, Bitov thus insistently challenges the frequent conception of photography as the most mimetic of art forms.

The utilization of the same class of imagery for contradictory aims furthermore speaks to the complexities of Bitov's artistry, as well as his belonging to a generation accustomed to the relative instability of cultural values. Bitov, indeed, frequently uses photography to reconsider both local and universal forms of cultural appropriation and historical revisionism in ways that accentuate key features of his own art, while linking him to broader trends, whether in the late- or post-Soviet contexts. In *Pushkin House*, he suggests that the Russian writer hoping to overcome his belatedness relative both to the West and the Russian Modernist era must turn to his present instead of the past.⁶⁹ As a result of the breaks in Russia's cultural history, Leva cannot exist in the past, because he can never make full sense of it, nor in the present because he constantly directs his gaze backward, nor in the future because he will always feel a step behind. *Pushkin House* then represents Bitov's endeavor to live and to write in the “middle of the contrast”: a state of being championed by Modest Platonovich that accepts the past for what it is

and recognizes that the future is yet to be.⁷⁰ Bitov's photographs engender a similar idea. In a variety of ways, they express his belief in the danger of looking to and altering the past to create a new simulative reality in the present moment. It cannot be controlled, but rather only studied for inspiration. Echoing writers from Nabokov and Proust to contemporary figures such as Sebald and the post-Soviet author Victor Pelevin, Bitov recognizes that human perception remains at best misguided, at worst faulty. Even photographs from the *future* pose similar risks. The proper perspective from which to consider photography, Bitov intimates, instead involves taking on the properties of a photo-plate as in his *Man in the Landscape* and allowing the subject to speak for itself. Even as the individual recognizes a unity between himself and the photograph's object, a separation that allows the latter to inform its viewer's perspective rather than the opposite must also be achieved. Thus, the natural beauty of Georgia and the life of its people infuse Iosseliani's images, and a woman's playful gaze into the camera lens can speak to a writer years after it was captured even if its mystery cannot be fully unraveled. Through these contrasting approaches to photography, Bitov exhibits a desire to transcend the pull toward solipsism, indeed to respect the interrelated concepts of nature, history, and culture for what they are, not what they may be compelled to be. Ultimately, photography, through its cordoning off of discrete layers of life, serves as a reminder of the ever-present chasm between one's knowledge and reality, between self-imposed notions and the truth found in that very limitation.

¹ Andrei Bitov, "Fotografiia Pushkina (1799-2099)," in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 2 (Khar'kov, 1996), 404. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

² Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) produced the world's oldest surviving photograph. Stephanie Sandler argues that an "acquisitive urge" rather than an appreciation of Pushkin's "lived experience" drives the scholars in Bitov's story to hunt for "emblems that can celebrate their skills in organizing

jubilees.” She suggests that Igor' instead recognizes the value of the imagined Pushkin. However, given his frustrations and eventual descent into madness, it seems likely that Igor' fails to attain this insight.

Stephanie Sandler, *Commemorating Pushkin: Russia's Myth of a National Poet* (Stanford, 2004), 293.

³ Bitov, “Fotografiia Pushkina,” 436. Bitov here refers to Pushkin's 1935 poem “Cloud,” the hare that crossed Pushkin's path and that he took as a bad omen when returning to Petersburg to join his friends in the 1925 Decembrist uprising, and the flood depicted in his *poema* *The Bronze Horseman* that Igor' himself witnesses during his travels, respectively.

⁴ Sven Spieker, *Figures of Memory and Forgetting in Andrej Bitov's Prose: Postmodernism and the Quest for History* (Frankfurt am Main, 1996), 169.

⁵ Bitov, “Fotografiia Pushkina,” 436.

