The Total Art of Stalinism

AVANT-GARDE, AESTHETIC DICTATORSHIP, AND BEYOND

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Chapter One

THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE: THE LEAP OVER PROGRESS

IN RUSSIA as elsewhere, the art of the classical avant-garde is too complex a phenomenon to be wholly embraced by a single formula; but it does not seem an extreme simplification to define its basic spirit in terms of the demand that art move from representing to transforming the world. The readiness of European artists down through the centuries to lovingly copy external reality—their will to ever more perfect mimesis—was based on an adulation of Nature as the whole and consummate creation of the one and only God that the artist must imitate if his or her own artistic gift were to approximate the divine. The intrusion of technology into European life in the nineteenth century caused this picture of the world to disintegrate and gradually led to the perception that God was dead, or rather that he had been murdered by modern technologized humanity. As the world unity guaranteed by the creative will of God disappeared, the horizon of earthly existence opened, revealing beyond the variety of visible forms of this world a black chaos—an infinity of possibilities in which everything given, realized, and inherited might at any moment dissolve without a trace.

Of the Russian avant-garde, at least, we can state with certainty that its entire artistic practice was a reaction to this most momentous event of modern European history. Contrary to what is often maintained, the Russian avant-garde was far from enthusiastic about technology or inspired by a naive faith in progress. From the outset, it was on the defensive rather than the offensive. Its paramount task was not to destroy but to neutralize and compensate for the destructive effect of the technological invasion. Earlier unfriendly critics

and many sympathetic modern observers who felt they must praise the avant-garde for its "demonism" were in error when they portrayed it as inspired by a destructive, nihilist spirit or burning with incomprehensible hostility toward everything "sacred" and "dear to the heart." Avant-gardism differed from traditionalism not because it reveled in the ravages wrought by modern technological rationalism, but because it believed that this destruction could not be resisted by traditional methods. If the avant-garde followed Nietzsche's maxim to the effect that what is falling should still be pushed, it was only because it was deeply convinced that the fall could not be broken. The avant-garde regarded the destruction of the divine work of art that had been the world as an accomplished and irreversible fact whose consequences had to be interpreted as radically as possible if any compensation were to be made for the loss.

WHITE HUMANITY

One good example of this avant-garde strategy is the artistic practice of Kazimir Malevich, who in his well-known work "On the New Systems in Art" (1919) wrote: "All creation, whether of nature or of the artist, or of creative man in general, is a question of constructing a device to overcome our endless progress."[1] Thus Malevich's avant-gardism is reflected least of all in a desire to be in the vanguard of progress, which he regards as leading nowhere and therefore as completely meaningless. At the same time, he considers that the only way to stop progress is, as it were, to outstrip it, finding ahead rather than behind it a point of support or line of defense offering an effective shield against it. In order to find something irreducible, extraspatial, extratemporal, and extrahistorical to hold on to, the process of destruction and reduction must be taken to the very end.

This irreducible something was, to Malevich, the "black square," which for a long time became the most famous symbol of the Russian avant-garde. The *Black Square* is, so to speak, a transcendental painting—the result of the pictorial

reduction of all possible concrete content. In other words, it is a sign for the pure form of contemplation, which presupposes a transcendental rather than an empirical subject. The object of this contemplation is to Malevich nothing (that nothing toward which he felt all progress was moving), which coincided with the primordial substance of the universe, or, in other words, with the pure potentiality of all possible existence that revealed itself beyond any given form. His suprematist paintings, which represent the differentiation of this primordial form of the *Black Square* according to purely logical, "unearthly" laws, describe the "nonobjective world" that exists on a different level than the world of sensual forms. The fundamental thesis of Malevich's aesthetics is the conviction that the combination of these pure, nonobjective forms "subconsciously" determines both the relationship between the subject and all that is seen and the overall situation of the subject in the world.[2] Malevich assumes that in both nature and classical art the original suprematist elements were in "correct" harmonious relationships, although artists did not realize or consciously reflect this fact. The technological invasion destroyed this harmony, making it necessary to reveal these previously subconsciously operating mechanisms in order to learn to control them consciously and attain a new harmony in the new technological world by subjugating it to the single organizing and harmonizing will of the artist. The loss that technology caused the world was thus also to be compensated technologically, and the chaotic character of technological progress would be succeeded by the single total project of reorganizing the entire universe, in which God would be replaced by the artist-analyst. The goal of this total operation was to halt all further development, labor, and creation forever. Arising out of all this is a new "white humanity." The consciousness of "white humanity" is nonobjective, free of all desire to move toward any ideal or concrete salvation. According to Malevich, the spectacle of the "nonobjective world," that is, the vision of absolute nothingness as the ultimate reality of all things, would cause "the prayer to die on the lips of the saint

and the sword to fall from the hand of the hero,"[3] for this vision consummates history.

First of all, however, all art must cease. Malevich writes: "Every form of a spiritual world that is created should be built according to a general, single plan. There are no special rights and liberties for art, religion or civil life."[4] The loss of these rights and freedoms, however, is not a real loss, since man is originally unfree. He is a part of the universe, and his thought is directed by unconscious "stimuli" that give rise both to the illusion of "inner existence" and the illusion of "external reality."[5] All aspirations to knowledge are illusory and ridiculous, since they involve an attempt to use thoughts arising from hidden "stimuli" to study "things" that also arise from these stimuli, which in both cases necessarily remain hidden. "Investigating reality means investigating what does not exist and is incomprehensible."[6] Only the suprematist artist is capable of controlling, modifying, or harmonizing these hidden stimuli, since only he or she knows the laws of pure form.

Malevich repudiates religion and science, because they belong to the realm of the conscious rather than the subconscious. Significantly, in his late works he perceives the only rival of the artist to be the state, and here he evidently means a totalitarian state of the Soviet type. The state also appeals to the subconscious: "The state is an apparatus by which the nervous systems of its inhabitants are regulated."[7] He does not fear the competition of the state, however, because he trusts official Soviet ideology when it maintains that it is based on science and is striving for technological progress. In Malevich's view, therefore, the Soviet ideologist falls into the same category as the priest and the scientist, whose successes, because they are oriented to consciousness and history, are always temporary and consequently inevitably generate a variety of religions and scientific theories. The artist, by contrast, is oriented toward the subconscious: "If it is true that all works of art come from the action of the subconscious center, then it may be stated that the center of the subconscious is more accurate than the center of consciousness."[8] Here

Malevich is obviously incorrectly equating Soviet ideology with ordinary liberal rationalism. Soviet Marxism similarly assumes the subconscious determinacy of human thought, although it seeks it not in the visual but in the social organization of the world. Thus this ideology is a more serious competitor for influence on the "nervous system" than many had at first assumed.

Malevich's approach to art, which I have presented above only in brief outline, is characteristic of his time and is merely expressed more radically by him than by others. Thus another leading representative of the Russian avant-garde, Velimir Khlebnikov, assumed that the ordinary forms of language concealed a purely phonetic "transrational" language that worked secretly and magically upon the listener or reader. He undertook to reconstruct this "language of the subconscious," as Malevich would have called it, and to master it consciously.[9] Like Malevich's suprematism, Khlebnikov's phonetic transrational language, which went farther than anything at the time (or perhaps at any time) in overcoming ordinary linguistic forms, claimed universality and the ability to organize the entire world on a new audial basis. Khlebnikov called himself "Chairman of the World" and the "King of Time," since he thought he had discovered the laws that delimit time and separate the new from the old in the same way as such division is possible in space. Knowledge of these laws would grant the avant-garde power over time and allow it to subject the entire world to this power.[10]

Even outside avant-gardist circles, however, it is possible to find contemporary parallels to Malevich's principal ideas. Thus his reductionism resembles Husserl's phenomenological reduction, the logical reductionism of the Vienna Circle, and Lev Tolstoi's call to simplification; all of these seek to find a minimal but real point of support, and all turn to the "ordinary," the "folk" (Malevich arrived at suprematism by way of folk art, the icon, and the signboard),[11] and all share an "antiprogressionist" spirit. Malevich is even more reminiscent of the neognostic "theurgy" of Vladimir Solov'ev, who defined the meaning of art as "life-building" and believed that the artist is capable of discovering the latent harmony of all things that will not be universally revealed until after the apocalypse.[12] According to Solov'ev, people are in the power of cosmic forces and can be saved only together with the entire universe in a single apocastasis that will neither add to nor remove anything from the world, but will simply unveil the hidden harmonious relationship among all things within it. Here is one certain source of Malevich's insistence that harmonizing "materials" and pure color sensations must be made "visible," as if perceived from a different, apocalyptic, otherworldly, posthistorical perspective.

The novelty of the contribution made by avant-gardists such as Malevich and Khlebnikov, however, is not apparent from such parallels. Central here is the radical notion that the subconscious dominates human consciousness and can be logically and technically manipulated to construct a new world and a new individual. It is on this point that the early avant-garde of Malevich and Khlebnikov was radicalized by their followers, who considered that suprematism and transrational poetry were too contemplative, since, although they contemplated the inner "subconscious" construction of the world rather than its external image, they did not break completely with the cognitive functions of art. Rodchenko's later constructivism reinterprets suprematist constructions as immediate expressions of the artist's organizing, "engineering" will, and Boris Arvatov, a theorist of the later, productionist variant of constructivism, speaks of the engineering nature of Khlebnikov's poetry.[13] The line of defense constructed by Malevich and other early avant-gardists was thus rather easily overrun by technological progress, which readily availed itself of the radical technical apparatus that had been designed to engage it in a final and decisive struggle.

Red Agitation

The absolute zero that was to mark the beginning of a new world in which the new "white humanity" would be cleansed of all previous images, leave its former dwellings, and resettle

the suprematist *Planits*, was for Malevich still a matter of artistic imagination. After the October Revolution and two years of civil war, however, not only the Russian avant-garde but practically the entire population of the former Russian Empire correctly perceived that this zero point had actually been reached. The country was reduced to ashes, normal life was utterly disrupted, housing was uninhabitable, the economy had reverted almost to the primitive state, social relations had disintegrated, and life gradually began to resemble a war of everyone against everyone. In the famous phrase of Andrei Belyi, "the victory of materialism in Russia resulted in the complete disappearence of all matter." Thus suprematism no longer needed to prove what had become an obvious truth, namely that matter as such is nothing. Since it seemed that the apocalypse had come and that things had been displaced to reveal themselves to the apocalyptic vision of all, the avant-gardist and formalist theory of the "shift" that lifted things from their normal contexts and "made them strange" by deautomatizing perception and rendering them "visible" in a special way was no longer merely the basis of avant-garde art but an explanation of the Russian citizen's everyday experience.

In this unique historical situation the Russian avant-garde perceived not only an undeniable confirmation of its theoretical constructs and aesthetic intuition, but also a singular opportunity for translating them into reality. A majority of avant-garde artists and writers immediately declared their full support for the new Bolshevik state. Because the intelligentsia as a whole were hostile toward this state, representatives of the avant-garde occupied a number of key posts in the new centralized administration of Soviet cultural life. This rush for political power derived not merely from opportunism and the desire for personal success on the part of the avant-garde, but followed from the very essence of the avant-gardist artistic project.

Traditional artists who aspire to re-create various aspects of Nature can set themselves limited goals, since to them Nature is already a completed whole, and thus any fragment of it

is also potentially complete and whole. Avant-garde artists, on the other hand, to whom the external world has become a black chaos, must create an entirely new world, so that their artistic projects are necessarily total and boundless. To realize this project, therefore, artists must have absolute power over the world—above all total political power that will allow them to enlist all humanity or at least the population of a single country in this task. To avant-gardists, reality itself is material for artistic construction, and they therefore naturally demand the same absolute right to dispose of this real material as in the use of materials to realize their artistic intent in a painting, sculpture, or poem. Since the world itself is regarded as material, the demand underlying the modern conception of art for power over the materials implicitly contains the demand for power over the world. This power does not recognize any limitations and cannot be challenged by any other, nonartistic authority, since humanity and all human thought, science, traditions, institutions, and so on are declared to be subconsciously (or, to put it differently, materially) determined and therefore subject to restructuring according to a unitary artistic plan. By its own internal logic, the artistic project becomes aesthetico-political. Because there are many artists and projects and only one can be realized, a choice must be made; this decision is in turn not merely artistic but political, since the entire organization of social life is dependent upon it. Consequently, in the early years of Soviet power the avant-garde not only aspired to the political realization of its artistic projects on the practical level, but also formulated a specific type of aesthetico-political discourse in which each decision bearing on the artistic construction of the work of art is interpreted as a political decision, and, conversely, each political decision is interpreted according to its aesthetic consequences. It was this type of discourse that subsequently became predominant and in fact led to the destruction of the avant-garde itself.

