Seeing Russia through Dmitry Markov's Lens:
The Optics of *Svetlukha* in an Artistic, Civil, and Educational Digital Space

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: Seeing Russia through Dmitry Markov's Lens:
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This thesis investigates the work of Dmitry Markov, a contemporary Russian photographer who used his iPhone camera to document the ordinary lives of provincial and marginal Russia, blending visual art, social activism, and literary storytelling in his self-curated Instagram platform. The work highlights how Markov's multimodal Instagram presence fostered an alternative photographic relationship and challenged the binary of light and darkness as well as the boundaries between documentary photography, personal narrative, and civic engagement. The analysis addresses ethical implications, investigates the features and affordances of digital technologies, and proposes that Markov's work can offer valuable pedagogical material for teaching Russian language within a multiliterate and intercultural framework. Ultimately, the thesis positions Markov's Instagram gallery as an artistic achievement, a deterritorialized social space, and a rich resource for fostering cross-cultural dialogue and educational innovation.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Imagine a stale-waffle grid of an old Soviet-style building's facade in grainy grey brick, dotted with shiny squares of warm windows, each a fleeting icon of somebody's hidden life. This is what Dmitry Markov's photography gallery resembles: a grid of little windows into ordinary lives that together somehow add up to a portrait of the entire block of a country. The gallery is not made of printed photographs but instead is fully digital and hosted on Instagram, a popular social media platform. Dmitry Markov was a down-to-earth artist in this way: he used his iPhone to take pictures of ordinary life scenes in Russia's remote provinces, little towns devoid of tourist attention, their industrial and residential quarters, and their most marginalized denizens. The resulting photographs were nothing short of extraordinary, captivating the hearts and minds of the public, making Markov one of the most recognizable photographers of its young century in the Russian cultural space.

As a popular hero, he soon acquired a mythology: a people-whisperer, a blogger and Instagram star, a social worker, a province-prowler who traded Moscow for a smaller less famous town, a professional phone photographer, a willful observer of the darker aspects of the Russian condition, a drug addict who slipped one time more than recovered. His vision, his stories, and his social impact now live on without him while relevant scholarship is still behind on discussing his work. This thesis aims to reflect on several little-discussed aspects of his multifaceted legacy from a multidisciplinary academic perspective, and possibly even create some of this legacy by connecting his work to contemporary teaching practice.

The first chapter synthesizes the existing knowledge about Markov's work, sourcing it from a wide array of journalistic articles, interviews, and his personal platforms, including web pages and print publications, to set up an informative foundation for a critical discussion of his

themes and his artistic subjectivity. It offers an alternative reading of his overall style, arguing that the thematic and stylistic interplay of darkness and light creates a unique optic that is both unsettling and insightful. The second chapter situates Markov's social and artistic work within the existing discourse of the ethics of photography, exploring how the act of photographing entails questions of power, responsibility, and the relationship between photographer, subject, and audience.

Out of Markov's broad format range – books, exhibitions, countless Web publications – his Instagram account is selected for deeper analysis because of its accessibility, authenticity, and, most importantly, multimodality that combines different modes of expression into a cohesive artistic idiolect. The third chapter discusses the implications of the digital and mobile nature of his photography, first drawing a general comparative analysis of the analog and digital formats and then focusing specifically on the affordances and interactive features of his Instagram gallery. One of the most important and unique aspects of his work lies in the way Markov played with the visual and verbal codes, creating complex multimodal narratives that play out on multiple semiotic levels simultaneously.

The concluding fourth chapter connects Markov's multimodal encoding to the notion of visual literacy and multiliteracy, a set of interpretative skills that allows for successful decoding of complex messages. His work is regarded as a potential teaching material for students of the Russian language, taking the conversation from an artistic and civic space into the space of cultural and linguistic education. Thematically, his narratives offer unique sociocultural insight into the contemporary Russian society; semiotically, their composition can facilitate the kind of learning that transcends the classic triad of culture, vocabulary, and grammar, teaching broader and more authentic critical communicative competencies. The chapter connects the cultural-aesthetic

paradigm to the pedagogical one and concludes with a sample classroom activity sequence built on the unique traits of Markov's work and the principles of language teaching. In the big picture, what distinguishes this thesis is its integrative analysis of form, content, and educational practice. It does not rest its merit on the sole fact that very few academic accounts of Markov's work exist at this moment but pushes the discussion into the uncharted territory on the crossroads of digital art, ethical spectatorship, and language pedagogy, revealing the complexity and potential of Markov's work.

II. CHAPTER 1. ABOUT THE ARTIST: DMITRY MARKOV

1.1 The Question of Legacy

We know a lot about Dmitry Markov's life and work: a "hero of our time," he left a significant digital footprint in the Internet, especially (but not exclusively) its Russophone segment colloquially known as "Runet" after the web domain .ru, which is featured as part of Markov's artistic project's title – dcim.ru. He engaged in a lot of self-reflection, autobiographical narration, and reminiscences in his Instagram account through captions and photographs. Though Markov himself rarely appeared in his photographs, his authorial subjectivity and personality came through in his choices of topic, subjects, framing, and his signature low-saturation, slightly hazy, cold bluish-grey tint editing. Markov often added textual snippets of his own memories to photographs of anonymous children of "city N,"[1] superimposing stories of his biography onto his now-adult gaze at life around him; scattered among his 784 posts, these little windows into Markov's life story do not necessarily give us a biography in a strict sense, but they do give us a glimpse into the inner layers of his artistic sensibility.

Markov willingly gave interviews to be transcribed and published in popular online outlets like Meduza, The Village, and numerous local Web-sources, and often participated in video interviews, public talks, and documentaries like Yury Dud's[2] YouTube project. The Internet contains a vast repository of Markov's anecdotes, opinions and confessions, ruminations on photography, stories from social work, intermittent chronologies, and intimate accounts of life experience from childhood triumphs like his first publication in a youth magazine to the escapist euphoria of drug use followed by the pain of withdrawal. After his sudden death from an opioid

[1] A common name referring to an obscure, nameless, provincial Russian towns, which was frequently used in Russian literature, for example, in the works of Gogol, Chekhov, and Dostoyevsky.
[2] Russian Юрий Дудь, pronounced /du:d'/ similarly to English "dude."

overdose on a grim – some Russians would argue, the grimmest – day in February 2024,[3] his life was recounted in greater than ever detail, reconstructed from friends' and family members' narratives. Sometimes these accounts were verbatim in the immortalized (i.e. digitized) words of the recently departed as in the case of Shura Burtin's article for Cherta Media that blended his commentary with Markov' stories audiotaped in the kitchen when the two were roommates, just before Markov started experimenting with mobile photography (Burtin 2024).

According to Russian journalist, photographer, and activist Vladimir Sevrinovskii, the idea is echoed among Russian artists that it may still be a decade before Markov's impact is understood and transformed properly into an artistic legacy (Sevrinovskii 2024). At this point, we have few print publications aside from Markov's own three books, an honorable mention in the recently published book by English author Howard Amos *Russia Starts Here: Real Lives in the Ruins of Empire* (2025) that explores contemporary Pskov (Markov's home base), and a teased forthcoming book by a sizeable team of Markov's friends and family, including the aforementioned Sevrinovskii. Add to all that a handful of academic papers (mostly student-written and tangential), a short stack of curatorial statements from Markov's past exhibitions, plus whatever archival evidence Markov's surviving family kept – and that would be the inventory of available info-artefacts of Markov's short life. On the one hand, it is a compelling collection of sources, many first-hand, covering his personal life, impactful social work, artistic journey and, by a natural extension, his understanding of contemporary Russia on the grand scheme of things. On the other hand, he was the "Russian Cartier-Bresson" who undertook the task of representing without queasy detachment the Russian masses usually spared aesthetic representation at a crucial and cruel time of societal rupture (Serebrennikov 2024a). For an artist of his significance and novelty, this

[3] Markov passed away on February 15, the same day as Russian opposition leader and political prisoner Aleksei Navalny was found dead in detention.

literature portfolio is scant, especially with regards to academic inquiry and critical or comparative analysis of his work in a global perspective.

If Sevrinovskii was right, we might expect to see discussion of Markov's work in future books, textbooks, and photographic compilations; leafing through the 2018 London hardcover catalogue *Another Life: Photography on the Margins*, it is easy to picture Markov's shots among photographers like Diane Arbus, Bruce Davidson, Larry Clark, contemporary artists like Katy Grannan, or Markov's Soviet compatriots Igor Palmin and Boris Mikhailov. We could see, in a few years or decades, more academic publications exploring Markov's work from new angles, like the recent paper "Dmitry Markov: The Phenomenon of the Russian Documentary Photography in the Epoch of Well-Developed Visual Social Networks" by Irina Chmyreva that focuses on Markov's imagery of childhood from a comparative standpoint, and hopefully more interdisciplinary discussions that go beyond just photography and into, for example, sociology, regional studies, or education, as this thesis attempts. Markov's photography developed and became a cultural phenomenon at a time of rupture that outlived him and continues to this day; we have yet to develop a distanced, holistic historical perspective of early 21st century Putin's Russia depicted in Markov's photography, so until then, and while the ongoing war discourages focus on the art from within actively aggressive states, we will not see that legacy take a definite shape or place.

1.2 Life and Work, in no Particular Order

A unique characteristic of Markov's photography, namely his choice to use a smartphone camera instead of more "professional" equipment, might be a double-edged sword when it comes to the question of legacy. His iPhone camera became his signature instrument just like the

Instagram square – his signature shape; this approach was a deliberate artistic choice that gave Markov many advantages, from the way it facilitated photographer-subject interaction at the "decisive moment of photography" to the immediately recognizable "Markovian" composition and format. Despite being Markov's *fishka,*[4] this vernacular quality of his photography might also be an obstacle to his wider recognition. The idea that iPhone photos destined for an Instagram account can count as serious art can be met with doubt and resistance that stems in part from the commonplaceness of said technology, and in part from the anxiety over having to rethink the foundations of what we know about photography as a phenomenon.

Markov's turn to the mobile camera was a development, not a starting point; he had started with a real camera, first taking pictures of his friends as a teenager, working his way up to journalist positions in college and then larger outlets like *Argumenty i fakty* (*Arguments and Facts*), and eventually securing lucrative contract work as an event photographer. Photographing lavish parties in Moscow halls with professional-grade camera equipment brought the most money but paid little in terms of moral satisfaction. Coming from the small industrial town of Pushkino, too far from Moscow to absorb any of its shimmer but close enough for direct comparison, Markov felt an intense dissonance between Moscow high-society and the masses he came from and returned to after work. He was able to reconcile it as he started volunteering and channeling that money into charitable work: as Markov told Kirill Serebrennikov at the opening reception of his exhibition at the Gogol Center, a check from a single such event in Moscow could cover several months of living in the villages where Markov volunteered (see Serebrennikov 2024b). Those occupations – photography and volunteering, which soon evolved into full-scale social work with a variety of vulnerable groups – remained Markov's main focus for the rest of his life. Working as a

[4] From Russian, signature trick, a token of stylistic uniqueness.

photographer correspondent for charitable organizations, Markov would still use a full-scale digital camera even after his mobile photography broke the mold and became his signature format. Still, it seems like for Markov the artistry of a photograph was inversely proportional to the grade of his camera – the smaller the device, the more diverse, independent, and layered the photograph.

As any Russian can certify, God loves the Trinity, that is – it is proper for things to come in threes. The third form of Markov's art is writing. Though less commonly featured, it actually brought Markov the first important triumph of his life: his first publication as well as his first award. As a teenager, he wrote an article about a video game for a young adult magazine *Velikii drakon* that won third place and got published. The published article has been preserved in his family archives, and even the first sentence shows Markov's intricate writing style full of expressive descriptions, alliteration, humor, and syntactic complexity uncharacteristic of typical teenage boys who split their time between the street and video games. The story of the publication has bittersweet tones as it happened more "in spite of" something than "due to": young Dmitry ended up sending an unfinished manuscript out of frustration over the condescending remarks of his father who later tried to tell his son his piece was never published (Dud' 2025, 11:40–12:50).

Markov's relationship with his father was a difficult one, and he openly wrote about it. For example, the very first chapter of this debut book *#draft* is devoted to his childhood memories. The highlights include his parents' difficult relationship, his father's drunken rough housing, and the regular experience of having to carry his inebriated father to bed. Like most of Markov's writing as seen from his Instagram posts, this difficult story is told with literary grace and an effortless hint of humor. Every one of the six chapters in his first book starts with a short essay showcasing Markov's smooth, vivid narration that does not dilute the heavy, terrifying reality of life but somehow makes it easier to accept with the help of his lucid, matter-of-fact style that is

both conversational and poetic, somber and tongue-in-cheek. As with his photography, Markov proved himself a perfectionist: political activist Konstantin Gorozhanko recalled that Dmitry asked for his feedback on the essays, worried that they did not live up to his own standards. "I have seen his photos before and had a good idea of what they are like. But when I read the text, I was shocked – it was so piercingly tough <...> [H]is text has just as much power as the photos…" ("Chelovek serdtsem naruzhu" 2024). Though not as often praised (the examples here may exaggerate the attention to his writing as compared to photography or social work), writing also has played a significant role in his life. What started as a teenage hobby and a ploy to avoid being drafted into the army in his youth (college students are exempt, and Markov's enrollment subsisted solely on his editorial job at the local newspaper) evolved into professional journalistic writing and, in his personal Instagram outlet, an independent, poetic narrative genre married to his equally unique photographs.

A little over a decade had passed between Markov's first publication in a gaming magazine (1996, Markov is fourteen) and his first serious photography award for his series *Besprizorniki*[5] (2006, Markov is twenty-five). This already hinted at what was to become one of his central themes: street-roaming kids who invariably reminded Markov of his own childhood and adolescence that he calls a "happy time" regardless of its distressing details. A mere decade later in 2025, Markov is thirty-three and a winner of his first international award, the Getty Images Instagram Grant that brings him global recognition (his photos were featured in New York along with the other two winning artists), a mentorship opportunity, and an incentive to expand the reach of his lens beyond his new provincial home of Pskov. Fast-forward a year later, Apple selects Markov's photographs to be featured in cities around the world as part of their "Taken on the

[5] Russian "street kids," street urchins; literally "those without anyone watching over."

iPhone" campaign; Markov will visit Manhattan and Paris, publish three photobooks (the fourth was in progress when he died), open several gallery shows, sell his most famous photograph of a masked OMON officer sitting next to a framed Putin's portrait for two million rubles, and donate the entire sum to civil non-profit organizations helping people detained on political grounds. With the money from foreign exhibitions, Markov will buy an apartment in Pskov, a typical provincial Russian town that he discovered while volunteering and found more comfortable than Moscow or Paris; from that home base, he travelled to remote Russian regions and beyond, usually gravitating to residential streets, markets, small cultural venues, and refuges for his most vulnerable compatriots. He will continue his social work, taking in "difficult teenagers," slashing through infamous Russian red tape to help marginalized groups receive their due benefits (his friends recall that even in his official correspondence with institutions, he retained his characteristic writing style), and using his visibility to raise money for the causes he encountered during his photographic or journalistic trips. He will also use drugs during the entire time chronicled above, enter rehab centers several times to recover for a while and relapse again. Just like with his family history, Markov was open about his ongoing history with addiction, and he supported dozens, maybe hundreds, of addicted adolescents and adults. His Instagram features many posts from rehab centers and youth recovery camps like "Vyzhyvshyie,"[6] and perhaps the most astonishing aspect of these is the fleur of joy and calm radiating from these photographs – a positivity not meant to be overpowering or deceptive, but rather hopeful. Despite all hope, Markov will not survive his addiction, succumbing to it in his Pskov abode, still unable to make sense of his role and character in the war-waging, self-devouring, deeply beloved Russia he documented so relentlessly in his trilanguage of activism, photography, and writing. Founding a substance abuse rehabilitation

[6] Russian Выжившие, the survivors.

center for adolescence was one of his last projects; it has since successfully opened its doors in Nizhny Novgorod and bears Markov's name.

