

## Subway: Loving, Hating and Aging Together with an Iconic Urban Technology

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This presentation is a quite spontaneous outcome of my research project “Subway: an aging technology and its present day users”. This ethnographic research was conducted in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2015-2016 and included 30 interviews with subway users, hours of observations in the subways of both cities, ride-alongs with the passengers and analysis of several groups devoted to the subway in social networks.

For Russian big cities subway definitely is “**a cultural technology**” – the one that shapes a specific urban environment including rhythms and patterns of everyday life, new materialities and practices as well as urban imaginary. So, from my perspective, subway is one of the most appropriate analytical tools for studying Russian big cities.

Subway has been one of the most important signs of urban modernization for Soviet and then Post-Soviet cities. Opened in 1935, Moscow subway right from the beginning was considered not only as a means of transportation, but as one of the most important ideological projects. As Ditmar Neutzatz noticed: "Hardly any other construction of the former Soviet Union enjoys such popularity and symbolism as the metro does. Hardly any other construction has been covered so actively and for so many years by contemporary propaganda". In St. Petersburg the subway was opened 20 years later than in Moscow, in 1955, which reflected the status of the city – which was the second largest one in Soviet Union and the place where Soviet State emerged.

For a long time, subway represented all the best and most progressive things that could exist or be dreamed of in a modern city. For many generations of Russians, the metro is an important criterion of urbanization. Having a metro, even a small one playing no significant role in urban traffic, is still perceived as a certificate of exclusivity and progressiveness of a city. The popularity of the metro makes it an important part of the urban imaginary. In this case, the absence of a real underground may be compensated by the creation of an imaginary one. This role is usually assigned to a website created by fantasies and efforts of local underground admirers and containing a map of the imagined subway, a description of it and a news section. Some of such websites can mystify an uninformed stranger, as it happened in Barnaul (a city in Siberia) where a traveler was surprised to find out that the subway which she had planned to use upon her arrival existed only in the form of a digital code.

While doing my research on the subway, I realized that some theoretical difficulties that I have experienced were the part of a broader context – Urban, Mobility or Infrastructure Studies. First of all, in my research I wanted to focus on the subway users - their experiences, feelings, perception and relationships with the subway. This micro-optics seems to be so trivial, but less than a decade ago the subway users as well as other passengers were considered as the “incarcerated” ones, whose experience was totally predefined by the rules of a large scale technology. This micro-optics with its sensitivity to the users’ experiences is still quite a rare thing in studying subways, especially Russian ones, that are still perceived as Soviet ideological project rather than lived or used space. The number of papers such as “A Metro on the Mount: The Underground as a Church of Soviet Civilization” by Andrew Jenks or “The Art of Totality” by Boris Groys significantly narrowed the research foci almost ignoring the users’ perspective.

The second problem that I realized, while researching the subway, was the lack of categories describing some positive emotions or attachments. This “noir vision” is typical for understanding the modern city, which is usually portrayed in “50 shadows of black” style. Notions of happiness, compassion, love (not as commercial products, emotional labor, or affective capitalism) and other more nuanced feelings and emotions are just getting popular and are still suspicious for urban researchers.

The last, but not the least problem, is once again the limited repertoire for description of the close relationships of people and/or objects, while talking about the urban life, which is not a surprise since from the very beginning the Urban Studies were inclined to analyze the distance. Lewis Wirth described the essence of urban life noting: “In the city physical contacts are close but social contacts are distant”.

So, coming back to the Moscow and St. Petersburg subways. The everyday life of urban citizens has been intertwined with the subway for many decades, since the subway has been the most accessible and reliable means of public transportation. It is one of the most emotionally saturated urban spaces. It might be hated or admired, but it rarely perceived indifferently. Having almost no alternatives in both cities, the subway inevitably causes some emotions.

My numerous observations and talks convinced me that the perspective of the subway riders is the essential one for understanding the subway life. It is not just a manifesto. It came up in my research that the operation of subway at least in Moscow and St.Petersburg is very personalized, with interactions between staff and users often being regulated not by uniform role rules or hierarchies but by the logic of the moment, personal likes and dislikes, sense of responsibility or desire to take care. One of my informants was referring to his childhood experience. Thus, once he was accompanied by his dad, who asked him to keep the distance and not to get closer to the train in order not to scare the driver, who might be afraid of injuring the people on the platform.

Both in Moscow and in St. Petersburg, the subway map has long been the city map. In the perception of residents and visitors the city is divided not in administrative districts but in areas associated with metro stations. So, the subway functions as the most effective urban navigation

system. Quite often **the subway map serves as a life map** on which significant personal and family life facts such as births, moves, workplaces etc. are mapped. This functional diversity of the underground which allows **a combination of very personal and very universal experiences** turns it into an important part of an urban dweller's identity and everyday life:

“I was born in Moscow in 1985. Well... Domodedovskaya metro station ... I actually always tie my whereabouts to the metro, because it's more convenient. Because when you say a street name, no one will understand”. (30 y.o., was born in Moscow, moved to St. Petersburg 5 years ago, works for an advertising agency).