⁶ T.L. Rybal'chenko, “Motiv fotografii v proze A. Bitova,” in *Materialy k “Slovariu siuzhetov i motivov russkoi literatury”*: *Sbornik nauchnykh trudov*, ed. V.I. Tiura, vol. 1 (Novosibirsk, 1996): 178-91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁸ For major recent contributions to this topic, see, for example, Stephen Hutchings, *Russian Literary Culture in the Camera Age* (London, 2004); Katherine Hill Reischl, “Objective Authorship: Photography and Writing in Russia, 1905-1975” (PhD thesis, U of Chicago, 2013); and Molly Thomasy Blasing, “Writing with Light: Photo-Poetic Encounters in Tsvetaeva, Pasternak and Brodsky” (PhD thesis, U of Wisconsin, 2014). Hutchings investigates the development of the relationship between photography and Russian literary culture throughout the nineteenth century, the Soviet period, and the post-Soviet era. Hill Reischl uses photography to examine authorial subjectivity as expressed by writers from Lev Tolstoy and to Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Finally, Thomasy Blasing explores the ways in which several twentieth-century Russian poets use photography to create connections to the past or as a corollary to the “poetry of witness,” among other topics. For analyses that extend beyond the Russian context and provide a sampling of approaches to the topic of literature and photography, see David Cunningham, Andrew Fisher, and Sas Mays, eds., *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne,

2005) and Marsha Bryant, *Photo-textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature* (Newark, 1995).

⁹ Jessica Werneke, "Photography in the Late Soviet Period, *Ogonek*, the SSOD, and Official Photo Exchanges," *Vestnik: The Journal of Russian and Asian Studies* (Aug. 24, 2015), accessed May 23, 2017.

On photography in the late Soviet period, see also Jessica Marie Werneke, "The Boundaries of Art: Soviet Photography from 1956 to 1970" (PhD thesis, U of Texas at Austin, 2015) and Jessica Werneke, "Sovetskoe Foto and Photography Clubs in the Late Soviet Period," *Studia Culturae* 3 (2016): 65-72.

¹⁰ Leah Dickerman, "Camera Obscura: Socialist Realism in the Shadow of Photography," *October* 93 (2000): 143.

¹¹ On Nabokov and photography, see also Maria Malikova, "Nabokov's Photo-biography," *Nabokov Online Journal* 8 (2014) (photography as a reduction of life); Laurence Petit, "Speak, Photographs?: Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*," *Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009) (destabilizing captions in Nabokov's autobiography); Gerard de Vries and D. Barton Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam, 2006), 47-50 (photography as an inspiration for art); and Robert Alter, "Nabokov and the Art of Politics," in *Nabokov's Invitation to a Beheading: A Critical Companion*, ed. Julian Connolly (Evanston, IL, 1997), 47-65 (photography as "anti-art").

¹² J. J. Long, "History, Narrative, and Photography in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten*," *The Modern Language Review* 98 (January, 2003), 122.

¹³ Similarly, Maya Barzilai suggests that in *The Emigrants* and Sebald's final novel *Austerlitz* photography serves "as an emblem for the uncanny reemergence of the past," something that also occurs in Bitov's *Pushkin House*. Maya Barzilai, "On Exposure: Photography and Uncanny Memory in W. G. Sebald's *Die Ausgewanderten* and *Austerlitz*," in *W. G. Sebald: History — Memory — Trauma*, eds. Scott Denham and Mark McCulloh (New York, 2006), 213.

¹⁴ Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom* (Sankt-Peterburg, 1999), 418. All other citations from this novel come from the version included in volume 2 of the *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh* edition.

¹⁵ Optimistically, the early French film theorist André Bazin claimed that "photography does not create

eternity, as art does, it embalms time, rescuing it simply from its proper corruption.” André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, 1980), 242.

¹⁶ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), 10, 155.

¹⁷ Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture*, trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Amherst, MA, 1995), 191.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190.

¹⁹ Áine Larkin, “Photography in Proust’s *A la recherche du temps perdu*,” in *Text and Image in Modern European Culture*, eds. Natasha Grigorian, Thomas Baldwin, and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (West Lafayette, Indiana, 2012), 97. On Bitov and Proust, see Harold D. Baker, “Bitov Reading Proust through the Windows *Pushkin House*,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 41 (Winter, 1997), 604-626.

²⁰ John Berger, “Understanding a Photograph,” in *Classic Essays on Photography*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven, Conn., 1980), 294.