1.3 Darkness and Light

Chiaroscuro: "an arrangement or treatment of light and dark parts in a pictorial work of art" (Merriam-Webster 2025). Photography: from Greek photos – "light" and graphos – "write," writing with light (Oxford Reference). For Dmitry Markov, this interplay of light and dark was not a mere technicality of photography's mechanics. Being a student of Aleksandr Lapin, a Soviet photographer who shot in black and white and wrote extensively on the light craft in photography, Markov paid close attention to his use of shadow and light. Though he showed preference for overall lightened, lower-contrast pictures with a hazy hue, the dark-light balance was a constant in his vocabulary, giving many of his photographs a painterly quality that has been noticed by art critics and Instagram followers alike. This, however, applies to good photography in general; what makes Markov's use of chiaroscuro unique is his thematic interplay of light and dark. "People tell me sometimes that I darken reality…", said Markov in a 2015 interview to the alternative media outlet Furfur, "I try to capture moments that can be interpreted positively. For example, homeless people sleeping at the train station. I took their photo as they lay hugging each other, cheek to cheek. Take a step back, photograph the environment – that would be trashy, but I was captivated by this tenderness of theirs" (FURFUR 2025).

The conversation on the graveness of his themes started early in his fame and never died down: even though nearly every major interview Markov gave had some discussion about it, the question never seemed to exhaust itself. In his famous appearance in Yury Dud's YouTube-based interview documentary *Markov: Life of the Russian Province* released in 2020, the photographer admitted to being tired of the label of darkness, doom, and despair. His choice of topic was

sometimes skewed by his line of work: as he portrayed what he saw every day, it makes sense that social work resulted in the overrepresentation of the so-called *sotsialka,*[7] and his history of addiction gave him the access and perception to bring to light this dark issue of substance abuse. Though his responses grew stronger with time and became more like defenses, the basic retort stayed largely the same: he captured what he understood as "Russia on the average," simple folk in familiar places in circumstances that may seem depressing to those who see or prefer to see its more manicured side.

The common accusation of painting an unflattering, even disturbing picture of Russia has often been worded as *chernukha*, a term that appeared in the 80's during Glasnost and remained part of the post-Soviet art and mass mediascape. Contemporary Slavic Studies scholar Eliot Borenstein, who specializes in modern popular phenomena, defines chernukha[8] as "unrelenting negativity and pessimism both in the arts and in the mass media" (Borenstein 2004, 243). Many of Markov's frequent motifs – poverty, disability and disease, addiction and alcoholism, homelessness, post-Soviet ruin of the forgotten provinces inhabited by the famously unsmiling, prematurely aged Russians – fit the description. Subtle flavors of these themes seemed to permeate even the more sanguine subjects: these happy children sit on dirty old furniture from the dumpster, these playing dogs are stray, this smiling man was hooked on heroin and forever risks relapsing, this sunlit apartment building, like its million identical twins across the country, has not been repaired since Khrushchev. Either his subjects or something about them was often dark and heavy, but nevertheless, it is impossible to ignore in his words a certain optimism and love that are aware and complex as opposed to blind or artificially arranged; the title of his memorial exhibition in

[7] Russian "социалка" – portrayal of relevant social issues and vulnerable groups e.g. poverty, homelessness, etc.
[8] Russian "chornyi / чёрный": "black."

Moscow, *The Optics of Hope*, is a testament to the palpable positivity of Markov's work. In his curatorial statement to the original exhibition, Sky Seven, Vladislav Efimov aptly observed that Markov's technicality and intentionality create "a kind of a geometry of sorrow and joy" (Efimov 2024).

A more fitting name for the tone, or even an idiolect of his photography could be *svetlukha*, from the Russian "svetlyi" meaning "light" or "bright," preserving the end of the word from chernukha to keep the reference to crude, chthonic, dark themes that are colored, however, with sympathy, love, and hope. An intelligible neologism tied firmly to a late-Soviet phenomenon seems like a fitting way to describe Markov's artistic legacy which is radically novel yet familiar and rooted in the history and phenomenology of his subjects and his subjectivity.

Markov's svetlukha was not whitewashing, a mere accessory, or even a coping mechanism, but a requirement; for an artist-activist, chernukha as an optical frame would entail despair, futility, and repulsion, rendering the weight of social work insurmountable. In this way, Markov's photography was beyond documentary: he was showing real Russians and their real stories, but statement-of-fact does not encompass his narratives, visual or textual. His selection of scene and its framing, composition, and palette transcend subjectivity not just in the way his shutter arrests the moment to depict the optical unconscious, but also in the way he imprints a specific perception, an optic onto a photograph. Markov was well-versed in the language of photography, having studied under Aleksandr Lapin who had a tremendous influence on Markov's photographic style that looks effortless (captured) yet artistically precise (composed). Markov's measured composition was perhaps the strongest, most compelling tool of turning the commonplace into the artistic and the unsightly into a sight, an idea consistent with Lapin's views: "The divide between the contents of the picture and that of the pictured is as great as the divide between an event's

description and a poem or short story, that is, imagination and fiction are achievable in photography" (Lapin 2008, 87). By means of aesthetic principles like framing (cadrage), composition and geometry, contrast and balance, and color palette, Markov distills the fabula of documentary photography into a single-frame plot, a happening of significance in the flat square microcosm of an Instagram-bound photograph. As a result, his images often come out almost exalted or at least reimagined from the perspective of mastery and beauty. A beautiful photograph of a vulgar subject may generally be ironic, but in Markov's case, the beautification is sincere and affirming, backed by the verisimilitude of photography that captures what it sees, and by his civic engagement, identification with the subject, and disambiguating comments attached to the images through captions, essays, or verbal narratives (interviews). Also adding to the veritable optimism of his pictures is nostalgia that many Russian viewers admit to in the comment sections of his Instagram posts. Some of the viewers respond to the tokens of general Soviet culture like metal playgrounds, low garage boxes, pastel school halls, and flimsy bazaar stalls, while others are drawn to the images of specific streets and towns they grew up in. Nostalgia is famously capable of turning darkness into light, which in this case illuminates Markov's pictures from without.

Arguably, what triggers Markov's accusers (beyond the baseline distrust from the stigma of drug use) is not chernukha, but precisely svetlukha – the shock and cognitive dissonance of seeing negative phenomena in a beautiful, romanticized, optimistic way that pleases the eye and lays claim to positive emotional responses of hope, nostalgia, endearment, and recognition, in addition to the negative ones like fear, disgust, pity, anger, and once again, recognition. Markov dared to not just see, capture, and display for a global audience the dirty laundry of the nation, engaging in voyeuristic chernukha in a comparatively universal language of photography; he also dared to suggest there is good and beauty in rehab centers, crumbling walls, and idle, ever-street-

bound packs of children and dogs. Markov himself seemingly had less confidence in the displeased viewers, blaming their criticism on chernukha and the viewers' selective blindness. In a post from the Krasnodar region, Markov uses the caption space to "translate" his visually encoded idea into a more concrete verbal form, essentially dubbing the message in an attempt to explain himself to an audience that allegedly failed to understand:

Fig. 1.1 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 08/20/2023. www.instagram.com/p/CwK7RpNohfy/?hl=en.

"<…> All in all, it's upsetting that many – not the majority, of course, but many – judge the quality of the shot based solely on formal, apparent qualities. Because, for example, if you shift your attention away from these "gymnasts" and focus on the actual content, you will see a touching picture of the best childhood qualities: excitement, spontaneity, and imagination."[9]

[9] All translations of Markov's Instagram captions here and later are translated by Nessie Kurganova.

Besides svetlukha, this post illustrates several other Markovian traits: children in focus, a picturesquely suspended moment (flips or jumps caught mid-air are particularly common), and his use of captions to reflect on his photographic process and communicate his views directly to his viewers in a social media space meant for communication. Other times, his writing takes less of a didactic or interpretative role relative to the photograph and functions as an equal, fully-fleshed out narrative, as seen in his visual-literary portrait of the town Uzlovaya.[10] The visual narrative unfolds in six photographic vignettes featuring children engaged in play battles with cards and toy guns, an obscure city event involving circle-dancing with a bear mascot, older men braiding grass and selling axes at a flea market, and a young man of color smoking like James Dean and sporting a decorative police cap.

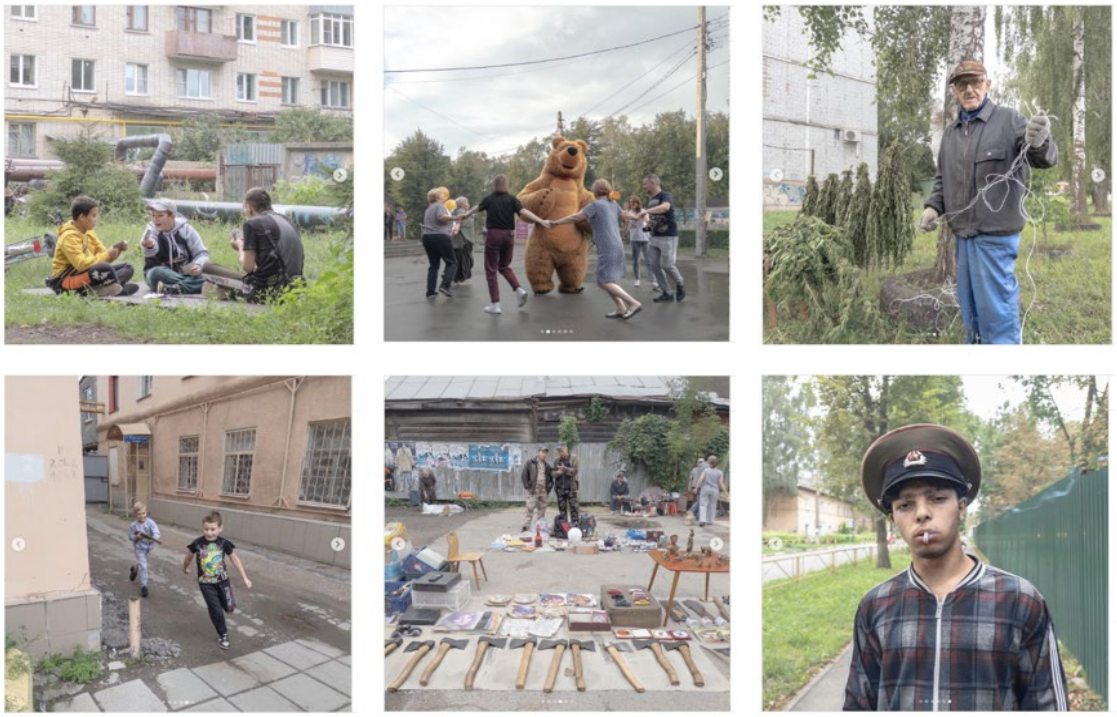

Fig. 1.2 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 08/14/2023. www.instagram.com/p/Cv7CZBqI1NO/?hl=en&img_index=6 .

[10] Russian: Узловая, a city in Tula oblast'.

The long caption does not interpret any of these unusual scenes but spins a parallel portrait of the town. It is quoted in full below for three reasons: first, it is a clear example of svetlukha in text, second, it showcases (as much as my arguably mellow translation permits) Markov's literary voice that deserves more attention, and third, his captions are otherwise unavailable in quality translation since Instagram-embedded automatic translation fails to parse the colloquial and literary layers of these texts.

> To get to Tula, I had to transfer at Uzlovaya. At the train crossing, someone immediately took a blow to the mug – not me, but a local train-station drunk who wanted to bum a cig from a taxi driver. The dude approached him from behind and put his hand on the driver's shoulder – the unexpected physical contact provoked a reflex, and the drunk got what he asked for, though not the way he planned. I crawled out of the train still sleepy, but this scene invigorated me and I concluded that the town deserves a closer look.
>
> It turned out to be a real historical village of the late 90's – early 00's. That became apparent when I was still in the cab: the temperature in the car was subzero like in a morgue, and the crackling speaker blasted pubescent rap. The details seemed to be warning me: this place exists in the extremes, and it's best to clear the recently learned Buddhist principles of temperance from my memory cache: this knowledge is out of place here.
>
> The center of Uzlovaya is clean, neat, and artistically speaking, boring like Soviet wallpaper. Real beauty begins where the city budget ends. Ironically, the richest concentration of life was found in the district called "Dead" (it's a real name, you can check it on Yandex Maps). First of all, there is a huge number of kids who move around in packs of 5-10. Some play soccer, some cards, others climb trees, etc. The adults are mostly

concentrated in the garages and on benches near apartment blocks. While the grandmas plant flowers, grandpas braid nettle brooms for winter – wonderful. Lawns near apartment blocks drown in flowers, and to the locals' benefit I should note that it might be the only city in Russia where I didn't spot the heart-wrenching ZHEK art[11] made of beer bottles and old tires.

Basically, I liked it there. My impression was not even ruined by the guard of the newly renovated train station who, in polite words, informed me that she is concerned by my criminal mug and suggested I wait for my train outside.

This caption matches the photographs as a series of vignettes, each with its own story unfolding in this town of extremes that contains things that are distasteful or even violent, things that are beautiful, and then things that are commonly identified as nice (like the neat and clean downtown area) but are endowed with negative qualities (boring, banal). This example of svetlukha also emphasizes one of its core implications – the subjectivity of the artist. It plays a dual role in Markov's art: on the one hand, his identification with his subjects helped him get on the same level with those he photographed. He grew up much like these street boys, lived with addiction like the drug users in *pritony* (crackhouses) and *reby* (rehabs),[12] internalized the topography of apartment blocks, market streets, shabby playgrounds and gold-top churches. He photographed his own world and, through his choice of shots and their composition, he also photographed himself in a way no self-portrait could. On the other hand, he also exercised his subjectivity as a photographer which served as a point of detachment and created artistic distance

[11] Amateur garden decorations often resembling animals or cartoon characters, typically made by local enthusiasts of old tires, bottles, and loose materials like wood. ZHEK (Russian ЖЭК) is an acronym that stands for "Housing and Maintenance Office" (Жилищно-эксплуатационная контора), a now reformed government institution that oversaw building repairs, utilities, and public space management, but not art, which was grassroot.
[12] Russian jargon: притоны, ребы (short from реабилитация).

to allow a vantage point for observation and representation of phenomena beyond the personal. Though he knew many of his subjects, Markov aimed to capture them as instances of something more universal, something potentially generalizable. Chmyreva, who recently published one of the very few if not the only full academic paper on Markov, observed this interplay of association and distance especially with the images of children and teenagers. “Markov <...> managed to not only be accepted among the youth but also preserve the detachment that enabled him to capture the state of not just the individual, but a generation. This happens thanks to the gift of composition, through geometry and loftiness, when a teenager’s figure looks as angular, as dynamic and filled with flashes and glares, as the shot itself, and that is how the entire photographic space becomes a psychological portrait” (Chmyreva 2024, 63–65). Markov’s photographs are products of fruitful negotiations between the two – the personal and professional (in his social worker capacity) familiarity with his topics, and his authority as a professional photographer who has the right tools to communicate complex ideas through photographs.

III. CHAPTER 2. PHOTOGRAPHY AS MORAL DILEMMA

2.1 To Take a Photograph: A Conversation with Susan Sontag

The discussion of the relationship between the photographer armed with a lens and the subjects it captures invariably involves the question of morality in photography. It is especially acute in the case of social photography where the photographed subjects are in a state of multiplied vulnerability: that of their marginalized or vulnerable social status, and that of being exposed to a camera lens to be portrayed for the very society that marginalizes them. This same moral consideration applies likewise to other genres of photography (e.g. documentary, artistic, or an intersection of both as in Markov's work), whenever the dimension of identity, subjectivity, and personhood becomes central to a given photograph.