When Rodchenko and his group proposed the new program of constructivism[14] in 1919, however, enthusiasm was still overwhelming, and the avant-garde was convinced that

the future was in its hands. Thoroughly renouncing the contemplativeness that to some extent could still be found among the first generation of the avant-garde, Rodchenko, Tatlin, and other constructivists proclaimed the work of art to be a self-sufficient autonomous thing with no mimetic relationship to external reality. The model for the constructivist work of art became the machine, which moved according to its own laws. True, in contrast to the industrial machine, the "artistic machine" of the constructivists was, in the beginning, at least, not regarded as utilitarian. In accordance with their original formalist aesthetics, it was instead meant to bring out the very material of construction and the constructive nature of the machine itself—the "machine of the subconscious," so to speak—that was concealed in the utilitarian machine much as it was latent in the traditional painting that attempted to transmit "conscious" content. The constructivists themselves regarded their constructions not as self-sufficient works of art, but as models of a new world, a laboratory for developing a unitary plan for conquering the material that was the world. Hence their love of heterogeneous materials and the great variety of their projects, which embraced the most diverse aspects of human activity and attempted to unify them according to a single artistic principle.

The constructivists were convinced that it was they and they alone who were destined to undertake the aesthetico-political organization of the country, for although they cooperated with the Bolsheviks politically they were, at bottom, sure of their own intellectual superiority. Initially they regarded the Bolsheviks as merely a necessary transitional phase, a force that could destroy the old world and harness the country to the creation of the new. For their part, the Bolsheviks did not conceal the fact that they had but a vague idea of how to go about this construction, as no specific methods had as yet been developed by Marxist theory. Attempting to secure the broadest possible support from the old intelligentsia, the party, in particular Minister of Culture Anatolii Lunacharskii, was at this time advocating pluralism among artistic currents,

and the party leaders, who had been brought up on traditional aesthetics, were more than mildly skeptical toward the new avant-garde art. Lenin candidly admitted that he understood little about art, but that he did like Beethoven's "Apassionata Sonata," Chernyshevskii's novel *What Is to Be Done?*, and the Revolutionary song, "You Fell the Victims. . . ." The Bolsheviks, of course, appreciated the support of the avant-garde, but they were troubled by its dictatorial ambitions, which repulsed the representatives of other currents that were closer to them aesthetically although usually upposed to them politically. The avant-gardists took this ambivalence on the part of the party as a de facto admission that it was unable to cope with the construction of the new world. They constantly expounded the intimate interrelationship of politics and aesthetics, impressing upon the party the complete opposition between the two currents in art—on the one hand, bourgeois, traditional, counterrevolutionary mimetic art; on the other, the new proletarian revolutionary aesthetics proposing that communism be built as a total work of art that would organize life itself according to a unitary plan.

More and more insistently, the artists, poets, writers, and journalists of the avant-garde merged aesthetic and political accusations, openly calling upon the state to repress their opponents. However, as the stability of the Soviet regime became increasingly obvious and broad circles among the initially hostile intelligentsia began to support the Bolsheviks—which, of course, the latter welcomed—the avant-garde's base began to shrink steadily. The very first years of the New Economic Policy (NEP) witnessed the emergence of a new art market and a new reader demand among the nascent Nepman bourgeoisie, to whom the avant-garde was alien aesthetically and especially politically. The NEP—that of 1922 rather than the 1930s—marks the beginning of the decline of the avant-garde, which, although it continued to exist on a modest scale, had lost all its influence by the late 1920s. Emerging now were such organizations as AKhRR (The Association of Artists for a Revolutionary Russia) and RAPP (The Russian Association

of Proletarian Writers), which combined traditional aesthetic devices and the slogan "learn from the classics" with avant-garde rhetoric and the tactic of labeling their opponents political counterrevolutionaries, a practice that found increasing official support. During this same period there also arose groups of rather influential fellow-traveler artists and writers, many of whom—particularly in groups like OST (Society of Easel Painters) and Bytie (Objective Reality)—in the visual arts were quite young. These artists were not easily intimidated by the avant-garde's incantations, and in their search for a new market for their works they attempted to combine traditional and avant-garde devices within the conventional form of the easel painting.

Significantly, however, it was precisely during this period that the most active radical wing of the avant-garde, the Lef group, associated with the journals *Lef* and then *Novyi Lef*, radicalized its program even more, moving beyond the slogan of constructivism to that of "productionism," that is, the production of utilitarian objects and the organization of production and everyday life by artistic methods. The *Lef* theoreticians declared all autonomous artistic activity to be reactionary and even counterrevolutionary. Rodchenko, who became the leading artist of Lef, called his former ally Tatlin a "typical Russian holy fool" for his loyalty to the "mystique of the material." When Tatlin designed his famous utopian Monument to the Third International and for the first time a Bolshevist note began to creep into the avant-garde debate, Shklovskii objected with a call for purity, universalism, and the rejection of political commitment. He was answered that Communist power, the Third International, and so forth were as much a fantasy as the art of the avant-garde and could therefore be considered avant-garde materials and used as elements in avant-garde constructions.[15] Constructivist theoretician Aleksei Gan declared:

> We should not reflect, depict and interpret reality, but should build practically and express the planned objectives of the newly active working class, the proletariat . . . the master of color and line . . . the organizer of mass actions—must all become Constructivists in the general business of the building and the movement of the many millioned human mass.[16]

Although in the 1920s the polemics of *Lef* and its artistic position became even more radical than this initial optimism, they also reflect the avant-garde's wavering confidence in its ability to accomplish its goals on its own. Lef's language gradually became more "Communistic," and the group itself was increasingly inclined to view the party as the only force capable of implementing its projects. More and more, it regarded itself as a "specialist" working to fulfill the "social commissions" of the party and as an artistic mentor whose duty was to identify true friends and foes and teach the party to formulate constructive artistic tasks in response to the demands of the time.

Boris Arvatov is an illustrative example. A leading theoretician of "productionist" Lef, Arvatov was a former Proletkultist who had been influenced by Bogdanov's "general organizational science," which Proletkult thought of as a Marxist replacement of contemplative knowledge of the laws governing the world by the concrete organization of the world on a new basis. Although Arvatov maintains that artists should organize the life of society down to the smallest everyday details to give the world a new artistic form corresponding to the contemporary level of technological progress—that is, to bring it into harmony with progress (here again that same old idea of Malevich's)—at the same time he limits the role of art to the search for the optimal means of achieving total organization, whose goals should come from without. "Artists," Arvatov writes, "must become the colleagues of scholars, engineers, and administrators."[17] Thus he continues to perceive the goal of art to be the creation of a closed, autonomous, internally organized, self-contained whole that does not refer to anything outside itself, except, perhaps, in the functional sense; that is, Arvatov's notion of the work of art continues to tend toward the traditional avant-garde ideal of the internal combustion engine into which he would like to transform all

of society. In Arvatov's theory, however, this ideal has already lost the universal cosmic dimension typical of Malevich's and Khlebnikov's avant-garde and is instead restricted to the purely social reality controlled by concrete political forces. The main burden of organizational work is transferred to these forces—specifically, the Communist party—and all that remains for the artist is to fulfill limited functions within the framework established by the unitary "party command." Proceeding here from its own artistic project, the avant-garde itself renounces its right of preeminence and surrenders the project to the real political power, which is beginning to take over the avant-garde artist's task of drawing up the unitary plan of the new reality. The demand for complete political power that follows from the avant-garde artistic project is in effect now supplanted by the demand that the real political power acknowledge that its project is aesthetic in nature.

Arvatov's view of traditional mimetic art is marked by the same dualism. On the one hand, he declares this art a feature of an imperfectly organized society, that is, the result of a failure and an obstacle to the avant-garde project—a morbid phenomenon that testifies to the insufficiently "artistic" character of life itself. He rejects the "contemplative" art of Malevich, Kandinskii and Tatlin on the same grounds. Arvatov writes approvingly of the role of left art in the early years of the Revolution: "The mask of realism concealed the blackest reactionary desires; the high priests of eternal art who sympathized with the Kadets persecuted everyone else. They had to be destroyed, driven out, disarmed."[18] Arvatov is also negative toward the 1920s renaissance in the visual arts, which he interprets in the usual leftist way as a symptom of the overall cultural reaction associated with NEP. On the other hand, the function he is prepared to allot to art is not only constructive and organizational but also agitational, since in such a role art does not simply reflect life but really contributes to transforming it. For this task he is obliged to rehabilitate even the traditional mimetic "easel painting" that was theoretically destroyed by productivism: "Figurative art as an art of fantasy

can be considered justified when for its creators and for society as a whole it serves as a preliminary step in the transformation of all society."[19] Obviously, this formulation anticipates later aesthetic tenets of the Stalin period.

The other leading theoreticians of Lef held similar views. In an article by Nikolai Chuzhak characteristically entitled "Under the Sign of Life-Building"—an obvious allusion to Vladimir Solov'ev[20]—we read: "Art as a method of knowing life . . . is the highest content of the old bourgeois esthetics. Art as a method for building life—this is the slogan behind the proletarian conception of the science of art."[21] The allusion to Solov'ev, of course, prevents Chuzhak's position from being considered exclusively or completely "proletarian." Following Hegel, Solov'ev maintained that the cognitive role of art had ended and that art must therefore be assigned a new goal—the transformation of reality—if it was to be granted continued legitimacy. According to Solov'ev, the artist must cease to be defined by "inherited religious ideas"—that is, cease creating within a tradition—and instead strive for the "conscious control of the incarnations of the religious idea" that were supposed to reveal things in their future aspect. Only then will the artist become truly "popular" [*vsenarodeh*]; that is, rather than subscribing to popular conceptions of the aspect of things as they are, he will show to everyone things as they will be at the end of time.[22]

The reduction of this new function of art—with which Chuzhak essentially agrees—to the "proletarian science of art" amounts once again to a capitulation to the leading role of the party. The life-building artist becomes in effect a mere "decorator" of a reality created by someone else, a role to which Chuzhak himself vehemently objects. It was not for nothing that the AkhRR opponents of Lef maintained that its program was not so very different from that of any Western artist employed by a large corporation as a designer, in advertising, and so on.[23] Chuzhak's own awareness of this contradiction probably accounts for the following famous passage in the above article:

> We imagine a moment when real life saturated to overflowing with art will *reject* art as unnecessary; this moment will be a blessing to the futurist artist, his beautiful "go in peace." Until then, the artist is a *soldier* guarding the social and socialist revolution as he awaits the great "corporal of the guard"—Halt![24]

Here we no longer deal with the disappearance of art as an autonomous sphere of activity, as in the initial premise of the avant-garde as a whole, but with a renunciation of avant-garde art itself, a rejection of the artist in his or her extreme productionist embodiment. The avant-gardist here is not the heroic creator of a new world, but a stoic dedicated to a doomed cause. It is not, as in Hegel, science and the Idea that overcome art in its cognitive function, nor is the artist replaced by the thinker. Rather, it is in precisely this new, avant-garde function of constructor of the new world that the artist is succeeded by a military and political leader ruling over the whole of "reality saturated with art"—the mystical figure of that "great corporal of the guard" soon to be incarnated in the very real figure of Stalin. Here Chuzhak points to the inherent limit of the avant-garde artistic project. If the limitations of the mimetic art claiming to provide knowledge of reality were marked by science, which successfully accomplished that project, then the limitations of the life-builders' project of total mobilization in the name of beautiful form were marked by military and political power, which not only theorized about mobilization but mobilized in actual fact.

Lef's theory was in complete agreement with its artistic practice. Since its artists and writers could not directly influence production or determine real social relations, they concentrated above all on agitation and propaganda. Maiakovskii designed his famous "windows" for ROSTA (the official information agency) and wrote advertisements; Rodchenko painted posters, and many others designed theater sets, clubs, and so on. The avant-garde art in such projects became increasingly figurative, although the artists strove to work with the photograph rather than the easel painting, and the writers aspired toward so-called literature of fact, that is, newspaper

materials rather than traditional narrative forms. Newspaper reports on the "victories of labor" or photographs of smiling collective farmers and proletarians with their faces turned to the future may have been interpreted as "facts" and contrasted with the "fictive," "illusory" art of the past; but to the modern observer, at least, a glance at Lef's agitational art reveals that the material with which the group was working was not any immediate manifestation of "life" but the product of manipulation and simulation by mass media under the complete control of the party propaganda apparatus. All of these newspaper materials and photographs dedicated to "topical themes," "public statements by front-rank workers," and similar Soviet ideological products modeled on stereotypes patterned in turn on the idealized hagiographic art of the past were interpreted by Lef as materials of life itself—materials which, although they must be shaped creatively, were raw and primary outside this process. The Achilles' heel of avant-garde aesthetics as a whole lies in this failure to understand the mechanisms through which reality is technically processed by the modern means of communication that register it. In part because the artists of *Lef* enthusiastically shared the underlying ideology and were actively involved in this processing, in both theory and practice they regarded the photograph and the news article as a means for discovering reality and remained blind to the fact that such forms of information are an ideological operation.