²¹ Rosalind Marsh, *Literature, History and Identity in Post-Soviet Russia, 1991-2006* (New York, 2007), 15.

²² *Ibid.*, 158.

²³ Andrei Bitov, “Avtobus,” in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 1 (Khar'kov, 1996), 14. “The Bus” is not the only story in which Bitov associates photography with exotic images. *Pushkin House*’s protagonist Leva recalls his “bewilderment over foreign journals with photographs of film stars.” Andrei Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom*, in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 2 (Khar'kov, 1996), 220. In “The Forest” (1965, 1972), Aleksei Monakhov, one of Bitov’s recurring heroes, encounters “a large foreign photograph — a naked white girl next to a giant, also white, insulating roller.” Andrei Bitov, “Les,” in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 1 (Khar'kov, 1996), 292. Likewise, in “O — Number or Letter (Freud’s Family Doctor),” the mentally handicapped Gummi receives “a batch of pictures of Broadway theater stars” as a gift. Andrei Bitov, *Prepodavatel' simmetrii* (Moskva, 2008), 100. These examples

emphasize the pull that the images wield over their viewers, who believe the exotic can be contained.

²⁴ Andrei Bitov, "Sad," in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 1 (Khar'kov, 1996), 203.

²⁵ A version of *The Symmetry Teacher*, which Bitov has reworked for decades, included "Pushkin's Photograph." See Andrei Bitov, *Chelovek v peizazhe* (Moskva, 1988). "Pushkin's Photograph" was first published in Andrei Bitov, "Fotografiia Pushkina. 1799–2099," *Znamia* 1 (1987): 98-120.

²⁶ The title refers to a photograph in Vanoski's room that depicts nothing except a sky with a small cloud in one corner. It hangs opposite a window in his room that opens up only to the sky, emphasizing the divide between image and reality.

²⁷ Bitov, *Prepodavatel' simmetrii*, 39.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁹ Lev Anninskii, "Pozhar, zalivaemyi pivom: Andrei Bitov v 'Ozhidanii obez'ian,'" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, October 27, 1993, 4.

³⁰ Bitov, *Prepodavatel' simmetrii*, 83.

³¹ Bitov, *Prepodavatel' simmetrii*, 53.

³² A. O. Bol'shev, "Apologiia organichnosti v tvorchestve A. Bitova," *Russian Literature* 61.4 (2007): 491.

³³ Marina Balina, "A Prescribed Journey: Russian Travel Literature from the 1960s to the 1980s," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 38 (Summer, 1994): 263. Mary Louise Pratt's description of the ways in which empirical centers use peripheries applies quite well to the state-sanctioned travel writing of this era: "empires create in the imperial center of power an obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. It becomes dependent on its others to know itself." Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2008), 4.

³⁴ Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad After Stalin* (New York, 2011), 21.

³⁵ Andrei Bitov, *Uroki Armenii*, in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 3 (Khar'kov, 1996), 68.

³⁶ This same attitude was expressed by Bitov's contemporary and friend, the Nobel Prize-winning poet Joseph Brodsky, who, according to Svetlana Boym, remained "critical of the photographic quick fix (the formula of contemporary tourism)." Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001), 296. Likewise, Sanna Turoma has suggested that Brodsky took issue with the ways in which "the countless reproductions of tourist sights [...] have engulfed the original sight." Such perspectives make clear that writers of Bitov's generation were dealing with very similar concerns, namely the dissolution of reality in favor of simulacra in contemporary society. Sanna Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad: Empire, Tourism, Nostalgia* (Madison, WI, 2010), 57.

³⁷ Bitov, *Uroki Armenii*, 90.

³⁸ Andrei Bitov, *Gruzinskii al'bom*, in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 3 (Khar'kov, 1996), 306.

³⁹ Ellen Chances, "Andrei Bitov's 'Armenia Lessons': Culture and Values," *Armenian Review* 41.3-163 (1988): 48.

⁴⁰ Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom*, 40.

