

## Vanguard/Avant-garde\*

It is not my intent to produce yet another narrative of how Lenin and the party victimized the avant-garde. Rather, it is to argue that conceptions of temporality have political implications,<sup>1</sup> and that blindness to this fact contributed to the historical failure of the artistic avant-garde and the political vanguard alike.<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to see this situation clearly, because the historical actors themselves did not. The terms "avant-garde" and "vanguard," which I am defining against each other, were not held apart with any rigor in the early twentieth century.<sup>3</sup> In Russia at the time of the Revolution they seem to have been used interchangeably, or just as often not used at all.<sup>4</sup> It was only in the 1960s that Western art historians constructed retroactively an international narrative

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

1. I am indebted to Peter Osborne's *Politics of Time* for this argument.

2. Recent scholarship argues that the artists, not the political leaders, most vociferously called for a cessation of cultural autonomy and a unity of cultural line. Charlotte Douglas goes quite far in exonerating everyone but the artists themselves: "Until the mid-1920s, the Party resisted the insistent demand from literary and art groups to endorse a genuine official style. In a decree of June 1925, however, it finally capitulated, supporting the goal of a culture that was specifically proletarian" ("Terms of Transition," *Great Utopia*, p. 454). In the context of renewed class warfare in the late 1920s, artists became stridently intolerant of difference, with the journal *Novy Lef* in the lead: "...it must be clear that *Novy Lef* was not only sensitive to the new demands for 'class vigilance' in the field of art but that it played a leading role in promulgating that theme -- at a time when the Party leadership was by no means committed to that policy" (Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol 1, p. 105). My argument is not that it was wrong to consider the class basis of culture, but that it would have been better considered had historical time not been understood as a cosmology of class struggle.

3. As I have worked primarily with English translations of the Russian-language sources, I do not know how carefully (or whether at all) a distinction has been made by the translators between the Russian words *avangard* and *vanguard* -- or whether the words were used so interchangeably that it does not matter. Bowlt (who has spent much time with the original sources) observes that during World War I, the terms *avant-garde* and *arriere-garde* came into general use in Europe in their original military sense; they were thus part of everyday language (Bowlt and Matich, "Introduction," *Laboratory of Dreams*, p. 3).

4. Bowlt notes that "avant-garde" was used only intermittently before the Revolution (by Khlebnikov, Malevich, Maiakovskii) and even more rarely by post-revolutionary artists (Filonov and Kakabadze). See Bowlt and Matich, "Introduction," *Laboratory of Dreams*, pp. 3-5.

of the artistic "avant-garde," in which the Russian modernists figured as a critically important moment.<sup>5</sup> As for the political "vanguard," Marx himself never used this term.<sup>6</sup> It was Lenin who put forth the notion that the party was in advance of the rest of the working class -- but when he developed this theory in *What is to be Done?* in 1902, he appropriated the (Russofied version of) the French term "avant-garde" (*avanguardia*) to describe his minority, Marxist party -- the "avant garde of the revolutionary forces of our time" -- in order to draw on the power of that word within intellectual circles at the turn of the century.<sup>7</sup> The situation is further complicated by the fact that the two terms are not

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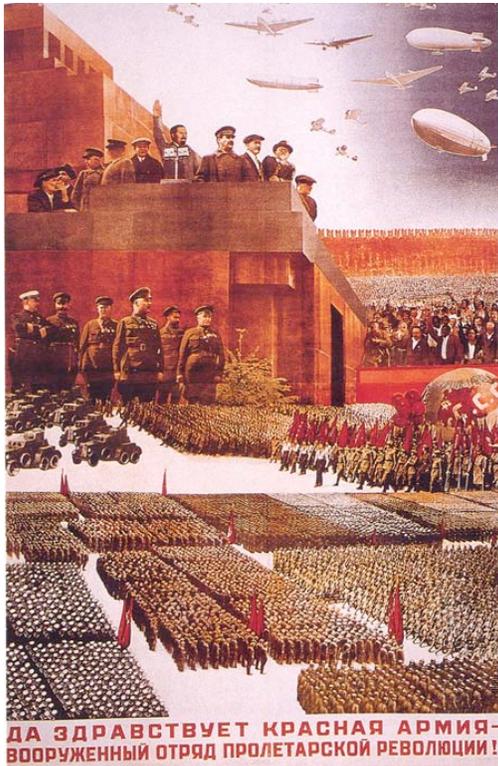
5. The term "Russian avant-garde" was applied systematically only after the fact, codified by Camilla Gray in her pioneering account, published in 1962, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922* (the later edition, which I cite here, has the title, *The Russian Experiment in Art*). This book set the logic of the discourse, connecting Russian artistic modernism to developments in Western Europe. By the decade of the 1980s, over 100 exhibitions were devoted to "Russian avant-garde art" in Europe, the U.S., Russia, and Japan (see Bowlt and Matich, "Introduction," *Laboratory of Dreams*, p. 5). Because the periodization of the "Russian" avant-garde straddled the political divide of the Bolshevik Revolution, it tended to depoliticize this movement, ignoring the artists' active engagement in revolutionary practice. Because the avant-garde moment was seen to end with the end of the Civil War period and the consolidation of soviet power, the implication was that avant-gardism and socialism were incompatible. Renato Poggioli comes to a similar conclusion, equating collectivism with totalitarianism: "Avant-garde art is by its nature incapable of surviving not only the persecution, but even the protection or the official patronage of a totalitarian state and a collective society..." (Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968], p. 95). This Cold-War presumption has been overturned by revisionist scholarship since the late 1980s, which is cited in this chapter. My argument should not be seen as a return to the Cold-War prejudice, despite the fact that I criticize the cultural avant-garde for submitting to a particular political cosmology. Indeed, I consider the cultural avant-garde in the West to be just as vulnerable to the criticism of presuming historical progress, but here the result has been to reduce avant-garde practice to fashion's repetitive gesture of the "new," as art, like commodities, is endowed with built-in obsolescence. The betrayal of the critical gesture of temporal interruption is arguably greater in the Western case, where political engagement is often not even the intent.

6. Egbert reminds us of this fact, noting that "in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels had carefully written: 'the Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties,'" even if the manifesto clearly positions the proletariat at the "head" of the revolutionary movement that advances history through class warfare (Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73, 2 [December 1967] p. 354).

7. Lenin, *What is to be Done?* (1902)

differentiated in all European languages.<sup>8</sup> It is only in retrospect that their different *times* can be seen to matter.