In her seminal book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag discusses the subject-photographer relationship in the essay "America Seen through Photographs, Darkly" devoted to the work of Diane Arbus whose faithful lens captured New York denizens in their strange, unsettling, sometimes monstrous and pained selves. Arbus's subjects, as Sontag notes, face the camera in a candid and deliberate act of exposure, seemingly unaware of their grotesqueness. Arbus was described as a curious, hungry-for-seeing photographer capturing not merely America, but the America that is other, strange, unknown, internally exotic to an observer like Arbus who came from an insulated, safe, stable background. Her distance from the subjects, whether it was the colorful specimens of Manhattan or distant images of middle America, sharpened the perception of strangeness in her photographs, and her lens was a pass to new visual-sensual experiences, a "license to go wherever [she] wanted and to do what [she] wanted to do" (Sontag 2005, 33). As a photographer, Dmitry Markov was similarly curious and preferred to photograph openly, having established contact with his subject instead of trying to disguise the camera. Though many of his

shots caught the subjects unawares, Markov did not deliberately conceal the act of photographing like, for example, Walker Evans did with a film camera that was a lot more difficult to hide than Markov's casual iPhone. Some of his most striking photographs, if such a selection can be made, show the uncanny moment the subject's gaze meets the lens in a direct encounter and the potential viewers indirectly, registering the act of photography and for a split-moment *being* the photograph. As Markov's photography started gaining momentum, it also became like a license to explore new places and new experiences: the money he earned through grants, awards, and merchandise enabled him to take long trips to other regions, and his journalistic work with charities gave him a pass to visit the private nooks of society like family homes and social facilities. However, whereas Sontag suggests that the lens "annihilates moral boundaries and social inhibitions, freeing the photographer from any responsibility toward the people photographed", for Markov it was the opposite. His lens gave him not just an aesthetic perspective but a social and activist one; as he travelled Russian backroads, it became a sort of a "nomadic weapon" that facilitated "affective encounters" between the photographer and the traversed spaces, calling him and by extension his audience to go beyond observation and into participation in the form of a "reflexive, embodied, and relational community engagement that may activate new ways of seeing our everyday environment" (Coats 2014, 1–6).

The radical intimacy and candidness of Markov's works that portrayed 21st century Russia rough and raw, contrary to the social realist aesthetic of the past Soviet tradition, seemed to puzzle viewers. Just as Sontag on behalf of the American public wondered about Arbus's freaks – "do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like that? do they know how grotesque they are?" (Sontag 2005, 28) – Markov's audience wondered how his subjects felt being photographed not in their best light: poor, drunk, addicted, pensive, dressed in simple clothes or not at all. Markov was

often asked about his interactions with the people he photographed: in his interview with *Afisha Daily*, he joked that "for some reason everybody thinks that people must want to beat me up for photographing them" (Morozova 2024). Markov also routinely used the caption space on Instagram to reflect on his artistic process and communication style. Next to a picture of an old man reclining on a lawn by a familiar Soviet apartment block,[13] a lengthy caption reveals that the act of communication is an integral part of photography for Markov, a skillset that develops "only with practice" and has no universal manual:

> How do I communicate with them? It depends. How do I edit photos? Manually. <...> Many think that there is some universal life-hack – a conversation script, an editing filter, etc. <...> The only way to get the experience of communicating with people is practice. It's also difficult to give advice here because everyone starts with their own behavioral approach. Some negotiate, some just take pictures like nobody cares, others hide it, and so on. Context also varies: sometimes it's enough to just shoot a quick shot on the go, and other times you need to get to know the people. I think real mastery is the ability to predict which option would be most effective in a given situation and yield the best result. And this comes with practice.

Direct engagement with the photographed subjects was integral to Markov's work. Another exceptional anecdote that Markov liked to share described the story of a photograph that never happened, or rather, one that perished after losing the battle with morality. In his conversation with director Kirill Serebrennikov, he described a photograph of a young bus passenger looking through the window faintly reflecting a cathedral, a "neutral photograph" in Markov's words. The label of

[13] Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 05/25/2023; www.instagram.com/p/CsqwbpJIGRy/?hl=en.

neutrality refers to the classic debate on whether a photograph is coded or non-coded, first raised in Roland Barthes' canonical work "The Photographic Message" and later contested and developed by scholars involved in the semiotics of photography. The non-coded, or denotative, quality of a photograph refers to the camera's ability to capture reality exactly as is and produce authentic representations, a quality especially important in the earlier days of photography to distinguish it from painterly or generally artistic, creative representations. Unlike the suggestive, connotative, coded interpretation, photographs regarded as non-coded claim a neutral rendition of reality, though like it was with Barthes' argument, it is prone to being contested. This was the fate of Markov's bus photograph that could not be: the boy's mother asked the photographer to delete the publication because she saw it as coded even though the narrative of the candid shot was authentic and generally neutral. What broke the code of neutrality was context: the mother was worried that her child's picture appeared in the same gallery as the homeless, the addicted, and the street kids she probably would not want as her son's friends. "He plays accordion, gets good grades, [is] a good boy," she explained in a message, saying essentially that the photograph coded the boy as belonging to the same kind as Markov's marginal subjects and prompting him to dispose of a photograph whose composition he described with such artistic pride (Serebrennikov 2024b). Objectively, many of his photographs show neutral and often positive scenes, but the public interpretation is colored by the context of Markov's willing representation of the reprehensible, as well as the viewers' own aesthetic or life experiences that are read into the photographs.

The question of the morality of photography is embedded in language: in English, we *take* a photograph, that is, obtain possession of the subject that could not be possessed otherwise; similarly, though more obscurely, in Russian we *take off* or *cast*[14] a photograph from reality. The

[14] Russian: снять, снимать.

idea of photography as possession was one of the central theses in Sontag's *On Photography* where she associated the act of photography with objectification, captivity and, consequently, violence: "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" (Sontag 2005, 4). In the chapter on Diane Arbus Sontag adds another important layer to this ethical aspect: who is it that takes possession of the photographed, and what is their relationship, real (personal) or imagined (social), beyond the photographic space? Arbus, a young woman coming from a wealthy personal and professional background, might have felt at home in Manhattan, but she was never on the same level as her subjects; her Americans were the extraordinary, strange, marginal personas, her America was the othered America. Markov, on the other hand, came from a typical provincial family riddled with bone-chilling but trivial problems; like those he photographed, he grew up and lived among apartment blocks, market streets, shabby playgrounds and churches, used drugs, and could never recover from addiction. His Russians were often marginalized but still average, cumulative, organic to their surroundings and dispersed around the Russian province, endemic to Russia as a whole. His subjects were not captured in pictures like animals caged for display and meant for gawking, they were rather like regular, native inhabitants who had to be written into the representations of reality that tried to erase them.

Markov's Russia was familiar to him to the point of internalizing it: "*I am a citizen of this contemporary*[15] *Russia to the bone. My place is here. I am the two hundred ruble bribe. I am this black mold on the benches. I am that ficus plant whose roots grew through the windowsill.*" These words conclude the Instagram caption to a photograph[16] featuring two undressed men in a public

[15] России настоящего; another translation: real Russia.

[16] Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 06/13/2021; www.instagram.com/p/CQEij6MM289/?hl=en.

banya (sauna or bathhouse), one hosing down the other. Markov recounts the story of his getting to the banya after hours by giving the *banshchik* (banya attendant) a 200-ruble bribe, which made him realize that he "will never find himself in this happy Russia of tomorrow": he is what Russia is today. Who or what did Arbus see in her subjects? Is it possible she could have seen herself, or her belonging to the diverse community of Manhattan or America, or a strange version of herself she could have been or longed to be vicariously? Sontag was right to raise the question of identity of the artist, though mostly she focuses her attention precisely on the sense of detachment or the framed, the deliberate othering performed by Arbus's lens and evident within the photographs. In Markov's photography, artistic tools like framing, pose (not deliberately assumed by the subjects but deliberately captured and selected by the artist), composition, framing, color scheme, and even exophotographic elements like captions serve to represent the subjects in a harmonious, aesthetic way and thus assert their right for representation, beauty, and, as will be discussed later, citizenship. Markov was able to relate to his frequent subjects: dwellers of smaller towns, workers, children and teenagers coming of age, drug users and alcoholics. Like Arbus, he was curious and studious in his street photography, and he had a sense of childlike wonder even though he was hardly really surprised by the scenes he was capturing. His Russians did not have to be out of the ordinary – he rendered them thus, and they did not have to be freaks like Arbus's sword eaters because society already labeled them as such.

The connections between these two very dissimilar artists seem to rest on intersections made as much of parallels as of differences. If Diane Arbus's artistic thirst came from boredom and dissatisfaction with the insulated world of family wealth and upper-class industries like fashion, Markov's came from a place of belonging to the marginalia, familiarity, and acute interest in it. Where Arbus saw the Other, Markov saw another – another native of the province, another

boy growing up, another product of this same reality. His childlike curiosity, a trait that Sontag also attributed to Arbus, came not from a place of innocence or naivete, but from his history of drug use: as Markov reflected in a photograph caption[17] (his family and friends also echoed the idea in interviews), people with addiction tend to get stuck in whatever age they started using. In her photographs, Arbus presented Americans to Americans, much like Markov first and foremost presented Russians to Russians. Markov and Arbus both succumbed to the pressures of their sensibilities and arguably died by their own hand with the help of substances, though Markov's death was evidently not a deliberate suicide. Their photography seemed to have helped them hold on to life for longer, but not long enough. Their deaths made their photography instantly more popular, inspiring retrospective exhibitions within a year of their deaths. In life, both artists attracted controversy, some or perhaps even most of it coming from the unsettling nature of their photographs and their subjects whose depictions, let alone artistic depictions, seemed taboo. In this sense, whether we regard Markov's pictures through the optic of chernukha or svetlukha, when it comes to his subjects as real people rendered for the gaze of others, the act of being photographed seemed to push into the freak category these resting, drinking, commuting, unfashionably dressed, scruffy, prematurely aged Russians.

The question of subjectivity and morality is a grand, multifaceted complex of questions. How do the coded and non-coded aspects of photography interact? By extension, how much is read into the photograph as opposed to written into it, and what role do captions and other contextual elements play? Are the viewers critical of the photographs or what these photographs as indexical signs pointing to reality depict – in other words, are they disturbed by images of "unwashed Russia" or their origins, the state of the country as it is? Are photographs of painful or

[17] Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 6/7/2023 www.instagram.com/p/CtMpncLId81/?hl=en.

difficult subjects – poverty, disease, war – acting on moral grounds by raising awareness and providing representation, or are they immoral in the way they reinforce the distance between the viewer and the photographed, creating a safe, voyeuristic way to have experiences, including pain and suffering? Susan Sontag claimed the latter in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a sequel to her original 1977 oeuvre that focused on photographic images of violence. From her newly-21st century perspective (the book was published in 2003), Sontag also argued that the growing omnipresence of photographs of suffering creates an effect of fatigue, desensitizing the viewer, and together with the distance embedded in the photograph does little to actually help or prevent the situations of atrocity.

2.2 Photography as a Contract: A Conversation with Ariella Azoulay

Markov did not take images of atrocity, or at least not in the sense that Sontag was referring to: the pain and victimization in his photography is dull, accumulating in his subjects in a systematic way day by day and year by year as opposed to acute scenes of violence inflicted in war or direct physical aggression. It was also penetrable by light and made space for beauty, and often also hope and joy, which is different from the images and themes discussed by Sontag. He was, of course, affected by the war on Ukraine that broke out in February 2022. That year after the war started, Markov only published three posts with six photographs total, as if losing his ability to speak his artistic language in the new reality. He was not a war journalist and did not see direct combat; the most striking images telling the truth of war, factual or emotional, came from the Ukrainian front lines that year and are perhaps better contextualized by Sontag's works. The same can be said about Ariella Azoulay's critique of some of Sontag's assumptions about photographing

atrocity: her 2008 book *The Civil Contract of Photography*[18] provides a more fitting framework for images of occupation violence and the role of photographs as artefacts of existence and assertions of citizenship in their rightful states, be it Ukraine or Palestine, through their claimed citizenship in photography.

Azoulay's thesis reimagines not only the way we perceive photographs of violence and suffering but also how we understand citizenship. She focuses her analysis on a vulnerable group familiar to her from her early life in Israel, Palestinians under occupation, exploring the photographic portrayal of their suffering and specifically the relationships created between the photographer, the photographed, and the spectator. The latter trifecta forms a group of participant agents who encounter each other in a deterritorialized civil space of photography and are governed by its unwritten *civil contract*, a "hypothetical, imagined arrangement regulating relations within this virtual political community <...> not dictated by the ruling power, even when this power attempts to rule and to control photography" (Azoulay 2008, 23). In a civil photographic space, stateless persons are allotted equal rights to representation even when their physical or political spaces suppress their political participation and representation. The photographic encounter is conceptualized as a political act, a *civil spectatorship* which, contrary to Sontag's claims about image distance and image fatigue, bridges the divide and encourages action or can even itself constitute action. The photographed assert their right to claim photographic space and use it to testify about the wrongs they are suffering. For example, Azoulay describes a photograph of a Palestinian merchant showing his store destroyed by the Israeli army, inviting the viewers to witness his condition as active participants endowed with a responsibility of "viewing <...> that

[18] See reference to Azoulay in Musvik, Viktoriia. Kak fotograf Dmitry Markov i iego snimki sozdali estetiku novogo Rossiiskogo kino, [How Photographer Dmitry Markov and his Photographs Created the Aesthetics of New Russian Cinema].

reconstructs the photographic situation and allows a reading of the injury inflicted upon others," which Azoulay sees as a civic as opposed to aesthetic skill (Azoulay 2008, 14).

This distinction is another point of disagreement between her and Sontag, who wrote that photography has a "dual power," the power to document and to make beautiful art, and the two can clash when pain and violence are evoked in a photograph: "Transforming is what art does, but photography that bears witness to the calamitous and the reprehensible is much criticized if it seems aesthetic; that is, too much like art" (Sontag 2004, 76). Beholding beauty is seen as an indulgence which, when applied to images of atrocity, stands at odds with the documentary power and turns the witnesses' shock into voyeurism. Azoulay, on the other hand, makes a point to build her argument almost entirely in the civic space as opposed to Sontag's "aesthetic judgement." Sontag's conception of photography is rooted in the understanding of a photograph as an artefact rather than a dynamic relationship or negotiation between the participants. The civil contract framework does not necessarily discredit images that are both beautiful and distressing, or at least not explicitly; what it rejects is an 'ethics of seeing' grounded in the aesthetic or artistic realm and thus separate from the social or civic dimension. Describing a visibly arranged photograph of a beheaded person from Michal Heiman's series, Azoulay connects the deliberate composition of this visceral scene not to aesthetics that obscures atrocity, but to evidence that makes the unknown photographer visible and directs our attention to the fact of the photograph, the relationship between the beheaded person, whoever arranged him, and the spectator of the resulting scene. However, one can argue that Azoulay ends up cornered in her framework much like Sontag or Barthes whom she criticized, trading an aesthetic gaze for a predominantly civic one. What would we find if we allowed ourselves to explore the function of formal beauty within photography as a civic space?