The Lef ideologists, therefore, looked down with scorn on the "uncultured," "reactionary" AKhRR, which simply illustrated party decrees with traditional paintings or created "tendentious art" that claimed no independent aesthetic function. The members of Lef regarded themselves in the spirit of Solov'ev as "engineers of the world" who overcame the opposition between autonomous and utilitarian art by subordinating their works to a single universal purpose that deprived art of its autonomy only in the name of something higher than any temporal goal, namely, the transformation of the world as a whole. From the perspective of this synthesis, the art of AKhRR really is a kind of "antisynthesis"—an awkward com-

bination of traditional autonomous figurative art and subordination to the crude utilitarian aims of propagating and illustrating the latest party proclamations. The members of Lef considered that it was they instead who were called upon to shape the life and consciousness of the masses through the "incarnations" of the new Communist religion.

Despite all their daring experiments with newspaper and advertisement language (Maiakovskii) or the photographic image (Rodchenko), however, Lef's art was rendered secondary by the fact that it was unconsciously dependent on the ideological processing of primary visual and verbal information. Neither the newspaper nor the photograph was questioned as media; in Lef-Opoiaz terminology, therefore, the sincerity of the "servile" illustrations of AKhRR allows them to be regarded as a "laying bare of the device." In other words, such works revealed the secondary nature of art—including that of Lef—relative to ideology and its immediate manifestations in the form of party decrees, instructions, and theses.

The blindness of the avant-garde in this respect isolated it and led to its dual defeat in the late 1920s. On the one hand, as the state consolidated its power, Lef's aspirations to engage in autonomous life-building distinct from the actual party-led construction of socialism became increasingly anachronistic, inappropriate, and irritating; on the other hand, the moderate "fellow-traveler opposition" that in many respects set the tone in the 1920s was, within the bounds set by the censorship, attempting to use traditional mimetic means to create an image of reality that to some extent diverged from the official one. This fellow-traveler intelligentsia therefore regarded the apologetic art of the avant-garde as totally unacceptable and even dangerous, since in those harsh years avant-gardist accusations of "counterrevolutionary form and content" could represent a mortal threat.

It deserves to be noted that Soviet attitudes toward the avant-garde continue even today to reflect its dual isolation from both the state and the opposition. In the context of the Western museum, the Russian avant-garde may be highly regarded as one original artistic phenomenon among others, but in the Soviet Union its claims to exclusiveness and its almost realized ambitions to destroy traditional cultural values have not been forgotten. The vindictive state still cannot forgive the avant-garde for competing for the leadership of the transformation of the country, and the no less vindictive opposition cannot forgive it for persecuting its "realist" opponents. Aside from a few enthusiasts gravitating toward the West and Western scholarly notions, therefore, even today the resurrection of the avant-garde is universally regarded as unnecessary and undesirable. Bulgakov, Akhmatova, Pasternak, and Mandel'shtam, all of whom contrasted their traditional conception of the writer to the new propaganda apparatus, are being canonized everywhere, but Lef is usually remembered as a shameful disease that has fortunately been cured and is best not mentioned in public. History teaches us that this situation may and even probably will change, but it is at present impossible to predict when and how that might happen.

The fears Malevich expressed to the constructivists in many of his later writings generally came to pass: the quest for "perfection" through technology and agitation made them prisoners of the time and led them into a blind alley, since such a search is equivalent to the founding of a new church, and since all churches are ephemeral and doomed to extinction when faith in them disappears.[25] As to his own art, Malevich assumed on the contrary that, because it arose out of nothing—out of the all-negating material infinity and nonobjectivity of the world—it transcended all beliefs and ideologies. Yet the very name of his artistic principle—"suprematism," or the doctrine of the highest—indicates that he himself was not free of the idea of "perfection" for which he reproached others. He himself programmed the defeat of the avant-garde when he made the artist a ruler and demiurge rather than an observer. For Malevich as for Khlebnikov, of course, contemplation and domination still constitute a unity; they still contain a living faith in the magic of the image and the word, which, like Plato's "Idea" or the "Truth" of the seventeenth-century rationalists, would the moment they appeared peaceably subdue

entire peoples and grant absolute power over the enchanted world. In this sense Malevich's position is truly "supreme," for it marks the greatest possible faith of the creator in his creation. This high point, however, was soon passed, and "restructuring of the old life" began to be forced upon those who were prevented by the "remnants of the past" in their thought from absorbing the truth of the new mystical revelations. Before the people could gain access to the supreme truths of the new ideology, their consciousness would have to be transformed through changes in the base, the subconscious, and the conditions of existence.

Chapter Two

THE STALINIST ART OF LIVING

THE AVANT-GARDE as an independent entity was forever rendered impossible by the Central Committee decree of April 23, 1932, which disbanded all artistic groups and declared that all Soviet "creative workers" would be organized according to profession in unitary "creative unions" of artists, architects, and so on. This party decree, which was intended to put an end to factional strife "on the artistic and cultural front" and subordinate all cultural activity to the party leadership, formally marks the beginning of the new, Stalinist phase in Soviet culture. It was adopted during the first "Stalinist" five-year plan, whose goals included accelerated industrialization guided by a single, rigorously centralized plan, a program of forced collectivization that can be regarded as the second, Stalinist revolution, the liquidation of NEP and its relative economic freedoms, and the suppression of opposition within the party, which was accompanied by a rapid increase in the influence of the security organs. To achieve Stalin's objectives of "socialism in one country" and the "total restructuring of life" after the party's "tactical retreat" during NEP, the regime now launched an energetic program for gaining total control over even the most trivial aspects of everyday existence.

The termination of NEP also meant that the private art market was liquidated and that all "detachments on the Soviet art front" began devoting their energies to filling party orders. In effect, all culture became, in Lenin's famous phrase, "part of the common cause of the party,"[1] which in this case meant a means of mobilizing the Soviet population to fulfill the party's restructuring directives. Lef leader Maiakovskii was thus granted his wish that the government analyze his poetry together with other achievements on "the labor front." The

pen, as he had hoped, had become the equal of the bayonet; like any other Soviet enterprise, the poet could now report to the party, "raising high the hundred volumes of his party books," and through the monument "to us all, . . . socialism was being built in struggle." The avant-garde's dream of placing all art under direct party control to implement its program of life-building (that is, "socialism in one country" as the true and consummate work of collective art) had now come true. The author of this program, however, was not Rodchenko or Maiakovskii, but Stalin, whose political power made him the heir to their artistic project. As noted earlier, the avant-garde was itself prepared for such a development and stood stoically awaiting the great "corporal of the guard." The central issue to these artists was the unitary nature of the politico-aesthetic project rather than whether such unity would be achieved by politicizing aesthetics or aestheticizing politics, especially since it could be maintained that the aestheticization of politics was merely the party's reaction to the avant-garde's politicization of aesthetics. Although the party had long attempted to observe a certain neutrality in the struggle among various artistic groups, their internecine strife had literally forced it to intervene.

One significant result of this prolonged strategy of neutrality was that most of the creative intelligentsia warmly welcomed the 1932 decree stripping the power from influential organizations such as RAPP and AKhRR, which by the late 1920s and early 1930s had established a virtual monopoly in culture and were persecuting all political undesirables. It was not Stalin but RAPP and AKhRR that in fact liquidated the avant-garde as an active artistic force. The symbol of this defeat was the suicide of Maiakovskii, who had just joined RAPP in order at least partially to escape persecution and who was subsequently proclaimed by Stalin to be "the best poet of the Soviet era." Many fellow-travelers close to the avant-garde became prominent writers under Stalin: Shklovskii, Tynianov, Pasternak, and others were published, as were Kaverin (a former Serapion Brother), and Ehrenburg (who together with Lisitskii had published the constructivist journal

Veshch' [*Thing*] in Berlin). There were also more conservative fellow-travelers who had been blocked by RAPP and now went on to successful careers. Stalin, therefore, really did to some extent justify the hopes of those who thought that direct party control would be more tolerant than the power exercised by individual groups of artists. It was once rather aptly said of Stalin that he was a typical politician of the golden mean, except that whatever he found extreme he destroyed. Responding to the prolonged entreaties of the majority of Soviet artists and writers to take direct control of culture, Stalin presented his own project, and he was prepared to welcome anyone from any camp who unconditionally supported it. Those who insisted on their own exclusiveness or emphasized past services, on the other hand, were regarded as attempting to be "wiser than the party," that is, the Leader, and were ruthlessly punished. The result, which often surprised outside observers, was that the most ardent supporters of the party line became Stalin's first victims. It was no accident, therefore, that the triumph of the avant-garde project in the early 1930s should have coincided with the final defeat of the avant-garde as an established artistic movement. There would have been no need to suppress the avant-garde if its black squares and transrational poetry had confined themselves to artistic space, but the fact that it was persecuted indicates that it was operating on the same territory as the state.

In accordance with the rules prescribed by the art of war, Stalin's aesthetico-political coup was preceded by a series of conferences whose participants included not only Stalin, but also high-ranking party and government leaders close to him, such as Molotov, Voroshilov, and Kaganovich, and a number of writers, most of whom were later shot (Kirshon, Afinogenov, Iasenskii, and others).[2] Henceforth, just as Maiakovskii had demanded, the speeches of party leaders on the state of the country would juxtapose analyses of agriculture, industry, politics, and defense with comments on the situation in art that attempted to define "realism" and the desirable relationship between form and content, discussed the problem of the typical, and so on. It is of course irrelevant to object here that

Voroshilov or Kaganovich or Stalin himself were not experts on literature or art, for they were in reality creating the only permitted work of art—socialism—and they were moreover the only critics of their own work. Because they were connoisseurs of the only necessary poetics and genre—the poetics of the demiurgic construction of the new world—they were as entitled to issue orders on the production of novels and sculptures as they were to direct the smelting of steel or the planting of beets.

Stalin approved the slogan "socialist realism" and proclaimed it mandatory for all Soviet art. Most important here was literature—the socialist realist method was given its final form and adopted at the First Congress of the Writers' Union in 1934, and was subsequently superimposed on the other arts with no alterations whatever. This alone is evidence of its "antiformalist" spirit, which was oriented not toward the specific characteristics of a given art form, but toward its "socialist content," and it is for this reason that socialist realism is usually interpreted as the absolute antithesis of the formalist avant-garde. The discussion below, however, will focus on its continuity with the avant-garde project, even though the realization of that project differed from the avant-garde vision. The basic line of this continuity has already been sketched in some detail above: the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project. Thus if Stalin is viewed as the artist-tyrant who succeeded the philosopher-tyrant typical of the age of contemplative, mimetic thought, Stalinist poetics is the immediate heir to constructivist poetics. Still, there are obvious formal differences between socialist realism and avant-garde art, and, as has already been noted, these must be explained on the basis of the logic of the avant-garde project itself rather than as the result of attendant circumstances such as the low cultural level of the masses or the personal tastes of the leaders. Such factors were present, of course, and to some extent they have always existed everywhere—both in the West and in the East—yet in the conditions created by Stalinist culture they behave quite differently. It must not be thought, therefore, that they clarify anything about the specific situation of the time. The avant-garde regarded the plurality of tastes upon which the art market depended as analogous with the parliamentary democracy that the Bolsheviks had replaced: the tastes of the masses and the new reality were to be shaped together. Sergei Tret'iakov, noting that the complete restructuring of everyday life must focus first of all on remaking the human beings defined by this life, declared:

> Propaganda about forging the new human being is essentially the only content of the works of the Futurists, who without this leading idea invariably turn into verbal acrobats . . . what guided Futurism from the days of its infancy was not the creation of new paintings, verses, and prose, but the production of a new human being through art, which is one of the tools of such production.[1]

As is evident from Stalin's "shifted" avant-garde metaphor "writers are the engineers of human souls," Stalinist aesthetic theory and practice proceed from this same conception of educating and shaping the masses.

