

Dreams of Minsk.

A Journey through Aesthetics of Utopia within a European Experience

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“In terms of history, death and resurrection make the algorithm for [...] the territory that in its present reincarnation is called Belarus”.

Artur Klinau

“The Sun City of Dream” is how the artist and writer Artur Klinau¹ named Belarus’ capital Minsk in its present reincarnation.² The metaphorical reference to the *sun* and *dreams*, according to Klinau, appeared in the conception of Soviet Minsk in the 1950s, when the city was built anew after the destruction caused during World War II. Balancing between a futurist utopian vision and a romantic image of imperial province, in his book *Minsk: The Sun City of Dream* (2006)³ Klinau discloses the city as a visual, conceptual and textual experience. The aim of the present article is to offer an interpretation of the city’s text. Looking at the text from three different metaphorical viewpoints – bird’s eye view, the flâneur and the window – I seek to unfold the

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structure of meaning that Klinau builds through historical, literary, philosophic references, leading the narrative to one focal point: even as peripheral city, post-imperial Minsk has an ego of its own, deeply rooted in European aesthetic traditions. This is visible by approaching the city's structure, after its re-birth as a Soviet *urbs* with a strongly Utopian spirit, as well as by approaching the city's history, and precisely its relationship with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and Vilnius. For this reason, the present article will consider these two main aspects – structure and history – by decoding the meaning of the visual and conceptual elements that Klinau brings together to build Minsk's text.

Through a cultural semiotic analysis, applying Yuri Lotman's and Vladimir Toporov's approach⁴, I present Klinau's work as a cultural text for a city which never had one before. As the art historian Siarhei Khareuski said, Klinau can be considered the first author who tried to give sense to Minsk as an individual and self-referential entity. The semiotic approach in this work implies the practice of decoding the cultural references made by the author in his text – like for example references to a historical event, to a concept or an image – by placing them in the specific context of Minsk as a physical city and as an idea. A collective reading of such references build up the cultural text which, for a person belonging to Klinau's cultural milieu, is implicitly

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understandable without mediation, but still misses explication. The analysis of the text's constituents (cultural references) and of their links to the main object of analysis (Minsk) is what makes meaning accessible also to a person who does not belong to Belarus', Minsk's and Klinau's cultural universe.

The richness of symbolic and historical reference in Klinau's work supports my view of the book as an intentional (and successful) attempt at giving meaning to Minsk within a broader identity discourse. The uniqueness of Klinau's conception also lays in his cosmopolitan formulation of Minsk's *ego*. Being a Soviet city, at the same time it deeply belongs to European utopian aesthetics – stretching from the work of the 17th century philosopher Tommaso Campanella, to the Italian metaphysical painter Giorgio De Chirico, going through a long historical experience which links Minsk to other European urban realities.

Artur Klinau therefore delivers a message of shared European experience, which he contrasts to the popular binary Cold War approach of a Europe's East and West, separated politically and therefore culturally. Minsk's text serves the author's desire to ultimately rejoin the idea of the "Soviet" into that of "Europe". The way how Klinau tries to achieve his aim is what I would like to explore in my analysis. It is therefore important to stress that with the term "Europe", Klinau refers

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in fact to Western Europe⁵; this semantic strategy will be applied also in the present article, in order to keep as close as possible to Klinau's original idea. According to the Khareuski, Artur Klinau is also the first author who described Minsk from a Belarusian perspective. This statement opens up a key question: is *Minsk: The Sun City of Dream* only a Belarusian vision? Is it not at the same time the product of a deeply cosmopolitan mind, sophisticated and sensible to the wider European dimension of urbanity?

From a Bird's-Eye View: A City Devoted to the Sun?

The prototype of Utopia, Sir Thomas More's island⁶, was not enough for Artur Klinau. He needed a more totalitarian and enclosed vision to narrate Minsk. This section devoted to a panoramic picture of the city will focus on how Minsk is compared to the philosopher Tommaso Campanella's urban construction *The City of the Sun* (1602).⁷ Both Klinau's Sun City and Campanella's City of the Sun are closed and circular, being the circle a very ancient symbol of perfection and fulfilment. According to Iuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii, concentric is the entire system of preserving and communicating human experience (Lotman 213): the city is a result of such process. Describing the City of

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the Sun, an Admiral of the Genoese fleet explains to his interlocutor, the Grandmaster, that the city is “divided in seven distinct rounds, called with the seven planets’ names” (Campanella 2). This image, recalling Dante’s *Inferno*, refers to the Universe – the cosmic order of things which is represented by the city.

The city, in turn, acquires the same cosmic character and becomes the centre, the fulcrum or origin. Minsk however lacked the property of centrality, which is one of the focal points in the Belarusian urban discourse of the last twenty-five years. The philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich argues that the idea of Minsk represents the primordial ghost of Belarus’ identity *topos*: it has a sacral content and an ideal character, but for it to grow to an existential discourse, the concept of centre is necessary (Akudovich 1998). Despite the lack of a centre, Minsk does actually have a circular structure, thanks to the ring roads embracing the city at different stages. They are defined by Pushkin and Zhukov’s prospects: Aerodromnaia, Vanevaia, Surganov and Orlovskaiia streets forming the inner ring and Minsk Circumferential Highway forming the outer ring of the city.