Sometimes, the experiences were not just put on the subway map, but took a place in the subway:

“We went to the subway to celebrate our graduation. Well, it was... let me think ...in 1957. That's hard to believe, but the station was closed for several hours just for us. It was unforgettable! We were dancing on the platform. Well, we graduated from technical university, lots of us were employed in the Leningrad subway later on”. (73 y.o., St.Petersburg resident, has been living in the city for 52 years)

People not just map their life using the subway map. They inscribe their own biographies in the larger life of the subway: they grow up and grow old together, they part and meet again. Speaking about the long term relationships with the subway I am talking about the people that have been using it independently for two decades or more, paying a special attention to the ones who have been “living with the subway” for four or five decades. The experience of these users – usually in their 60<sup>th</sup> or 70<sup>th</sup> - was often a personal experience since it had not been articulated or somehow shared before. These talks revealed the limitation of the internet as an archive, since there were a lot of facts, references that could not be found somewhere else, but talks with the people. Once, my informants in St. Petersburg both in their 70s were trying to sing me a song about the subway. It appeared that they forgot the major part of the lyrics. They were upset and I promised to find it in the internet and share it with them. Needless to say, that I could not keep my promise and find the lyrics. It made me think that researcher is still an archivist collecting experiences, which were not shared or spread.

Speaking about “their life with the subway”, my informants quite often refer to their sensual experiences. Subway is one of the urban spaces that enhances the sensitivity of urban dwellers to their bodily experiences. Situated under the ground, it forces the users to acquire and improve the skills of switching, which include switching from the street navigation to the sign based one, from one temperature mode or one speed of movement to another, etc. Undergoing frequent transitions and interchanges increases the subway rider's sensitivity to their own changing body states. My informants have repeatedly talked about a kind of **physical or sensory intimacy with the subway**. Some of them were referring to the underground as a sort of ‘additional clothing’ one puts on not quite voluntarily; others mention a particular smell, sound or light that they are fond of or can't stand at all. These **sensual traces** of the subway were extremely important for its users. According to them, these traces were the very essence of the subway and one of the reason of the personal attachment. It was repeated in many interviews: “Well, it might sound quite

surprising, but the subway for me is just a smell. I bet that nobody has told you about that before". Speaking about the smell, almost all people that I talked to was not able to define what kind of smell they were talking about.

'Living with the subway' sets a very **compassionate and understanding** tone when talking about it: "In fact, this happens due to infrastructure's aging. The metro is 80 years old, after all. It should be treated with understanding". In some cases, though, 'living with the metro' is regarded as a permission for criticizing it.

The longer people use the subway, the more tolerant to it they become. They are quite ok with many imperfections caused by aging of the subway, especially material ones. These imperfections are noticed, but they are just accepted as a part of the subway life, until they do not significantly influence the speed of the transportation – the key value of the subway. Explaining their tolerance, people were saying that they are also not getting younger, so why they should care much about the imperfections caused by aging?

This idea of the long term attachment or relationships with things or technologies (though quite a changeable one) seems to me quite a productive one. More often, in Social Sciences or Humanities the relations with the objects are described as emotionally or temporarily distant ones. They are qualified in emotionally neutral or negatively connoted terms such as functionality or alienation. One of the rare examples to describe it in some intimate terms, implying a close distance, is Walter Benjamin's collection of essays "Berlin Childhood...". In its part devoted to the phone he very romantically described the phone in terms of fascination, amusement, mesmerizing. Benjamin was talking about the experience of his childhood. Though he described the phone as "his twin-brother", since both of them were born in the same time, he referred to it as something quite distant, which was left behind both temporary (in his childhood) and geographically (in Berlin).

The idea of tolerance, compassion or understanding of the old or aging things is not quite typical for Russian cities where, in contrast to many European ones, the culture of old age is virtually inexistent. Indications of buildings' or other material substance's age are generally perceived as signs of decline, not of a rich history, and therefore people require renovations. This position was mentioned in many interviews.

"Well, on one hand you notice a new car, but on the other it's like "Lord, how many old cars are still running!" I mean there is this new one and you noticed it, and there are lots of old ones in operation, making you think that these cars are very old and that it's a good idea to update them". (28 y.o., St. Petersburg resident, has lived in St. Petersburg since birth).

The relationships with the subway might be changed due to different reasons – changes of the subway, changes of personal experience, or some external changes. One of the main reasons is the extensive modernization of the city that introduces some new standards of living. The Moscow subway has been an urban wonder or an attraction for a long time both for locals who proudly showed it to the visitors and for the visitors who enjoyed such a rare experience:

“I remember we went to Moscow and we were shown the main sights like the Mausoleum, the Kremlin... But the subway made the brightest impression... It was like a fairy tale, being carried by that staircase somewhere, up or down... And the second was that experience of trains running under the ground: how they arrive, and how these beautiful lights shine in the tunnel, and how they dash out to the platform”. (42 y.o., Kazan resident)

Now the subway is not an urban attraction or a wonder anymore (except some particular cases), especially for its younger users. The situation has been changing since the middle of 2000s due to extensive construction and renovations. Some new places like shopping malls or renovated railway stations appeared introducing the new standards of urban living.

- Can you remember your first metro trip?
- Well, it was ordinary... After all, what is special about that? Escalators are all around now, in any shopping mall. (21 y.o., student, has never used the metro before coming to the city).

This changing urban environment brought to life the idea of the subway as “a city museum”, “a good old technology” or even the “sensory theme park”:

Even when I switch completely to driving, I will continue using subway from time to time... Because you feel differently there. A kind of retro, you know.

—You mean it’s a sort of an urban theme park for you?

—Well, yes, an urban theme park (laughs) (22 y.o., student, Saint-Petersburg resident)

Concluding, I just suppose that this very micro, very personal, not that much shared experiences and relationships are worth studying, because they are interesting and widening our understanding of the complexity and multi-layeredness of the urban life. But I also assume that speaking about these pretty emotional and personal relationships and appreciations could be useful for understanding a state that might be called a **pre-participatory culture**: the social solidarities and types of mobilization that are in becoming and not actualized yet.