Simplifying somewhat, we can group the basic differences between avant-garde and socialist realist aesthetics around the following problems: (1) the classical heritage; (2) the role of reflecting reality in the shaping of reality; and (3) the new individual. Below I shall argue that the relevant distinctions arose not because the avant-garde project was abandoned, but because it underwent a radicalization that the avant-garde itself was unable to accomplish.

Judgment Day for World Culture

The attitude of the Bolshevik leaders toward the bourgeois heritage and world culture in general can be summarized as follows: take from this heritage that which is "best" and "useful to the proletariat" and use it in the socialist revolution and the construction of the new world. Whatever their differences in other respects, on this point all Bolshevik ideologists

agreed. Lenin sneered at Proletkult's attempts to create its own, purely proletarian culture,[4] but even Bogdanov, whose theories were the basis for Proletkultist activity, called for the past to be used in approximately the same terms as Lenin.[5] Although Trotsky and especially Lunacharskii were more sympathetic than other leaders toward "left" art, their appreciation of traditional cultural forms was never shaken by avant-garde propaganda.

Although the party leaders' positive attitude toward the classical heritage was a source of later Stalinist definitions of socialist realism, it must not be confused with the devotion to the classics displayed by groups hostile to the Soviet regime or by fellow-traveler ideologues such as Polonskii, Voronskii, or even Georg Lukacs, all of whom were rejected by Stalinist culture.[6] The turn of the opposition and fellow-travelers to the classics was motivated by an aspiration to defend the traditional role of the autonomous artist who maintained an aesthetic distance to reality and was therefore capable of independently observing and recording it. Such a role suited neither the avant-garde nor the party, and there was no place for it in Stalinist culture. The artist's involvement in the shaping of reality within a unitary, collectively executed project precluded "disinterested" contemplation, which under the prevailing circumstances was invariably regarded as tantamount to counterrevolutionary activity.

The issue in the debate between the avant-garde and the party was not whether or not art should be totally utilized—on this point both sides were in agreement—but concerned the scope of the artistic means and resources subject to such utilization. The stumbling block here was avant-garde reductionism, which if implemented would first of all deprive the party of the means of influencing the individual and society available in classical art; and second and even worse, it would in effect leave all traditional art, which at that time also represented considerable material wealth, in the complete control of the bourgeoisie. This latter fact ran directly counter to the tactics of the Bolsheviks, who wanted to "seize the cultural heritage from the bourgeoisie and give it to the proletariat,"

or, what amounts to the same thing, to appropriate it for themselves as they had already done with the state apparatus, the land, and the means of production.

From the very outset, the party was particularly critical of the avant-garde program for artificially and illegitimately limiting the use of the property that had been seized from the former ruling classes. When, to cite the two most frequently quoted declarations of the time, the futurists urged that Pushkin be "cast overboard from the steamship of modernity" and the Proletkult poets proclaimed they would "burn Raphael and trample the flowers of art in the name of our tomorrow," the party regarded such summons as incitements to destroy state property, which, in the case of Raphael, for example, could be sold for a great deal of money or at least be used to nurture "the feeling of harmony absolutely necessary to any builder of the radiant future." The charge most commonly leveled against the avant-garde was that they were "liquidationists" and thus Mensheviks, and at the same time left revisionists. The avant-garde struggle with past art was interpreted as a call to "liquidate" it and "to squander our ideological arsenal." The party's goal, on the other hand, was not to deprive itself of the tried weapon of the classics, but on the contrary to give it a new function and use it in the construction of the new world. Here the avant-garde encountered its own limitation: although it denied the criteria of taste and artistic individuality in the name of the collective goal, it continued to advocate singularity, individuality, and purely subjective taste as justification for its own devices. Almost from the very birth of the avant-garde, this contradiction was pointed out by certain of its most radical representatives, in particular the so-called vseki,[7] who insisted on a consistent eclecticism and maintained that the avant-garde's search for an original "modern" style artificially narrowed the scope of its project.

If the avant-garde and its adherents looked upon socialist realism as a kind of artistic reaction and "lapse into barbarism," it must not be forgotten that socialist realism regarded itself as the savior that would deliver Russia from barbarism by preserving the classical heritage and all of Russian culture

from the ruin into which the avant-garde wanted to plunge it. Unbelievable as it may seem today to anyone who views avant-garde works in a museum but forgets that the avant-garde project did not allow for the existence of either museums or works, it was perhaps this role of savior of which the theoreticians of socialist realism were most proud. This pride is clearly perceptible many years later in the once universally quoted passage from a speech by Andrei Zhdanov:

> At one time, as you know, bourgeois influences were very strong in painting. They cropped up time and again under the most "leftist" flags, giving themselves such tags as futurism, cubism, modernism; "stagnant academicism" was "overthrown," and novelty proclaimed. This novelty expressed itself in insane carryings-on: for instance, a girl was depicted with one head on forty legs, with one eye turned toward us, and the other toward the North Pole.
>
> How did all this end? In the complete crash of the "new trend." The Communist Party fully restored the significance of the classical heritage of Repin, Briullov, Vereshchagin, Vasnetsov, and Surikov. Were we right in reinstating the treasures of classical painting, and routing the liquidators of painting?
>
> Would not the continued existence of such "schools" have meant the nullification of painting? Did the Central Committee act "conservatively," was it under the influence of "traditionalism," of "epigonism" and so on, when it defended the classical heritage in painting? This is sheer nonsense!
>
> . . . We Bolsheviks do not reject the cultural heritage. On the contrary, we are critically assimilating the cultural heritage of all nations and all times in order to choose from it all that can inspire the working people of Soviet society to great exploits in labor, science, and culture.[1]

Thus Zhdanov finds absurd the very thought that he might be accused of traditionalism, and in fact it was he who launched the persecution of the traditionalist writers Akhmatova and Zoshchenko. It is, on the contrary, the avant-garde's position that Zhdanov presents as backward and obsolete. This motif of the absolute novelty of socialist realism relative

to all "bourgeois" culture, including the avant-garde, surfaces constantly in the writings of the apologists of Stalinist culture, who refused to regard themselves as "reactionaries." In this respect as well we can truly agree with them. The avant-garde proclaims that an entirely new era in art is succeeding the age of the representational easel painting, yet by regarding its own works in contrast to traditional ones it assumes a place in the history of art that it has declared to be terminated as of its own appearance. Avant-garde reductionism arises out of the aspiration to reject tradition and begin from zero, but this very rejection is meaningful only insofar as tradition is still alive and serves as its background. The formal innovations of the avant-garde, therefore, internally contradict the requirement that all autonomous forms be rejected. This contradiction is resolved by the productionist demand that easel painting, sculpture, narrative literature, and so forth in general be abandoned, but it is obvious that this demand remains a gesture within that same historical continuity of styles and artistic problems. Thus because the avant-garde cannot abandon its opposition to tradition, it becomes a prisoner of the very tradition it wants to overthrow.

To the Bolshevik ideologists, in contrast, point zero was the ultimate reality. The art of the past was not living history that could serve as a guide to the present, but a storehouse of inert things from among which anything that seemed appealing or useful could be removed at will. It was often said in Stalin's time that the Soviet Union was the sole preserver of the cultural heritage that the bourgeoisie itself had rejected and betrayed. Stalinist theoreticians found confirmation of the fact in the success of the "nihilist" and "antihumanist" avant-garde in the West. The absolute novelty of socialist realism needed no external, formal proof, for it followed from "the absolute novelty of the Soviet socialist order and the party agenda." Thus the novelty of Soviet art derived from the novelty of its content rather than from any "bourgeois" novelty of form, which merely concealed an old, "bourgeois" content. In its own view, Stalinist culture was not merely culture in the making, but represented instead the mature, posthistorical culture

for which the "capitalist encirclement" was simply an external, moribund formation fated to disappear together with the entire "history of the class struggle." To such a thoroughly apocalyptic consciousness the whole question of original artistic form seems impossibly antiquated. The relationship between Stalinist culture and the avant-garde is similar to that between the established church and the first ascetic sects: in both cases the blessings of the old world were first renounced and then, after the victory, exploited and "sanctified" in the new age.

The relationship of Stalinist culture to the classical artistic heritage conforms to its relations with tradition in general. The so-called Stalin Constitution of the 1930s resurrected the basic civil liberties; elections were held regularly, and even many minor details of the former way of life were revived—epaulets were reintroduced in the army, for example, as was the old aristocratic model of separate schools for boys and girls. All of these reforms were at first hailed by liberal observers as symptoms of "normalization" after the nihilism of the early revolutionary years. In actual fact, of course, the Stalinist ideologists were far more radical than the cultural revolutionaries, who had received a very bourgeois upbringing and who were in fact Westernizers aspiring to make Russia a kind of better America. The radicalism of Stalinism is most apparent in the fact that it was prepared to exploit the previous forms of life and culture, whereas even the avant-garde detractors of the past knew and respected the heritage to such a degree that they would rather destroy than utilize or profane it. (Just how smoothly the mechanisms of Stalinist culture worked can be seen in the denunciation at about this time of the prominent constructivist mathematician Nikolai Luzin. Luzin was accused of taking "a Menshevik and Trotskyist position in mathematics, as is apparent in his intention to deprive the proletariat of the important weapon of transfinite induction." Transfinite induction was repudiated by constructivist mathematics, which, although it arose at about the same time as artistic constructivism, is entirely unrelated.)

Attitudes toward the classical heritage may also be regarded from another perspective. The art of the avant-garde

was theoretically based on the method of "making it strange" or "laying bare the device," techniques that were supposed to reveal the mechanisms by which the work achieved its effects. This method also assumed continuity in the history of art, as it described each successive current as a baring of the devices concealed by its predecessors. Thus Malevich's suprematism can be viewed as working with the color and pure form that had been hidden by the mimetic forms or "content" of the traditional representational painting; Khlebnikov's verbal artistry reveals a phonetic side of speech that was hidden in classical "content" poetry, and so on. This theory demanded that art constantly be renewed and "made strange" to produce an unusual quality, novelty, and "shift" that would enhance its impact on the viewer. It might even be said that the politics of the revolutionary years were another such baring of the device. Thus it was maintained that liberal democracy is inherently repressive but conceals its repressiveness behind its form, and that this oppression must therefore be revealed by means of open proletarian terror, which, precisely because it is so candid, is superior to bourgeois democracy.

Obviously, this theory presupposes a background that can be shifted, negated, made strange. It proceeds upon the notion that the receptivity of the viewer is gradually blunted and therefore in need of renewal. Yet it was "the baring of the device" and novelty as such to which spectators of the 1920s and 1930s were no longer responding—what they wanted, as it were, was for the device to be concealed. The theory of the "bared device" contains the contradictory demands that the human subconscious be mastered and manipulated as by an engineer, on the one hand, and, on the other, that this manipulation and the achievement of the effect be revealed on the level of conscious perception. Thus formalist aesthetics required art to shape reality and then, in a spirit of "permanent revolution," immediately to destroy what it had shaped in order to comply with the demand for constant novelty. This in fact precluded the systematic, planned work that was declared to be the artistic ideal.

Stalinist culture, in contrast, was most interested in various means by which the subconscious could be shaped without

revealing the mechanisms of the process. Such, for example, were Pavlov's theory of conditioned reflexes or Stanislavskii's "Method," which taught actors to enter into their roles so completely as to lose their own identities. Stalinist culture strove not to deautomatize but rather to automatize consciousness, to shape it in the desired mold by controlling its environment, its base, its subconscious, which did not imply that the relevant devices were somehow "ideologically" concealed on the level of theoretical interpretation. Consequently, what the solution of this problem presupposed was not the rejection of artistic techniques in order to bare their devices (which theoretically produced an emotional shock but in fact merely neutralized their effect) but, on the contrary, a study of these devices and their purposeful application. Viewed from the perspective of the avant-garde's theoretical self-interpretation, in other words, Stalinist culture both radicalizes and formally overcomes the avant-garde; it is, so to speak, a laying bare of the avant-garde device and not merely a negation of it.