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Minsk thus preserves the “original” shape of things, the shape of life and beginning, of synthesis, since “everything is round in the end [...] In the world of imagination, there should also be a curvature which resists all flattering, all linearity, all programming” (Baudrillard 2007). Minsk's concentric structure, while resisting flattering and linearity, was however a direct result of “programming”, of a Soviet plan for social architecture, marked by the distribution of social layers in the urban texture:

In the Sun City proper, flats were allocated only the “best citizens” of the Land of Happiness – Party members, workers of the Metaphysic and Security organs, various specialists, well-known writers, poets, artists. In the

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peripheries of the city [...], common Party members, sportsmen, doctors, teachers and other members of the *intelligentsia* would settle. Further beyond that area stood big factories, and around them used to live the people who worked there – the proletariat (68).

The practice of developing cities according to a concentric pattern is typical for “urban planning in the Soviet Union [...] the city expands not by re-developing already built areas but through the addition of ‘concentric rings’ to the periphery [...]” (Barykina). According to Larisa Titarenko and Anna Shirokanova, Minsk’s condition can be juxtaposed to the city-polis (closed fortress or citadel) and compared to the “city-cross of the Roman type [based on *Cardo* and *Decumanum* streets]” (31). By breaking the Greek circle, “the Roman principle of linearity tends to balance its irresponsibility towards the past with a detailed design of the future” (Titarenko 31). If Belarus’ capital city does not fulfil the role of centre, it becomes clear why Artur Klinau looks for solutions in Campanella’s urban vision: similar to it, Minsk’s myth must convey a time and space-less primordial experience, it must be absolute. Klinau therefore found the concept of origin for Minsk in the European utopian tradition.

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There is another reason why Minsk reflects *The City of the Sun*. Ascribable to the tradition of solar cults, the symbol of the sun carries a masculine principle, associated with life energy, vitality, sense of origin and also with wisdom and intellectual illumination. The sun represents the God par excellence, thus containing the notions of righteousness, justice and truth. In the *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Carl G. Jung refers to the solar symbol as:

really the only rational representation of God, whether we take the point of view of the barbarians of other ages or that of the modern physical sciences. In both cases the sun is the parent God, [...] He is the fructifier and creator of all that lives, the source of energy of our world. [...]
(127-128)

In this paragraph, by including a time span from “other ages” to “modern physical science”, Jung in fact presents the timelessness of the solar symbol, its absolute validity through space and its unconditional power to originate. In synthesis, the Sun is linked to the idea of time, space and centre in the same way as Minsk is, in Klinau’s conception.

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The archetypical character of the solar symbol is thus faithfully reflected by the Sun City.

Approaching the topic of solar symbolism in Klinau's work, it is important to stress that *masculinity* in the concept of the Sun City does once again elegantly reflect *The City of the Sun* by Tommaso Campanella, where women are totally deprived of subjectivity. There, the Admiral tells the reader that the Sun society is based on the principle of community of goods, in which women are included. Artur Klinau does not write of a community of women in the Sun City, but he presents them in a specific way, making a clear allusion to sexuality as their main virtue. The easily attainable sexual relation between women and men in the Sun City is stressed in various passages: in one of them, women are referred to as "orchids", delicate protagonists of the erotic aura hovering over the urban space:

The Sun City has always been filled with erotica. [...] Our streets were full of those particular, fragile but resplendent flowers which, in so big quantities, grew only here. [...] Delicate decadent orchids on slim stems. [...] Love with the orchids was not particularly difficult: they indulged in it because sensible to aesthetics. (108-110)

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In his book, Klinau refers only a few times to “old women of the old neighbourhood”. The only personalized female figure in the book is the author’s mother, whose character still presents elements of subordination to men (the father), despite the position of command she enjoys and despite her profoundly emancipated Soviet life-style. The gender dimension of Utopian Minsk is relevant throughout the whole literary journey, which is for a big part lead by the manly eyes of the flâneur, a typically masculine figure. Nevertheless, a sense of emotional repression, very strong in the text, dilutes masculinity as a dominant force that the geometry, the whiteness of marbles and the silence of Minsk’s street impose.

The City of the Sun by Campanella is ideally stoic and emotionally neutral, is totally deprived of sexuality, like the social Soviet Utopia in its integrity. Minsk escapes the canon in this respect, being a place where lust, as well as simple human warmth and joy appear, despite sarcasm in the interstices left to intimacy. In a similar way, Minsk gives space for true happiness, intended as a work-in-progress state of mind, a pursuit rather than an accomplishment. However *true* happiness in the Sun City is overshadowed by its utopian double, for which the human dimension is little less than an act of speech. Science, justice and order are in Utopia

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much closer to the concept of happiness than the individual self because these concepts, accomplishments of the ideal, are static, eternal and universal. Human beings instead, belonging to the universe of senses and illogicity, struggle but cannot truly step in the realm of utopian happiness – the realm of equality and of Gods. This tension animates Minsk, as Klinau sees it.

