

Avant-Garde Art and Bolshevik Time*

Malevich, Kazimir. *Teapot*,
1923. State Historical
Museum, Moscow.



Suetin, Nikolai and Varvara
Rukavishnikova. "Cup and
Saucer," 1923. Kuskovo
State Porcelain Museum.



Debates among these "Futurists," as Lenin called all of these experimental groups, were waged on numerous issues, but they shared a general tendency in their move away from art -- particularly away from oil painting -- and into "life," the lived experience of the everyday.

"Art of the proletariat is not a holy shrine where things are lazily regarded, but work, a factory which produces new artistic things."

They understood their work not as documenting the revolution but as realizing it, serving (and also leading) the proletariat in the active building of a new society. Constructivists and Suprematists and others of the avant-garde both turned to "production art,"

- Nikolai Punin, 1918

applying their earlier formal and technical innovations to the design of everyday objects and architectural spaces that the masses would produce and use.¹ Although production art was variously practiced, it provided the sense of a shared political task.² "The proletariat

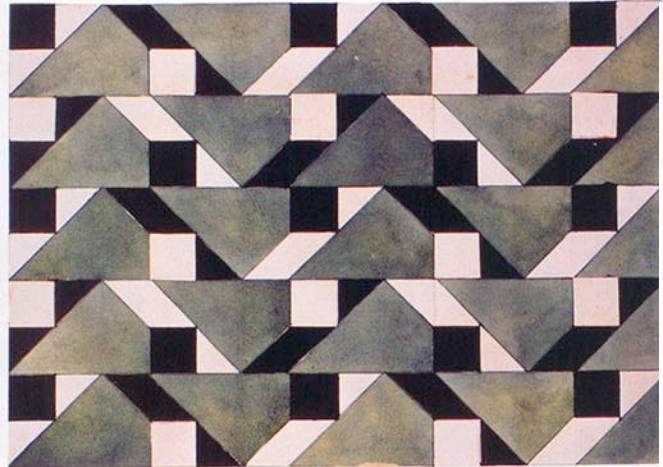
* Based on material from Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000).

¹ The Russian avant-garde had similar ideas even before the revolution. In a real sense, Constructivism was a continuation of the movement of "art into life" that had begun in Europe and the United States with the arts and crafts moment, and had taken an industrial turn with the decorative art produced at the turn of the century. The difference of the movement in post-Revolutionary Russia was the absence of commodity logic, and the fact that the consumer was here understood as the new collective, the working class.

² Theories of production art were developed in the avant-garde journals by Punin, Boris Kushner and Osip Brik. The differences in understanding among the artists were sometimes very great: Although Tatlin established with Arvatov a "production laboratory" in Petrograd, he claimed that he was never a true Productionist: "I want to make the machine with art and not to mechanize art -- there is a difference in understanding" (Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 213). Constructivists claimed the

Liubov Popova, *Textile Design and Shape*, 1923-24, reconstructed by van Laack according to the original artist's sketches, 1979. will create new houses, new streets, new objects of everyday life," wrote Nikolai Punin as early as 1918: "Art of the proletariat is not a holy shrine where things are lazily regarded, but work, a factory which produces new artistic things."³ Vladimir Maiakovskii spoke of making "the streets...our brushes and the squares our palettes."⁴

The avant-garde turned to commercial forms such as fabric design, children's books, journal covers, advertisements, street decorations, theater sets, porcelain design, photo- and cine-montage. The UNOVIS group, which



Tatlin, Vladimir. "Everyday Clothes," from *Novy Byt*, 1923.

Liubov Popova, *Textile Design and Shape*, 1923-24, reconstructed by van Laack according to the original artist's sketches, 1979.

Suprematists' objects were not utilitarian enough; Malevich returned the insult by accusing Tatlin of having planned a Monument to the Third International the structure of which was scientifically unsound, and could not be built. In fact, all of the avant-garde can be accused of (or praised for) having what Hubertus Gassner describes as a "utopian supplement" in their work, a theme to which I return below.