Of particular interest in this context is the prominent formalist theoretician Grigorii Vinokur's article "On Revolutionary Phraseology," which appeared in an early issue of *Lef*. Vinokur objects to the monotony of official Soviet propaganda, which he says has rendered it completely ineffective. Although he admits that the Soviet strategy of drumming the same simple slogans into the popular consciousness has been successful, in the best formalist tradition he fears that if used forever the approach will produce the opposite result and automatize the impact of the slogans. In other words, they will merely "go in one ear and out the other," and will never be consciously perceived by the masses. Almost pleading for mercy he continues: "Strike once, strike twice, but don't beat them unconscious!"[9] Even staunch Communists are no longer receptive to typical Soviet slogans such as "Long live the working class and its vanguard the Russian Communist party!" or "Long live the victory of the Indian workers and peasants!" for these are mere "hackneyed clichés, worn copper farthings, worthless tokens . . . a transrational language, a collection of sounds to which our ear has become so accustomed that it is utterly impossible to react to these exhortations."[10]

This last remark warrants caution, however, for in an earlier essay[11] Vinokur praises Khlebnikov's transrational poetry and suggests that transrational language offers the means of consciously and systematically controlling language as such. When toward the end of his article on revolutionary phraseology, therefore, he urges recourse to poetry—by which he undoubtedly means especially futurist poetry—one cannot help but wonder just why one form of transrational language should be exchanged for another.

Khlebnikov began creating his transrational language at a time when the Russian linguistic subconscious was starting to disintegrate. This is the source of his project for a new, magic discourse that would reunite all speakers beyond the bounds of ordinary "rational" language, in which the conflict of opinions, styles, and slogans had done irreparable damage and led to the irreversible decline of the previous linguistic unity. In the Soviet period, however, language acquired a new unity, a new linguistic subconscious that had been artificially "drummed in" by the party. The moment they were no longer perceived as such, the party slogans "dominated" the masses, becoming their subconscious, their way of life, the sort of self-evident background that remains imperceptible until it is lost by the emigré abroad. The slogans thus became transrational and ceased to bear any definite content, that is, in the terms of formalist aesthetics they were "formalized" and "aestheticized." The fact that formalist aesthetics could not identify them in this function is evidence of the fundamental weakness shared by the theory and the Russian avant-garde in general. Born in a period when the world and language were in decline and dedicated to the goal of halting and compensating for this disintegration, the avant-garde lost its inherent legitimacy and even its previous powers of analysis when the process was overcome in reality not by it but by its historical rival.

The principal ideological obstacle to the assimilation of the classical heritage was for a long time the notion of so-called vulgar sociologism, which viewed art and culture in general as

a "superstructure" erected on the economic base. This thoroughly orthodox Marxist thesis was widely applied by avant-garde theorists, in particular Arvatov, to substantiate the necessity of creating a specifically proletarian art that was to be formally novel with respect to the art of the past. The usual "fellow-traveler" objection to this demand—that in the 1920s Soviet Russia did not yet have the socialist economic base to which such a new art could correspond—became of course unacceptable in the Stalin era of "socialism in one country."

The solution was found in Lenin's earlier ideological construct of "two cultures in one,"[12] which holds that the culture of a given period does not uniformly reflect the base as a whole but is split into two camps, each of which expresses the interests of the two classes struggling within each economic formation. Thus for each period it can be established which art is progressive, that is, reflects the interests of the oppressed and historically progressive classes of society, and which is reactionary and reflects the ideology of the exploiting classes. On the basis of this theory socialist realism was proclaimed the heir to all progressive art of all periods of world history. As to the reactionary art of each period, it was to be forgotten and stricken from the annals of history; the only possible reason for preserving anything at all was to illustrate the forces hostile to genuine, progressive art.

Thus since socialist realism shared the "historical optimism," "love of the people," "love of life," "genuine humanism," and other positive properties characteristic of all art expressing the interests of the oppressed and progressive classes everywhere in all historical periods, it acquired the right to use any progressive art of the past as a model. Frequently cited examples of such progressive art included Greek antiquity, the Italian Renaissance, and nineteenth-century Russian realism. All oppressed and progressive classes of all ages and nations were united by Stalinist culturology into a single notion of the "people." This meant that both Phidias and Leonardo da Vinci were considered popular artists, since even though they themselves did not belong to the exploited classes, their works objectively expressed the progressive popular ideals of their

time. As stated by an instructive article in *Voprosy filosofii* published in the final period of Stalinist aesthetics, "Great classical art has always been imbued with the spirit of struggle against everything old and obsolete, against the social vices of its time. Herein resides the vital force of truly great art, the reason it lives on even when the age that gave birth to it has long since disappeared."[13]

It is noted further that "classical realist art retains its significance for us because of its links with the people."[14] This, it is observed, is particularly true of the classical Russian heritage. Moreover, it must not be supposed that "proletarian ideology" is the sole guarantee of realism. Most important are the realist method itself and its inherent bond with the people, whose heritage, as Lenin has shown in his discussion of Tolstoi, "contains elements that retain their significance, that belong to the future. It is this heritage that the Russian proletariat assumes and reworks."[15] Although Tolstoi's worldview was by no means Marxist, his heritage is therefore still important. The journal concludes on this basis that the theorists of the 1920s were incorrect when,

> like RAPP, they derived the objective significance of a work directly from the subjectively professed ideology of the artist or writer. . . . The Communist party and its leaders Lenin and Stalin led the struggle against Proletkult, against RAPP, against all the vulgarizers and their anarchist, contemptuous attitudes toward the great cultural achievements of the past. The party unmasked the Machist-Bogdanovite essence of Proletkult and the "theories" of RAPP, which are deeply inimical to the Soviet people. The struggle against anti-Marxist, nihilist views in aesthetics is a part of the party's overall struggle against formalism and naturalism and for socialist realism in art and literature.[16]

In this view, then, all "progressive" world culture acquires a superhistorical significance and eternal relevance that make it the contemporary of any new "progressive" aspiration, and "antipopular," "reactionary," "decadent" culture assumes a no less superhistorical, universal significance that reveals its inner sameness at any given moment of history. As has already

been noted, Stalinist culture looks upon itself as postapocalyptic culture—the final verdict on all human culture has already been passed, and all that was once temporally distinct has become forever simultaneous in the blinding light of the Final Judgment and the ultimate truth revealed in Stalin's *Short Course* of party history. Only that which can endure this radiance will remain to bask in it—everything else will be plunged into a gloom from which only "decadent" moans can be heard.

Between the progressive and the reactionary in each historical period, therefore, Stalinist culture discerns an absolute difference that is usually imperceptible to the formalist eye, which registers only similarities deriving from the unity of a historical style. Thus if Schiller and Goethe are regarded as "progressive" and "popular," Novalis and Holderlin are reactionary, antipopular exponents of the ideology of the moribund feudal classes, and so on. Under Stalin, such reactionary authors usually disappeared from the historical annals no less completely than recently unmasked "wreckers." As for progressive writers, anyone who has learned the history of art or literature from Soviet textbooks will recall that these authors became utterly indistinguishable in accounts that were not real, historical history, but a kind of hagiography that was intended to foster a deindividualized hieratic image. This hagiographic description made no distinction between Goethe and Sholokhov and Omar Khayyám—they all loved the people, were persecuted by scheming reactionary forces, labored for the radiant future, created truly realistic art, and so on.

As is evident from this brief description, the Stalinist reception of the classics differs radically from what was envisaged by the avant-garde in general and Lef in particular in their struggle with the classical heritage. Lef perceived an obvious gap between its own "demiurgic" aesthetics and the contemplative art of the past, which it usually divided into historical styles rather than into reactionary and progressive categories cutting across these styles. Here again we can see the historical limitations of the classical avant-garde, which was a prisoner

of its own all too clearly perceived place in the history of the arts.

In contrast, socialist realism, which regards historical time as ended and therefore occupies no particular place in it, looks upon history as the arena of struggle between active, demiurgic, creative, progressive art aspiring to build a new world in the interests of the oppressed classes and passive, contemplative art that does not believe in or desire change but accepts things as they are or dreams of the past. Socialist realism canonizes the former and dispatches the latter to a second, mystical death in the hell of historical oblivion. According to Stalinist aesthetics, everything is new in the new posthistorical reality—even the classics are new, and these it has indeed reworked beyond recognition. There is thus no reason to strive for formal innovation, since novelty is automatically guaranteed by the total novelty of superhistorical content and significance. Nor does this aesthetics fear charges of eclecticism, for it does not regard the right to borrow from all ages as eclectic; after all, it selects only progressive art, which possesses inherent unity. The reproach of eclecticism would be justified if the quotations were of something the aesthetics had itself determined to be reactionary, and from time to time such charges did in fact threaten writers and artists with dire consequences. Socialist realism as a whole, however, could be considered eclectic only by an outside, formalistic observer who sees nothing but combinations of styles and ignores the high ideological qualities (*ideinost'*) and "popular spirit" (*narodnost'*) that unite them.

Underpinning socialist realism was the Marxist doctrine of dialectical and historical materialism, which defined the socialist revolution as the final stage of a dialectical evolution whose intermediate phases serve as prototypes or symbols anticipating this final and absolute event. This is also the source of the Stalinist dialectical radicalization of the avant-garde, which was defeated as being "metaphysical" and "idealist." Because the avant-garde took an undialectical view of its own project as absolutely opposing or directly negating the past, it

was unable to stand up against the total dialectical irony of Stalin's negation of the negation, which in the practical language of dialectical materialism signified a dual destruction—the unending destruction of the destroyer, the purge of the purgers, the mystical sublimation of human material to distill from it the new "Soviet individual" in the name of Stalin's superhuman, transcendent, transhistorical "new humanism."

The Typology of the Nonexistent

To distinguish their views from the aesthetics of the avant-garde, the theorists of socialist realism usually insist on the role of art as a means of knowing reality, that is, on its mimetic function, which is what allows the method to be contrasted as "realism" with avant-garde formalism. However, Stalinist aesthetics distances itself no less emphatically from naturalism, associating it with the repudiated "ideology of bourgeois objectivism," which upon closer consideration proves to be what most observers, including the Lef theorists, meant by the term "realism"—the reflection of immediately perceived reality. Mimesis, which in the aesthetics of the Stalin period and even in the Soviet Union today is associated with the so-called Leninist theory of reflection, thus signifies something quite different from an orientation toward the traditional representational easel painting.

An analysis of this distinction must begin with a consideration of the notion of "the typical," a key concept in all socialist realist discourse. One definition that accurately reflects the mature phase in the evolution of the doctrine is in Georgii Malenkov's report at the agenda-setting Nineteenth Party Congress:

> As our artists, writers, and performers create their artistic images, they must constantly bear in mind that the typical is not that which is encountered the most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force. From the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical does not signify some sort of statistical mean. . . . The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the party spirit of realistic art. The question of the typical is always a political question.

After thus quoting Malenkov the journal continues:

> Thus, in the way the typical in the life of society is brought out in the artistic representation, we can see the political attitude of the artist toward reality, social life, historical events.[17]

Socialist realist mimesis, then, attempts to focus on the hidden essence of things rather than on phenomena. This is more reminiscent of medieval realism and its polemics with nominalism than of nineteenth-century realism. Medieval realism, however, did not observe any principle of party spirit and did not claim to provide political guidelines—not even to resist the temptations of the devil—because it focused on that which exists, on the true essence of things. Socialist realism is oriented toward that which has not yet come into being but which should be created, and in this respect it is the heir of the avant-garde, for which aesthetics and politics also are identical. The notion of the typical was based on the following statement by Stalin:

> What is most important to the dialectical method is not that which is stable at present but is already beginning to die, but rather that which is emerging and developing, even if at present it does not appear stable, since for the dialectical method only that which is emerging and developing cannot be overcome.[18]

If it is further considered that what is regarded as dialectically emerging and developing under socialism is that which corresponds to the latest party policies, and that anything that runs counter to these policies is becoming obsolete, then it is obvious that the former will eventually prevail and the latter will be destroyed. The connection between the typical and the principle of partymindedness, or *partiinost'*, is thus clear: the portrayal of the typical refers to the visual realization of still-emerging party objectives, the ability to intuit new currents among the party leadership, to sense which way the wind is

blowing. More precisely, it is the ability to anticipate the will of Stalin, who is the real creator of reality.

This explains why so many writers, artists, movie-makers, and so on were afforded access to privileged party circles and encouraged to participate directly in the Stalinist power apparatus. It was not a case of a vulgar "bribe"—like everyone else, cultural figures could be made to work by intimidation. The point instead is that they were thus given an opportunity to glimpse "the typical" that they were expected to reflect in their works. That is, they were provided an insight into the process through which reality was molded by the party leadership, and since they belonged to this leadership, it was a process in which they could even personally participate. As party bureaucrat the Soviet artist is more an artist, more a creator of the new reality, than in the studio in front of the easel. Thus what is subject to artistic mimesis is not external, visible reality, but the inner reality of the inner life of the artist, who possesses the ability to identify and fuse with the will of the party and Stalin and out of this inner fusion generates an image, or rather a model, of the reality that this will is striving to shape. This, then, is why the question of the typical is a political question—an inability to identify with the party is reflected externally in the inability to select the "correct" typical and can only indicate political disagreement with the party and Stalin at some subconscious level. The artists themselves may not even be aware of such dissension, but subjectively consider themselves completely loyal. Although it might seem irrational from the viewpoint of another aesthetics, here it is quite logical to eliminate artists physically for the differences between their personal dreams and that of Stalin.