We can present the philosophical problem more clearly if we look again at empirical history, this time more broadly, focusing on the changing contextual meanings of the terms. Both words, *avant-garde* and *vanguard*, originated in the West as spatial



Vasilii Elkin, *Long Live the Red Army — the Armed Detachment of the Proletarian Revolution!*, poster, 1932.

concepts within the military, where they referred to the leading edge of the army, a small force sent out in front to surprise the enemy. The terms came to be used metaphorically when they were transcribed onto the dimension of historical time. "Avant-garde" came into general use in France in the mid-19th century, when it was applied both to cultural and political radicalism as both endorsed, in the spirit of Saint-Simonianism, the idea of history as progress.<sup>9</sup> At the end of the century, in the climate of artistic modernism that was concentrated in bourgeois Paris and other West-

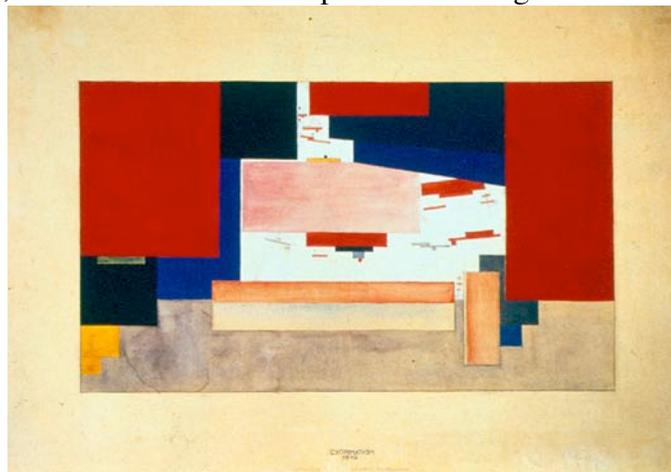
European cities (where many Russian avant-garde artists and vanguard politicians, including Lenin, lived before the Revolution), the "avant-garde" took on a more specifically cultural meaning. Although most of the members of the cultural avant-garde would have described themselves as politically on the Left and aligned with history's "progressive" social forces, the term did not necessarily imply a political allegiance. It

8. It does in Russian, English and German, but not in French, Italian and Spanish, where "avant-garde" is applied to both culture and politics.

9. See Linda Nochlin, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830-80," Thomas B. Hess and John Ashbery, eds., *Avant-Garde Art* (London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1968), p. 5.

meant to be alienated from established bourgeois culture (as a bohemian) or on the cutting edge of cultural history (as a radical), but it did not seem necessary to conflate these positions with an endorsement of any particular political party. It became an issue, however, at least for the Russian avant-garde, with the Bolshevik success in October 1917. As we have seen, Lenin immediately articulated this revolutionary event in terms of a cosmological temporality, situating the October Revolution within world history, and in his Plan for Monumental Propaganda he sought to secure this vision of a particular historical trajectory with the help of art. The artists' response was generally to support the October Revolution, and yet their situation was both intellectually and existentially ambiguous. Many of the leading avant-garde artists were explicitly anarchist in their political statements. This was particularly true in the spring 1918, when, under pressure of the renewed war with Germany, the Leninist leadership was cracking down on anarchism.<sup>10</sup> There was

considerable unease among radical artists, including Malevich, Tatlin and Maiakovskii, about the costs for creative freedom of collaborating too closely with *any* state organizations, including the new



Lissitzky, El and Kazimer Malevich. "Study for Curtains for the Meeting Room of the Committee to Abolish Unemployment," 1919. State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow.

10. When the Germans resumed fighting in spring 1918, Lenin retreated seriously from his earlier anti-statist comments, a change in the discourse of the political vanguard that may explain a new intensity in the artists' public criticism of state control -- in turn prompting the party to crack down on anarchist intellectual and cultural activity, particularly in the cities. In March 1918, Tatlin published an appeal in the newspaper *Anarkhiia* (Anarchy), urging "all my confederates" to "embark on the path of anarchism" (cited in Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," *Great Utopia*, p. 302). Malevich wrote in the same newspaper: "Whenever a state is being built, a prison will be erected once the state is there...[The Revolution must] destroy all foundations of the old so that states will not rise from the ashes" (cited in *ibid.*, p. 304; from March to July 1918, Malevich contributed frequently to *Anarkhiia*). Maiakovskii declared in March 1918 that "Futurism" was the aesthetic counterpoint of "anarchism," and that only a cultural "revolt of the psyche" would "liberate workers from the constraints of obsolete art" (cited from the first and only issue of *Gazeta futuristov* [Futurists' Newspaper] in *ibid.*, p. 303).

ones. It is here that the politics of conflicting temporalities becomes important.

Precisely the intellectual prejudice of history-as-progress led both artists and party leaders to assume that political revolution and cultural revolution must be two sides of the same coin. But when the October Revolution brought to history its scenario of proletarian class rule, the logic of what constituted "progressive" art became intellectually confused and politically controversial. The avant-garde artists -- Suprematists and Futurists -- were clearly the most "revolutionary" in terms of their break with traditional artistic practice. But did this prove their clairvoyance as anticipatory of the proletarian culture, or was it, on the contrary, a sign of historical decadence, connecting them fatally to late-bourgeois, European modernism, which it was now clear was *not* the harbinger of socialist

Rodchenko, Aleksandr. "Poster for Trekhgornoe Beer," 1923.



revolution? In winning *this* battle, defining its rightful place within the historical continuum of art, avant-gardism lost its credibility as a revolutionary strategy in its own right and was reduced in the soviet story to a historical moment within "art's" development.<sup>11</sup> The avant-garde's claim of being the historical destination of art might indeed be accommodated within the cosmological temporality of the party, but



Maiakovski, Vladimir. "Ad for Galoshes," 1923.

by this same gesture its "truth" was historicized. Already by the mid 1920s, the avant-garde of Suprematism and Futurism was spoken of in Russia as *passé*. All art that was not going in the direction of the party was historically "backward," bourgeois rather than proletarian, and hence ultimately counter-revolutionary. Once artists accepted the

11. Still in Russia the artistic avant-garde is a term referring to this particular moment in history and not, as in the West, to the ever-new fashion of artistic radicalism.

cosmological time of the political vanguard, it followed that to continue to be revolutionary in a cultural sense meant glorifying the successes of the party and covering over its failures. And this entailed a complete reversal of art's experiential effect. Art was no longer to inspire imagination in a way that set reality into question but, rather, to stage affirmative representations of reality that encouraged an uncritical acceptance of the party's monopolistic right to control the direction of social transformation.

It could be argued that despite the Constructivist call for art's entry into social life, the Bolshevik avant-garde was compromised precisely by attempting to hold onto "art" too tenaciously, that is, to hold on to a historical continuum of art that ran parallel (and was ultimately made subservient) to the cosmological continuum of historical progress.<sup>12</sup> After the October Revolution, the mere gesture of refusal which marked the bourgeois avant-garde was no longer considered sufficient. Artists made the fateful decision, in facing forward rather than backward, to move triumphantly into the future alongside of political power. The only argument was at what relative speeds, whether, as Tatlin and Lissitzky claimed, artistic practice was chronologically in the lead of the Communist Party, or whether, as Trotsky wrote in 1923, art would generally find itself "in the baggage train of the movement of history."<sup>13</sup>

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12. That this progress was conceived by party theoreticians as "dialectical" does not alter the argument made here. Rather, dialectics became a convenient discourse for maintaining the myth of continuous progress despite apparent setbacks.

13. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (1923), cited in Boris Thomson, *Lot's Wife and the Venus of Milo: Conflicting Attitudes to the Cultural Heritage in Modern Russia* (New York: Cambridge Press, 1978), p. 62. In fairness, Trotsky in this text described the Russian avant-garde as an exception, describing it as a pre-vision of history's immanent political crisis within the sphere of art. But he believed this visionary power was limited; it would provide "vital sprouts" for future development only when adapted and transformed by a culturally mature working class -- in universal, not class terms (a "proletarian art" would "never exist" because the period of proletarian dictatorship was transitory). Trotsky's position after his exile to Mexico (stated in the document written in collaboration with André Breton and Diego Rivera in 1938, "Towards a Free Revolutionary Art") returned to the idea of the artist as a visionary seer, but here it is used to argue unconditionally for the political justification of artistic freedom.