⁴¹ "In terms of image-repertoire, the Photograph [...] represents that very subtle moment when, to tell the truth, I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter. The Photographer [...] himself fears [...] this death in which his gesture will embalm me." Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1981), 13-14. "To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed. [...] All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt." Sontag, *On Photography*, 14-15.

⁴² Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom*, 90.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴ Natal'ia Ivanova, *Tochka zreniia: O proze poslednykh let* (Moskva, 1988), 180.

⁴⁵ Lisa Saltzman, *Daguerreotypes: Fugitive Subjects, Contemporary Objects* (Chicago, 2015), 13-14.

⁴⁶ Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom*, 49.

⁴⁷ Although light on commentary, David King's *The Commissar Vanishes* offers a fascinating look at the ways in which Soviet officials edited photos to excise individuals from visual accounts. See David King, *The Commissar Vanishes: The Falsification of Photographs and Art in Stalin's Russia* (New York, 1997).

⁴⁸ Epstein, *After the Future*, 295-6.

⁴⁹ Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky suggest that this trend continued into the post-Soviet era: "[...] the most traumatic phenomenon in this literary discourse and in post-Soviet sensibility in general was this *impossibility of separating the present from the past* — mesmerization by a past that with a mystical inexorability dictates the logic of present-day events and behavior, dooms the characters to a 'recurring return' to the soviet catastrophe and the post-Soviet nightmares that follow from it." Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky, "The Burden of Freedom: Russian Literature after Communism," in *Russian Literature since 1991*, eds. Evgeny Dobrenko and Mark Lipovetsky (Cambridge, UK, 2015), 10.

⁵⁰ Chances views this problem as the antithesis of Bitov's artistic message: "Bitov's call is for the authentic, the genuine, the honest, the truthful. He believes that the only way to get authenticity is to let people, things, and cities evolve naturally." Ellen Chances, "Authenticity as the Tie That Binds: Andrej Bitov's 'Armenia Lessons,'" *Russian Literature* 28 (1990): 6.

⁵¹ Bitov, *Gruzinskii al'bom*, 266. As pointed out by Chances, some of the photos described within the pages of *A Georgian Album* apparently adorn the covers of a 1985 edition of the text. See Andrei Bitov, *Gruzinskii al'bom* (Tbilisi, 1985). The paratextual inclusion of these images conflates "life with art." Chances, *Andrei Bitov*, 248.

⁵² Barthes also calls the *punctum* a "sting, speck, cut, little hole," "that accident which pricks me." It is the element of a photograph that most clearly grips the viewer's attention and elicits a personal reaction, one that often triggers a strong mnemonic association. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27.

⁵³ Bitov's affinity for Iosseliani's art stems from similarities in their aesthetics. Referring to the Georgian proverb, "What you give is yours, what you keep is lost," the filmmaker has said, "Everything that happens in my films has to do with people's weakness for possession. [...] And this leads to real values such as feelings disappearing." The "bad" photographers in Bitov's texts exhibit this "weakness" for possessing reality that cause them to lose more than they gain when they open themselves up to others and "give" away what they hold dearest. "Otar Iosseliani Retrospective," Arsenal, accessed September 23, 2016, <http://www.arsenal-berlin.de/en/arsenal-cinema/current-program/single/article/3271/2803.html>. On the subject of Bitov and film, see Olga Hassanoff Bakich, "A New Type of Character in the Soviet Literature of the 1960s: the Early Works of Andrei Bitov," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 23.2 (1981): 127; Peter I. Barta, "Bitov's Perilous Passage: 'Penelopa', Odysseus and Plato on the Nevskii," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 76.4 (1998): 633-42; Ellen Chances, "Andrei Bitov: The Attenuated Boundary Between Art and Life," *Slavic and East European Arts* 6 (Winter, 1990): 148-58; and Chances, *Andrei Bitov*, 8, 12, 16, 49-51, 146-51, 161.

⁵⁴ Bitov, *Gruzinskii al'bom*, 264.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 271. Niko Pirosmiani (Nikala) – a Georgian primitivist painter. *Ibid.*, 239-40.

⁵⁶ Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad*, 249.