Markov's work provides a fitting case study. It bears repeating that he did not photograph open confrontation, and despite continuous accusations of chernukha, his photographs are less viscerally shocking if we regard them against Sontag's or Azoulay's examples, or photographs from the Ukrainian frontline that Markov undoubtedly saw with the rest of the world. One kind of suffering does not delegitimize another, and experiences like drug abuse, parental neglect, the state's neglect of its provinces, living with disability in scarcity, and other of his frequent topics belong in the category. Markov created a space of alternative citizenship for groups whose representation is deemed undesirable by the status quo, those experiencing systemic, chronic pain that is arguably less visible compared to the shocking images of momentary, acute violence. Markov's distinctive lightwashed svetlukha optic, as previously argued, can create a dissonance for the viewers who both recognize the suffering and perceive the beauty and balance framing it. In Sontag's paradigm, this reaction makes sense: his images send "mixed signals" (Sontag 2004, 77), and the same can be said about the text that may accompany those images.

Azoulay's civic approach generally appears to be a more lucrative framework for understanding Markov's art: his images, though beautiful, are often explicit calls to action, ranging from noticing and acknowledging to providing financial assistance. In his fundraising posts, he used captions to add almost literary narratives to the artistic photographs of the benefactors, which broadens Azoulay's principle of the spectator's responsibility in two directions: the multimodality of captioning photographs, and the potential for greater agency of the spectator to act upon their civic spectatorship. Beyond this occasional direct involvement, Markov's photographs are generally consistent with Azoulay's framework as they are not merely invitations to see, but invitations to take a longer look, to commit to seeing, and to recognize the seen as part of the community. The people and situations he photographed are not news to his Russian viewers, but

what constitutes a novelty is the opportunity he creates for a more egalitarian, considerate look at things we tend to look away from, like homeless people, difficult teenagers, or ugly crumbing facades of the Soviet concrete tundra. In Markov's gallery, people living with addiction get a chance to be represented as fellow people, not living warnings for the masses or symptoms of a disease. In Markov's photographs from rehabilitation programs, these people get a chance to make a public appearance while in recovery, experiencing joy and community despite the hardships of addiction and withdrawal.

Azoulay provides a useful framework to account for the social and civic aspect of Markov's work, which is especially significant given that his photography was born in a civic space, not in an artistic one. Publicist Pavel Gerasimenko notes that some of Markov's earliest photography awards dating as far back as 2009 were won in the sphere of social photography (Gerasimenko 2024). His personal statement for the pivotal Burn project, which would eventually inspire his first steps in mobile photography, ends thus: "I hope that my photos have not the small share [sic] in drawing the attention of benefactors, volunteers and journalists. I do hope that they help the society to look at the problems of such children in a humane way" (Markov 2010). However, the civic framework laid out by Ariella Azoulay offers little structure for understanding the civic role of the aesthetic aspects like composition, scenery, framing, light and color balance, the things that led Markov's Instagram fans to call his work painterly and even compare his photographs to specific artists like Alexander Deineka, Valentin Serov, or the foreign Edward Hopper and Vermeer.

Markov's work shows how aesthetically pleasing photographs of the reprehensible or vulgar and thus underrepresented can constitute activism and appeal for the viewers' engagement. His geometry renders dilapidated playgrounds and square cement blocks as intricate patterns that emerge in perfectly balanced compositions; scowling pedestrians with their surrounding elements

come together in organic, almost pastoral vignettes, and troubled teenagers are caught sunlit at the heights of their own little triumphs. These photographs are not appeals to sympathy or provocations of disdain, but an invitation to see these other lives as intricate, worthy, deserving of curiosity, artistic attention, and civic respect. In this way, the beauty of Markov's compositions becomes a *civic instrument* that disarms habitual indifference, drawing the viewer into meaningful engagement with lives that might otherwise remain invisibly common and ignorable. Rather than obscuring hardship as Sontag warned may happen, the aesthetics of his work actively create space for recognition and dialogue or, using Azoulay's language, a *contract*. The artistic dimension does not distract from the civic call but amplifies it, offering a fuller and truer representation to marginalized subjects and fostering the kind of civil spectatorship Azoulay envisions – one where responsibility emerges not in spite of beauty, but because of it. In the civic and artistic space of Markov's work, aesthetics and ethics converge, and he as a participant of the contract also had to reconcile the two. In one of his interviews, Markov tells the backstory of several photographs portraying a disabled father in a wheelchair and his son, where being a social worker and an activist, his goal was to protect the family from being torn apart by bureaucratic "welfare," but as a photographer, he aimed to capture the subtle beauty and mutual care of a father-son relationship.

Though some of Markov's shots are "still lives" or landscapes of Russian villages and towns, most of them feature people living their lives, which is where building a composition hinges on the photographer's ability to catch the right moment from the right angle. Cartier-Bresson, whom Markov admired, called it the "decisive moment," and Aleksandr Lapin, Markov's teacher, lyrically described the same phenomenon as "an angel flew by and fluttered its wings" (Serebrennikov 2024a). Markov's gallery is a testament to his ability to catch that decisive or angelic moment consistently, bulls-eye. A whole complex of factors and skills enabled Markov to

produce meaningful, beautiful, and lucky shots, one of these factors being the affordance of technology. Most people today have their smartphones at hand at all times, which for Markov meant constant readiness to capture. Phone cameras have been getting smarter and more capable, which is easy to notice if we compare Markov's 2020 shots to his earlier works from the mid-2010s. Today, iPhone cameras are not only incredibly fast but also can capture multiple frames within the same shot, allowing the photographer to choose the exact split-second needed for a good composition. This function shows the astonishing transformation that photography experienced since its appearance in our social and cultural space: in the 19th century, subjects would have to sit motionless for a discernible likeness to emerge from a complex mechanical and chemical process. Today, it is enough to press one virtual button on a pocket-size device to receive a perfectly sliced, high-definition moment, and our cultural space is still adjusting to accommodate for the growing availability of quality photographic equipment.

IV. CHAPTER 3. THE WAYS OF SEEING

3.1 On Digital Photography

In one of his interviews, Markov jokingly said that his photographic process is him simply walking around and pressing the camera button. Though we know from his biography, his writings, and his photographs that there is a lot more to his work than button pressing, Russian folk wisdom says that every joke has a morsel of truth in it.[19] Ontologically, modern photography is a radically different notion from its 'classic' original, no longer a "technology of optics, chemistry, and mechanics" (Lister 2013, 7) but a malleable, transient product of recurrent algorithmic patterns that virtually anyone can access but no-one properly owns, an illusion built from ones and zeros, essentially Baudrillard's simulacrum of photographic imagery (see Lister 2013, 113–134). The shift to digital photography, the scale of its proliferation in our lives and its commodification present a serious challenge to intellectual inquiry. With a drastic overhaul of the process, photography today is a ship of Theseus, if not an entire fleet. It traded its indexicality, a direct semiotic tether to reality, for iconicity that operates on resemblance as computer algorithms re-assemble bits of registered light into code, into pixels, into pictures. By this logic, it is no longer "writing in light" as none of the original light from the subjects is captured in an act that is as chemical as it is alchemical.

When we try to stretch a string of reason from Markov's work all the way to, for example, Barthesian notions of studium and punctum, we inevitably run into this issue of continuity: when we use the word "photography" for either, are we discussing the same thing, is it a case of metonymy, or even a substitution of concepts? Daniel Rubenstein and Katrina Slius in their exploration of the photographic rupture note that it should not be surprising to not find references

[19] Russian В каждой шутке есть доля правды.

to “the persistent questions about representation that fascinated writers on photography for decades” in newer papers that explore the digital iteration of the art (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008, 16). “Photography is dead, long live photography,” proclaims one of their titles (Rubinstein and Sluis 2008, 10). On the other hand, David Bate in his contribution to *The Photographic Image in Digital Culture* cautions against hardlining the divide. He writes that “[a]mnesia (rather than history) allows analogue and digital to inhabit a binary logic,” noting the heterogeneity of the phenomenon or rather a complex of phenomena for which we recently had to invent the umbrella term “analogue photography” (Lister 2013, 121). Bate also reminds us that today, the most common format even for the originally analogue photographs is digital: unless we go to a museum to see a photograph or invest in a certified print copy, we ‘know’ most photographs by their digital selves. He essentially suggests that the form of the photographic image, whether it is a negative, a print, or a collection of pixels, has little influence on the essence of a photograph, the “perceptive value of the picture” and its “relation to the referent,” thus taking a less tangible and more phenomenological approach to understanding the nature of photography. Indeed, we can still recognize a photograph as a photograph whether it was taken on a Canon or a Leica, though with the proliferation of generative Artificial Intelligence this too might change. The parameters of a good photograph have largely remained the same, many now hardcoded into digital mechanisms (e.g. auto-focus, light balance), which has the effect of shrinking the distance between amateur and professional photographers (Manovich 2017).

There is argumentation and evidence for the continuity between the different interactions of photography, and yet the examples of departure and even rupture are also there. In the ocean of academic, professional, and artistic inquiry, it is easy to lose sight of the horizon while trying to decide whether the ship is the same, different, or has it sailed entirely. Going back to the issue at

hand, i.e. Markov's work, anchors the discussion in the following bivalent truism: his work is photography, and his photography is shot on an iPhone. Whatever argumentation helps move towards a greater understanding of his work should be included; all else is flotsam. In line with Manovich's argument about the continuity in tradition and standards, we can say that Markov learned from film photographers and attended to the same basic principles even though he did not have to press his watchful eye to the eyepiece of his camera or push a voluptuous button to 'shoot'. Though his teacher Aleksandr Lapin sadly passed away in 2012 as Markov just barely started exploring mobile photography, we know from Lapin's books that he acknowledged and embraced the digital turn of his craft. He devoted a considerable part of the introduction to his volume *Fotografiia kak…* (*Photography As…*) to the discussion of the change he experienced firsthand as a professional photographer who worked through the turn of the millennium. The digitization and computerization of photography rendered the old tripartite foundation of photography – shooting, film development, and printing – obsolete except for the first pillar. The new formula suggested by Lapin – the ability to notice, the ability to construct or compose, and the ability to understand or read – aptly describes the essence of Markov's work. As for the main content of Lapin's book beyond the introduction, it is noticeably independent of the mechanics of the medium and hence perfectly applicable to mobile photography.

One could go as far as to suggest that the smart affordances of modern digital cameras free the photographer from the burden of technicalities and the cruelty of chance while simultaneously raising the stakes of what would constitute an exceptional photograph, thus refining photography as an art form and distilling it into a more independent medium. At least, there is no denying that ubiquitous photography did not create a society of photographic artists: the "real ones" still stand out, regardless of their medium. Since his participation in the Burn Diary project that played on

the new accessibility and immediacy of photography, Markov had made the switch to the mobile and found himself in the vanguard of artistic mobile photography and digital exhibition. He took advantage of technology both socially and technically. Socially, phone photography allowed him to remain casual with the reality whose moments he was after, increasing the likelihood of capturing the unsuspecting "it" of photography. Technically, he let technology shape several core aspects of his work, namely its multimodality (discussed in detail in the next chapter) and the signature square shape he adopted from Instagram and kept even after the shape restriction had been removed from the platform and his own photography spread into other formats. Markov also relied on basic tools like the phone cameras' ever-improved visibility in the dark, opportunities for digital editing that created his recognizable color palette, and iPhone's multi-shot "roll" shutter that allowed him to select the best of multiple photographs. Interestingly, some of these modern tools were employed to mimic the qualities of older photography: in particular, the grain of his photographs must be a deliberate post-production feature as modern iPhones are technically capable of producing extremely smooth, clear images. Another intriguing instance of such mimesis is Markov's insistent concealment of his "developing" routine: since photo editing tools have been widely available to the masses (e.g. on Instagram), Markov made sure to preserve some secrecy over the "magic of photography," as if paying homage to the old darkroom.

Another important advantage that lies between the technical and the social planes is the reproducibility of a digital image. As digital photography is essentially data, its proliferation now is extremely easy, fast, and cheap. Markov's preferred platform, Instagram, made it even more accessible by allowing instant two-click sharing, a mechanism partly responsible for the "viral content" phenomenon and for Markov's growing popularity. In fact, he produced a truly viral

photograph at least on one occasion: the picture of the OMON[20] officer taken by Markov and posted online while in detention immediately received millions of views and not only became a symbol of the Russian democracy protests but also funneled financial capital into the budget of human rights NGOs working against the system shown in the photograph.

Fig. 2.1 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 02/02/2021. www.instagram.com/p/CKyiKP9M1wT/?hl=en.

Markov's digital photography eventually went beyond 'reposting' and online proliferation, taking on tangible printed forms in physical analogue spaces, namely print books and gallery exhibitions, both of which formats are still being produced after his death by a team of his friends, family, and colleagues. In a way, his photographs walked the reverse version of the path that classic photography used to take: not from original physical artefacts to digital icons, but from digital 'originals' to physical printed copies. Today, his Instagram account titled @dcim.ru remains an

[20] ОМОН (Отряд мобильный особого назначения, Special Purpose Mobile Unit): a special unit of the Russian National Guard recently used to suppress mass protests in Russia.

open-access memorial museum[21] that stores and displays not only the chronology of his photography, from before it took shape to his final heart-and-mind-wrenching photograph, but also his writing, his artistic geography, and a massive corpus of public discourse around his art. Instagram in this case is not simply a matter of social media, which many artists use today to exhibit their work or curate their public image, but a complex of affordances and features with enormous, defining implications for Dmitry Markov's artistic language. As his photography grew and transformed to take on other forms, it created an opportunity for comparative perspective that can broaden our understanding of his photography beyond what happens within its square frames. What external elements beyond the contents of the photograph are responsible for shaping our experience with his work? What do his photographs gain and lose when taken in and out of different realms?

Instagram offers the most expansive collection of his works, numbering over seven hundred publications covering his entire artistic journey. However valuable this collection is, the social media platform is not associated with prestige, losing it in the tradeoff for instantaneity, self-direction, and down-to-earth accessibility. On the other hand, physical presence of artworks in organized spaces – gallery showrooms or book pages – is associated with acclaim of the artist's work. Markov's mobile photography produced three printed volumes (one of which has also inspired a music album) and several exhibitions. In this thesis, discussion of the different formats focuses on the digital one, Instagram, and only briefly considers the physical embodiments of his work as points of comparison and contrast. The emphasis on Instagram is not motivated by claims of purity or superiority as no such claim can be made in good conscience, nor is it a simple matter of access and practicality. What motivates explicit consideration of form and medium is the belief

[21] Save for political issues such as Meta bans effective, for example, in Russia.

that the circumstances of encountering a work of art fundamentally changes the ways it can impact us, a belief supported as much by empirical observations as by classic discussions of aesthetics like Walter Benjamin's aura theory (Benjamin 2015). Particularly, special attention to Instagram as a format supports the pursuit of the immediacy and multimodality of the format that opens doors to both theoretical and practical applications across academic disciplines.

3.2 Screen to Print: Encountering Markov's Russia on Pages and Canvas

Within months of Markov's death, two retrospective exhibitions were organized in Russian art galleries: *Sed'moe Nebo* (*The Seventh Heaven*) in Saint Petersburg's Anna Nova and, as its sequel, *Optika Nadezhdy* (*The Optics of Hope*) in Moscow's Winzavod. Until April 2025 – when The Seventh Heaven started its tour around the Russian provinces by opening an exhibition in Perm – the shows inadvertently underlined and accentuated the social-geographical hierarchies that Markov's digital platform challenged. Placed in the two main urban cultural centers, Moscow and St Petersburg, earnest photographs of the Russian provinces were colored with otherness and the juxtaposition created between the photographic and physical spaces of the exhibition. While it comes as no surprise that the two cultural hubs would be the first to make gallery space for these memorial shows, it still arguably reinforces the idea that there is Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and everything else around them, which contrasts with the work of a Pskov-based photographer whose camera aimed to capture the "everything around." There are plans in motion for more exhibitions across the country with the goal of decentralizing the project and bringing the museum experience of Markov's Russia to its provinces; however, in terms of accessibility, it is hard to surpass the Internet. The permanent exhibition at the @dcim.ru gallery has no entrance fee, and each encounter is a private, self-regulated experience. It imposes no obligation for the viewer to be social, dressed, or engaged in a certain way, but instead meets them where they are – on a bus, in bed, in the

waiting room, at a “party in the USA” – and takes them to the world of the photograph. The kind of popular access that Instagram provides can shrink the social distance between the spectator and the depicted, allowing them to appear in the digital space anonymously and on equal terms.