In acquiescing to the vanguard's cosmological conception of revolutionary time, the avant-garde abandoned the *lived* temporality of interruption, estrangement, arrest -- that is, they abandoned the *phenomenological experience* of avant-garde *practice*.<sup>14</sup> It is politically important to make this philosophical distinction in regard to avant-garde time and vanguard time, even if the avant-garde artists themselves did not. The avant-garde philosophically understood, as a temporal structure of experience, is a cognitive category -- "aesthetics" in the word's original sense of "perception through feeling."<sup>15</sup> From an empirico-historical, descriptive point of view, it is enough for artists to call themselves avant-garde for them to *be* it (the Western art strategy). But from a philosophical viewpoint, the artwork itself must demonstrate this claim, within (and against) its historical context. Artworks, not artists, are avant-garde,<sup>16</sup> and even here the category is not a constant. It is the *aesthetic experience* of the artwork (or of any other cultural object: literary text, photograph, cinema, theater performance, musical recording, etc. -- but also theoretical texts, including this one) that counts in a cognitive sense. The power of any cultural object to arrest the flow of history, and to open up time for alternative

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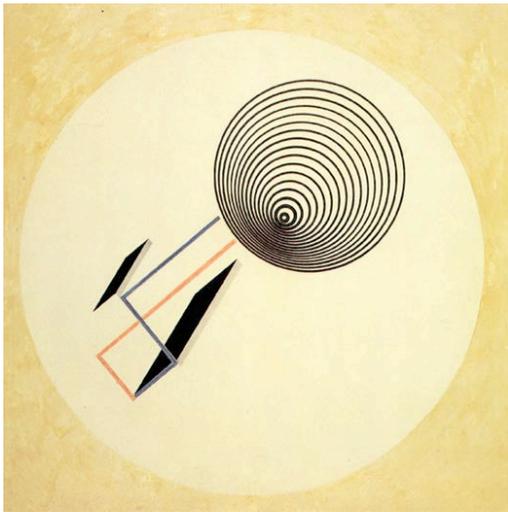
14. See Osborne, *Politics of Time*. I believe Osborne is correct in his description of Walter Benjamin's concept of revolutionary time as "phenomenally lived" rupture, the interruption of daily life, hence fundamentally different from the cosmological temporality that marks the Hegelian-Marxian conception -- which was also Lenin's, of course, and that of the vanguard party. But it is problematic to equate, as Osborne does, Benjamin's conception of time with the temporality of the avant-garde -- problematic, because this theoretical distinction ignores real history. Osborne writes that the Benjaminian experience of the "now" ("now-being" he calls it in a dubiously Heideggerian move) is "a form of avant-garde experience. For the avant-garde is not that which is historically most advanced in the sense that...it has the most history behind it" (*ibid.*, p. 150). But, alas, this is precisely how the avant-garde has understood itself.

15. See Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Reconsidered," *October* 62 (fall 1992): 3-41.

16. Cf. Bois' distinction between the "Brechtian" Lissitzky, who presents the spectator with a riddle which it is up to him or her to resolve, and the "Stalinist" Lissitzky, who tries to convey "a revolutionary content by means of the cathartic illusionism upon which the traditional [art] was based" (Yve-Alain Bois, "El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* [April 1988], p. 167).

visions varies with history's changing course.<sup>17</sup> Strategies range from critical negativity to utopian representation. No one style, no one medium is invariably successful. Perhaps not the object but its critical interpretation is avant-garde. What counts is that the aesthetic experience teach us something new about our world, that it shock us out of moral complacency and political resignation, and that it take us to task for the overwhelming lack of social imagination that characterizes so much of cultural production in all its forms.

The art of the Russian avant-garde prided itself in being "non-objective," and was accused by its enemies of being "formalist," but it remained representational in the



important sense that it was mimetic of the experience of modernity. Precisely through abstraction, the artworks gave expression to a human sensorium fundamentally altered by the tempos and technologies of factory and urban life.<sup>18</sup> What was utopian in UNOVIS' art was the belief that the geometric forms laid bare by industrial production could, in their mathematical interrelationships, bring about a reconciliation between modern human beings and their new environment.

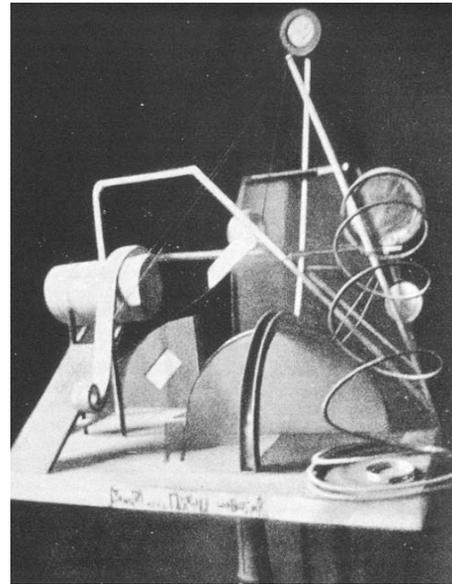
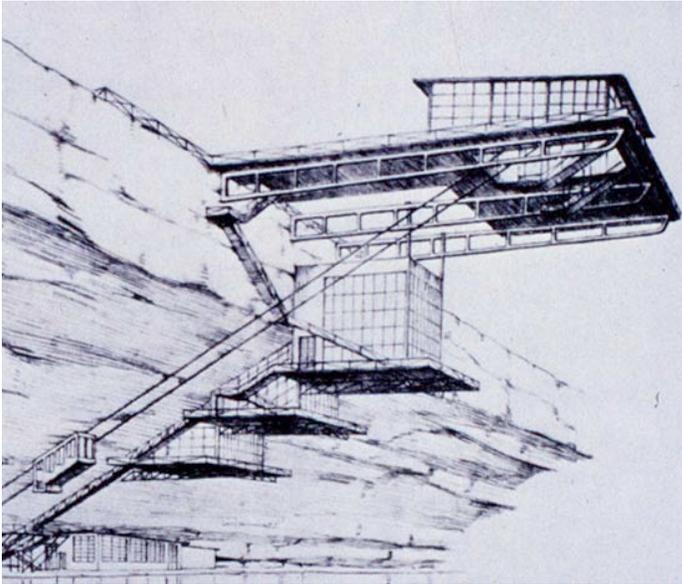
Lissitzki, El. "Proun 93 (Spiral)," 1923.  
Staatliche Galerie Museum Moritzburg,  
Halle.

17. It is thus misleading to speak of an avant-garde "tradition," as if such practices could produce their own historical continuum. I part company here from, e.g., Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg, for whom (in Greenberg's words) avant-garde artists, retaining their "personal autonomy" from political parties and their "original talents," work to develop the "inner logic" of their art. For Greenberg, aesthetic problems and their "solutions" are carried out within distinct national and international traditions. Painters "catch up" with the avant-garde artists who are in the lead of a historical continuum that keeps "moving," while the "rear-guard" is occupied by "kitsch," i.e., popular and commercial, "low" art (Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood). These themes are developed in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

18. Cf. Kudriashev, a pupil of Malevich, who said of his own work in the mid-twenties: "Painting...ceases to be an abstract construction of color and form and becomes a realistic expression of our contemporary perception of space" (Ivan Kudriashev, cited in John E. Bowlit, "Beyond the Horizon," *Kasimir Malevich zum 100. Geburtstag*, p. 248).