The Sun City is introduced not by the human but precisely by the utopian concept of happiness. “Welcome to the Land of Happiness” should hang on the gates of the purgatory, before the Sun City proper – proposes Klinau. In fact, he continues, the essence of the idea of communism is to build universal (not individual) happiness, “which only Utopia has so far dared to define and realise” (8). Such a project was not alien to Western Europe: on the contrary it was a centuries-old dream of all Europeans striving for an ideal and just society not limited in time. Nevertheless Klinau alerts: “it is fundamental to distinguish between the project of building happiness from its practical realization and, even more, from the impressing attempt at its realization which took place in the Soviet Union” (12). Entering the city through its gates, Artur Klinau takes the reader into the official “hall” of this amazing social laboratory, pompous, impressing and overwhelming. However, walking through it, one starts noticing how officialdom gives space to informality and how

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the main gates of the Land of Happiness dwindle in front of the many backdoors to a land of uncertainty.

A Flâneur's Perspective: Architecting a big Stage with Reminiscences of Sacredness.

Entering the city, setting foot on Minsk's streets, the perspective changes. The general structure and conceptual skeleton of the city shrinks to an urban visual and sensorial experience depicted in a theatre scene where its actors leave space for human beings walking in Minsk. "The act of walking around the city's streets was consecrated in Baudelaire's and Benjamin's literary texts, which made the flâneur the main character in the urban landscape of 19th century Paris" (Lazzarini 187), and many other cities, still today. Having acknowledged the intrinsic maleness of it, the practice of *flânerie* is primarily about details and authenticity, about real and engaged observation, which classically reports the life of cafes, of the *passages* and arcades, of the dark and infamous districts. In his research, the flâneur sinks into urban reality and "proposes a re-signification of the city" (Lazzarini 184). This is exactly what Klinau does in *The Sun City of Dream*. The flâneur's perspective in the text is expressed through the author's first-hand experience of Minsk. Despite its natural subjectivity, the conscious use of

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a wide spectrum of cultural and historical references makes Klinau's work part of the wider Belarusian cultural and urban discourse.

Like Nikolai Gogol' did with St. Petersburg or Georg Simmel with Venice, Klinau writes about Minsk as a spectral illusionary city. The City of Palaces slowly "melts before your eyes, extinguishes, evaporates" (135). The whole architectural complex of the Sun City is a "gigantic decoration of a strange spectacle" (135), "plain scenic design" (127), "ideal geometry illuminated by artificial light" (84), at times resembling an "empty scene from where decoration has been removed" (84). When Valiantsin Akudovich refers to Minsk as "a city, which is not" (Akudovich, Miane Niama), he in fact very laconically introduces the topic of artificiality, of illusion, of mask covering the emptiness behind. According to Georg Simmel, when we feel in something a lack of truth, it is because there is "a lack of agreement between the work (of art) and its own idea" (42). Artur Klinau depicted very clearly Simmel's thought: in Minsk there are two cities, one of the socialist utopian project and one of the common people conducting their everyday life. As Akudovich put it,

Apart from Minsk situated in my desire [...] there is [...] Minsk as the idea of Minsk, which for centuries wandered through villages, demanding to settle

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permanently in the most different times and spaces.

(Akudovich “Misto, JakogoNiama”)

The realms of reality and its representation are certainly linked. Therefore Klinau can present the topic of theatricality, illusion and absence through the observation of Minsk’s architecture. “The whole city is an overture”, he writes. “It is a gigantic theatre set for the romantic and exalted play called Happiness” (Klinau 117). At the same time though, he reveals the falsity of this monumentality. Initially he tells how Minsk is a city of palaces, which:

keep strongly tight to the earth with their thick paws, as if they were Bull Terriers menacingly looking at pedestrians, ready to attack them and at any time and rip them to shreds. In the palaces' crouching one could feel the power of the epoch, in which the Land of Happiness was strong with its belief. (116-117)

Only later one discovers that “the People's Palaces in the Sun City [...] are only symbolic signs of palaces” (127). Klinau takes the reader in a visual journey through Minsk, where images like pompous *stuccos*,

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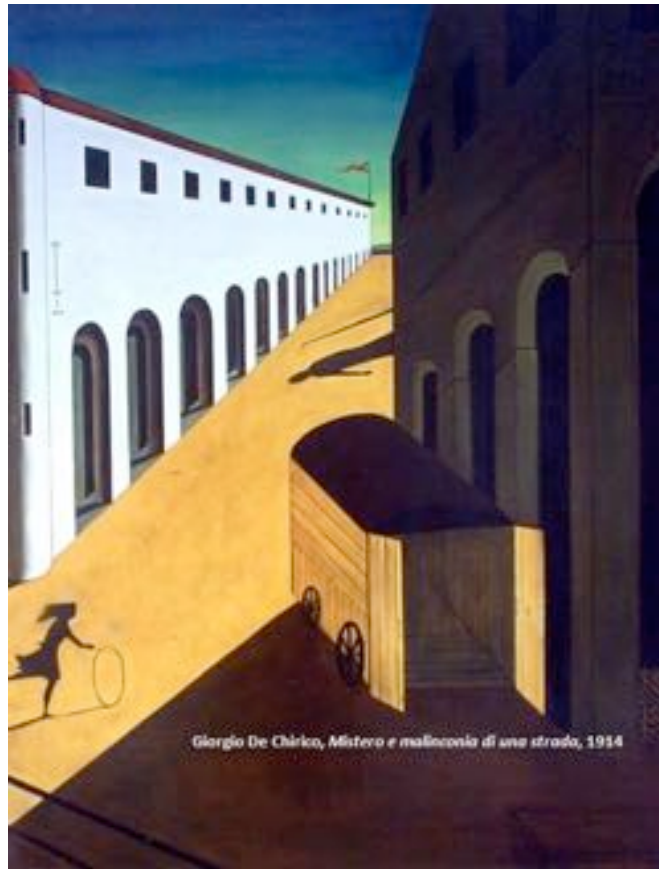
flatness, and shallow facades repeat themselves. In this theatrical scene, the back sides of palaces lack plaster, the whole atmosphere becomes a “surrealistic composition, a big rebus created by someone, who did not understand the sense of his own masterpiece” (Klinau 119).