Conversely, the fact that Internet-mediated viewing is mostly a solitary experience, even when shared synchronously or via messages, is not an absolute advantage: where it wins in accessibility, it loses in atmosphere and community. The experience of seeing a photograph in a museum space functionally transforms casual viewers into deliberate art connoisseurs and electrifies the physical space with attention and appreciation. When Walter Benjamin talked about the *aura* of artworks, he juxtaposed the museum originals with popular copies or prints. Though the mechanics of his actual argument crumble in the example of Markov’s digital photographs whose true originals are only legible for machines, the point of aura can still apply, albeit in a different sense. In this case, the aura could refer not to the fleur of originality, but to the attention imbued by the organization of the space and common intention of its visitors. The Internet is a famously distractful space, especially its social media platforms whose native locomotion is scrolling. The format of a gallery exhibition creates a contained physical space for experiencing it with pace, attention, and deliberacy, unlike the casual, random act of perusing a digital gallery on a smartphone screen.

For the average gallery or museum visitor, directed attention often creates confusion as a byproduct: I am here to look at this photograph, this photograph matters, but why and how? Art curation emerged as a way to alleviate the burden of intensive viewership. The curator of the memorial exhibitions Vladislav Efimov had the task of framing the exhibition in a way that meaningfully connects the visitors to Markov’s displayed art. An important advantage of curated works is their ability to transcend chronology: unlike Instagram posts locked in a rigid timeline,

gallery prints can be rearranged to encourage new connections and foster a more holistic appreciation of Markov's body of art. Curatorial statements traditionally welcome the visitors and help them frame their visual experience in a familiar linguistic form: as a literate society, we often feel comforted by linguistic presence and challenged in its absence. The artist's voice is amplified through the visual channel, speaking primarily through photographs, while literal commentary is provided from a third-person perspective by outside experts of interpretation – the curators. Translation of a digital gallery into an art exhibition thus created a more defined hierarchy of text and picture, giving center-stage to the photographs and the experience of visual interpretation, removing text from the immediate surroundings of the corresponding photographs and into separate spaces designated for curatorial statements, a genre specific to physical gallery spaces.

Interestingly, while the guidance of textual interpretation is brought to supplement and support the visual experience of photography, the 'native' textual elements of Markov's internet publications, namely his captions and location tags (geotags) are absent in the memorial exhibitions. On the one hand, it tunes the viewer to the visual narrative and encourages raw interpretation, creating a space where a photograph can be itself – a photograph, an image, a picture. On the other hand, by stripping the photographs of their geotags, individual snapshots of specific cities, towns, and villages blend into a cumulative amalgamated portrait of average Russia. Location tags often prompted the joy of recognition and thus personal connections with Markov's photographic narratives: under most geotagged photos of public places, reactions like "this is where I grew up, I recognize the street, this photograph sounds or smells in a particular way" fill the comment space. The absence of the author's own captions had a similar generalizing effect on the narrative of the pictures: depending on the role of a particular caption, either the photograph's subject's backstory or Markov's own artistic or civic reflection on it are erased. As the viewers fill

the interpretative gap, they build a connection with the narrative, but the nuance of these real photographed experiences gets replaced with generalizations that are our natural mechanism of handling incomplete information. In this way, it becomes clear that galleries represented Markov's works more as pieces of art and less as documentary narratives of early 21st century provincial Russia or tokens of the photographer's involvement in social work and activism – something that Ariella Azoulay warned against in her theory.

To compare it with another tangible, respected analog format, Markov's debut photography book *#chernovik* (*#draft*) preserved time markers and geotags that place every picture on a map and tie it to a specific year. The book represents an interesting example of transition from the digital: just as its physical shape inherited the square shape, its chapter titles preserved the format of hashtags: #childhood, #addiction, #system, #province, #sickness, and the eponymous #draft. Hashtags here are atavistic: having lost their original referential functionality, they still serve as a connection to the original form and function. This first publication gave Markov the opportunity to curate his photography by theme or idea rather than time, which also influenced his choice of textual support: instead of individual photograph captions, Markov opened each of the six thematically organized chapters with a brief personal essay exploring his own biographic connection to the theme: his experience growing up, getting addicted to drugs, doing social work, and finding himself as a photographer. His second book, *Russia Squared*, eschewed long texts in favor of letting the photographs speak for themselves. Out of the three formats, the books offer possibly the most intimate, solitary experience as they have no embedded mechanism for interaction: neither a comment section like on Instagram, nor a physical space for a communal appreciation of the photographs. The comparative perspective reveals very particular aspects that otherwise would remain obscure, as a given. Each presentation has its own affordances and effects,

the original Instagram gallery being the most representative of the broadest sense of his work that combines writing and activism with art photography.

3.3 The Multimodality of Instagram: Seeing, Reading, Connecting

Markov's adoption of Instagram's square as the primary format seems almost serendipitous if we look at his teacher Aleksandr Lapin's two publications, one titled *Ploskost' i prostranstvo, ili zhizn' kvadratom* (*Surface and Space, or Life Squared*), the other featuring a laconic square of the cover of its first edition. The square was imposed by the Instagram platform only until 2015 (Manovich 2017), but with rare exceptions of a few tall or wide rectangle images made seemingly as an experiment in 2016, Markov stayed so faithful to the square that his books #draft and Russia Squared inherited the unlikely shape. A square is a peculiar shape in terms of aesthetics and composition: Chmyreva speaks of the "truism" of the square in painting (photography's direct aesthetic predecessor), meaning that square framing tends to trivialize the image, a connection reinforced by the appearance of the casual formats of first the Polaroid and then Instagram (Chmyreva 2024, 53). It produced a new type of iconography she wittily termed iPhonography which familiarized the square and created a different relationship between viewers and the image: that of casual, portable, social, and ultimately fleeting interactions (Ibid). Markov's technique adapted to the conventions of the square and defamiliarized the experience of viewing his photographs through artistic transformation.

In the Instagram gallery, individual photographs form a tightly filled grid or a mosaic of thumbnails, a format that facilitates two types of interaction: efficient preview with a simple mechanism for skimming and choosing and drawing interpretative connections between different photographs. The latter is evidenced by user comments that suggest visual or narrative parallels between two different publications placed closely in the grid, an analytical leap that relies on

working memory and is more difficult to accomplish in compartmentalized formats that focus on one image at a time (e.g. gallery). The grid used to be made of faithful miniatures of canonically square shapes (1:1) but in 2025 morphed into 4:5 rectangles to better accommodate the oblong full-screen video clips that are now competing with still images on social media. Though Markov did not contribute to the video takeover of the platform[22] and did not live to see his grid suddenly morph into a rectangle grid, the fact remains that he did not have full control of Instagram as a creative medium, and there is no referring to it as self-curated without an asterisk and fine print. For example, Instagram does not allow flexibility in ordering the content and forces a linear chronological order, a considerable creative limitation that is only to a marginal degree offset by the power of instantaneity advertised in *Insta*gram's brand.

However, besides the aforementioned restrictions and Instagram's explicit content policy,[23] overall Markov as an artist had a good degree of agency on his personal digital platform. Starting in 2017, Markov could organize his content on the micro-level with a feature called *carousel*: the grouping of up to 10 images in one pod under the same caption and geotag, like a stack of photographs in a folder. This function created little subgroups with a sense of an organized consecutive narrative made of photographs with common context. His agency and freedom were not only technical but also thematic. While Russia-based memorial exhibitions organized after his death chose to not feature any war-related content, Markov readily published such materials on his Instagram account. Following a long-standing artistic tradition of obfuscation through creative mastery, he claimed his e-gallery space for public reflection on the devastation of state violence,

[22] However, Markov has worked in videography, mostly in the social sphere; for example, for the last few years of his life he was working on a documentary about drug use, Proiekt Zyzhyvshyie, [Project: Survivors].
[23] It had little effect on Markov's mellow imagery with one exception of a photograph featuring a tastefully distant pair of buttocks in a sauna: the thumbnail was blurred, and the user has to acknowledge a content warning with a click to open the image. Curiously, the caption to the photograph mocks Instagram censorship, possibly in anticipation of such an outcome.

despite the associated risks. Within his personal Instagram gallery, Markov was able to speak his mind more freely. In September 2023, he published a series of photographs from a journalistic assignment for *Novaia Vkladka* (*New Tab*), a Russian media outlet. The article featured a story of a wrongful murder accusation in a broken justice system, but particularly in Markov's Instagram version, the caption contained a reference to a corruption scandal that had emerged in Chechnya two days prior over Ramzan Kadyrov's son's documented but unpunished use of violence against detainees.[24] Though the reference contained no names or direct ties, anyone in Russia (or any curious Internet-literate person) would be able to understand it unambiguously. The *New Tab* article written by another journalist contained no such ties, and Markov's discretion to make the connection is an example of the agency he had over self-expression on the platform.

Text captions placed on equal level with the image represent one of the most significant affordances of Instagram: thought of as a primarily visual digital platform, it is actually multimodal in the way it incorporates and encourages interactions between text and image. Markov's work shows versatility in his use of captions ranging from no text to long stories the size of a short essay; they may provide a title, instill a respectful silence, give the subject's or the place's backstory, spin a social or philosophical argument, encourage interaction, or delve into a discussion of photographic methods. Some of the medium to long caption texts stylistically approach the genre of a literary sketch (*ocherk*), reminding us of Markov's long career as a professional journalist and suggesting that he developed not only a uniquely recognizable visual language, but also a literary voice. His writing was the feature that adaptation to other formats tended to obscure; Instagram, on the other hand, provided an organic medium for a visual-textual blend. The comment history of his publications across the years strongly suggests that when given a chance, Markov's audience

[24] Ramzan Kadyrov was and remains as of May 2025 the head of the Chechnya Republic.

interacts with his verbal narratives as much as the visual ones interpreting his work through two different channels. Seen through the framework of multimodality, the familiar notion of a post becomes a term of significance and describes not merely a photograph posted online, but a complex semiotic unit with layers of visuality, textuality, and digital interactivity.

To explore the interaction between texts and images in Markov's Instagram gallery, his publication history over 8 years (2017–2025) was analyzed with special attention to the following data points: year of publication, number of photographs in one post, size of the caption, and the option to comment. Eleven promotional posts were excluded from consideration; the number of individual photographs within a post ranged from one to ten and reflected the newer versions of Instagram with the carousel feature, which determined the sampling range. While it excludes the earlier stages of Markov's evolution as a photographer, it also highlights his more mature artistic style and helps keep the data more uniform in terms of the medium's constraints. The size of captions were grouped in the following categories: 0 (zero, no caption), title (one word to a phrase), short (one to four sentences), medium (five to ten sentences), long (multiple paragraphs, over ten sentences), and extra-long (the text is longer than the caption space allows and is continued in the comment or image space). Instagram allows authors to restrict public comments for particular posts, which reveals patterns in Markov's artistic and civic decisions and can be insightful for understanding his multimodality. The opportunity to comment was recorded as yes or no, while the content of the comments was observed informally and thus allowed for generic impressions only. While locations from the geotags were not recorded, informal observations were made: an overwhelming majority of posts contained information about location, ranging from the general region to a specific institution; on rare occasions, location was marked as "Russia" or omitted altogether. Based on informal, unquantified observations, Markov's audience paid attention to the

locations and often connected with them on a personal level based on life experience. In exceptional cases, toponyms carried specific linguistic denotations and could thus influence the interpretation of the posts' narrative regardless of personal connections, for example, "Dno" (Bottom), "Budushchee" (Future), or "Bogoiavleniie" (God's Apparition). However, captions as creative artifacts remain the most intriguing case of multimodality.

When counted per individual photograph as opposed to the whole post, data shows that the majority of images (68%) were associated with at least some written text in the caption, underscoring the significance of this oft-ignored part of Markov's narratives (see chart 1 in Appendix). Long captions, the type that allowed for unfolding deep and complex narratives, represented the most common category. Though it seems somewhat surprising for a platform that is popularly imagined as a visual space, the overrepresentation of long captions can be explained by their association with longer visual sequences. While the average number (mean value) of images per post is less than two (1.69), within the long caption category this mean value increases to 4.43; as for non-captioned posts, they tend towards the minimal number of photographs (1.05; see chart 3 in Appendix). This reveals a correlation between the length of the image sequence and the length of the text, suggesting that longer narratives correspond to larger groups of photographs. When recorded for posts as opposed to individual photographs, the most prominent caption category is "no caption," accounting for a little over half of the publications (51.6 %, see chart 2 in Appendix), which again is the result of the tendency for longer image sequences to have longer captions. In this thesis, it is understood that a post is a medium-specific construct, which is why individual photographs are regarded as the basic unit of visual narrative.

Imagining the patterns in a time progression suggests that as Markov's style continued evolving: he posted fewer captionless photographs (around 40% in the 2017-2019 window, down

to approximately 15% in 2020-2023) and chose to write long captions slightly more frequently (see chart 4 in Appendix; note that years 2022 and 2024 had very few publications because of the start of the war and Markov's death respectively, which renders them non-representative). Still, by far the most insightful result of the analysis is not quantitative but qualitative: the opportunity to spend quality viewing time with each photograph helped identify interesting cases of interaction. Just as digital photographs are not mere ones and zeros, multimodality lies not in numbers and percentages, but in the content, within and between the lines and signs. The concluding subsection of this chapter analyzes several posts that represent different configurations of multimodality. The selected examples are not broadly representative as they come from the last year of Markov's life and work (2023-2024); the rationale for the selection is to highlight the examples of his multimodal language at its latest, most developed stage.

3.4 Taking a closer look: on patterns of stories and silences

In a square Instagram window, a simple interior: a coffee table with evidence of a just-finished meal, a table with kitchenware, three paper butterflies grace the white wall above a taped flower-printed wall drape. A middle-aged man in a black tracksuit sits on a bed, palm pressed to his eyes, mouth strained in a grimace, feet pressed together in self-warming or self-soothing. This compelling shot keeps on giving to a wandering eye, which upon a more persistent gaze may find a tentative bottle of vodka under the coffee table, or that a nearly-finished bottle of Coke sports a copycat brand name in Cyrillic (Bela Kola), or that the table in the background is a makeshift kitchenette and the odd flower-patterned tapestry is actually a practical detail, a splatter screen.

These details weave the man's habitat in this intimate shot: a man cries in his bedroom as another takes his likeness with a phone.

Fig. 3.1 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 02/06/2024 www.instagram.com/p//C3Ajscso88P/?img_index=1.

The location tag pins the story in a small town in the Vladimir region: a usual type of provincial environment for Markov's photography. This is Markov's last published photograph before his death, and it is accompanied by a long caption that tells the story of the two men's encounter, taking the visual narrative of the photo in a different direction and placing it in a specific political and human tragedy that the world watches unfold: it identifies the man as a Russian veteran who had just come back from Ukraine and was planning to go back. Despite the fact that Markov openly disagreed with the Russian government both domestically (especially through his social work) and internationally, the caption passes no judgement: only, perhaps, sympathy.

We met Andrei when walking around a residential area in Aleksandrov: he stepped outside to get a bottle of vodka from a taxi driver and stumbled upon us on a narrow snow-covered trail near his two-story apartment building:

– F***ing enough with your digging, there are no drugs hidden here…

We explained that we were tourists and got ourselves invited to his place. It turned out Andrei just returned from SMO[25] and is fixing to go back. [He] drinks. He offered us buckwheat with sausage links and some tea. Said he wouldn't take no for an answer. First, he took care of us: heated up the food, boiled the water, served a simple dinner and only then sat down, opened the bottle and poured himself vodka.