Geometric harmony was seen as a model for spiritual and hence social harmony. Insofar as these artworks still have the power to evoke this sense in the observer, it is a mark of their political success.

L'dovski, Atelier. "Restaurant on a Cliff," 1922.

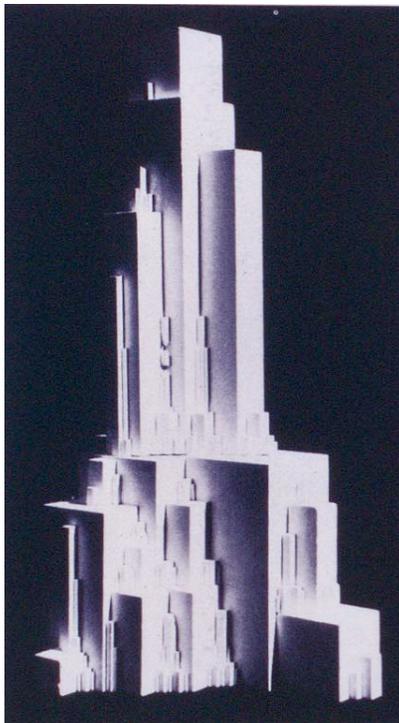


Liushin, Vladimir. "Station for Interplanetary Communication," 1922.

Lunacharskii criticized the Constructivists for their pretensions of being engineers: "They play at being engineers...but they don't know as much of the essence of machinery as a savage."<sup>19</sup> It is true that "for the most part Constructivist ideas remained on the level of designs only, and substantial industrial links were few."<sup>20</sup> But to dismiss the *cognitive* power of these images for the reason that they remained imaginary is to miss the political point. Much of avant-garde architecture consisted of maquettes and drawings rather than blueprints and buildings. Tatlin's world-famous Monument to the Third International was never built. Konstantin Melnikov's most daring architectural proposals remained on the drawing board. Malevich intended his vertical and horizontal "architectons" to provide models for real buildings precisely because they were "outside

19. Anatolii Lunacharskii (1922), Cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 177.

20. Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 1, p. 124. "Constructivism...cannot be said to have fulfilled its programme of transforming the three-dimensional environment or of influencing to any real extent the production processes of industry," although this was its stated intent (*ibid.*, p. 133).



everything utilitarian."<sup>21</sup> El Lissitzky's "Prouns" captured the transition between the model as a representation of the imagination and the building as an object in the world, arresting this

moment rather than providing a blueprint for the building itself.

Iakov Chernikov's "machine architecture" consisted of painted drawings that took literally the modernist call for housing as "machines for dwelling," performing a quasi-magical transformation of tools from instruments used by human beings into habitats that

might shelter them. Georgii Krutikov's "City on Arial Paths of Communication" settled for nothing less than the domestication of the planet, while Andre Burov imagined utopia at the opposite end of the scale: one urban building was to house all of life's activities as a micro-model of the world. Anton Lavinskii proposal for a "City on Springs" was sheer architectural fantasy, celebrating the audacity of human imagination. These "products" of the avant-garde adhered to a different logic than machine

*Kazimir Malevich, Architecton Gota, 1923. Pompidou Centre, Paris. Malevich called these drawings "spatial" suprematism, composed of three-dimensional "volumetric" forms: "I understand architecture as an activity outside everything utilitarian," and "all the arts as activity free from all economic and practical ideologies."*

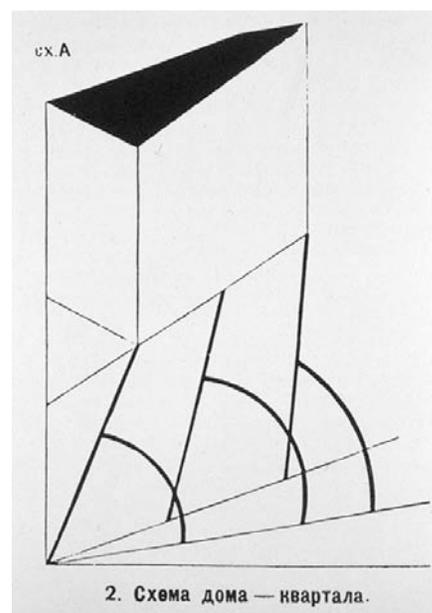
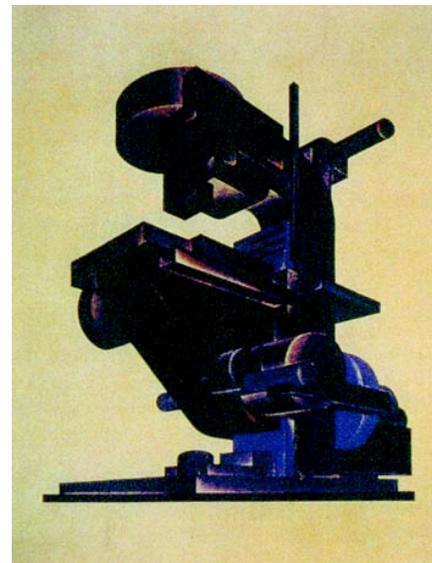


*El Lissitzky, Proun 1 E, The Town (1921). State Mustafaev Azerbaijan Museum of Art, Baku. (Proun = Project for the Affirmation of the New.) "The new element of treatment which we have brought to the fore in our painting will be applied to the whole of this still-to-be-built world and will transform the roughness of concrete, the smoothness of metal, and the reflection of glass into the outer membrane of the new life." Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," 1920.*

21. Malevich, cited in Anatolii Strigalev, "Nonarchitects in Architecture," *Great Utopia*, p. 672. This independence from "naked utilitarianism" made architecture one of the arts: "Thus I understand *all the arts as activity free from all economic and practical ideologies* [emphasis added]," Whereas technical products were "things" the construction of which improved in time: "a cart, a carriage, a locomotive and an airplane are a chain of unconsidered possibilities and tasks," art "can call its creations *finished works*...since their execution is absolute, timeless, and unchanging...." (Malevich, cited in *ibid.*, pp. 672-73).

Iakov Chernikov, "Vertical Milling Machine," from the series *Machine Architecture*, 1923.

efficiency or industrial engineering. They were dream-images, expressing the wish for a transformed relationship between human beings and their environment. Becoming collective property through their multiple reproduction as image, they gave sensual representation to the dialectical convergence between revolutionary imagination and material form.<sup>22</sup> This accounts for what Gassner has called the utopian surplus, or supplement of avant-garde art.<sup>23</sup> The point of this supplement was that it did not lose sight of why in a socialist society humans were making the machines: not to exploit nature but to enhance human existence within it. This goal remained palpable in the works of the revolutionary avant-garde at precisely the time that it was in danger of being forgotten by the political vanguard. The imagination of such designs interrupted existing time and



Anton Lavinskii, "Sketch of a Housing Block," from *City on Springs*, 1921. In the journal *Lef*, Arvatov discussed Lavinskii's plans for a circular city on springs raised above the earth: Will they work? Probably not, but Lavinskii is "making suggestions," to use Maiakovskii's phrase: "Let the engineers say what is possible and what is not possible.."

space as a non-functional, utopian presence *in* the present. By not closing the gap between dream and reality, the artworks of the avant-garde left both dream and reality free to criticize each other.