⁵⁷ Pratt, *Imperial Eyes*, 200. In writing these travelogues, Bitov was well aware of the history of Russia's complex and all too often bloody involvement in the Caucasus, particularly as reflected in the works of such writers as Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, among others. Readers in the nineteenth century, at least, turned to such accounts for entertainment and for a better understanding of the region, that is, they read them as both art and document. Susan Layton maintains that texts such as Pushkin's "Journey to Azrum," mentioned by Bitov, both affirmed and challenged imperialist notions. In much the same ways, Bitov's literary photographs in *Armenia Lessons* and *A Georgian Album* explore the relationships between fact and fiction, reality and imagination, self and other. Susan Layton, *Russian Literature and Empire: Conquest of the Caucasus from Pushkin to Tolstoy* (New York, 1994), 9-10. Turoma notes,

however, that there were key differences between these writers and Bitov and his contemporaries, both in Russia and the West: “in the Leningrad counterculture that Brodsky [and Bitov] affiliated with, a Euroimperial past was the object of aesthetic nostalgia, whereas in the 1970s Western cultural practices that past was becoming a focus of vigorous critique.” This fact helps explain Turoma’s criticism of Bitov’s stance in *Armenia Lessons* and *A Georgian Album*. Turoma, *Brodsky Abroad*, 107.

⁵⁸ Richard C. Borden, *The Art of Writing Badly: Valentin Kataev’s Mauvism and the Rebirth of Russian Modernism* (Evanston, IL, 1999), 296.

⁵⁹ Andrei Bitov, *Ptitsy, ili Oglashenie cheloveka*, in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh: Oglashennii*, vol. 4 (Khar'kov, 1996), 18-19.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

⁶¹ It is worth noting that this text is partly inspired by Dante’s *Inferno*. For an analysis of relevant parallels, see Brownsberger, “Man in a Landscape: Toward an Understanding of Bitov’s Design,” *Russian Literature* 61.4 (2007): 393-416.

⁶² Andrei Bitov, *Chelovek v peizazhe*, in *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*, vol. 4 (Khar'kov, 1996), 72-3. For a recent concise consideration of the historic interaction between photography and Impressionism, see Jesse Matz, *Lasting Impressions: The Legacies of Impressionism in Contemporary Culture* (New York, 2016), 101-4. Matz, using some of the same terminology as Pavel Petrovich, proposes that “photography was seen as freeing the art of painting from the ‘resemblance complex,’ its inartistic penchant for realist representation. Impressionism in particular was the result, since it marks the moment in which painting began to depart from photographic verisimilitude.” Matz, *Lasting Impressions*, 103,

⁶³ Ivan Shishkin (1832-1898) – a Russian landscape painter involved with the *Peredvizhniki* (Wanderers) movement. David Teniers the Younger (1610-1690) – a prolific Flemish painter. *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁴ Cf. Walter Benjamin’s seminal 1935 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 119. Bitov here uses *natury* with its dual meaning of nature and life and the verb “*pishu*” (*pisat'*) playing with its two meanings: to paint a picture and to write. This phrase has a long history of common

usage in Russian not necessarily connected to photography, though it may be done so with reference to William Henry Fox Talbot's *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-46), the first book to be illustrated with photographs.

⁶⁶ Bitov, *Chelovek v peizazhe*, 110.

⁶⁷ Irina Rodnianskaia, *Khudozhnik v poiskakh istiny* (Moskva, 1989), 99.

⁶⁸ Ivanova has examined the wide-ranging presence of "roles" in Bitov's work. Ivanova, *Tochka zreniia*, 173, 183. On the topic of narrative masks, authenticity, and simulation in *Pushkin House*, see V. V. Karpova, *Avtor v sovremennoi russkoi postmodernistskoi literature (na materiale romana A. Bitova "Pushkinskii dom")* (Borisoglebsk, 2005).

⁶⁹ Cf. Ann Komaromi, "The Window to the West in Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House*," in "*Pushkin House*" by Andrei Bitov: *A Casebook*, ed. Ekaterina Sukhanova (Normal, IL, 2005), 78-102.

⁷⁰ Bitov, *Pushkinskii dom*, 323.