– Aren't you afraid to die, I asked.

He kept silent for a while and answered:

– I'm afraid to see others dying…

And he cried.

For many viewers, the crying man turned from a victim – of poverty, alcoholism, masculinity – to a villain; for Markov, the multimodal post reflected the inner conflict that occupied his mind in the months leading to his death: how do we reconcile sympathy for the human condition with righteous anger at its political and social hellscape? In one of his last public communications (Markov 2024), he reacted to the criticism he received in response to the post:

[25] Russian СВО – Специальная Военная Операция, Special Military Operation, a euphemism officially adopted by the Russian government to neutrally refer to the war on Ukraine.

> <...> I am here. I cannot simply cease to love the people I've been close with and start hating them. And I understand that because of that, I am a legitimate target for hatred for Ukrainians. I don't know how to do the right thing in this situation, how to be good to everyone, and if it's even possible…

The comments that are usually found under the caption are missing, meaning that they were intentionally disabled, a practice observed only in 4.5% of his posts in the analyzed date range. As the later days of that February would mark two years since the start of a full-scale war, any hint of sympathy was sharply scandalous, causing a heated debate among the commentators divided across the moral lines. That Markov's most controversial shot would become his last is a harrowing conclusion to his artistic and personal life. The photograph seems to be mirrored in one of Markov's earlier publications from December: a woman crying over a cheap blue coffin inside a funeral bus.

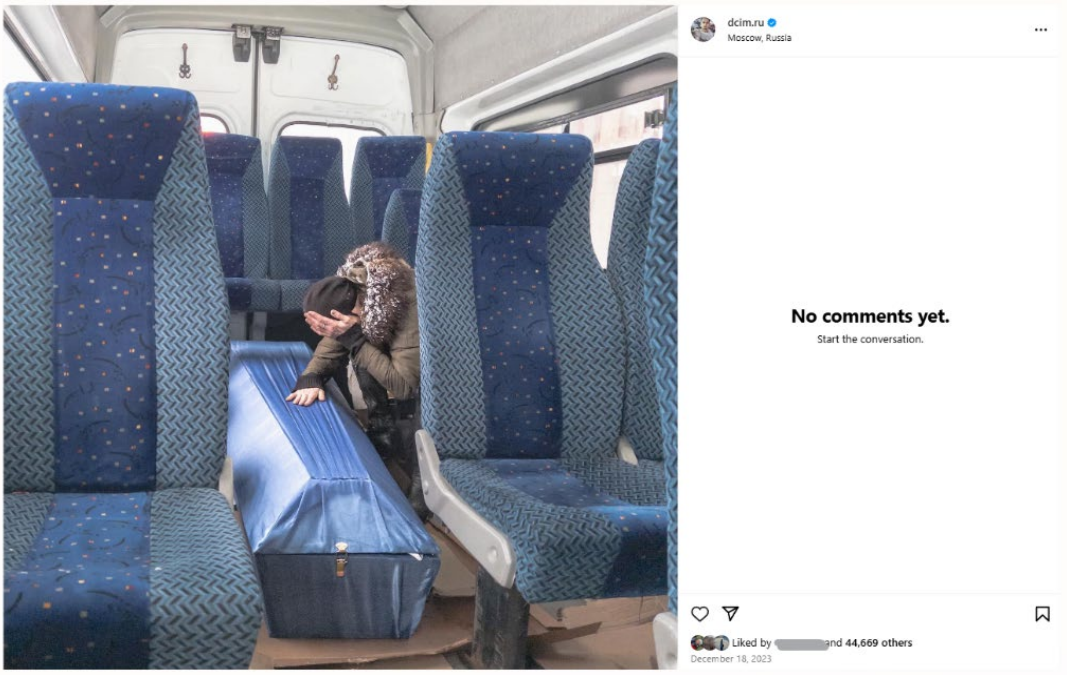

Fig. 3.2 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 12/18/2023 www.instagram.com/p/C1AOpVLIkCx/.

Like the crying man in the last photo, she is leaning down in a similar pose, her hand pressed hard to her face; like him, she is alone in her pain. Her hat-clad head heavy with grief ties the dead center of the square picture, in contrast with the off-white empty center of the last shot; the prevailing tone of the photograph is cool as opposed to warm domestic tones, but in both shots the settings feature ironically colorful patterns: compare the confetti and zig-zag on the bus seats with the flowers and butterflies on the apartment walls. What is most striking is the difference in communication channels: Markov left the photograph entirely without literal text from himself (caption) or his audience (comments): all we have for interpretation is the visual narrative of the shot. Silence markedly becomes a vital part of the story and composition, almost as if imposed by the social rules of behavior in ceremonial spaces. As captions tend to accompany photographs on the platform, the absence of any textual comment leaves a glaring empty space: a loud, visible, deliberate kind of silence. The absence of a caption may also be announced in the caption itself, like Markov did with a photograph of a departing soldier accompanied by the caption “Seeing [them] off to the army. Today I think there will be no comments”:

Fig. 3.3 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 07/11/2023 www.instagram.com/p/CujHnIzIZWK/.

This caption explicitly announces silence, or actually a double silence: on behalf of the artist in the absence of his caption, and on behalf of the viewers as the option to comment is turned off for this photograph. The silence in the gallery mirrors the silence in the photograph itself: the crowd's chattering goodbyes are muffled by the thick glass window on the train, leaving the departing young soldier in an insulated silence, his thoughts now cut off from civilian life, his gaze stretching in the opposite direction from the crowd and into some inner space that cannot be directly photographed. In his photo gallery, Markov constantly changes the picture-text dynamic, downplaying textual comment in some cases, and then letting text overtake its visual anchor, words spilling into the photographic space.

Fig. 3.4 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 12/01/2023 www.instagram.com/p/C0UavdIoS2L/?img_index=1.

A sleeping baby is clutching Markov's (presumably) finger; the baby's fist is the size of just one phalange of the adult's finger, the baby's head roughly the size of the adult's fist. Markov's composition is deliberate and well-balanced yet not forced, but the photograph is not as gripping as the baby in it: it is not a unique shot, and it frankly lacks any telling context, puzzle or

uniqueness. The child's story instead unfolds in the caption, filling the entire allowed caption space and continued in the carousel. Swiping through the carousel reveals squares of plain text where one would usually expect more photographs; the picture thus becomes a mere illustration to a long and detailed textual narrative of the child's abandonment, addiction in parenthood, and social work. However, long captions do not necessarily steal the attention from the visual: in fact, this post constitutes somewhat of an exception. In another particularly wordy post,[26] the caption takes the role of a guide that helps interpret the otherwise ambiguous photograph of a young woman sitting in a relaxed, somewhat seductive pose on a hospital cot while two men on the opposite side of the window seem to be working on some repairs.

Fig. 3.5 Markov, Dmitry [@dcim.ru]; 11/29/2023 www.instagram.com/dcim.ru/p/C0O8tM-oJHg/?hl=en&img_index=1.

[26] One of only three in Markov's gallery that go over the 2,200-character limit and have to "borrow" space from either the images (as screenshots) or the comments.

What are they doing? What brought the woman to the hospital, and why is she posing this way for the photograph? Perhaps, this woman is in a maternity ward, since this photograph is published next to the picture of a baby? The caption leaves the answers to these questions for last, starting instead with a series of intense descriptions of Markov's addiction and recovery attempts: hospitalizations, withdrawal deliria, and contraband schemes that constitute failures no matter if they succeed or not. This seeming divergence between the pictured and the described serves as a hint to the audience to build their interpretations within a specific theme: addiction. In the images (screenshots) three and four of the carousel, Markov's text turns into explicit, almost pedagogical guidance to understanding the photograph, interpreting elusive visual details (she is wearing a diaper because she was just recently restrained to survive the worst initial stage of withdrawal), the portrayed subjects (the men in the window are also in recovery, and they are installing bars on the window to keep their peers from relapsing), and their behaviors (the woman's staged pose is a sign of self-irony, a common coping mechanism).

Being the sole curator of the gallery, Markov finds a proper text-to-visual ratio for every story, creating a dynamic interplay between the two modes of communication and expression, sometimes foregrounding the visual narrative and omitting the caption to let the picture be worth a thousand words, other times subordinating a photograph to the text that dominates the photographic and caption space. There are multiple examples where the visual and the textual components are interdependent to a degree that neither part is felicitous without the other, like the photograph of the young woman in the hospital, or his last published photograph where the crying veteran becomes a complex object of sympathy and anger when the two narratives fuse. Take away either one of the components, and the story deflates to a mere example of composition, losing significant detail. Markov's photographic visuals communicate authentic, documentary moments,

using the principles of art to underscore the beauty and value of his subjects: Russian provinces, their backroads untreaded by tourists, and the Russian people – imperfect but human. Text as a wholly different medium is not able to communicate such complex ideas instantly and as affectively with such a strong, piercing emotional impact: this is where the visual excels. However, text can support the visual through its unambiguous expertise, informing our relationship with the photograph through its real stories, names, and causalities we may not be aware of given our own life experience. Markov's deep knowledge and understanding of his topic underpins the stunning quality of both his photographs and his writing, the former communicating an optic (attentive and affective vision) and the latter adding a narrative anthropology that allows the audience firsthand knowledge of the pictured scenes. His work thus operates between Sontag's aesthetics and Azoulay's civics precisely through this dynamic multimodality which is seen most distinctly on his Instagram platform.

V. CHAPTER 4. FROM MULTIMODALITY TO MULTILITERACY

4.1 Word and Image: Bridging the Gap

The interpretative relationship that combines different modalities, text and image, to create a semiotic unit that exceeds the mere sum of its components has been discussed in the academia under the term "meaning multiplication." Suggested by semiotician Jay Lemke, it was investigated in detail by John Bateman in his comprehensive volume *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide*. Following the mathematical metaphor, Markov's caption of the photograph of the crying man produced text multiplied by image (or we could say, image multiplied by text, foregrounding the supposed focal modality of Instagram), which together amounts to "more than text simply occurring with or alongside images" (Bateman 2014, 5). The multiplied meaning in a perfect mix of modalities is not the default in the gallery: if that were the case, the investigation of the text-image relationship in this gallery would fall flat; it is the fluctuations of the modalities' weights and roles that make for an interesting case.

Qualifying the relationship that constitutes multimodality is, however, a challenging task: a large body of theoretical or philosophical discussion of the "image and text" problem is riddled with disagreement and ambiguity, revealing that in the big picture, "multimodality" is not a tangible phenomenon but an intellectual construct that groups together a dazzling, ever-growing variety of available case studies. Multimodality describes advertisement, ubiquitous design, most media we consume (newspapers, websites, social media), much of visual art, elementary functions of everyday life – in other words, it permeates our lives and, as W.J.T. Mitchell noted in his fundamental *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*, "all media are mixed media, and all representations are heterogeneous; there are no 'purely' visual or verbal arts" (Mitchell 1994, 5). The question is then not "what differences are there" between the two ends of

the representational spectrum, but "what difference do the differences make" in the way we make meaning. For Mitchell, the pervasive multimodality of our meaning-making urges us to turn away from comparing and contrasting the artificially juxtaposed two and to begin considering their complex relationships and their implications; this exact approach was adopted for the analysis of selected posts in the previous chapter.

According to Mitchell, modernity experienced something he termed a "pictorial turn," a successor to Rorty's famous "linguistic turn," a shift away from the traditional focus on the word and towards greater integration of the image, brought about by the digital condition of the contemporary image with photography in the vanguard. At the same time, scholars note that while the sheer quantity of images around us increases, submerging our generation in a virtual "image bath" ("bain d'image"), our analytical apparatus is not keeping pace with the newly illustrated reality even as it becomes clear that "understanding the world in purely linguistic terms is neither satisfactory nor adequate" (Avgerinou 2009, 28). Gunther Kress and Theo Van Leeuwen explain that the notion of this new image language is regarded by the elites as a threat to the dominance of the word that underlies our understanding of literacy (see Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). They propose to use our well-developed existing linguistic toolbox to construct an alternative "grammar of visual design" whose syntax uses alternative means (e.g. perspective, angle, color, etc.) to produce differently but equally complex narratives. This leveling of the field allows for a more equitable discussion of multimodal messages that we interpret through "integration codes" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 177), a set of rules that helps us translate the combined properties of multimodal documents (information value, salience or relative importance, framing) into holistic meanings.

In accordance with Mitchell, no matter what format we choose to interact with Markov's photography, whether it is his Instagram, one of the countless mini-Web galleries reproduced by media outlets, one of the print books, or a physical exhibition, all of these formats are multimodal – the only difference is the balance between the integrated components. Galleries as artistic spaces tend to prioritize the image and subordinate the text, and so do photography books, though some may make more generous space for verbal narratives. On the other hand, the impressive mass of popular Internet articles about Markov's photography expands the relative significance of text (e.g. interviews, biography, art critique), especially if read by people familiar with Markov's style and thus likely to tune their curiosity to the new, verbally encoded information that can expand their understanding of his work. The unique multimodality of the Instagram platform is characterized, on the one hand, by its complexity and flexibility: the many components of a post (an image, which may also contain language in it, its date and geotag, the author's caption, and user comments) can be arranged in a variety of combinations with layers of interconnected meanings. On the other hand, this complexity is designed for convenience and remains steadily familiar to Instagram users through the predictability of the platform: once the user "learns the ropes" of the medium, they are able to use that schema as a reliable "integration code" that facilitates integrated understanding.

If the digital generation is routinely immersed in image-saturated environments that builds interpretative patterns for their recognition, the question becomes – does this new kind of literacy have to be explicitly taught? Maria Avgerinou, a scholar who has been working on building conversation around visual literacy, responds with another question: "does a fish know it's wet?" (Avgerinou 2009, 28). That is, the pervasiveness of images does not necessarily lead to greater awareness or mastery of linguavisual narratives, just like the ubiquitous nature of technology does not automatically make us more computer-savvy when it comes to higher-order, creative

operations; in fact, the omnipresence of something can have the opposite effect, lulling our attention. Having analyzed an eclectic body of inquiry over the span of three decades, Avgerinou and Pettersson identified the building blocks of what could constitute a sufficient theory of visual literacy, which included the postulate that "visual literacy must be learned" (Avgerinou and Pettersson 2011, 8-9). Though our recognition of images is more instantaneous and automatic, the ability to read visual messages at a deeper level constitutes a challenge for most people uninvolved in visual arts. The addition of a textual caption can disambiguate or "anchor" the visual narrative (Bateman 2014), unless the artist chose to be deliberately poetic and attach an abstract, confusing title. This illustrates another core domain of visual literacy as outlined by Avgerinou: "visual language often needs verbal support" (Avgerinou and Pattersson 2011, 12-13). In the case of Markov who worked with expressive yet narratively clear visual-literal stories, public comments reveal that at least on the personal level, the audience can decode and connect to his multimodal narratives: share an emotive reaction, an opinion, a comment on the theme, or a related personal connection. Some of the comments come from non-Russian audience members who, thanks to the general universality of image code and automatic text translation function, can get a glimpse of provincial or alternative Russia through Markov's lens. The photographs are able to communicate the atmosphere and the mood of the pictures and portray the visual traits of post-Soviet space in a documentary way. The automatic translation is currently unable to communicate the artistic style or accurately translate the frequent figurative turns of his language, but judging by foreign commentary on his Instagram, the general narrative that does get across is enough to make an impression.