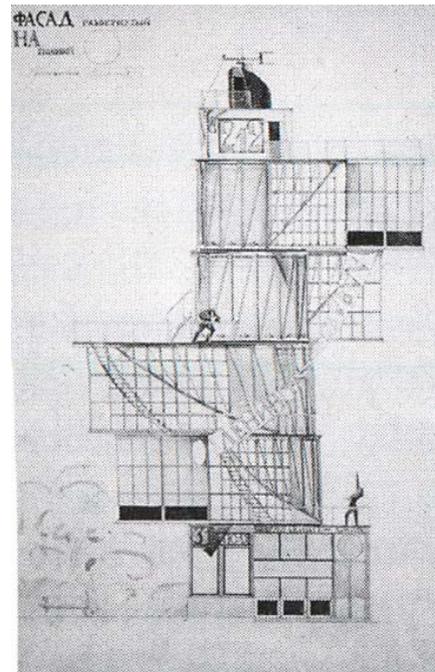
22. This process of the collectivization of the imagination, aided by illustrated magazines and periodicals, was international and indeed cosmopolitan. Lines of influence (and later friendship) flowed from LeCorbusier's atelier in Paris to the Bauhaus in Weimar to VKhUTEMAS in Moscow, as they did from Malevich to Mondrian, and Chaplin to Eisenstein.

23. Gassner, "Constructivists," *Great Utopia*, p. 299. Gassner describes this supplement in terms of "surplus value."



During the famine years of the 1920s Vladimir Tatlin "cracked open the pavement in the yard of the Leningrad Academy of Art and planted potatoes..."<sup>24</sup> Anti-urbanism became a movement on the eve of the First Five Year Plan.<sup>25</sup> the architect Moisei Ginzburg suggested solutions for dwelling places that were implicitly critical of the hierarchy and urban centralization. A proposal was made for transforming Moscow itself into a Green City. Taylor writes:

"Such attempts to `de-centre' the traditional city clearly implied a new type of relationship between city and countryside, hence between proletariat and peasant. [T]hese schemes attempted to incorporate principles of planning suggested by `nature,' in opposition to the `hard' design principles of orthodox technology and science. They implied a high degree of mobility and a collapse of the conventional symbolic hierarchy in which power is vested in the city and handed out to the provinces. In this sense they were `organicist' as well as `communist,' and might well have had far-reaching consequences for Soviet life."<sup>26</sup>



*Konstantin Melnikov, competition project for the Moscow bureau of Leningrad Pravda, 1924, showing each floor opened up to its maximum extension.*

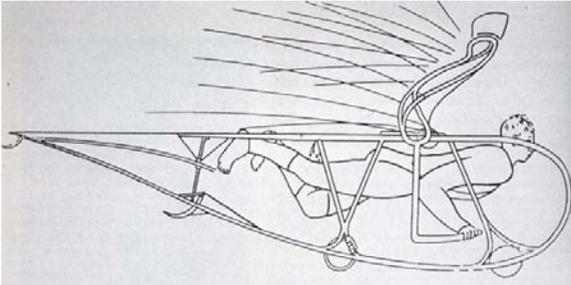
The fact that they did *not* have far-reaching consequences was a lost opportunity not only for Soviet urban development, but for the history of socialism generally. While tons of

24. Paperny, "Movement -- Immobility," Efimova and Manovich, eds., *Tekstura*, p. 66.

25. "[A]s late as 1933 Le Corbusier still thought that `in Russia everyone was mad about Deurbanism" (Paperny, "Movement -- Immobility," Efimova and Manovich, eds., *Tekstura*, p. 63.)

26. Brandon Taylor, *Art and Literature Under the Bolsheviks*, vol. 2, *Authority and Revolution 1924-1932* (London: Pluto Press, 1992), p. 162.

asphalt were being dumped on the city streets to make them look just like a Western capitalist metropolis (only bigger), Melnikov, Tatlin, and visionaries like them were nudged to the periphery.



Against the current that glorified heavy industrial development (again, on the Western capitalist model) Tatlin undertook a pointedly individualist project that experimented with low technology, justified in socialist terms. It was

necessary, he wrote, to produce "an original object which differs radically from the objects of the West and America," necessary because: "Our way of life is built on completely different principles...on healthy and natural principles. The Western object cannot satisfy us...[T]herefore I show such a great interest in organic form as a point of



departure for the creation of new objects,"<sup>27</sup> even as Fordism was being mimicked in the Soviet factory. Working in the Novodevichy Monastery on the outskirts of Moscow from 1929-31, Tatlin built such a "new object," a flying machine that

worked as an air bicycle, which he called *Letatlin*.<sup>28</sup> He hoped that this bird-like structure would become a mass item of use and as cheap as a regular bicycle.<sup>29</sup> It would, he claimed, return to humans the power of flight, which they had lost during biological

27. Tatlin (1932), cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, 2, p. 163.

28. The word fuses Tatlin's name with the Russian word "to fly" (*letat'*).

29. "I have made it as an artist....But I count upon my apparatus being able to keep a person in the air, I have taken into account the mathematical side, the resistance of the materials and the surface of the wings. We have to learn to fly with it in the air, just as we learn to swim in the water or ride a bicycle" (Tatlin [1932], cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 215.) Although Tatlin gave a paper at the Soviet Ministry of Aviation, "his ideas were received with skepticism" (ibid. p. 300n).

evolution.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, it was environmentally sound: "The air bicycle will relieve the town of transport, of noise, and overcrowding, and will cleanse the air of petrol fumes."<sup>31</sup> "We have been robbed of our feeling of flight by the mechanical flight of the aeroplane," Tatlin wrote. "We cannot feel the movement of our body in the air."<sup>32</sup> His lament resonates with the earliest fantasies evoked by airplane travel, depicting technology as an enhancement of human sensory existence, an aesthetics of everyday life: "Nature," said Tatlin, "is more clever than mechanics."<sup>33</sup>



In 1929 *Pravda* suggested that an ideal socialist community be built outside of Moscow, a proposal that turned into the "Green City" competition.<sup>34</sup> Green City was to be a recreational, collective space not devoted to production. The competition proved embarrassing, however, as some of the most well-known architects suggested environments that, as compensatory relief from the strains of production, were so antithetical to the socialist work world as to imply a radical criticism of it.



Nikolai Sokolov, VKhUTEMAS project for a resort hotel, 1928. State Shchusev Museum, Moscow.