Surrealism is introduced in the text when the author recalls scenes from his childhood, in which shadows would form spaces similar to Giorgio De Chirico's⁸ paintings:

when the sun, the sky and the space in whose centre I stood found themselves on the same line, through the square a great shadow would unfold. I looked at how it rose first on the buildings' walls, those standing far from me, on the other side of the square – and then it would crawl directly onto me, making the white ochre of the asphalt beneath my feet look like ash. (Klinau 123)

In De Chirico's paintings, Artur Klinau finds elements of the city of his childhood's memories, as the image of the long shadow firmly suggests.

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The parallel with Minsk and De Chirico's metaphysical art is crucial, because it is a way to express the cross-space and cross-time common European aesthetic experience, deeply rooted in Klinau's thought. At this point, images talk by themselves. The aesthetic sensitivity of a Minsk(ian), Parisian or Roman dweller are supposed to meet, reconstituting the bridge between the allegedly separated Soviet and European utopias. The art of urban geometry and solitude of Giorgio De Chirico gently accompanies the reader from this point onwards, throughout the book, for the juxtaposition has a great evocative power.

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De Chirico's cityscapes, just like Minsk's, carry the essence of illusoriness and theatricality.

The internal yards of buildings are particularly important for Klinau, exploring the topic of "theatrical scene" in Minsk's spatial text. They are the place where the city's parallel life takes place, where reality sometimes reveals itself in the form of drunkards speaking with vases, children playing and white linen hanging on old ropes. In the Sun City's yards people could "hide from the imperial architecture, menacingly looking at you, and from its geometry – which was so faithful to the rules, that among perfect proportions, space for humans was somehow always missing" (Klinau 94). Nevertheless, fragments of the big utopian theatre would be present in backyards too. There one could find "the remains of scenic decoration made when the Sun City was being built" (Klinau 96): gypsum sculptures, pieces of cornices and Corinthian pilasters.

Concepts like "geometry", "endlessness", "eternity" and ruins keep shaping the image that the author has prepared for the reader, in order to promote the idea of myth – a metaphysical manifestation of the being. Meta-physicality and transcendence are strongly present in Klinau's text not only in the architectural scenes depicted, but also in the vocabulary used, which is rich in abstract and religious terminology. In Klinau's

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account, the authorities guarding and governing the Sun City are the Metaphysic, helped by Might, Wisdom and Love. In Campanella's City, they are named Pon, Sin and Mor. The non-intelligible God, linked to Christian tradition, is absent instead. The author recalls:

When I was a child, in the Sun City there already was no God. Once I asked my kindergarten teacher, why He does not exists, and she answered to me straight: "Gagarin flew to the Space and did not find god". [...] Gagarin became my Highest Authority. (Klinau 46)

Klinau often makes use of words like religious ministers, Demiurges, temple, Necropolis, Justice, Truth, secret, cult, mission – very frequently capitalizing also adjectives, among which the most frequent is "Great". This practice serves to recreate an aura of sacredness and mysticism in the overall conceptual and physical construct of Minsk. Just like De Chirico's silent and geometrical cityscapes in deserts that stretch towards the "far and beyond", Minsk stretches towards God-Utopia. The Sun City's architecture in Klinau's view is however just a "hint" to De Chirico, as it is just a "hint" to the idea of happy and just

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society. Therefore, like a theatre play, Minsk is a simulation of something.

Jean Baudrillard lends a very useful conceptual tool for the analysis of Minsk from this perspective. This tool is the idea of *simulacrum*: “the truth which conceals that there is none. The simulacrum is true” (Baudrillard 1998, 166). When illusion is the only thing available to perception, the tension between truth and lie, synthesised by Baudrillard as *simulacrum*, eventually generates a new quality of truth, one which reflects its own absence. In other words: something is in the act of *not being*, like Minsk of Akudovich’s imagination, wandering in search for a place to “settle”, to affirm its existence. The definition of simulacrum can be applied to the image of Minsk that Artur Klinau wants to convey: a city which deludes by claiming to be something which is not (and cannot be) – Utopia. In fact, in its act of simulation, the city’s unique architectural body cross-references the idea of utopia that motivated its construction. It does so in every single piece or fragment, as if those were signs and the whole of the city was an allegory. The semiotic nature of Minsk’s fragments is unveiled in the following passage:

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The People's Palaces in the Sun City were in fact not real palaces, but only symbolic signs of palaces. They created a mere illusion. Cornucopias on the facades were stuck to the building's constructivist corpus, which had one or at best two walls facing the Prospect [...] On the non-visible parts of the building, the whole decorative richness instantaneously disappeared. Pompous stuccos, Corinthian pilasters and window cornices turned into a grey brick-wall. The Palaces were in reality plain things. (Klinau 132)

In a similar way to Baudrillard's definition of simulacrum, this fragment lets the reader feel a certain tension between what the objects described represent and what they actually are. The *signifié*, which People's Palaces should make reference to, is the utopian city of the Soviet dream. In this context, relying on Emmanuel Levinas' theory on otherness as trace of something past (Levinas, 1986), the Polish philosopher Ewa Rewers speaks of "trace as a significant, which does not make reference to the absence of the Other (*signifié*), but to another significant, to another trace" (Rewers 21). She pinpoints that in the urban space, a specific type of exchange takes place between signs and

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traces. The latter bears a sort of secret meaning, not easy to uncover, usually a leftover of past events and people. Ruins, often filling the cultural discourse on Minsk and Belarus as a whole, are ultimately traces: *archaeocultural*⁹ evidence of past life, which keeps shaping the city's present.

A View from a Window: Traces of the Past in the Present's Urban Structure

The metaphor of the view from a window serves at this stage to illustrate how the observation of the city entangles with traces of past events, private memories and collective imagination. Watching from a window indicates, that even being fully inside the city, between the observer and the city there is a threshold. It also implies the existence of a room (where the observer stands), which represents intimacy and introspection, but also memory. The act of filtering the present by re-approaching the past takes place as a continuous looking outside and back inside the room, to compare and interpret the city's text through personal memory. As Jacques Derrida argues, "one actually transposes the image of the threshold from space to history" (Derrida 243). Derrida here points out the interchangeable relation between space and time (history), when we think of boundaries. The idea of threshold is naturally represented in spatial terms, even when it refers to temporal dimensions.

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In fact, the boundary marked by the window is in reality not physical but cognitive and temporal: on one side there is the urban present, while on the other side are private experiences which belong to the past and stored and re-transmitted, constantly shaping the city's text.

“To cognize the city from a threshold means asking the question: what is the city?” (Rewers 64). Exploring the identity of urban space is a journey also in time, in both private and collective past. In the case of Minsk, this journey ends up involving “the memory about places and people that are quite alien to the existing image” (Rewers 64), since Minsk's pre-war past is visually silent. Therefore, in *The Sun City of Dream*, Klinau performs both journeys: one in his personal history – through experience and memories set in Soviet Minsk, and another one in the history of the city from its foundation onwards. In this way, Klinau joins together two stories that otherwise were divided and conflicting in the public sphere.

The “Sun City”, the “Land” and the “Land of Happiness” acquire familiar names in Klinau's book only when memory and history emerge: they suddenly start being called “Minsk”, “Belarus” and “Empire”. Faithful to concentricity, the text presents exactly in its centre (77) a change: the word “Minsk” appears for the first time, following the account of the death of the old city centre. The latter, mainly covered by

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Nemiga district, was demolished in lengthy process according to the urban master plan of the Minsk District Executive Committees. It began already in late 1920s and aimed at “wiping out Minsk’s nineteenth-century provincial architecture, turning the city into a dynamic modern Soviet capital, with wide boulevards, open squares and gigantic edifices” (Bemporad 117). This plan, interrupted and in a way “helped out” by World War II destruction, was eventually completed in 1960s, with Nemiga district totally disappearing from the urban texture of Minsk.

Initially it [Nemiga] was turned into a big decoration, a gigantic ruin, where various equips from all over the USSR filmed movies about war. I did not understand why they killed the body of the old City – because Nemiga was the body of old Minsk. (Klinau 76)

Without its old centre, Minsk “splattered in suburb-shards, scattered, disintegrated and eventually became its own spectrum” (Klinau 77). The centre is in fact essential for the city’s meaning and coherence, for it to be embracing and not alienating. The paradox of a concentric structure without a proper centre is ascribable to the peculiarity of Soviet urban

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planning practice, in which architecture becomes an instrument of disaggregation.

According to Dmitrii Zhukov, for example October square was designed with the purpose of avoiding public gatherings (Barykina 2008). Anne Applebaum would recall that in Belarus' capital city "everything was so big, as if the architects wanted to remind Minsk's dwellers of their own insignificance in front of the enormous forces of history" (Applebaum 166-167). Natalia Barykina writes that in Minsk, just like in any other Soviet *urbs*, "citizens are discouraged by diverse visible and invisible power strategies from enjoying the city, from interacting and making the city space their own" (Barykina 2008). According to this logic, Nemiga district as "good little world full of human warmth", had no reason to be preserved.

Acknowledging that space is produced through social relations and structures (Lefebvre 2000), the tension between Old Minsk (represented by Nemiga district) and New Minsk (the Sun City) becomes a clear example of clashing social interpretations and appropriations of space, resulting in clashing spatial productions. On the one hand, city dwellers are homogenized and scattered by the clear wide and minimalistic spaces, through messages of grandiosity and power. On the other hand, as Barykina put it, "the city space in contemporary Minsk also functions

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as condensation of nostalgia” (Barykina 2008). This is reflected in Klinau’s words about Minsk’s spirit: despite the imperial megalomania of its architecture, the city had always kept an air of “provincial sentimentalism” (119).