Foreign viewers and readers constitute an interesting subsection of the audience. Markov himself knew of the growing international popularity of his content after several exhibitions abroad

and years of curating his open-access Instagram gallery; he even self-translated some of his earlier captions for a short period of time before the translation function was available. He maintained, however, that non-Russians or people without ties to the post-Soviet space saw a different picture when interacting with his photography (Otkrytaia bibilioteka 2022, 19:30):

> I still think that only one of ours[27] can see these photographs for what they are. I mean that foreigners, they like those things that in their opinion describe Russia, and also my exercises in composition. But our people, they are already familiar with all of that, for them, I think, the impression from my pictures is a lot more saturated than the impression foreigners may have. Because for our folk, it's the habitat[28] that they live in, not some exotic places…

However obvious, this idea is an important reminder that there are three parties involved in a photographic encounter: the photographed, the photographer, and the audience, viewer and readers. All the involved parties enter this asynchronous relationship, or in Azoulay's term, the civil contract, with their own subjectivities, their own schemata that helps drive the interpretative process. Their position towards the matter of his photography also influences the nature of their agency: given who they are, what kind of civic responsibility can they assume in the social contract of *dcim.ru*? For local viewers who probably constitute the majority of Markov's audience, channels of agency could include tangible direct action like monetary donations that Markov encouraged repeatedly through his photographs and captions; it could also be broader underlying social agency like raised awareness of one's social environment or more positive attitudes towards

[27] Russian "только наш человек", a common turn of phrase referring to compatriots or like-minded people, the "in-group."
[28] Russian "декорации", literally a stage set, decor.

fellow citizens from various marginalized groups. Then, what kind of agency would be available for Markov's international followers?

Given their social, cultural, linguistic, and geographical distance from Markov's subjects, we might imagine a degree of curiosity and exoticization that colors their relationship with the photographs, an othering stemming from both their cultural perspective and their class. At the same time, we can hypothesize that this curiosity cannot be fully satisfied precisely because of their unfamiliarity with the depicted, their inability to rely on schemata to accurately interpret Markov's narratives. Not only do foreign audiences have limited access to understanding his captions because of linguistic limitations, they also struggle to break down the visual code of the images. For a foreign pair of eyes, the significance of many local phenomena that Markov captured – the details of infrastructure, the specific habitus of public transit, the maze of the bureaucratic apparatus, the symbolism of the buildings' entryways,[29] makeshift yard decorations, and bazaar stalls – are elusive without extra support in interpretation. When the need to interpret the message (whether mostly visual, heavily textual, or more equitably intermodal) takes the interpreter out of their familiar cultural or linguistic environment, a more curatorial or pedagogical approach can turn gawking into observation, general aesthetic impressions into more nuanced analysis, confusion into understanding. The concluding sections of this thesis argue that Markov's Instagram gallery provides rich teaching material for non-Russian scholars of the Russian language and culture at the university level. Besides the obvious benefit of the authenticity and relevance of this photographic material, it also addresses two critical needs of modern language classrooms: thematically, a more diverse and earnest 'insider' representation of Russia, and pedagogically, a focus on visual literacy and broader yet, multiliteracy in the relevant field. Both aspects are crucial

[29] Russian подъезды.

in guiding aspiring global citizens towards a more holistic literacy. In the civic domain, Markov's multimodal photo gallery can promote greater awareness and compassion as well as encourage informed curiosity for the social diversity of the target linguistic community.

4.2 Photography and Social Media in a Foreign Language Classroom

One predictable difficulty for the visual literacy push in language classrooms is the perception of the educators that they should teach exactly this: language, the verbal kind. It is further reinforced by the typical limitations of most curricula: limited time to cover a lot of material, the complexity of the Russian language, and even the issue of face validity – will the students feel like they are learning something important or digressing into the arts? Engagement with multimodality that merges the visual with the linguistic can address this reservation by attaching the target linguistic code (e.g. captions or user comments) to the visual material. It is important to note that photographs and other visuals are already used by language teachers as cultural illustrations. The gap is in *how* these visuals are used, and specifically whether the tasks meaningfully involve the visuals or sideline them as decorations, encouraging quick, inattentive looking, arguably doing the counterproductive work of desensitizing the students to images like social media often does. As emphasized in the theory of Visual Literacy, visuals may help learning, but haphazard or overabundant decorative use of images may have the opposite effect on all aspects of literacy (Avgerinou and Pettersson 2011, 11). Susan Britsch, another advocate for multimodality in language classrooms, notes that "the visual lies at the center of language learning, not at its periphery," adding that these two parts of multimodality cannot replace each other (Britsch 2009, 711). However, successful integration of multimodal use of images into language curricula can be challenging.

Educators may feel uncomfortable leading guided observations of photographs if they are not familiar with the theory and practice of integrating visual materials into language curricula. Britsch describes a case of a rare but particularly inspiring 16-week course for acting and aspiring ESL (English as a Second Language) educators that aimed to challenge them to incorporate alternative narrative modes, including image-text multimodality. In the practical portion, teacher students were asked to create a photography based multimodal project that they could potentially use in their own classrooms with the overall goal "not simply to merge visual learning with the verbal curriculum but to reify a multimodal view of identity and its role in learning" (Britsch 2009, 718). Participants of the course explored their connection to their local communities (for some of them, the local community was also a foreign one) through photographic and verbal narratives, and they found that photography helped them express important meanings that language did not; as this group consisted of expert English speakers, it is easy to imagine how much more difference this effect would make for the less proficient language learners.

The project touched on the topic central for Markov, belonging and connecting to one's community. This connection suggests a promising framework for integrating Markov's gallery into a language curriculum while also ensuring that students can express narratives close to them and their own communities. Using Markov's multimodal narratives both as cultural material and a model, students can learn about his understanding of belonging to this Russian community (reading and analyzing) and produce their own narratives about their respective communities in the target language (wiring and creating). In fact, Instagram can be used as a medium for students' work,[30] potentially increasing students' motivation and using its technological affordances to facilitate collaboration and peer feedback.

[30] If Instagram is used as a platform for productive tasks in a language course, then for the sake of privacy and efficacy, students would need to create new learning profiles separate from their personal accounts.

That Instagram can be adopted as a language learning platform is not a novel idea. Its affordances have been explored at length in recent literature, and although the bulk of it comes from ESL or EFL, the principles can be applied to other languages authentic to the global digital environment. Keith Wagner explores the ways to use Instagram's multimodal microblogging environment to practice non-English (e.g. Spanish, Italian) and less commonly taught languages like Bulgarian and Azerbaijani. His account is valuable not only for its linguistic diversity, but also for including all the semiotic components of Instagram besides the picture and the caption. He discusses features like hashtags, comments, geotags, and even functions like automatic translation as components of multimodal ensembles, holistic semiotic units whose parts facilitate each other's interpretation to support comprehension for various proficiency levels. Moreover, Wagner proposes a method that brings explicit awareness to the "intentional meaning-making" of the content creator: when analyzing posts in the target language, students fill out an organizer that helps them note the utilized modes (e.g. caption, geotag, photograph or graphic, carousel, etc.), descriptions (e.g. what the caption tells or the image shows), and meaning (what impression the elements create together and why the author might have used that combination). This routine helps produce nuanced analysis in a similar vein as demonstrated in the previous chapter of this thesis. Of course, language students do not come to the classroom for expertise on multimodality, social media, or Dmitry Markov per se – their learning outcomes lie in broader and more fundamental patterns of discourse. This structure can serve as scaffolding for rich activities where students can first analyze culturally relevant content on both functional (what choices were made) and critical (what results it created) levels and use that analysis as a model for output in the target language.

Working with multimodal social media posts is most impactful if integrated into the long-term structures of learning. A dedicated Instagram account can serve as a digital collaborative

platform that adds authenticity, lowers the stakes of language production, allows for peer collaboration via likes and comments, and provides a platform for personal self-expression. In conjunction with the latter, Ellen Yeh and Svetlana Mitric describe an ESL course structure built specifically on the premise of cultivating a positive vision of one's identity in the target language. They present a framework inspired by the idea of "ideal L2 self" that uses "digital storytelling" as a vehicle for language development and self-empowerment in the chosen life trajectory, which is particularly appropriate for university-level courses. Many classrooms already use social online platforms like Padlet, but one shortcoming they have is lack of authentic language content "as seen in the wild," which social media offers in abundance. It also provides students with a tangible structure to facilitate constructing their second language identity in a dedicated yet still communal digital space, mimicking the formation and presentation of a digital self that the current generation tends to participate in.

If integrated as one of the regular learning platforms, Instagram profiles can turn into portfolios of language practice, much like Markov's page became a chronicle of his professional evolution (in a way, he was also learning a language – the language of multimodality). In addition to practicing presentation writing in posts and, potentially, presentational speaking via creating short Reels videos, students can work on their interpersonal communicative skills by commenting on each other's posts or videos, text or voice chatting via private messages with classmates or language partners, and interacting with authentic posts (memes, news, viral content, blogs) in the target language by following accounts of interest.

4.3 Sample language activity: This is My Community

This section assumes that the previous one was convincing enough, and there is an imagined Russian language course taught either in-person or online to adult audiences (e.g.

university) at the Intermediate level. The rationale for the audience parameters comes from the fact that Markov's posts contain occasional explicit language and touch on potentially heavy subjects (a general trigger warning may be warranted for topics like addiction). Intermediate level is suggested for this particular activity but can be adapted up or down; for alternative activity ideas, see the aforementioned Wagner, Lotti Baker's "How Many Words Is a Picture Worth? Integrating Visual Literacy in Language Learning with Photographs," or explore options in a variety of MALL (Mobile Assisted Language Learning) periodicals. It is assumed in this activity that students have had instructional support in setting up their dedicated language-learning Instagram accounts, followed their classmates' profiles, had the chance to explore other pages of interest in the target language, and created their first interactive posts with self-introductions or other products relevant to the course material.

Most intermediate-level language courses touch on the topic of local community (e.g. "my town") as it includes a wealth of common language structures and relates to the students' schemata and identities. This activity integrates into similarly themed units and prepares students for creating social media posts about their own towns and communities by providing an example from Markov's gallery. Besides the linguistic and cultural gains from novel and multimodal input, students also get a chance to engage with their local community from a new perspective. Cala Coats in "Thinking through the Photographic Encounter: Engaging with the Camera as a Nomadic Weapon" describes a scavenger hunt assignment that challenged her to explore the spaces of her own community (Dallas-Forth area) through taking pictures. She describes her grappling with the feelings of curiosity, discomfort, and belonging that active photographic process created when she photographed a roadside taco stand, a space she considered both alien and familiar, much like the spaces captured in Markov's work. The very process of taking photographs with the camera turns

observers into participants and creates conditions for meaningful engagement with the space and community – which in this lesson is also facilitated by the target language as students write captions for their photographs.

To encourage exploration of different modalities and empower students to make informed meaning-making choices, it is suggested to compile posts that relate to the topic through different combinations of modalities; for example, the selected posts can vary in length of image sequence and text caption. In general, students could approach the same type of assignment with a broader selection of input, exploring more casual public posts that can be sourced via Russian geotags or hashtags. Alternatively, students could explore Markov's posts from a particular town and use the geotag to compare his "professional tourist" posts to the more casual ones made by local citizens. For the purposes of this thesis, a compilation of eight posts is suggested (see Appendix); given the breadth of the topic, examples can be added or filtered out as needed.

In preparation for the class session (as homework), students are asked to "meet" the photographer by browsing his Instagram gallery, selecting a photograph or a post that they think represents their topic, and preparing to say a few words explaining their selection. Students also read a short one-paragraph artist introduction on the website of the Anna Nova gallery which was the organizing institution of his first and now touring retrospective exhibition. The paragraph is available both in Russian and in English translation; to facilitate authentic and impactful interactions, students can be instructed to encounter the text in Russian, identify what information they could gather, and only then turn to the translation to check their understanding. To encourage attentive reading, students answer the following organizing questions in Russian: what is important to know about the artist, what I was curious to learn, and what raised questions.[31] According to the

[31] Russian, Что важно знать об этом художнике? Что мне было интересно узнать? Что вызвало у меня вопросы?

principles of backward curriculum design, students should be informed about the end-goal: creating a series of posts about their city and community that reflects a variety of discursive elements (captions, compilations, comments). With this in mind, students can be encouraged to start selecting or taking their own photographs that fit the theme and could potentially be posted as part of the assessment.

In class, students warm up by orally sharing their selections of Markov's post, either in pairs or as a fluency circle[32] if time permits. As a transition, the instructor inquires whether any of the students noticed or mentioned anything besides photographs: where it was taken, what comments it received, or whether there was a caption. The instructor reminds the students that in their upcoming projects, students will need to not only post photographs but realize them through language, so for the remainder of the class period, students look at examples in pairs or small groups that can be assigned with needs differentiation in mind. The selection of photographs listed in the Appendix is only a suggestion; any diverse compilation of posts can be appropriate. Students analyze a subset of the assigned posts in pairs using a collaborative worksheet to record their elemental composition (the number of images, the geotag, hashtags, comments, and length of captions), describe the content of elements, and discuss their role in the post, according to Wagner's proposed framework.

After students have had the chance to parse the posts, they can present their findings in the big group and address any linguistic, content, and discussion questions; at this time, the instructor is able to call attention to grammatical patterns, figures of speech, and cultural nuances. The

[32] Fluency circles fit groups of 6+ people. Students form an inner circle and an outer circle, facing each other; in the first round, the inner circle shows and tells while the outer circle listens. Students are given a limited amount of time (1 minute, 100 seconds, or up to 2 minutes) to talk, after which the outer circle rotates to give the inner students a new listening partner. After a few rotations where each speaker had several attempts to explain themselves, inner and outer circles switch roles. This exercise can be used further in the course when students work on their own topics or prepare for speaking assessments.

instructor can check with the group whether the students took advantage of the inbuilt automatic translation function, and if so, what it did well and what it missed. This discussion can facilitate transition to the home assignment where students individually work on parsing the longest caption (#8) and may interact with the automatic translation function. Wagner specifically discusses the notion of "unreliable parallel text" that machine translations often produce, suggesting that explicit discussion of the ways students might mindfully interact with it can have a positive impact on their strategic competence (Wagner 2021, 161). Students can take time parsing the long caption at home with the same task of analyzing the component ensemble and comparing what automatic translation was able to elucidate and what they had to investigate completely by themselves. At this point, students can also start making decisions about their project posts and drafting their captions; as an assessment, students publish a series of posts about their town featuring different visual-textual combinations and leaving peer feedback for each other in the comment section. The task can be further extended to include integrated speaking, for example, in a live gallery walk conference format or as digital narrated videos. There is evidence for the positive effect of using self-selected mobile photographs as stimuli for speaking performance: Thu-Nguyet Huynh et al. report in "Learner-Generated Material: The Effects of Ubiquitous Photography on Foreign Language Speaking Performance" (2022) that compared to generic textbook-provided visual materials, self-made pictures yielded more complex narratives, fluent delivery, and greater self-satisfaction

This sample activity can integrate well into regular Intermediate-level curricula, especially if students regularly interact with digital discourse and react positively to it. Activities like this aim at not merely visual literacy and its supporting role for language acquisition, but a complex of multiliteracies, a set of discursive competencies that enable communicators to make meaning

through a variety of available channels beyond the plainly spoken or written word. Instructors interested in less overarching activities could alternatively select individual posts that reflect the current topic in some way. For example, Markov's last published post of a crying man (analyzed in the previous chapter) could serve as anchor material for a lesson around February 23, the day traditionally and problematically celebrated as the Fatherland Defenders Day, coinciding with the onset of Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine. This richly detailed and impactful image is conducive to attentive analysis and personal responses, while the caption guides the interpretation in a potentially unexpected way that can complicate the understanding of the issue and expose students to authentic vocabulary beyond normative textbook Russian. Educators could also choose to focus on visual literacy and use Markov's photographs as materials for warm-up or focusing. To guide students towards more meaningful interpretation and help them scaffold the difficult process of interpretation in a second language, the instructor can use one of Harvard Project Zero's thinking routines. For example, "See-Think-Wonder" can lead the students from factual noticing and naming through interpretation and towards inquiry and interaction and, depending on the students' proficiency level, they can rely on translanguaging to communicate some of the more complex ideas they might want to share.