³ Nikolai Punin (1918), cited in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art*, p. 220, a republication of *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

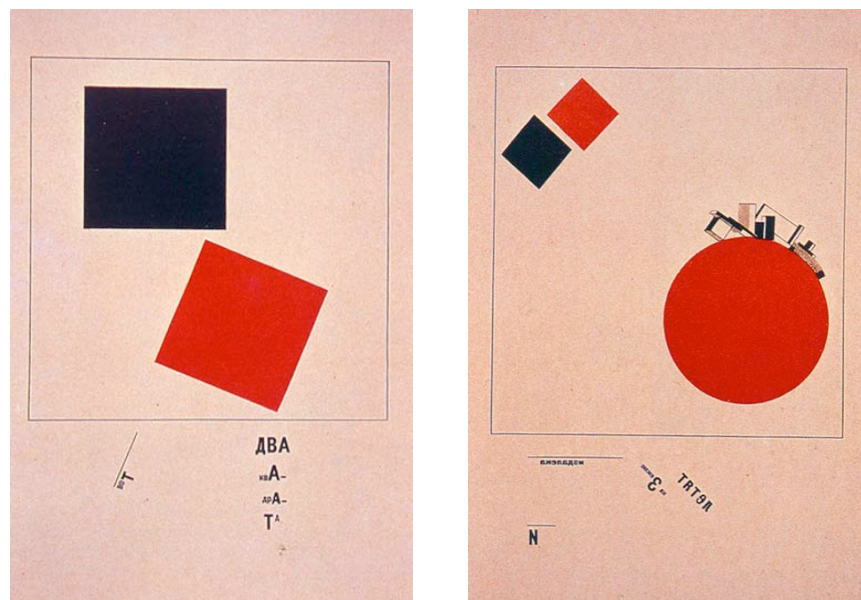
⁴ From Maiakovskii's "Order to the Army of Art," in the first issue of *Isskusstvo kommuny* (March 1918). Ivan Puni later reflected that this statement marked the redefinition of Futurism, now a "clearly and definitely expressed tendency to go beyond the limits of the work of art enclosed within itself, i.e., the trend toward the liquidation of art as a separate discipline" (cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 48; Puni's statement is from *Isskusstvo kommuny* no. 19).

described themselves as collective creators of a "new utilitarian world of things," was commissioned by the city of Vitebsk to apply Suprematist design to signboards, street decorations, buildings, interior decors, trams, and even ration cards.⁵ Lissitzky recruited the Suprematist square as protagonist in a children's book, *The Story of Two Squares*.⁶ Popova applied it to women's dress. Tatlin designed and produced workers' clothing (a coat and a suit) and an economical oven in five variants, establishing contacts with the Novyi (new) Lessner factory in Petrograd to develop his idea of the "artist-constructor."⁷ The Constructivists' program of 1921 stated explicitly that artists should enter the factory. Rodchenko wrote: "All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move toward organization and construction"; "real construction is utilitarian necessity."⁸

Illustrations from the children's book, The Story of Two Squares, El Lissitzky, 1920:

[Left] "Behold two squares."

[Right] "They fly to earth from far away..."