Nemiga district’s descriptions are therefore accompanied by images of the pre-war city, of Tatars, Jews and Slavs sharing the everyday life. Through images of such cultural heterogeneity, with light grey smoke rising from the small houses’ chimneys, Nemiga enjoys a status of authenticity, because it was the centre and the place where all began.

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The history of Minsk does in fact start in that area as a result of the tragic battle of 1067, on the banks of the river Niamiha, nowadays underground. The united armies of Kievan Rus' princes defeated those of prince Vseslav of Polatsk. In *The Tale of Igor's Campaign*, a late 12th century epic poem written in Old East Slavic language, we read:

On the Nemiga¹⁰ the spread sheaves
are heads,
the flails that thresh
are of steel,
lives are laid out on the
threshing floor,
souls are winnowed from bodies.
Nemiga's gory banks are not
sowed
goodly-
sown with the bones of Russia's
sons. (654-663)

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Such inauspicious genesis looms over Nemiga district, which therefore functions in the collective imaginary as a “cursed place”. The medieval chronicle’s words were revisited again, almost one thousand years later, in 1999, when a tragic incident took place there: a lethal stampede in the subway station Niamiha during a rock concert. The gloomy tones which characterize the “good little world” of Klinau’s childhood influence in a decisive way the city’s text and narration of origin. They justify the Soviet project, according to which:

The Sun City needed a new living space. Until Nemiga lived, the Sun City would not be the only one. Nemiga – his old competitor and enemy. Until She [Nemiga] lived, He [the Sun City] could not delve into the world of sweet dreams: He was the Sunny City of Dream, She was Insomnia [...] She woke him up, She would not let Him fall asleep. She was the Sleepless Night, He was the Sunny Day. Sooner or later He had to strangle Her.
(Klinau 77)

The conflict between Nemiga district and the Sun City represents the conflict between darkness and light, evil and good, but also between

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past and visions of the future, between tradition and novelty. The erasure of the pre-Soviet heritage could be justified by the presence of *Nemiga the Sleepless* (as the Lithuanian etymology of the word suggests).¹¹ Minsk's tragic beginning becomes for Klinau also an explanation of its further tormented history. Because of the original curse recited in the Tale of Igor's campaign, "in Belarus, cities kept being killed often and without any sorrow" (Klinau 83), turning the whole Land into a place of ruins (Babkou). Minsk, rebuilt after the World War II, "had workers, factories and a bright future. But because Minsk had no history, it had no soul" (Applebaum 166).

Nemiga district was not only that, but many other things. It was Minsk's Jewish quarter, representing one of the largest Jewish communities in the Russian Empire and later one of the main centres of Yiddish culture in the Soviet Union (Bemporad "Minsk"). The district was progressively but definitely transformed after World War II (Titarenko 31), nevertheless Artur Klinau has first-hand memories about it: he recalls his Jewish neighbours and Jewish first love in primary school. Distinctively "ethnic" names in that urban space were changed into ones more appropriate for a Soviet society in the making: the Jewish street became the Water Collector's street, Big Tatar street, Dmitrova street" (Titarenko 31) etc. Spared by bombs, it was not spared though by

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municipal authorities, which demolished its southern part in the '60s. After that, only traces were left, which kept feeding the city's palimpsest. Anne Applebaum travelled to Belarus' capital city in the 1990's, "in one of the furthest-flung suburbs, where lived a man who loved Jews. But not modern Jews: he loved Jews of the past [...] whose culture once dominated Minsk". Moved by passion, this man learnt Hebrew and Yiddish, becoming one of the few experts about Minsk's Jewish history (Applebaum 172-173).

The city's Jewish heritage represents an important slice of a shared Central and Eastern European experience, permeating Klinau's text. From the urban setting of old Minsk, the author's observations slowly evolve in thoughts about Belarus, Vilnius (today's Lithuania's capital) and the potential, but "stolen", European identity of Minsk. The turning point, the moment in which this chance was gone, occurred as soon as the territories of present Belarus were absorbed by the Russian Empire.

In the 19th century, the Empire began displacing from the Land [Belarus] everything which linked those territories to Europe. Similarly to war times, victims of the first blows were the cities. [They began with Brest]. Later on, they devastated also other cities. They mainly

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destroyed town halls, which in the Empire were now useless symbols of erstwhile freedom and Magdeburg Law. (Klinau 44)

Artur Klinau decides to label medieval Belarus, when it was part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1250 c.a. - 1795), “the only Democracy of its times” (Klinau 44), with its own constitution and privileged urban status. Magnifying what might have been the actual political condition of those lands at that time, Klinau nevertheless echoes a common view among part of Belarusian historians on the level of autonomy and self-government granted to the cities within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (Mikola Ermalovich; Uladzimir Arlou,). It was primarily the effect of the reach of Magdeburg Rights¹², which embraced the cities of today’s Belarus since late 15th century (Kulagin 13, Shybeka 22). In Belarusian historiography, the idea of the democratic nature of medieval Belarusian urban communities is also linked to favourable historical circumstances that spared those territories from Mongol rule. This argument is often employed to differentiate Belarus’ historical experience from that of Russia’s, which experienced Mongol yoke for more than two centuries. As the historian Uladzimir Arlou points out, “the autocratic totalitarianism of Moscow Principality [developed in the Mongol-Tatar

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period] is opposed by autonomy and self governance observed within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania” (Bekus 184).