Socialist realism represents the party-minded, collective surrealism that flourished under Lenin's famous slogan "it is necessary to dream," and therein is its similarity to Western artistic currents of the 1930s and 1940s. The popular definition of the method as "the depiction of life in its revolutionary development," "national in form, socialist in content," is based on this dream realism, in which a national form conceals the new socialist content: the magnificent vision of a world built by the party, the total work of art born of the will of its true creator and artist—Stalin. Under these circumstances, to be a realist means to avoid being shot for the political crime of allowing one's personal dream to differ from Stalin's. The mimesis of socialist realism is the mimesis of Stalin's will, the artist's emulation of Stalin, the surrender of their artistic egos in exchange for the collective efficacy of the project in which they participate. "The typical" of socialist realism is Stalin's dream made visible, a reflection of his imagination—an imagination that was perhaps not as rich as that of Salvador Dali (possibly the only Western artist recognized, albeit negatively, by contemporary Soviet critics), but was far more efficacious.

Light is also shed on the nature of the typical by specific recommendations of artists on how to achieve it. Particularly interesting in this regard is a speech by the prominent painter Boris Ioganson in which he attempts a concrete, practical interpretation of the theoretical tenets of socialist realist aesthetics. Repeating first the familiar theses that all art is partisan in nature and that "the so-called theory of art for art's sake" was devised "to seize an ideological weapon from the progressive forces of society," Ioganson proceeds to Lenin's theory of reflection, according to which

> the eye reflects objects as they appear to us, but human cognition of the surrounding world . . . depends on thought. [Thus] . . . the peculiarity of the artistic image as a subjective reflection of the objective world consists in the fact that the image combines the immediacy and power of active contemplation with the universality of abstract thought.
>
> . . . Herein lies the great cognitive significance of realism, the distinction between realism and naturalism in art. Absolutization of the isolated detail leads to naturalism, to a decrease in the cognitive value of art.[19]

This thesis Ioganson illustrates with the following passage from Gor'kii:

> A fact is still not the whole truth; it is merely the raw material from which the real truth of art must be smelted and extracted—the chicken must not be roasted with its feathers. This, however, is precisely what reverence for the fact results in—the accidental and inessential is mixed with the essential and typical. We must learn to pluck the fact of its inessential plumage; we must be able to extract meaning from the fact.[20]

Unlike most other contemporary critics, however, Ioganson does not limit himself to this quotation of "the father of socialist realism" describing the typical as a "plucked chicken" and the method itself as the plucking, but goes on to make some specific recommendations. There are, he says, examples of pure naturalism:

> A casually snapped color photograph in which composition and the purposeful will of the photographer are absent is pure naturalism. A color photograph taken with a definite purpose in mind and edited by the photographer's will, however, is a manifestation of conscious realism ... If the formal element of execution is connected with the artist's intent, it is a realistic element.... Thus the naturalistic and realistic approaches to photography can be distinguished according to the presence or absence of the will or purpose of the photographer. The will of the craftsman, artistic production, especially in the cinema (casting, makeup, etc.) is analogous to the will of the painter. Everything must contribute to expressing the basic idea of the work of art.[21]

Thus, after decades of bloody struggle with formalism, it suddenly turns out that "the formal element of execution ... is a realistic element." In this passage Ioganson is undoubtedly continuing to polemize with avant-garde critics who maintained that socialist realist art in general and Ioganson's paintings in particular were merely color snapshots that in the age of photography had therefore become superfluous, redundant anachronisms. Art should instead work immediately with "the unplucked fact," that is, the photograph. Ioganson is alluding to the already noted naiveté of the avant-garde, which

regarded photography, the cinema, and so on as such "facts" that had from the outset been "plucked"—directed, juggled—by the will of the artist-photographer. He agrees with his "formalist" critics that his works are little more than enlarged color photographs, but he denies that they are any the less "creative" for that. Instead, it is the transition itself from photography to painting, the change of technique, that reveals the photographer's artistic will behind the factuality of the photograph. Thus socialist realism candidly formulates the principle and strategy of its mimesis: although it advocates a strictly "objective," "adequate" rendering of external reality, at the same time it stages or produces this reality. More precisely, it takes reality that has already been produced by Stalin and the party, thereby shifting the creative act onto reality itself, just as the avant-garde had demanded. This transfer is more "realistic," however, in the sense that it reflects a political pragmatism that contrasts with the naive utopianism of the avant-garde.

The "theater" and "stagecraft" metaphor is anything but accidental in this context. As one influential critic of the time noted:

> The typical hero should possess a striking, vivid personality. Sometimes it seems that not only the spectator but even the artist has no really clear idea of the heroes of a work—their desires, their aspirations, their character traits, why they are where they are or where they are going. I think that here our artists could learn a great deal from Stanislavskii, who demanded that his actors express each separate personality even in crowd scenes; even if they uttered only two or three sentences they were required to embody a specific personality.[22]

Thus the socialist realist painting is not primarily intended to produce a visual effect or to render "the beauty of Nature" in the manner of traditional realism. Instead, it conveys the inaudible speech of the individuals it portrays, glimpses into their lives, looks for signs of good and evil, and so on. The mimetic nature of the socialist realist picture is a mere illusion, or rather yet another ideologically motivated message among

the other messages making up the painting. More than a true "reflection" of any reality, the work is a hieroglyphic text, an icon, or a prescriptive newspaper article. The three-dimensional visual illusion of the socialist realist painting can be broken down into discrete signs bearing a "supersensual," "abstract" content; it is read by spectators familiar with the appropriate codes and is evaluated on the basis of such a reading rather than on the virtue of its own visual properties. This is why the socialist realist painting judged by the traditional criteria of realistic art inevitably appears "inferior" and "bad." To the trained eye, however, it is no less rich in content than the Japanese No theater. To the viewer of the Stalin period, moreover, it offered the additional and truly aesthetic experience of terror, since an incorrect coding or decoding could mean death. Despite its surface radiance and prettiness, the socialist realist painting evokes in the Soviet citizen of especially that period the same awe that the Sphinx inspired in Oedipus, who did not know which of his interpretations would mean patricide—that is, Stalinicide—and thus his own death. Happily, to the modern viewer such pictures are as trite as the Sphinx, but the fact that they must be kept locked up in the cellars indicates that even today they have not entirely lost their former charms.

The Earthly Incarnation of the Demiurge

The radicalization of avant-garde aesthetics described above, of course, does not exhaustively explain why the notion that art must be an autonomous sphere of activity—a concept the avant-garde had always rejected—triumphed in the 1930s. Eclecticism and the total organization of life, it would seem, did not necessarily require socialist realist figurative duplication. The whole point, however, is that we do not have to do with any such simple duplication. It became clear as early as the 1920s that the total avant-garde project left one important lacuna that the avant-garde could not fill on its own, namely the image of the author of the project. By usurping the place of God, the avant-garde artist transcends the world he has created; he does not belong to this world, he has no place in it, for humanity is gone from avant-garde art. This creates the not entirely unfounded impression that although he creates a new world, the avant-garde artist remains in the old one—in the history of the arts, in tradition—rather like Moses on the threshold of the Promised Land. All aspirations toward the new notwithstanding, from the viewpoint of socialist realist aesthetics the avant-gardist is "decrepit" and a "formalist." That is, his projection of the new is merely logical, formal, and "soulless," for his soul is still in the past. At the center of socialist realist art, therefore, we find the image of the "New Man" as described by Comrade Zhdanov: "We must . . . shake off the decrepit Adam and begin working like Marx, Engels, and Lenin, like Comrade Stalin."[23]

Ia. A. Tugendkhol'd penetratingly described the crisis of the Russian avant-garde as early as the 1920s. Noting the "hypertrophy of analytical rationalism" in the leftist painting of the decade, Tugendkhol'd goes on to question the main premise of this art, which is that since the artist controls the form and color that act directly on the human subconscious, by changing the human environment he will also automatically shape the human psyche and consciousness.

> Malevich demanded that "the spiritual power of content be rejected because it is an attribute of the green world of meat and bone." . . . Punin argues that "no spiritual life, no content, no 'plot' [*siuzhetchina*] is necessary." All that is needed is form. Why? Because "it is being that determines consciousness, not consciousness that determines being. Form – being. Form/being determines consciousness, i.e., content," Punin writes. "We," he exclaims, "are monists; we are materialists, and that is why our art is our form. Our art is an art of form, because we are proletarian artists, artists of Communist culture."[24]

Tugendkhol'd responds as follows to these "formalist" arguments:

> Punin failed to understand that since this form of the age is mandatory for all, the distinction between proletarian and non-

> proletarian art happens to be found not in form, but in the *idea* of the use of this form. Locomotives and machines are the same here as in the West; this is our "form." The difference between our industrialism and that of the West, however, is in the fact that here it is the proletariat that is the master of these locomotives and machines; this is our content.[25]

When he brings up the technological backwardness of Russia and the sameness of Soviet and Western technology, of course, Tugendkhol'd is arguing like a typical fellow-traveler. Such views would later be condemned as slanderous "cosmopolitan groveling before the West" and Tugendkhol'd would be rejected by Stalinist culture, but here he is in essence expressing its central argument.

If at first the avant-garde and orthodox Marxists truly believed that consciousness was determined by the material base, this belief rather quickly dissipated for two, seemingly opposite, reasons. First of all, the human consciousness proved far less flexible than had been supposed previously, when it was sincerely thought that a simple change in conditions would automatically produce a change in consciousness. Thus the theorists unexpectedly found the consciousness of the "new individual" to be the main stumbling block. Since the Russian base continued to lag behind that of the West, however, this new consciousness was the sole basis and guarantee for the building of socialism. This in turn meant that to speak of socialism one must, like Tugendkhol'd, resort to purely psychological terms such as "the socialist attitude of the Soviet individual to labor." In both the positive and negative respects, then, the fate of socialism is defined and decided psychologically, whence Stalin's famous change of slogans from "technology decides everything" to "the cadres decide everything."

Like the 1930s in Europe, Stalinist culture rediscovered human subjectivity and a new romanticism. The way to this upheaval, of course, had already been paved by Leninism, particularly when Marxist theory was proclaimed "the victorious ideology of the proletariat" that was to conquer "decadent bourgeois ideology." Thus instead of a critique of ideology Marxism was itself declared an ideology; more precisely, although it remained a critique of ideology it began to be interpreted as an ideology. Hence such formulas typical of the Stalin period—and of our day as well—proclaiming that "history is driven by the victorious teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin." The materialist determinism of history, in other words, began itself to determine history. As Lenin had said: "Marx's teaching is omnipotent because it is true." In this slogan, which embellishes most Soviet cities, the essence of Lenin's revolution is perfectly clear. From the orthodox Marxist point of view, in contrast, Marxism is true because it is invincible, meaning that it corresponds to the objective logic of materialistically determined history. In this respect Leninism and Stalinism can be considered thoroughly idealistic, and to this day one can read in Soviet textbooks of philosophy that history is determined by great ideas, the greatest of which is the Marxist notion that history is determined materialistically. Only someone with an inadequate grasp of Soviet dialectical thought, of course, could be puzzled by such a statement.

Be that as it may, we cannot comprehend the Stalin period unless we consider Stalin's famous declaration, "Life has become better, comrades; life has become more joyous." The source of this joy was not any improvement in material conditions but the realization that such things were beside the point. Liberation from the "formalism," "machinism," and "leveling" of the preceding avant-garde period was itself experienced as happiness. At the same time, the struggle against formalism also connoted a struggle against bureaucratic formalism. Among the characteristic traits of Stalinist literary heroes is their ability to perform obviously superhuman feats, and they derive this capability from their refusal to approach life "formalistically." Thus they can cure tuberculosis by willpower alone, raise tropical plants in the open air of the tundra, paralyze their enemies with the power of their gaze, and so on.[26] Without any additional technology, by proletarian willpower alone, the Stakhanovite movement increased labor pro-

ductivity manyfold. Ignoring "formalist genetic methods," Academician Lysenko transformed certain plant species into completely different ones.