One of the key aspects of visual literacy theory is the acknowledgement that visual language, including photography, is not universal (Avgerinou and Petterssen 2011, 12). That is, students will often need support in the interpretation of visually-mediated narratives and unfamiliar culturally specific details of the photograph. This support can take different forms – peer discussion, written thinking routines, captions, and technological functions – but what unites most of them is their verbal nature. While language supports the comprehension of images, visuality in its turn also continues to play its traditional role of supporting text comprehension. We might not

know the word for ‘dog’ in the target foreign language, but we will recognize a photograph or a drawing of one; visual cues support language acquisition from the elementary level. As the present discussion demonstrates, the support of the two modalities is mutual and more complex than it may seem at first glance, so even as students progress to higher levels of proficiency and let go of the crutches of pictures and pantomimes, they still benefit from deeper engagement with visuals as it supports their multiliterate abilities and exposes them to cultural phenomena that cannot be verbalized as a sequence of words and sentences.

Photography should exist in language classrooms precisely for the same reasons it should exist in our lives in general: it does what language cannot do, and together with language it can tell stories larger than life. Markov is a particularly fitting photographer for modern Russian classrooms because he captured, eye-level and with amazing talent and rawness, his country at a critical point of rupture that is incredibly difficult and incredibly important to teach. His perspective offers a unique glance at Russia at a breaking point, at the scenes and phenomena that make up its sociocultural fabric but are not proudly projected by mainstream media and institutions. Whether he will be inducted into the imaginary Russian or global artistic hall of fame remains to be seen; the colloquial consensus rests that Markov is one of the most influential photographic visionaries of the Russian 2010s-2020s. Each of his photographs is a little square window into this shabby wonderland that sprawled over the Soviet remains, absorbing but not quite digesting them. Each photograph is an experience, and that can include being an authentic educational experience for those interested in contemporary Russian language and culture.

VI. CONCLUSION

When we say, "a picture is worth a thousand words," what do we mean by that? Usually, it is implied that a well-taken photograph is able to instantly and vividly communicate a complex web of meanings that verbal language would be slow to cover; it also reminds us of the direct connection of photography to reality while verbal narratives, however documentary, will always be a reproduction, glorified fiction. "Do not tell me – show me," it says. Markov's work suggests an alternative reading of this proverb: not as an either-or, but as a claim that a picture is worth speaking about, that it deserves a backstory, elaboration, discussion, interpretation. In their most native digital environment of Instagram, Markov's photographs are routinely surrounded by a thousand words: locations, dates, names, artist's commentary, and public discourse. Of course, his photographs can still pierce wordlessly, otherwise he would not be a critically acclaimed master of his craft. However, when his photography faced the categorically inescapable limitations of its own genre – its tendency for generalization, its ambiguity, its contemporaneity – Markov's journalistic and activist thinking allowed him to call upon verbal language to communicate more fully what he knew and what he felt.

As a practitioner of word and image, Markov developed an intuitive understanding of multimodality: he felt when it was necessary to lean into one or another mode, or when to cut the verbal channel completely by remaining silent or imposing the public's virtual silence in the presence of a photograph. He also understood the core premise of multimodality: that word and image must say something different differently, otherwise, the resulting tautology fails the narrative. Photography and text, he told Serebrennikov, "must reside in different planes. If text tries to replicate what is depicted in a photograph, it tends to look weak; or if I try to capture in a photograph some story that yields itself better to words, that wouldn't be great either… But when

the two are parallel and one helps to better understand the other and to grasp some more nuanced or complex impressions, that is awesome" (Serebrennikov 2024b). In further investigations of Dmitry Markov's legacy, the patterns of his multimodality would be an intriguing direction. For example, a comparative analysis of which photographs get selected for non-verbal representation (e.g. into exhibitions or books) and which are left out can provide practical insight into the expressive potential of artistic languages.

Multimodality became more than an artistic language of expression for Markov: it also became a tangible link that facilitated his social work and civic activism. His photographs claimed representation for those who constitute the majority but are the least portrayed and for those whose struggles deem them invisible for the establishment. Through captions, he was able to tell their stories and share his nuanced expertise in other life experiences: while photographs portrayed and evoked, his writing narrated, explained, conversed with his readers (sometimes even directly), and occasionally called for action. The pathos of photography served as a magnet for attention, using the momentarily piercing beauty of this art form to direct the audience's attention to these distant, niche, other life stories. It also might have worked as a memory anchor: according to the cognitive dual coding theory (DCT), our memory stores analog pictorial and linguistic codes in a parallel fashion, enhancing our ability to keep and retrieve dual-coded information with less strain on our working memory (Clark and Paivio 1991). Thus, the civil contract of Markov's photography builds complex multimodal connections between the participants of the photographic encounter and creates a space for legitimized citizenship in the art realm, in the physical Russian community, and in its symbolic image as perceived from the outside.

What Markov captures has not yet been transformed from current reality to historical documentation: over a year after his death, Russia remains in the same swirl of history. We can

only assume what his works will communicate when colored by the hindsight of historical perspective and whether they will even survive its capricious filters. His photographs stand a real chance of writing the common, the colloquial, and the marginalized into the historical image of Russia of the early twenty-first century, as Soviet photographers like Boris Mikhailov did before him for their communities of time, space, and culture. Markov made an effort to set these records as not just gruesomely realistic but also poetic and infused with action-based hope, setting a unique tone to his work. This quality of his photography was palpable for the public yet still unnamed; this thesis proposed svetlukha as not only an identifying term but also an explanation for the controversy of this work's reception. Its origins trace back to Markov's continuous involvement in social work that formed him as a citizen and an artist: his subjectivity played an immense role in the influence his photography had on his community and has now become part of his mythology.

The angle of authorial subjectivity is also what ultimately guided this thesis to culminate, of all things, in language teaching practice. Yet this move is not a mere rumination on possibility; it is grounded in previous teaching experience and conversations with fellow instructors of Russian as a foreign language. Thanks to the affordances of our digital age, we have an abundance of authentic materials to bring into our classrooms, none occupying quite the representational niche that Markov does. It communicates something elusive and yet pervasive within contemporary Russian culture: if not the infamous "enigmatic Russian soul" or "spirit of the times," then at least what Markov himself called "the average temperature at the hospital." The challenge and promise lie in translating Markov's layered vision into pedagogy not as static material but as a living invitation to deep reading, attentive seeing, and honest questioning. Deconstructing his complex visual and verbal messages can present the learners of Russian with semiotic riddles whose methodic solution sharpens a broad range of competencies, from cultural knowledge to visual

literacy, and from deciphering figurative language to the strategic use of technology. When we bring authentic, context-saturated resources into our pedagogy, we invite students to unlock empathy and critical thinking, and to discover, in ambiguity, not confusion but possibility. Markov's work reminds us that beneath every image is a dialogue waiting to happen, and that the classroom, too, can become a space for this kind of co-constructed, multilayered meaning.

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VIII. APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Chart 1

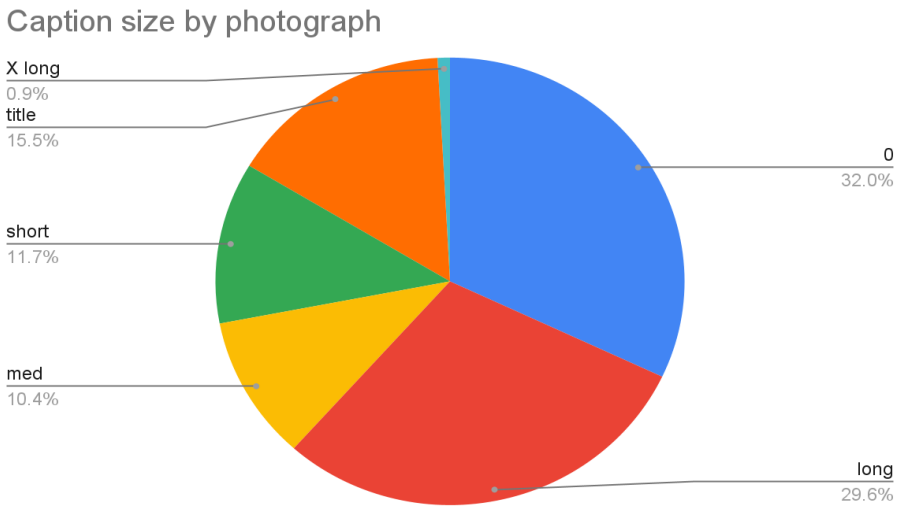


Chart 2

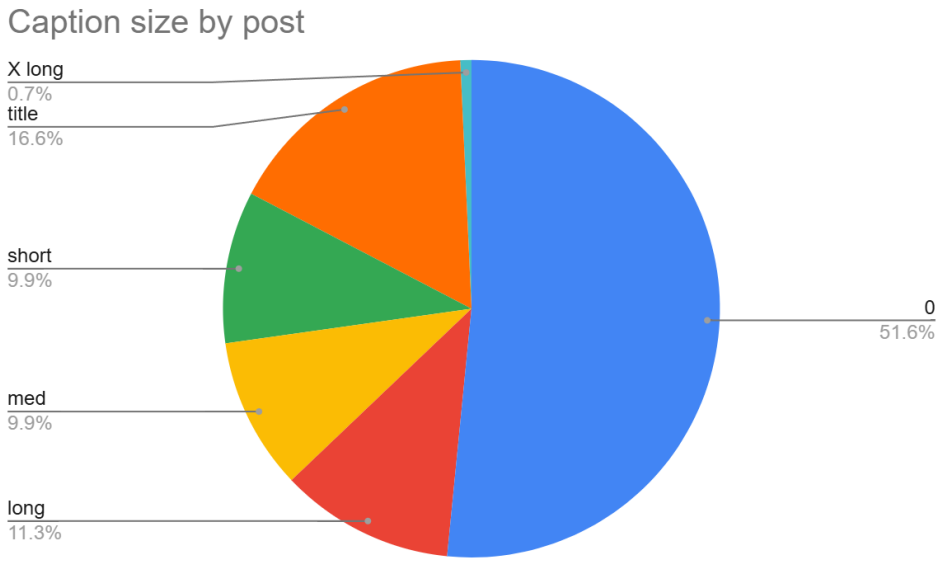


Chart 3

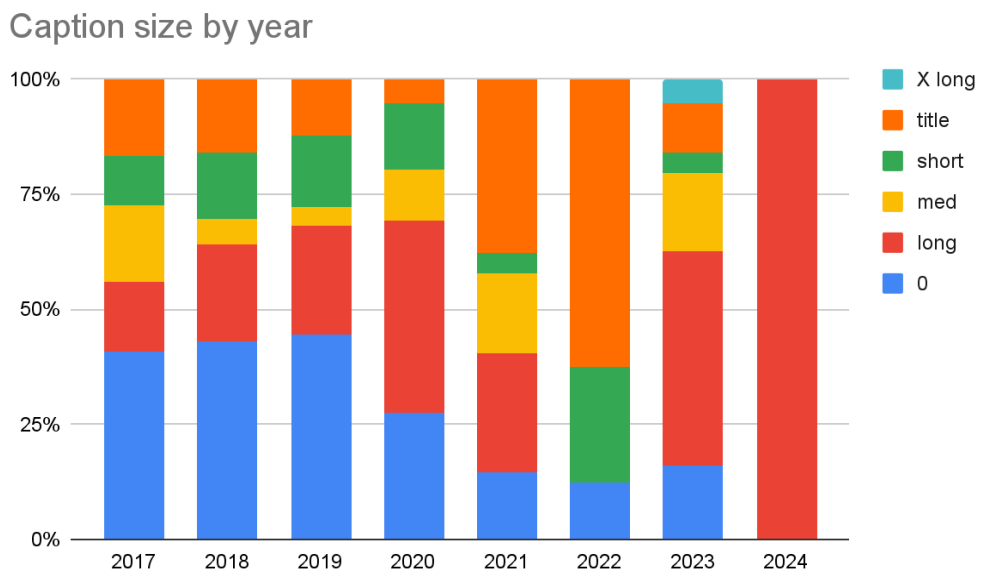
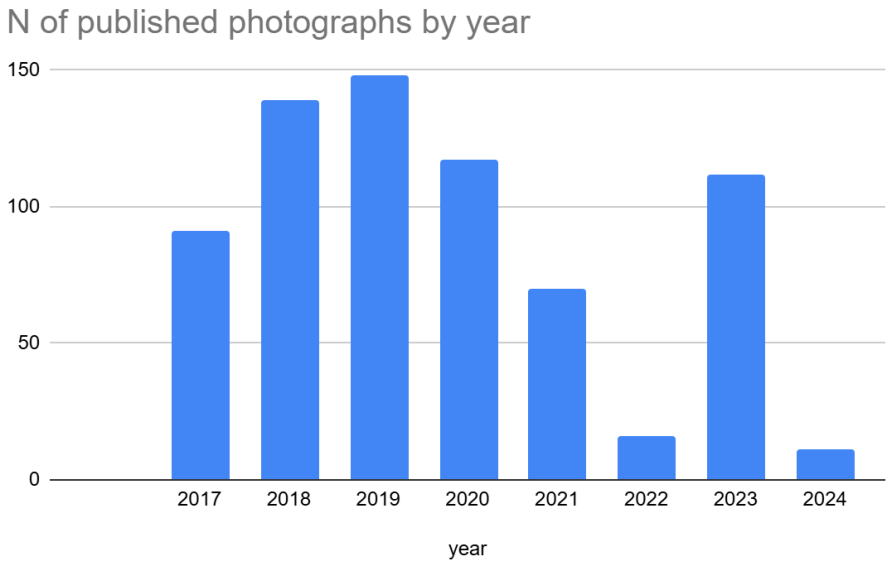


Chart 4



Appendix 2

1. 9/22/2024, Chusovoy; single photograph, no caption, comments. The photograph shows easily readable contrast of an old Soviet car and a newer imported car parked next to each other. www.instagram.com/p/CxfWBT3oBZz/ .
2. 7/17/2020, Russia; single photograph, no caption, comments. This subtly symbolic photograph shows a barred window with a Russian flag and laced curtains behind the glass; on the streetside of the bars, there are empty bottles and off patches of grass. www.instagram.com/p/CCvLnAIJFms/?hl=en .
3. 7/3/2021, Vyksa; carousel of nine photographs and a collage, medium caption, comments. www.instagram.com/p/CQ3ISWEMP_D/?hl=en&img_index=10 .
4. 8/23/2023, Krasnoyarsk; carousel of six photographs showing makeshift urban decorations, medium caption, comments. www.instagram.com/p/CwSiDnEIgqu/?hl=en&img_index=1 .
5. 1/8/2023, Moscow region; single photograph of a couple in a local train, short caption, comments. www.instagram.com/p/CnL6TbOMJwz/?hl=en .
6. 3/20/2019, Murmansk region; single photograph from a morning bus, title-caption (one word, pun), comments. www.instagram.com/p/BuiWsJ5gYRL/
7. 5/16/2019, Komsomolsk-na-Amure; single photograph of a young man on a bicycle with a tall bronze monument in the background, short caption, comments. www.instagram.com/p/BxhBz5oobLE/
8. 9/28/2023, Krasnokamsk; two photographs of urban environments with text in one of them, long caption, comments. www.instagram.com/p/Cxvka1_ISw2/?img_index=2