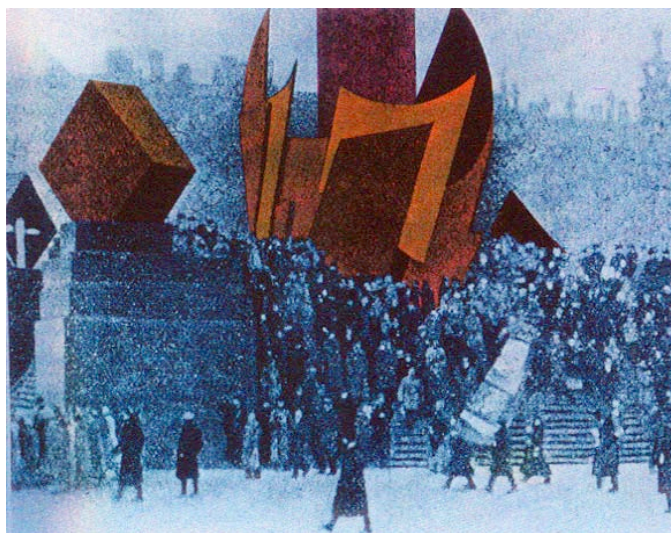
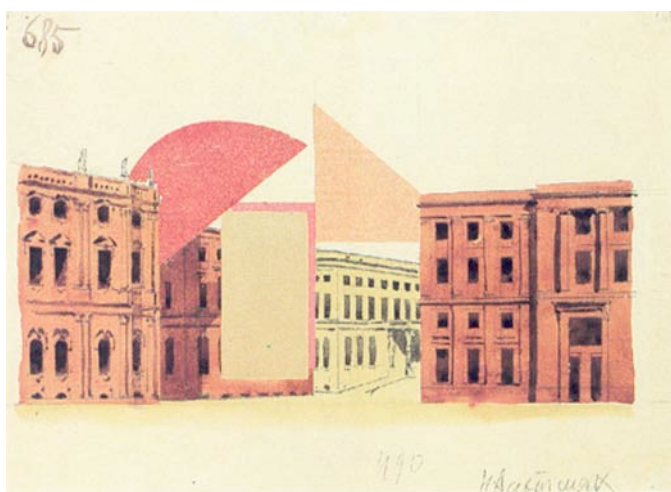
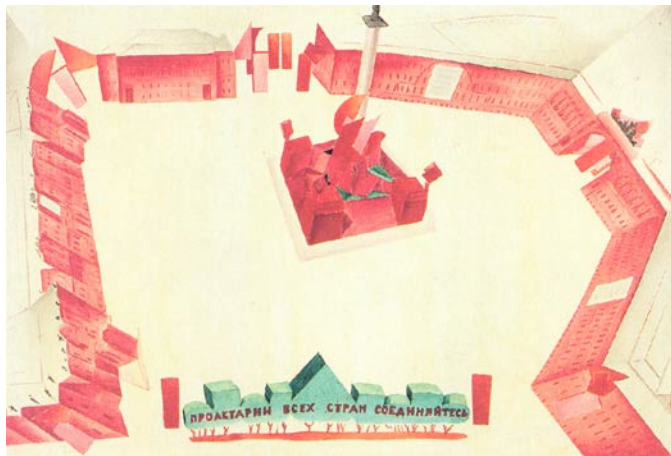
⁵ Shatskikh, "UNOVIS: Epicenter of a New World," *Great Utopia*, p. 57. The neologism "unovistic" entered the Russian language as synonymous with revolutionary style.

⁶ For the entire *Story of Two Squares*, please see <http://www.ibiblio.org/eldritch/el/pro.html>.

⁷ When Tatlin returned to Moscow in 1927 he taught at the VKhUTEIN (formerly VKhUTEMAS) in the Wood and Metal faculty (Dermetfak) and in the Ceramics faculty, and worked in his Scientific and Experimental Laboratory in the Novodevichii Monastery on his flying machine the *Letatlin*. In 1929 he wrote that he viewed his role as an "organizer of everyday life" (Paul Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," *Great Utopia*, p. 11).

⁸ Rodchenko, cited in Christina Lodder, "The Transition to Constructivism," *Great Utopia*, p. 267.

Natan Altman, Design drawing for Uritsky (formerly Palace) Square, Petrograd. The Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. First anniversary of the October Revolution, 1918 ("Proletarians of all countries unite")



"I set myself the task of changing the historical image of the square, and transforming it into a place where a revolutionary people would come to celebrate its victory....I decided not to decorate the square. The creations of [the eighteenth-century architects] Rastrelli and Rossi required no decoration. I wished instead to contrast the new beauty of a victorious people with the beauty of imperial Russia. I did not seek harmony with the old, but contrast with it. I placed my constructions not on the buildings but between them, where the streets opened the square....Only three vast paintings, almost the height of the buildings, were placed in front of the facades....a worker...unfolding a banner... 'He who was nothing will be everything,' ...a peasant holding a banner... 'Land to the Working People,' ...a worker...bearing the slogan: 'Factories to the Working People.'"⁹

⁹ Natan Altman, cited in *Street Art of the Revolution*, p. 71.