The slogan of the age became "Nothing is impossible for a Bolshevik." Any reference to facts, technical realities, or objective limits was treated as "cowardice" and "unbelief" unworthy of a true Stalinist. It was thought that willpower alone could overcome anything that the bureaucratic, formalistic eye perceived as an insurmountable obstacle. The model of such an iron will was Stalin himself, for whom, since it appeared to be his will alone that drove the entire country, nothing was impossible. Generations were raised on the examples of Pavka Korchagin and Mares'ev,[27] invalids who overcame their physical infirmity through sheer willpower. These characters are in a sense undoubtedly symbolic of Stalin's will, whose mighty power was felt throughout the land despite the Leader's sedentary reclusion within the Kremlin walls.

Incidentally, widespread formulas of the time such as a "will of steel" or the endlessly repeated song lyrics "we have wings of steel and a fiery engine for a heart" are extraordinarily well suited to the image of the "engineer of human souls," for they seem to suggest that the individual has absorbed technology and that the former irrational faith in technological might has been transformed into an equally irrational faith in latent human powers. The technical organization of the world became merely the visible realization of the inherent powers of its creator, and the solitary, suffering, self-sacrificing artist-hero of the avant-garde became the hero of Stalinist culture—now, however, as a sportsman, polar aviator, factory manager, collective farm party organizer, and so on—that is, a real creator of real life rather than simply a builder of castles in the air.

The depths of the human psyche, of course, revealed to Stalinist culture not only "creative might," but also a potential for negation and destruction. Loyal and well-known Communists suddenly turned out to be monsters capable of demoniacal, spontaneous, and unprovoked malice and violence. They incarnated the other, destructive side of the avant-garde,

whose passion for negating the past to clear the way for the new was as absolute as the creative energy it devoted to its artistic project. As Tret'iakov observed elsewhere in the article cited above: "Futurism was never a school. It was a socio-aesthetic tendency, the strivings of a group of people whose common point of tangency was not even positive tasks, . . . but rather a hatred for their 'yesterday and today,' a relentless and merciless hatred."[28] The figure of the "wrecker" that is so important to Stalinist mythology is no more "realistically" motivated than the superhuman power of creation in the "positive hero." The show trials of the 1930s demonstrated that seemingly quite normal persons were capable of strewing ground glass in the food of the workers, giving them smallpox and skin disease, poisoning wells and public places, infecting livestock with anthrax, and so on. Moreover, they did all this on a superhuman, unimaginable scale, accomplishing the most titanically destructive feats in many places at the same time but without any technical or organizational assistance (since that would eliminate their individual guilt), and by willpower alone (since they were the whole time working for the party and under its supervision).

That the actions of the show-trial defendant defied ordinary human logic was usually even emphasized in the accusation, because this inexplicability was evidence that his evil will was absolute and incorrigible and could only be subdued by physically eliminating the individual. Thus in view of the entire country the soul of an ordinary, seemingly unremarkable person opened to reveal enormous superhuman energy, and this, of course, could not but influence how the culture viewed humanity as such. Especially literature began to depict demoniacal doubles who destroyed everything the demiurge created (for example, in Veniamin Kaverin's *Two Captains* or Leonid Leonov's *Russian Forest*). Thus neither the positive nor the negative characters of Stalinist culture belong to the reality in which they act; they are not linked to it through the ordinary psychological motivations typical of genuine realistic literature or art. Here again the true nature of Stalinist art will be obscured if study is limited to a superficial consideration of the

traditional realistic forms of narrative, theater, cinema, painting, and the like that it employs. The positive and negative heroes of Stalinist culture are the two faces of the preceding avant-garde demiurge, and they transcend the reality they create or destroy. Likewise, the struggle between them takes place not within but beyond the sphere of the real, and reality itself is merely a stake in the game.

There is no place in avant-garde aesthetics for demonstrating this struggle, because it is waged outside the total aesthetic project that embraces the entire world. David Burliuk's lines, "Everyone is young, young, young, and there's a *devilish* hunger in their bellies,"[29] (italics added) and his subsequent call to devour the whole world eloquently illustrate the fact that both the creative and the destructive sides of the avant-garde operate in a space that transcends both the present and future worlds, so that they are completely irrational if judged by ordinary earthly criteria. The energy of the avant-garde destruction of the old world and the demoniacal force of its provocation derive not from worldly passions, but from an absolute, transcendental event—the death, or rather the murder, of God—the same source from which it draws its superhuman creative energy. The moment the avant-garde artist's position is occupied by the party leadership and the real figure of "the new individual, the rebuilder of the Earth," the avant-garde myth becomes a subject for art, and the figure of the avant-garde demiurge breaks down into the Divine Creator and his demoniacal double—Stalin and Trotskii, "the positive hero" and "the wrecker."

The above remarks explain both the resurrection of autonomous art in the Stalin period and its quasi-mimetic features. The goal of this art is to "reflect" or render visible the struggle to determine the destiny of the world and the protagonists of the struggle. The "materialistic art" of the avant-garde could not do this, for it failed to understand that what decides everything is not the "means of production" themselves, but their mode of employment, that is, the "relationship to them." The art of socialist realism, therefore, is not realistic in the traditional sense of the word; that is, what it provides is not a reflection of worldly events in their worldly contexts and motivations, but hagiographic, demonological, and other such depictions of transcendental events and their worldly consequences. It is not for nothing that socialist realist aesthetics always speaks not of "portraying" positive or negative heroes, but of "incarnating" them by artistic means. In and of themselves the positive and negative heroes have no external appearance, because they express transcendental demiurgic forces. However, to demonstrate these forces in a manner that is "intelligible to the people" (the "people" here meaning not actual consumers of art but mortals who lack transcendental vision), they must be symbolized, incarnated, set upon a stage. Hence the constant concern of socialist realist aesthetics with verisimilitude. Its heroes, as is stated in certain of the quotations cited above, must thoroughly resemble people if people are not to be frightened by their true aspect, and this is why the writers and artists of socialist realism constantly bustle about inventing biographies, habits, clothing, physiognomies, and so on. They almost seem to be in the employ of some sort of extraterrestrial bureau planning a trip to Earth—they want to make their envoys as anthropomorphic as possible, but they cannot keep the otherworldly void from gaping through all the cracks in the mask.

This "self-staging" of the avant-garde demiurge is also characteristic of other artistic currents of the 1930s and 1940s, particularly surrealism, with which, as with the art of Nazi Germany, socialist realism has a great deal in common. All that distinguishes surrealism or magic realism from the totalitarian art of the time is the "individual" nature of its staging, which was confined to "art," whereas in Germany or Russia the predicates of the surrealistic artist-demiurge were transferred to the political Leader. The kinship of these tendencies is also apparent in the conversion of a number of French surrealists to socialist realism and fascism, Salvador Dali's interest in the figures of Lenin, Stalin, Hitler, and others.

A great deal has been written recently on the proximity of socialist realism to the ritualistic, sacred art of the past, on the

theatrical and magical nature of its artistic practice, its use of forms of "primitive thought" resembling those described by Levy-Bruhl, and its continuity with medieval Russian and Western Christian prototypes. These publications, among which special mention should be made of V. Papernyi's *Kul'tura 2* and Katerina Clark's *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*,[30] contain many valuable observations and penetrating analyses of the impact on Stalinist culture of sacred archetypes familiar from the art of other religiously oriented periods. All of these studies, however, neglect to inquire why this quasi-sacred art arose where and when it did; more precisely, they treat it in the usual sociological spirit as a "lapse" of Russian culture into a "primitive state" or "pure folklore." Papernyi, for example, considers such lapses as typical of Russian history in general. This leads him, in effect, to deny the specific characteristics of Stalinist culture, which he, Clark, and many others consider quite apart from the striking analogies that can be observed in the contemporary culture of other countries. It is instead assumed that Stalinist culture somehow falls outside the entire historical process. As I have already noted, this assumption suggests that, though these scholars may be critical of Stalinist culture on the conscious level, subconsciously they have been transfixed by its claim to have transcended history.

The reason that the historical position of Stalinist culture cannot be determined even though its mechanisms have been fairly thoroughly described is that the rationality, technicality, and materialism of the avant-garde that preceded it have been greatly overestimated. Although the design of the avant-garde artistic project was rationalistic, utilitarian, constructive, and in that sense "enlightenist," the source of both the project and the will to destroy the world as we know it to pave the way for the new was in the mystical, transcendental, "sacred" sphere, and in that sense completely "irrational." The avant-garde artist believed that his knowledge of and especially participation in the murder of God gave him a demiurgic, magical power over the world, and he was convinced that by thus crossing the boundaries of the world he could discover the

laws that govern cosmic and social forces. He would then regenerate himself and the world by mastering these laws like an engineer, halting its decline through artistic techniques that would impart to it a form that was eternal and ideal or at least appropriate to any given moment in history. All of this certainly belongs to a mystical order of experience that differs from the simple utilitarianism of form and transparency of construction to which the avant-garde is usually reduced by those who consider it only in the context of the museum or of design. Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, and Malevich's mystery, *Victory over the Sun*, in which the sign of the black square first appeared, reproduces this "murder of the sun" and the falling of a mystical night in which is ignited the artificial sun of the new culture and new technological world. The avant-garde itself was perfectly aware of the sacred dimension of its art,[31] and socialist realism preserved this knowledge. The sacred ritualism of socialist realist hagiography and demonology describes and invokes the demiurgic practice of the avant-garde. What we are dealing with here is not stylization or a lapse into the primitive past, but an assimilation of the hidden mystical experience of the preceding period and the appropriation of this experience by the state. An analogy with the "death of the Christian God" in the history of the church is appropriate, because it is an integral part of the ecclesiastical history of Christianity and not merely an artificial stylization of previous models. Though it was ever ready to quote the past, Stalinist culture was not a stylization. On the contrary, in using the experience of the past it always strove to distance itself from the past by reading it unhistorically and "incorrectly" and incorporating it into the context of its own posthistorical existence.

Critics of the late 1920s and early 1930s repeatedly cited the necessity of returning to traditional forms of art to "incarnate the image of the new man," that is, the superman or demiurge. Particularly characteristic here are some remarks by Tugendkhol'd, who links the turn to realistic painting in the mid-1920s with the shock of Lenin's death. He writes: "When Lenin died, everyone sensed that something had been

lost, that now it was necessary to forget all 'isms' and keep his image for posterity. All currents were agreed that it was desirable to preserve Lenin."[32] Thus as the focus shifted from the project to its author, Lenin became more important than "Leninism."

The Lenin cult was very significant both in the political legitimization of Stalin and in the evolution of socialist realism, since even before Stalin came to power Lenin had been proclaimed the model of the "new man," "the most human of all human beings." Maiakovskii's slogan "Lenin is more alive than the living" adorning the streets of Soviet cities does not contradict the cult of Lenin's mummy in the mausoleum (perhaps one of the most mysterious in the history of world religion). Although I shall not attempt an exhaustive description of the cult here, it does deserve a few words. It has undeniably exerted a hidden formative influence on all subsequent Stalinist and post-Stalinist Soviet culture, if for no other reason than the central position it occupies in the invisible Soviet sacred hierarchy. Twice a year, "the entire Soviet land" submits its "report" in parades and demonstrations that pass by the mausoleum, and the leaders who accept this report stand on the roof of the structure, symbolically basing their power on the mummy of Lenin concealed within.

The construction of the mausoleum on Red Square and the founding of the Lenin cult were vigorously opposed by traditional Marxists and the representatives of left art. The former spoke of "Asiatic barbarism" and "savage customs unworthy of Marxists." Lef also reacted to the first temporary variant of the mausoleum, which was later slightly simplified, describing it as "a verbatim translation from the ancient Persian" that resembled the grave of King Cyrus near Mugraba. Such criticism today, of course, is no longer possible—not only because the mausoleum was long ago pronounced "sacred to all Soviet citizens," but also because everyone got used to it long ago.

The Lef critics, who perceived in Lenin's mausoleum only an analogy with ancient Asian tombs, were as usual blind to the originality of the new Stalinist culture taking shape before their very eyes. The mummies of the pharaohs and other ancient rulers were walled up in pyramids and concealed from mortals—opening such graves was considered sacrilege. Lenin, in contrast, is on public display as a work of art, and his mausoleum, as is evident from the long lines that have formed before it every day for decades, is without a doubt the most frequented museum in the Soviet Union. If the "militant atheists" of the time exhumed the relics of saints and exhibited them in museumlike displays as antireligious propaganda, Lenin was from the outset simultaneously buried and displayed. The Lenin mausoleum is a synthesis between a pyramid and a museum that exhibits Lenin's body, the mortal husk he shed to become the personification of the building of socialism, "inspiring the Soviet people to heroic deeds."