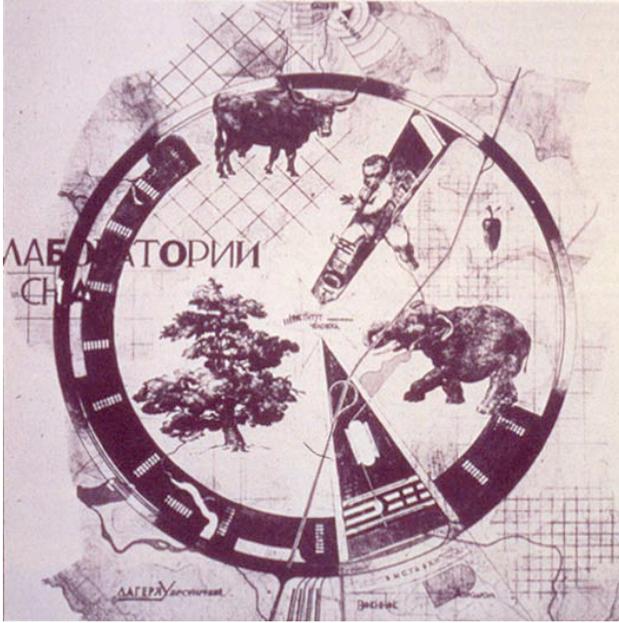
30. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 300n. This idea is similar to that of the painter Matiushin, who believed humans could regain their earlier optical capacity in the soles of their feet and back of their neck (see above, chapter 2).

31. Tatlin, cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p. 214.

32. Vladimir Tatlin (1933), cited in Taylor, *Art and Literature*, vol. 2, p. 163.

33. Cited in Vasilii Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," *Great Utopia*, p. 35.

34. The idea of Green Cities was in accord with the Marxist goal of "eliminating the contradictions between country and city" (see Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, 1945). It was part of the urbanist/anti-urbanist debate of the late twenties (see below).



The Constructivist architect Moisei Ginzburg and his student Mikhail Barshch submitted an entry that articulated leisure space in the anarcho-individualist terms, stressing privacy, voluntarism and lack of conformity -- the antithesis of the collective values of socialist production. Their entry was a linear city, based on the "ribbon scheme" that "cut a pair of automobile

roads through a territory and strung houses along them, with public facilities at appropriate intervals."<sup>35</sup> The buildings were in the international style of the Bauhaus and Le Corbusier; the social outlook was non-compulsory. "In the plan as a whole [Ginzburg] opposed `natural' order to geometric order; in transportation he favored the individualistic private automobile over the scheduled train or bus; in housing, he designed dwelling units for individual families, placing a sliding door between areas designated for husband and wife, so that `ties among people, even among man and wife, will be voluntary....'"<sup>36</sup> The goal was not efficiency but "the flowering of human personality."<sup>37</sup>

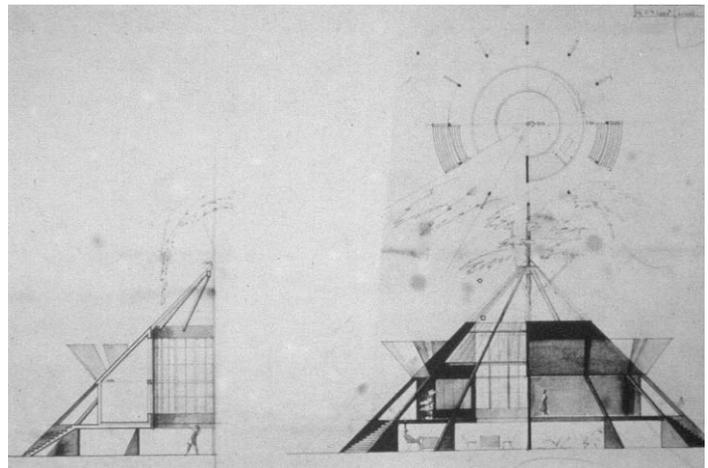
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35. S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 171.

36. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 171. The separate rooms included separate entries: "The relations between wife and husband, between two individuals are voluntary relations. As soon as these relations become a constraint imposed by the conditions of everyday life, they become a form of exploitation. What permits the women and men to be alone or not is the direct link with the outside" (cited in Anatole Kopp, "Housing for the Masses," *Conference on the Origins of Soviet Culture*, May 1981, Working Paper no. 149 (Washington, D. C.: The Wilson Center, Kennan Institute for advanced Russian Studies).

37. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 171.

Konstantin Melnikov's "Green City" proposal was, granted, collectivist enough. He designed a retreat with hotels rather than private homes, combining private entries and living spaces with communal kitchens and large common corridors, meet and socialize, reminiscent of the 19th-century phalanxes proposed by the French utopian theorist Charles Fourier.<sup>38</sup> But the plan's structuring of leisure space was implicitly critical despite its collectivism. "Melnikov quite correctly began with the assumption that members of the overworked labor force were exhausted. The recently lengthened working day, combined with the acute housing shortage and the introduction of rationing in 1929, pushed urban workers to the limit of their physical and psychological endurance."<sup>39</sup> The space was designed to provide "temporary respite for workers brought there on a rotating basis from teeming Moscow. His Green City would offer relief by placing industrial laborers in a direct and intimate relationship with the primary forces of nature. All forests were to be carefully pruned so as to combine sunlight and fresh air in ratios most beneficial for those walking through them. Specially constructed solar pavilions were to be erected in open areas to enable sallow mill-workers to expose their bodies to the concentrated rays of the sun, even in winter."<sup>40</sup> Melnikov's solutions highlighted ecological concerns that were totally absent from the mentality of Stalinist industrialization. "Energy for the city's needs would be drawn exclusively



Konstantin Melnikov, solar pavilion for the Green City, 1929, first variant.

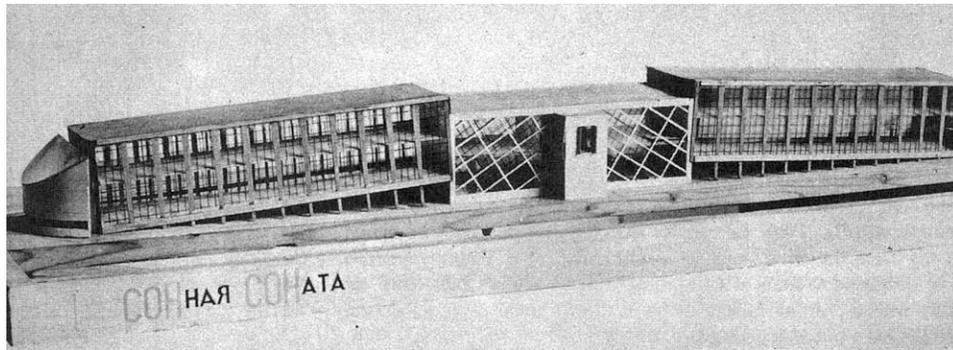
38. "[H]e conceived the galleries as being fluid spaces, to be divided up informally by plants, hanging nets, and even portable glass partitions. Through such devices, the individual would gradually become collectivized without being subjected to overt force or to the more subtle coercion of the communal apartments of the day" (Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 173).

39. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 176.

40. Starr, *Melnikov*, pp. 176-77.

from the wind, and...[in an] allusion to Fourier, animals would be permitted to roam at will through a large sector of the town, so the weary Muscovite could imagine himself once more a primeval man roaming in God's peaceable kingdom."<sup>41</sup>

This retreat offered a cure: sleep, providing the techno-aesthetics for its facilitation. Melnikov wrote: "Man sleeps one third of his lifetime....twenty years of lying down without consciousness, without guidance as one journeys into the sphere of mysterious worlds to touch the unexplored depths of the sources of curative sacraments, and perhaps of miracles."<sup>42</sup>



Konstantin Melnikov,  
"Laboratory of Sleep" for  
the Green City, 1929.