Leaving the historical debate aside, what counts for Klinau is that the political quasi-idyll was eventually “turned into ruins, into a remote province of the [Russian] Empire” (Klinau 44). In 1840 Tsar Nicholas I prohibited the nouns “Lithuania” and “Belarus”, spreading a new denomination: the “Northwest Land”¹³, which was essentially a geographical area on the map. Alternatively, they became the Ghost of unknown lands, which eventually began to “wander around Europe along with the ghost of Communism” (Klinau 58). Unknown lands seemed to host “unknown” people. As Applebaum noted, Belarusians have always been defined by ambiguity since it has never been clear who they exactly were (Applebaum 156). In a time of nations, this complex of non-belonging (or, as Pieter Judson formulated it, of national indifference) transmuted in a complex of non-existing, expressed through semi-mythological images. The Partisan is one of these images, present in the collective imaginary as in the Sun City’s urban space:

In the city there was also the cult of the Great Partisan,
hero of war against the Gigantic Third Rich; many

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monuments of him stood in the city's peripheries.

(Klinau 123)

The Partisan, as the symbol of rebellion, is today interpreted as the Belarusian “patriot”. His emblem became Ignat Hryniavitskii (Ignacy Hryniewiecki in Polish), a Belarusian aristocrat who, “working in the underground of the Empire, in 1881 assassinated the Tsar Alexander II” (Klinau 45). In line with Babkou’s post-colonial concept of “ethics of the underground”, Hryniavitskii embodies the Belarusian-chameleon: being Polish, Belarusian and Russian according to circumstances, he performed the highest act of rebellion against the Empire. The Sun City is in fact a partisan city, for it produces conspiracy and conspirators, constantly present in urban mythologies. According to one of those Lee Harvey Oswald, the sniper who assassinated John F. Kennedy, spent three years in Minsk, where people believe he formulated his plan.

The idea of the Partisan as the one who hides, is inscribed in the logic of absence, which forces Belarusian authors writing about: “the nation which is not”, “the I-am-not”, “ruins – as one of the essential terms for Belarusian culture” (Babkou 21). According to Titarenko and Shirokanova, absence materializes itself in urban practices of today’s Minsk, where the “triumph of uniformity takes place”, along with the

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practice of “self-erasure”. This happens since Minsk’s authorities keep a very tight grip over the city structure and organization, a sort of sterilization of the city’s environment (noticeable for example in the striking cleanliness of its streets) (Titarenko 25). Absence keeps appearing with echoes of the city’s heroes, as when Klinau writes of Minsk as a place “of artists, poets and geniuses” (Klinau 128). Many of them (mainly writers) were eventually assassinated or deported in the 1930’s. Others instead left Belarus, since:

only those who emigrated from here could save their genius. Those who stayed died and the world never knew about their genius. They died in barrels with sauerkraut, like Aleksei Zhdanov, or of alcoholism, like Anatol’ Sys (Klinau 130).

Minsk. The Sun City of Dream is crowned by the image of Minsk’s historical “alter-ego”: Vilnius. This city “appeared as something of a ‘spiritual home’ [...] to the Belarusian nationalists” (Rudling 44) since the time when their national project was formulated, in late 19th century. Vilnius was the first candidate to capital city of the imagined Belarusian nation state because, despite the fact that Belarusians in that city

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constituted only a minority¹⁴, their national movement was based in Vilnius and was largely limited to it (Rudling 63). Belarusians actually experienced Vilnius as their capital during the short-lived Litbel state. It was a Soviet experiment lasting five months in 1919, which merged Lithuania and Belarus in a unified Lithuanian-Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. However this experience was for the Belarusian nationalists disappointing, since they were not represented in the Litbel's government (Borzęcki 16), headed instead by a Lithuanian communist political activist. This was perceived as a confirmation of the city's full appropriation by the Lithuanians, regardless of its multiethnic and multicultural composition. Vilnius was in fact a nationally contended city, especially among Poles, Lithuanians, Jews and Belarusians (Rudling; Venclova; Brio).

Tomas Venclova writes about Vilnius as an object of nostalgia, expressed both on an individual and on a collective level, the latter shaped by the feeling of belonging to the city which was shared by many different groups (Venclova 126). Belarusians were among these groups, however they could never "posses" Vilnius, in the way the Lithuanians, the Poles or the Jews did. The type of possession I mean is not necessarily political, but especially cultural and, even more specifically, textual: is manifests with the layers of signs left on the city's surface that

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speak precisely of belonging. In one of the best scholarly works on Vilnius's text, *Poeziia i Poetika Goroda: Wilno – Vilne – Vilnius*¹⁵ by Valentina Brio, all the voices shaping this text are accounted for, but not the Belarusian. Even if, as Venclova points out, "Vilnius's text is often made by people who were separated from their own city" (Venclova 126), the tragedy of Belarusian "national dreamers" is that Vilnius never was their own city. That is why the image of Vilnius for them is often linked to the idea of loss and absence.