In the process of championing the revolution, the avant-garde artists were redefining it as their own accomplishment. This entailed, significantly, an appropriation of the chronology of revolutionary time. Tatlin claimed that the "events of 1917 in the social field were already brought about in our art in 1914," when material, volume and construction were made its basis.¹⁰ Lissitzky went so far as to declare that Communism, which had "set human labor on the throne," would have to "remain behind," because its reign of labor would be overtaken by those working in a posterior historical position to Suprematism's "square pennant of creativity."¹¹ Malevich claimed for his UNOVIS group the status of a "party" in art shadowing the official one, with UNOVIS branches in other art schools both domestic and abroad, and with his own Vitebsk school as the "Central Creative Committee."¹² The slippage in the meaning of words borrowed from the discourse of the political vanguard and applied to that of artistic practice was a strategy for gaining power in terms of the new idiom of cultural hegemony. The avant-garde's

¹⁰. Tatlin (1921), cited in Gray, *Russian Experiment in Art*, p. 219.

¹¹. "[I]f communism which set human labour on the throne and suprematism which raised aloft the square pennant of creativity now march forward together then in the further stages of development it is communism which will have to remain behind because suprematism -- which embraces the totality of life's phenomena -- will attract everyone away from the domination of work and from the domination of the intoxicated senses. It will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection.... AFTER THE OLD TESTAMENT THERE CAME THE NEW -- AFTER THE NEW THE COMMUNIST -- AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST THERE FOLLOWS FINALLY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM" (El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction" (1920), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 154-158. The text of this piece is from a typescript in the Lissitzky archives, reproduced here from Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky* (London 1968), pp. 327-30.

¹². Shatskikh, "Unovis," *Great Utopia*. One of UNOVIS' first projects was to publish (with Suprematist graphics) Malevich's theoretical text, *On New Systems in Art*, which he described as painting's "declaration of independence" from "objectivity" (i.e., representational art). It was a "new testament" containing commandments for artistic practice, including the obscure mandate to introduce into art a "fifth dimension, or economy" (*ibid.*, p. 40). The sign of this world economy was the sacrosanct Black Square, sewn by Unovis members on their inside cuffs, closest to their palms, while the Red Square was drawn in their workshops as a sign of the "revolution" in the arts (*ibid.*, pp. 55 and 62). Despite the cult-like practices of UNOVIS, it was democratic in structure: "UNOVIS was a 'party' that accepted all comers: anyone -- poet, musician, actor or artisan -- who wished to promote the 'augmentation' of the world with new forms could join" (*ibid.*, p. 62).

revolutionary enthusiasm threatened the political vanguard because it challenged the latter on its own discursive ground.¹³ But even the boldest among the artists acquiesced to a chronological perception of revolution that acknowledged the party had set the terms of the debate.

In 1920-21, Lenin campaigned to "quash" independent cultural organizations such as Proletkult (which had become a mass movement of half a million during the Civil War) because it "sought to operate autonomously, beyond the bounds of the Party," and he expressed a "growing impatience" with avant-garde movements of "Futurist" art which had infiltrated Proletkult groups.¹⁴ I am arguing that Lenin's hostility was not so much a matter of taste as one of time.¹⁵ Lenin shared with the avant-garde artists the elitist conception that a minority would be in "advance" of the rest of the population and hence would need to lead them.

¹³. But this also implied meeting the latter on its own *time*, a concession far more significant, as we shall see.

¹⁴. Taylor, "On AKhRR," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 52. In 1917, Proletcult could boast of close to 300 organizations and thirty-four journals (Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 71). Lenin's wife Krupskaja, who worked closely with Lunacharskii in Narkompros, complained in April 1918 that Proletkult "was a haven for intellectuals who needed jobs -- particularly, she claimed, socialist intellectuals with anti-Bolshevik leanings" (Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, p. 20). At the October 1920 First All-Russian Congress of the Proletkults, Lenin sent this message to the party official who was to speak there: "1. proletarian culture = communism; 2. it is the responsibility of the RKP (Russian Communist Party) 3. the proletarian class = the RKP = Soviet power. Are we all agreed on this?" (Bown, *Art Under Stalin*, p. 27). Party pressure caused the Congress to vote to relinquish their independence, which Bogdanov had thought so necessary. The art studios of Proletkult collapsed in 1921-22 under these Party attacks; only the Proletkult theater groups (to which for a time Sergei Eisenstein was attached) survived (ibid.).