The central hotel of the city was a "Laboratory of Sleep," a total sleep environment wherein all elements of the human sensorium could be effected. "[A]ll beds here were to be built-in, like laboratory tables; to obviate the need for pillows, the floors sloped gently to the ends of the structure. The walls were broken with great sheets of glass, for sleep would be encouraged at all times of day and would under some circumstances require sunlight as well as darkness."<sup>43</sup> At either end were control booths, where technicians produced an entire synaesthetic system by using instruments

"...to regulate the temperature, humidity, and air pressure, as well as to waft salubrious scents and `rarified condensed air' through the halls. Nor would sound

41. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 177.

42. Cited in Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 177.

43. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 179. Melnikov spoke of the need to "rationalize the sun" (ibid.).

be left unorganized. Specialists working 'according to scientific facts' would transmit from the control center a range of sounds gauged to intensify the process of slumber. The rustle of leaves, the cooing of nightingales, or the soft murmur of waves would instantly relax the most overwrought veteran of the metropolis. Should these fail, the mechanized beds would then begin gently to rock until consciousness was lost. At this point, the natural sounds might continue or, at the command of trained specialists in the control booths, specially commissioned poems or works of music would be performed so as to obliterate any residual tensions or anxieties from the world of consciousness. Step by step, the worker would relax and his psyche would be rehabilitated by the combined forces of art and technology. Taken together, the building would be a "Sonata of Sleep," or, in Melnikov's pun on *son*, the Russian word for sleep, a *SONnaia SONata*.<sup>44</sup>

Melnikov sent a placard to the jury for the competition: "Cure through sleep and thereby alter the character...[A]nyone thinking otherwise is sick."<sup>45</sup> The much debated entry received criticism ranging from "romantic" to "anti-socialist," the work of a "wrecker." "How, the jury wondered, could a major architect permit himself to apotheosize sleep at the very time when the nation was gearing up to transform life through work?"<sup>46</sup>

"One of the few to express unabashed enthusiasm for Melnikov's proposal to manipulate completely both the physical and psychic environment was New York's ebullient showman "Roxy" Roth, who, accompanied by his architect, Wallace Harrison, and several advisors, visited Moscow in the summer of 1931 as

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44. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 179.

45. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 179.

46. Starr, *Melnikov*, p. 181.

part of a continental tour to gain ideas for the proposed Radio City Music Hall. Melnikov recalled meeting with the delegation just as he was completing work on the *SONnaia SONata*. Roth had been directed to Melnikov because of the many auditoriums the Russian had recently designed for workers' clubs, but it was the *SONnaia SONata* that immediately caught Roth's imagination. He recognized at once the theatrical potential of Melnikov's fantastic control booths, and resolved to provide his own technicians with similar facilities for controlling the temperature, atmosphere, sounds, and smells in Radio City Music Hall. Within months, Roth's publicity department was bombarding the American public with the Melnikovian claim that "two hours in the washed, ionized, ozoned, ultra-solarized air [of Radio City Music Hall] are worth a month in the country."<sup>47</sup>

This U.S. entrepreneur had no trouble from the authorities in his own country for advertising the compensatory nature of his techno-aesthetical environment. On the contrary. Making up to the consumer what was robbed from his or her life as a productive worker was the norm of capitalist culture. But precisely the rejection of this human cost-accounting was at the basis of socialist legitimacy -- as well it should have been. By adopting the capitalist heavy-industry definition of economic modernization, however, Soviet socialism had no alternative but to try to produce a utopia out of the production process itself. In making this choice, the Soviets missed the opportunity to transform the very idea of economic "development," and of the ecological preconditions through which it might be realized.



The fantastic constructions of the avant-garde could no more be a blueprint for socialist existence than a Five-Year Plan can be for how economic activity actually impinges on human lives. Both are utopian representations, the forced actualization of

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47. Starr, *Melnikov*, p 181.

which can have very dystopic effects. The power of art to change life is indirect. But so is (or ought to be) the power of political sovereignty. Once a monument or building, once a policy or plan enters the interactive world of the everyday, its uses should be allowed, and indeed encouraged to transcend the constraints of the creator's intent. Granted, this was not always recognized by the architects and city planners of early Bolshevism. They meant their fantasies to be realized in concrete form, however modified.<sup>48</sup> And if it were not for the shortage of material resources they might more frequently have had their wish. But even in the cases when the projects of the architectural and artistic avant-gardes were realized, their transformation of the environment taught by example, encouraging change mimetically rather than by force. In bringing sensory form to utopian ideas, their "reconstruction of daily life" (*perestroika byta*) anticipated the socialist future *without sacrificing the present*. The manipulative strategy of bringing art into life relied on the mimetic principle of aesthetic analogy rather than instrumental domination or military command. Bodily pleasure and physical comfort were fulfilled, not postponed.



It has become fashionable to criticize totalitarian leaders on artistic grounds: Hitler was like a movie director;<sup>49</sup> Stalin attempted to make a "total artwork out of society."<sup>50</sup> But is the lesson that political revolutionaries should not be artists, or is it that

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48. Paradigmatic of this attitude is Lissitzky's letter to Malevich of 1919 describing his architectural models, or Prouns: "Our lives are now being built on a new communist foundation, solid as reinforced concrete, and this is for all the nations on earth. On such a foundation -- thanks to the Prouns [his series of drawings of "interchange stations between painting and architecture"] -- monolithic communist towns will be built, in which the inhabitants of the world will live" (Lissitzky, cited in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, intro. Herbert Read [Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1968], p. 21. The fact remains, however, that Lissitzky's Prouns were *not* architectural blueprints, but rather, drawings meant to *inspire* real construction according to a certain vision, the merits of which, had the future of society remained an open category, might have been debated.

49. See Syberberg *Hitler* and Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, tr. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989).

50. See Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, trans. from Russian by Gabriele Leupold (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1988). Groys makes this argument

they should become better ones? Precisely by refusing "art" as a world of illusion and entering "life," yet true to its own logic that sustains an uncompromised, utopian supplement, the avant-garde may have something to teach the politicians.

What if revolutionary political practice had to justify the imaginaries that it constructs in accordance with the logic of its own ideals? Rather than using society as a stage for illusion-filled action stories, daily melodramas featuring Class War, or Constructing Socialism, or Overtaking the West (while violent power remains hidden behind the scenes), a revolutionary movement would need to see itself as a stage, in full view of society, on which the multiple practices enacted by citizen-performers provided visible images of democracy and socialism, that are social processes rather than historically realizable stages, too multi-faceted and open-ended ever to be defined or realized completely. Unlike the "show trials" of the Stalin era, such performances would not have as their purpose the staging of the regime's own legitimation but, rather, experiments in democracy or demonstrations of socialism, allowing the citizen audience to draw its own conclusions, becoming experts in the "art" of living with others.