In Klinau's text, the name "Vilnius" echoes throughout the whole narration, but only at the end it is explicitly mentioned to mark Minsk's absence, thus letting the Sun City triumph. Vilnius is crucial, for it represents for Belarus the missed chance to be Europe. "Two centuries of colonial history washed the European nail polish away from Minsk's nails" (Klinau 41). The invisible past of this city, the one Klinau accesses through old photographs and memory, is in fact a surprisingly different one, and it irremediably approaches its old "competitor", Vilnius.

In those photographs, I saw a very European city, stylistically reminding me of Vilnius: sloping tiled roofs, Baroque churches towers, the city hall, the Jesuits college, amazing architectural complexes. Later I found

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out that Minsk and Vilnius were in fact projected by the same architects. (Klinau 41)



Nostalgia for Vilnius and the dissonance between past and present Minsk reveal a strong desire for historicity and space. The latter is represented by the wide, undefined geographical and cultural territory called “Europe” which, as perceived by the author, bears a cosmopolitan essence: the possibility of fluid circulation of experience. In this context, Artur Klinau presents Minsk as Soviet and European at the same time, which might seem logical to a twenty-first century reader, but is certainly

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not from a Cold War and even post-Cold War perspective. More difficult is to define its Belarusian character, if nationhood remains territorial and close. The Minsk of Artur Klinau's dream certainly challenges this concept, freeing the discourse on national identity of its geographical straightjacket. *Minsk. The Sun City of Dream* is a cultural text of Belarus' capital, for it includes Belarusian historical experience along with its openness to transformation. The text's abundant historical and cultural references intertwine with the purely philosophical and aesthetic experience of Utopia. The Soviet character and the old European roots of the city meet at this point, thanks to the author's ability to look within and beyond the geometry of things, in search for the fascinating interconnectedness of historical and aesthetic dimensions within the urban space.

Notes:

1. Born in Minsk in 1965, A. Klinau is a Belarusian artist, writer, publisher and a chief editor of the media project "pARTisan". Since the 1980s, he is an active member of non-conformist art movements, founder of one of the first informal art groups in

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Belarus “Association BLO”. Klinau is the author of literary works, engaging with art, architecture, philosophy and history.

2. The author’s idea was initially part of a visual art project, published online in July 2014 as visual poem and essay “The concept of the Sun City of Dream”, available on Artur Klinau’s personal website www.arturklinau.com.
3. The author’s idea was initially part of a visual art project, published online in July 2014 as visual poem and essay “The Concept of the Sun City of Dream”, available on Artur Klinau’s personal website www.arturklinau.com.
4. I. Lotman and V. Toporov were prominent literary scholars, semioticians and cultural historians (Lotman), both associated with the Tartu-Moscow semiotic school, of which Lotman was the founder. Lotman was the first Soviet structuralist. **The Tartu-Moscow School of Semiotics**, gathering Soviet scholars from both Tartu and Moscow universities, developed an original method of multidimensional cultural analysis, according to which the languages of culture are interpreted as secondary modeling

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systems in relation to verbal language. This school's journal, Sign Systems Studies (formerly published in Russian as *Trudy Po Znakovym Systemam*) was established in 1964 and is the oldest semiotics journal in the world.

5. This particular synecdoche (the term for the whole which refers to a part of the whole) is of common use still today in all post-Soviet countries, where the term "Europe" has a series of implications of political and cultural character, rather than geographical, most frequently related to Western Europe, progress, justice and wellbeing.
6. Sir Thomas More's island refers to his work of fiction and political philosophy, originally published in the Neatherlands, Leuven in 1516 as *Utopia. Libellus vere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festivus, de optimo rei publicae statu deque nova insula Utopia*.
7. Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978) was an Italian artist, founder of the Metaphysical School art movement, profoundly influential for the surrealists.

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8. Giorgio De Chirico (1888-1978) was an Italian artist, founder of the Metaphysical School art movement, profoundly influential for the surrealists.
9. I propose the term “archeocultural” instead of “archeological” in order to include immaterial culture, still remaining tied to the idea of “arkhaios” (the ancient), and of its re-discovery.
10. The proper romanised spelling from Ancient Slavonic and Russian is “Nemiga” (still used also for Minsk’s district name), whereas from Belarusian language is “Niamiha”, mainly used in reference to the river.
11. The word nemiga in Lithuanian means insomnia, sleeplessness, vigilance.
12. The Magdeburg Rights or Magdeburg Law were a set of town privileges introduced initially by the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I (936–73) ,which regulated the degree of internal autonomy of cities and towns.

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13. The translation of this term, in Russian Severo-zapadnyi Krai, is disputed and lends itself for different options: Northwest Territories, Northwest Borderlands.
14. Only 0.7 percent of Vilnius population was Belarusian, according to the Polish census of 1931. However the surrounding countryside's population was predominantly Belarusian. (Rudling 44; Petronis 145-185).
15. Derived from the Russian, Poetry and The Poetics of the City: Wilno – Vilne – Vilnius.

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