¹⁵. I am not disputing the fact that Lenin's personal taste was opposed to the avant-garde. I am arguing that it was not the reason for the virulence of his attack. Revealing is an account of Lenin's surprise visit in February 1921 to students at VKhUTEMAS. He arrived one night unannounced, and spoke with students who innocently expressed their enthusiasm for "Futurist" art: "[W]e will get the literature for you, Vladimir Illich; we're sure that you too will be a Futurist. It's impossible for you to be on the side of that rotten, old trash...."; Lenin responded by turning a student's non-representational drawing round and round, and asking: "Well, but just how do you connect art with politics?" When students praised Maiakovskii's *Mystery-Bouffe* and Kamensky's *Engine Mass*, while stating proudly that they never went to the traditional opera, Lenin said, apparently with good humor: "Well, tastes differ..." and "I am an old man...." (Sergei Senkin, cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, pp. 93-94).

And he was a maverick among Marxists in his belief that political movements could speed up the course of history.¹⁶ But this voluntarism only increased his sense of the constraining force of history when it came to cultural matters. In the wake of the devastations of Civil War, the logic of Lenin's position was straightforward. The tasks most pressing in culture were mass literacy, technical training and political education -- particularly for the majority, peasant class. In this context, the projects of the avant garde could indeed appear politically indulgent. As for the Proletkult groups, their impeccably Marxist commitment to the factory workers was to his mind naive, as was their optimism regarding the degree of mass enlightenment. In 1922 Lenin wrote in the margins of an article defending Proletkult: "but the peasants?...are the peasants building locomotives?"¹⁷ And



Vladimir Tatlin, Monument to the Third International, 1919. The model was exhibited in Moscow in 1920 at the 8th Congress of Soviets, as part of the show presenting the GOELRO plan for the country's electrification. To be built out of iron and glass, its three transparent volumes, rotating at different speeds (one completing its revolution in a year, the second in a month, the third in a day) were to house the various offices of the Comintern, as well as lecture halls, gymnasia, and "agitational rooms," the whole constantly in motion, while the tower acted as a transmitting station for revolutionary propaganda. An open-air screen, lit at night, would relay the latest news. A special projector would throw words onto the clouds, announcing a motto for the day. This was a machine for the generation of world revolution, a working monument commemorating the future rather than the past. Mayakovskii called it "the first monument without a beard."

¹⁶ In his notes for a biography of Lenin, Trotsky recalled Lenin's pre-1917 concentrated efforts to speed up the outbreak of revolution by building an ideological base and framework for it "in the shortest time possible" (Leon Trotsky, cited in Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 28.

¹⁷ Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 184. The article was by Valerian Pletnev, "On the Ideological Front"; it appeared in *Pravda* 27 September 1922.



Aleksei Kadakov, Literacy Poster, 1920: "An Illiterate is a Blindman. Everywhere failure and misfortune await him."

regarding the alleged supremacy of "intellectuals, artists and engineers" within the proletariat, he wrote scoffingly, "arch-fiction."¹⁸ But his logic only underscored the temporal paradox that had plagued him from the beginning, the fact that this Marxist revolution, historically the most modern, most vanguard of events, had taken place in what he himself believed was one of the most economically backward countries in Europe. It led the Bolshevik regime to endorse a policy of economic modernization as the very definition of revolution. Only by speeding up this modernizing process could the embarrassing gap between the economic meaning of time and the political meaning of time be obliterated. By the end of the Civil War, after a brief period of social experimentation and despite the temporary concessions of NEP to private enterprise (that of the peasants in particular), industrial modernization *was* the Leninist meaning of "constructing socialism." All other definitions -- democratic control (proposed by the Workers Opposition), popular participation (proposed by the Kronstadt rebels), cultural creativity (proposed by Bogdanov as head of Proletkult), human self-realization (proposed by Lunacharskii as Commissar of Enlightenment) -- were dismissed as secondary, criticized as left-wing infantilism, or condemned as downright counterrevolutionary.¹⁹

With a remarkably even hand, until his resignation from the position of Commissar of Enlightenment in 1929, Lunacharskii negotiated between the party and the

¹⁸ Cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 184.