Political power needs to give up the fantasy that by monopolizing the means of violence it has a monopoly over what is real. Sovereignty is as imaginary as art; art is as political as sovereignty.<sup>51</sup> Revolutionary politics needs to take seriously the fact that democratic sovereignty *represents* the masses, and that political actions represent history

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in full acknowledgement of the fact that many of the avant-garde artists were persecuted under Stalin. The toll in lives and careers was high. Maiakovskii (posthumously honored by Stalin) committed suicide in 1930. Filonov was persecuted constantly during the 1930s, and his school of Analytical Art was crushed. Filonov's student Vasilii Kuptsov was harassed by the state and committed suicide in 1935. Malevich was arrested for a time in 1930 (he died in 1935 just before being notified that his request for a pension had been turned down). Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested in 1939. Gustav Klutskis was arrested in 1938 and died in a prison camp in Kazakhstan in 1944. Punin was arrested in the war and died in a prison camp in 1953.

51. Note that the argument here concerns art and politics, which are views as two forms of cultural production. It does not equate art with that which ought properly to be termed "aesthetics," i.e., a form of cognition as "perceptive by feeling".

by giving it sensory, material form. What then does it mean to represent the temporality of revolutionary rupture through armed takeover and protracted civil war? What limitations of social fantasy might be implied by this scenario of violence -- or by the project of forced modernization according to the plan of a vanguard party? Both are based on a temporal conception that is theoretically impoverished and practically inaccurate. Social life in fact occupies a plurality of layers of time, from glacier-slow to lightning-fast, from inexorable repetition to ineluctable transience. Such hybrid rhythms cannot be played out on the diminished space of a linear continuum, however dialectically that continuum may be conceived. The range of temporal connections and disconnections produces a complex force field in which social revolutions in fact take place, rather than lining up obediently behind the leadership of Progress. Time must be granted a greater complexity than former revolutionary narratives have allowed.



*Aleksandr Rodchenko, Workers' Club interior, 1925. It was displayed in the Soviet Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Internationale des Décoratifs, 1925. French workers who visited the display stroked the furniture and said "this is ours." (Christina Kiaer, "Rodchenko in Paris," October 75 (Winter 1996), p. 31. Rodchenko was referring to the objects in his Workers' Club: "Things become comprehending, become friends and comrades of the person, and person learns how to laugh and be happy and converse with things" (Rodchenko, cited in ibid.).*

Consider critically in this context Lenin's commentary in 1902 on a passage by Dmitrii Pisarev, a political radical of the 1860s who was on the list of approved "fighters for socialism" in the Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Lenin cites Pisarev:

The rift between dreams and reality causes no harm if only the person dreaming believes seriously in his dream, if he attentively observes life, compares his observations with his castles in the air, and if, generally speaking, he works

conscientiously for the achievement of his fantasies. If there is some connection between dreams and life then all is well.<sup>52</sup>

But all is *not* well with this model. Lenin claimed that this operational approach could be applied to making "history" on a collective level. Utopian visions, "castles in the air," are scientific, Lenin wrote, when they motivate a "new people" to realize a revolutionary plan.<sup>53</sup> Historical actualization thereby becomes the criterion for the acceptability of socialist dreaming. It seems to give proof that the dream was no mere fantasy. But in the process, history itself becomes a dreamworld. The voluntarism of the vanguard party, including the arbitrariness of its revolutionary violence, is rationalized as history striding forward. Using the masses as an instrument for realizing the dreamworld of history, the armed vanguard "submits" to a conception of time that, so long as it remains victorious, legitimates its own rule. If revolution is the "illusion of politics" (Marx), it is the illusion of history that makes the political seem real. Of course, daydreams are salutary; we could not live without them. But when their logic, in compensating for the disappointments of today, becomes a "plan" that locks in future meaning, time's indeterminacy and openness is colonized, and the utopian dream becomes a reality of oppression.<sup>54</sup>



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52. Lenin (1902), cited in Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 42.

53. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, p. 42.

54. This criticism does not rule out economic planning as socialist policy. It only means that the plan cannot be articulated and executed as tyranny over future *time*. Guidelines, goals and projections are necessary for any collective endeavor, but as socialist, they ought to facilitate democratic participation rather than preventing it and facilitating instead control by the leaders.

In the last days of the soviet regime, dissident artists within the Soviet Union represented its past history as a dreamworld, depicting the crumbling of the Soviet era before it occurred in fact. For this generation, the moment of awakening replaced that of revolutionary rupture as the defining phenomenological experience. Exemplary is the 1983 painting of Alexander Kosolapov, *The Manifesto*, in which, against a martial, red sky and amidst ruins that include a bust of Lenin, three *putti* try to decipher a surviving copy of Marx's *Communist Manifesto*. The dreamer who is still inside the dream of history accepts its logic as inexorable. But at the moment of awakening, the dream's coherence dissipates. All that is left are scattered images. The compelling nature of their connection has been shattered. It is crucial to recognize that the end of the Soviet era was not limited spatially to the territory of the Soviet Union. The Bolshevik experiment, no matter how



many specifically Russian cultural traits it developed, was vitally attached to the Western, modernizing project, from which it cannot be extricated without causing the project itself to fall to pieces -- including its cult of historical progress. Those who at this stage of awakening attempt the task of political interpretation are not to compare themselves with revolutionary prophets. They do better to approach the dream fragments like soothsayers who read the entrails of animals before a battle, not to predict which army will win, but to decipher what forces of collective fantasy exist to withstand the violence of any army,

aiding those forces by exposing the deceptive representations on which every army depends.

"History" has failed us. No new chronology will erase that fact. History's betrayal is so profound that it cannot be forgiven simply by tacking on a "post-" era to it (post-modernism, post-Marxism). There is real tragedy in the shattering of the dreams of modernity -- of social utopia, historical progress and material plenty for all. But to submit to melancholy at this point would be to confer onto the past a wholeness that never did exist, confusing the loss of the dream with the loss of the dream's realization. The alternative of political cynicism is equally problematic, however, because in denying possibilities for change it prevents them; anticipating defeat, it brings defeat into being. Rather than taking a self-ironizing distance from history's failure, we -- the "we" who may have nothing more, nor less in common than sharing *this* time -- would do well to bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble in order to rescue the utopian hopes that modernity engendered, because we cannot afford to let them disappear. There is no reason to believe that those utopian hopes caused history to go wrong, and every reason, based on evidence of the abuses of power that propelled history forward, to believe the opposite.

When an era crumbles: "History breaks down into images, not into stories."<sup>55</sup> Without the narration of continuous progress, the images of the past resemble night dreams, the "first mark" of which, Freud tells us, is their emancipation from "the spatial and temporal order of events."<sup>56</sup> Such images, as dream-images, are complex webs of memory and desire wherein past experience is rescued and, perhaps, redeemed. Only partial interpretations of these images are possible, and in a critical light. But they may be

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55. Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, V: *Das Passagenwerk*, vol. 1, p. 596.

56. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. And ed. James Strachey (New York: Avon Books, 1965), note p. 84.

helpful if they illuminate patches of the past that seem to have a charge of energy about them precisely because the dominant narrative does not connect them seamlessly to the present. The historical particulars might then be free to enter into different constellations of meaning. The juxtaposition of these past fragments with our present concerns might have the power to challenge the complacency of our times, when "history" is said by its victors to have successfully completed its course, and the new global-capitalist hegemony claims to have run the competition off the field.

To be engaged in the historical task of surprising rather than explaining the present -- more avant-garde than vanguard in its temporality -- may prove in the wake of the twentieth century to be politically worth our while.

Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)*, 1915. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