¹⁹ See for Bogdanov and Lunacharskii *Politics of Soviet Culture*, pp. 9 and 20, and Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, p. 22.

various artistic groups, ensuring for the artists a continued space of creative freedom. The state organizations of NARKOMPROS controlled all aspects of artistic culture, including art education (through admissions policies and teaching appointments); museum purchases (through the Museum Office of NARKOMPROS);²⁰ galleries and exhibitions (within the Soviet Union and abroad);²¹ art journals (through the state publishing house Gosizdat);²² and commissions for every kind of specific project, from monumental statues to literacy posters, street decorations and interior decors. And yet despite this enormous state control, diversity flourished among contentious and independent-minded artistic groups, creating, *de facto*, a cultural pluralism that went against the epistemology of the party. Taylor describes this as the "central dilemma of art and literature under Bolshevism": "Very many aesthetic programmes claimed correspondence to the

²⁰ The Museum of Artistic (later, Painterly) Culture in Moscow was founded in 1919 to exhibit contemporary, "living art." It was directed by the Museum Office of NARKOMPROS, headed by Rodchenko. It was also a source of Western art journals and sponsor of an important series of lectures, thus functioning as a hub of information and debate. Original members of the board included Tatlin, Malevich, Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Kandinskii; later the board reflected a younger generation: Labas, Tyshler, Nikritin, Kogan, and Vil'iams). There were similar museums established in provincial towns. The number of purchases for these museums was sizeable. From 1919-1920 Rodchenko acquired 1,926 works by 415 artists. It organized thirty museums in provincial towns, distributing to them 1,211 works (Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 49).

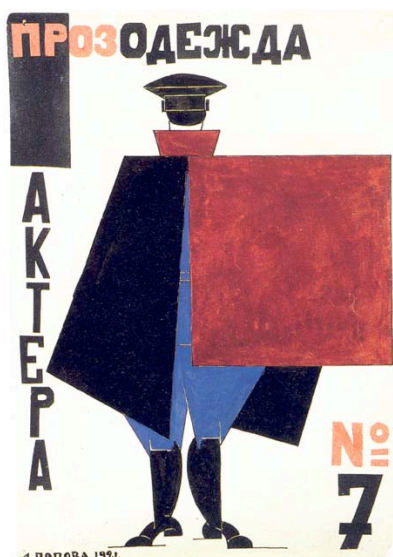
²¹ Domestically from 1918-1920 IZO (Department of Fine Arts in) NARKOMPROS organized 28 Free State Exhibitions without any selecting board to restrict entries. The first of these, held in the Winter Palace in April 1919, exhibited 1,826 works by 299 artists (Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 49). Participation in the international exhibitions was much desired by the artists. The younger generation envied older artists who had been in Europe before the Revolution, and international recognition remained a mark of success. Important foreign exhibitions included the *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* in Berlin 1922 and Amsterdam 1923; the Exhibition of Russian Painting and Sculpture in New York in 1923; the Soviet Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1924 which displayed approximately 600 pieces of art representing a wide range of styles (see Vivian Endicott Barnett, "The Russian Presence in the 1924 Venice Biennale," *Great Utopia*, p. 467); and the 1925 Paris *Exposition internationale des Arts décoratifs et industriels*, where the Pavilion (designed by Melnikov) included Rodchenko's *Workers' Reading Room*, a model of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, and showings of Eisenstein's film, *Battleship Potemkin*.

²² When *Lef* was launched during NEP (1923), funding from Gosizdat, the State Publishing House, was secured successfully after Maiakovskii's appeal that "the extreme revolutionary movements in art do not yet have their own journal....[W]e cannot obtain private capital...since we are ideologically a communist group" (cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 177).

Popova, Liubov'. "Working Clothes for Actor No. 6," 1921.



Popova, Liubov'. "Production Clothing for Actor No. 7," 1922. Collection Merrill C. Berman.



Bolshevik world-view; and yet there was nothing in Bolshevik doctrine -- nor for that matter in Marx and Engels -- that encouraged the simultaneous existence of many 'socialist' styles."²³ The genial, if unintended result of Lunacharskii's leadership was that by making political commitment more important than artistic style, he encouraged every kind of artistic group to compete with the others in demonstrating that *it* was the authentic one, in terms of being politically revolutionary, culturally proletarian and historically progressive.²⁴ The result was to ensure that all groups, no matter what kind of *art* they produced, were united in producing cultural legitimation for the Bolshevik regime.

In practice, then, as head of the state institution of NARKOMPROS, Lunacharskii was pluralistic. But in policy statements, speaking as a party member, he took the Leninist position.²⁵ Art was to provide inspiration for the socialist project of industrial modernization, but was

²³ Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 92-93.

²⁴ One has the sense that the revolutionary generation, many of whom had shared experiences of persecution under the Tsar, European exile, and the insecurities of the Revolution itself, sustained a generational solidarity that made it possible to disagree intensely on an ideological level without this causing persecutory animosities on the personal level. For the younger generation, however, solidarity was imagined more abstractly -- as a "class," or as the Soviet "people" -- and brutality against the sanctioned "enemy" tended to be more extreme. Younger artists appear to have led the intolerant attacks against such enemies in the late 1920s, rather than merely going along with the authorities.

²⁵ Here is an example of the separation of party and state. In the 1920s it was neither mandatory for artists to join the party, nor was it the rule. A division of labor was accepted between artists or technical experts and the Party leadership. The overlap of membership between artists/experts and the party increased during the First Five Year Plan, as the post-revolutionary generation, which had new and different training, came of age.



Lissitzky, El. "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge," 1920. Lenin Library, Moscow.

not a replacement for it.²⁶ In 1920, just when Lissitzky was making the extreme claim that Suprematism would surpass Communism in the culmination of world history, Lunacharskii wrote that art would remain "art" in the traditional sense, with the classics of the European past providing the foundation for

"creating purely proletarian art forms and institutions."²⁷ Futurism and Suprematism were corralled and brought back into line, specifically "the line of development of European art" that began with Impressionism.²⁸

In 1921 Lunacharskii addressed the Communist International in terms that already anticipated the socialist realism of the 1930s:

The proletariat will also continue the art of the past, but will begin from some healthy stage, like the Renaissance...If we are talking of the masses, the natural form of their art will be the traditional and classical one, clear to the point of

²⁶ "Art is a powerful means of infecting those around us with ideas, feelings, and moods. Agitation and propaganda acquire particular acuity and effectiveness when they are clothed in the attractive and mighty forms of art" (Lunacharskii, cited in Bowl, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 184-185). The revolution needed art -- as agitation and propaganda -- and art needed the revolution, as a "grand social event" to "provide art with vast material and to a great extent could formulate a new artistic soul" (Lunacharskii [1925], cited in *ibid.*, p. 194).

²⁷ Lunacharskii (1920), cited in Bowl, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, p. 185.

²⁸ Lunacharskii (1920), cited in Catherine Cooke, "Socialist Realist Architecture: Theory and Practice," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 89. "All this work, entirely conscientious and important as it is, has the character of laboratory research....the proletariat and the more cultivated sections of the peasantry did not live through any of the stages of European or Russian art, and they are at an entirely different stage of development" (*ibid.*)

transparency, resting...on healthy convincing realism and on eloquent, transparent symbolism in decorative and monumental forms."²⁹

What "time" could art have in this understanding? Art might develop within history, it might express eternal aesthetic forms throughout history, it might propagate "history" as



propaganda, it might provide visual models for history in the form of the new man or designs for the new society. But artistic practice could no longer attempt to disrupt the continuum of history as defined and led by the party. It could not challenge the temporality of the political revolution which, as the locomotive of history's progress, invested the party with the sovereign power to force mass compliance in history's name.³⁰

Hence, the lost opportunity: the temporal interruption of avant-garde practice *might have continued* to function as a criticism of history's progression *after* the Revolution. It became instead the servant of a political vanguard that had a monopoly over time's meaning, a cosmological understanding of history that legitimated the use of violence against all opposing visions of social transformation.



Vesnin, Aleksandr. "Sketch for Furniture and Props for G.K. Chesterton, 'The Man Who Was Thursday,'" 1922-1923. State Bakhrushin Museum, Moscow.

²⁹ Cooke, "Socialist Realist Architecture," *Art of the Soviets*, p. 89)

³⁰ In the early 1920s, "Russian modernists abandoned all opposition to the modernization of life effected by industrialization and mass production, and began to assume the functions of oil and engine in the machinery of progress" (Gassner, "The Constructivists," *Great Utopia*, p. 299).