Another significant fact is that whereas mummies are traditionally dressed in garments marking the transition of the mortal into the other world, Lenin's external appearance has been "realistically" reconstructed down to the last detail as he was "in life." This is often done at funerals today *before* the body is consigned to the grave, which is further evidence of the universal character of the religiosity embodied in the mausoleum. It might be said that if earlier the body of the deceased was honored because of its absolute otherness, because it belonged to a world that was an alternative to the earthly one and—as in Judaism and Christianity—because it offered the hope of resurrection, Lenin's body is revered precisely because the deceased has irrevocably parted from it. In other words, it no longer corresponds to any spiritual reality. In this sense, Lenin's body is venerated and displayed as evidence of the fact that he has forever departed from the world, as a testimony that he has abandoned this embodiment of his without a trace and that therefore his spirit or "cause" is available for incarnation in subsequent Soviet leaders. Lenin's corpse on display, which has not been and cannot be transfigured but remains "as it might have appeared on the day of his death," is meant to offer eternal proof that he really and irrevocably died and will not be resurrected, and that the only appeal that can be made to him is through the heirs who now stand upon his tomb. In this sense the removal of Stalin's body from the mau-

soleum and its burial indicate that the culture is unable to recognize the finality of his death and to free his spirit for further incarnations (it is no coincidence that Evtushenko's poem "The Heirs of Stalin," written on the occasion of the removal, expresses apprehension that Stalin's work will be continued).

"Immortality in deeds" and the passing on of the spirit to the individual's heirs after death are constant themes in Soviet culture and are aptly expressed, for example, in the widespread slogan, "Stalin is the Lenin of our day." Thus because it signifies the complete end of Lenin's autonomous existence outside and apart from his "work," the body in the mausoleum served to confirm the totality of Stalin's power, which no one's presence could limit even in the transcendental world and which no resurrection or Judgment Day could call into question. Lenin's mummy can at the same time be regarded as the model for the "incarnations" of the socialist realist hero; the external "human" wrapper is here merely that: a shell, a husk donned by the demiurgic and dialectical forces of history that they may manifest themselves and then exchange it for another. Thus ex post factum it is Lenin, and not the avant-garde claiming the role, who is acknowledged to be the demiurge of his age. It must also be recognized that "left art" itself had a hand in this canonization of Lenin: recall Maiakovskii's poem sanctifying him, or the collection of articles by the Opoiaz formalists Shklovskii, Tynianov, Eikhenbaum, and others who analyzed Lenin's style. Considering the rigor of Opoiaz's criteria, such analysis is tantamount to recognizing him as an artist, a creator.[33]

If Lenin was canonized after the fact, Stalin's image in art—as the genuine new man, the model for every builder of socialism, the true creator of the new life—allowed him to see his own reflection in the work of art he had created, because as a new Soviet individual, the artist could not be understood except as "inspired by the spirit of Stalin," as created by Stalin. In this sense the portraits of Stalin—the greatest achievement of socialist realist art—are reflections of the demiurge itself and thus the concluding stage of the dialectical process. It is in this sense that we must understand Stalin's famous directive to

writers and cultural workers in general to "write the truth." As was mentioned earlier, this refers not to an external, static truth, but to the inner truth in the artist's heart, his love for and faith in Stalin. As opposed to the avant-garde's "formalism," its insincere, devious "devices" and emotional emptiness and callousness, Stalinist culture is therefore moved above all by a spirit of sincerity and immediacy. The artist of Stalinist culture is a medium who spontaneously praises and condemns according to the inner dictates of the heart. The state judged the condition of the artist's heart on the basis of this spontaneous evidence, and even if the diagnosis was negative and the disease incurable, blame was placed not on the bards themselves, but on the appropriate party organization for failing to educate them properly and for "permitting disruption and waste in its ideological work." The writers themselves even inspired a kind of respect, serving as examples of "honest enemies" to the "insincere," cowardly formalists, who were called upon to finally reveal their "true faces" so that they could be befittingly liquidated.

This profound romanticism of Stalinist culture, for which the heart of the artist was either possessed by a divine thirst for good and gratitude to his creator Stalin or had been seduced by "the wrecker," naturally generated a cult of love as a kind of "inner utopia" that succeeded the external mechanical utopia of the avant-garde. The favorite heroes of Stalinist culture became Romeo and Juliet, Carmen, and the like, quite in accordance with Stalin's famous pronouncement on one of Gor'kii's stories: "This piece is more potent than Goethe's *Faust*. Love conquers death." If the avant-garde artist assumed that it was enough simply to build the world as a machine for it to begin moving and living, Stalin understood that in order to awaken life in the machine you must first arouse love for its creator. Death would not be conquered until the new human beings created by Stalin joined with their maker in a mystical union, surrendering their own wills so that the will of the creator be done.

The obvious "Byzantine" attributes of Stalinist culture and its saturation with Christian symbolism are often traced to

Stalin's theological training and traditional Russian piety, which was now frustrated and transferred to a new object. All such superficial sociological explanations, however, are unsatisfactory. The usurpation of God's role and the reconstruction and reinterpretation of the myth of God the Artist who shapes "life" and "overcomes the resistance of the material" are all hidden avant-garde mythologemes. These mythologemes, which render the avant-garde a primarily religious or mystical phenomenon rather than the technological and rational entity it seems to be at first glance, did not surface until the Stalin period. Moreover, if the figure of the avant-garde demiurge split into the infinitely good "grandfather" Lenin and the infinitely evil "wrecker" Trotskii, Stalin himself—despite his indubitable sanctity—also displays a great many demonic attributes. For example, he works at night, when "normal people" are asleep, his prolonged silence is frightening, and his unexpected interference in debates or everyday affairs often seem to be ambivalent provocations.[34] Thus he ensures to the full that he is both sincerely revered and held in awe.

This new cult of the protean "dialectical demiurge" that succeeded the traditional Christian cult of a God who was uniquely incarnated and retained his self-identity perhaps consummates the avant-garde's most important creative impulse, which was to bring forth the superindividual, extrapersonal, and collective in art, to transcend the limits of the earthly, mortal "creative individuality." Although all avant-garde artists declared their projects to be extrapersonal, cleansed of everything accidental, purged of the artist's "nature," or individual, spontaneous reactions, these projects remained individualized to the highest degree, because the very demand that a project be constructed in opposition to "automatized life" and the typically avant-garde set on novelty and originality obviously contradicted its ambitions for universality. Here again the result of reduction, be it ever so radically executed, depends on *what* is being reduced, on the context of the avant-garde projection. Each act of reduction was declared to be final—a reduction to absolute zero that rendered all further reduction impossible, the sole and definitive incarnation of the ambivalent, destructive, and creative demiurgic principle. Yet

each time it turned out that the reduction could be reduced again, and the avant-garde was thus transformed into a ritual that, blind to its own inner mechanics, denied it was ritualistic.

Despite its thoroughly romantic insistence on the individuality and spontaneity of the artist, socialist realism very quickly succeeded in unifying cultural life by fusing all hearts together with the same love and the same fear of Stalin. The discovery of superindividual strata of the creative and the demonic in the individual destroyed individuality and with it classical realism, or "naturalism," from within and in a certain sense forever. Stalinist art is an almost unbroken monolith. Especially in the later period, multifigured compositions were like major architectural projects done by the "brigade method." Literary works as well were rewritten so many times in response to instructions issuing from a variety of sources that they lost their individual authorship. The significance of the museum, whose holdings were merely increased by the avant-garde's futile struggle against it, was accordingly reduced almost to nothing. Just as the avant-garde had demanded, architecture and monumental art now moved to the center of Stalinist culture, and the easel painting that was resurrected on the grave of the avant-garde consequently practically disappeared. All of this, of course, afforded little consolation to avant-garde artists, writers, and critics, who, whatever they might say publicly, wanted individual recognition. Such have all "artists" always been, and such, evidently, shall they ever remain. Although Malevich was placed in a suprematist coffin, he was then very traditionally consigned to the grave, thus describing in the image of this final suprematist construction the actual trajectory of suprematism—all turn to dust again, as Solomon said. Lenin's dust, in contrast, has not yet been consigned to the grave, and, "traditional" though it is, it thus continues to confirm the impersonality and universality of the "work" of its temporary owner. It is difficult to say which of these forms of immortality is the more enviable.

Thus upon closer examination we see that the usual strict dichotomy between the avant-garde and socialist realism derives from the fact that both have been viewed from a false

perspective. This perspective, which both opposed, was the museum exhibition, which had moreover become the symbol of true faith and ethical approbation. With respect to the main ambition of the avant-garde, which was to overcome the museum and bring art out directly into life, socialist realism both reflected and consummated avant-garde demiurgism.

The avant-garde and socialist realism, by which is meant here the art of the Stalin period, also coincide with respect to their motives for extending art into life. Both aspired to resurrect by technological means the wholeness of God's world that had been disrupted by technology; to halt technological progress and the march of history in general by placing it under complete technological control; to conquer time and enter into eternity. Both the avant-garde and socialist realism think of themselves primarily in compensatory terms, contrasting themselves with "individualistic bourgeois decadence" and its impotence to cope with the decay of the social and cosmic whole.

Malevich thought that the *Black Square* had given him access to a vision of the pure materiality coinciding (in the best Aristotelian traditions) with the nothingness that arose after the disintegration of the Divine Logos—the world of Divine Forms, which (interpreted in the best Thomist traditions) were superimposed by God the Artist upon material chaos. Constructivism, on the other hand, demanded that art impart a new form to this chaos by taking the place of the God that progress had killed. Even in its most radical variant of Lef productivism, however, the Russian avant-garde preserved its faith in the dichotomy between the artistic, organized, and crafted word, image, and the like, and that which was unartistic, immediate, everyday, and "material." Consequently, in its practice it replaced work on reality by work on the reflection of reality in the mass media (the newspaper, the photograph, etc.), which had long been manipulated by the state and, to use a modern term, had become a simulacrum of reality.

Drawing upon the experience in manipulation that the party had been accumulating on the social level from the very outset, Stalinist culture declared the primary and the immediate to be the domain of artistic organization. At the same time,

in autonomous artistic activity it thematized the image of the demiurge—the creator of the new reality—in a way the avant-garde was unable to do by its own means. In this respect the art of socialist realism is akin to other currents—surrealism, magic realism, the art of Nazi Germany—in which the creative and the demonic elements of the avant-garde were manifested on the psychological plane. Transcending the historical framework of the avant-garde and eliminating the opposition between artistic and unartistic, traditional and new, the constructive and the everyday (or kitsch), the art of the Stalin period, like the culture of Nazi Germany, claimed to be building a new and eternal empire beyond human history, an apocalyptic kingdom that would incorporate all the good of the past and reject all the bad. This ambition to implement the avant-garde utopian project by non-avant-garde, traditionalist, "realistic" means constitutes the very essence of this culture and therefore cannot be dismissed as a superficial pose. The life-building spirit of the Stalin years resists interpretation as a mere regression into the past, because it insists that it is an absolute apocalyptic future in which distinguishing between past and future is no longer meaningful.

That the theorists of Stalinist culture were themselves aware of its logic is evident from their criticism of the evolution of avant-garde art in the West. Thus L. Reingardt, writing in the ultraofficious journal *Iskusstvo* (*Art*), describes post-World War II Western avant-gardism as a "new academism," the new international style suited to the internationalism of the large (principally American) corporations. He continues:

> Recognition of the latest currents in modern Western art by the wealthy bourgeoisie is tantamount to a death sentence. When they appeared these currents attempted to play on society's hatred of the obsolete order. . . . Now the game of opposing official art is no longer justified. The educated philistines have rushed to embrace their prodigal son. Formalist currents have become the official art of Wall Street. . . . A myriad of advertising firms and speculators create and destroy reputations, finance new currents, manipulate public taste, or rather the lack thereof.[33]

This is a statement that could be endorsed by more than one contemporary champion of postmodernism in the struggle against avant-garde "corporate art."[36]

The vehemence with which Reingardt condemns the avant-garde derives from the profound conviction that, in different forms adequate to the age, Soviet socialist realism preserved the vital modernist life-building impulse that modernism itself lost long ago, when it entered the academies and prostituted itself to its archenemy, the philistine consumer. In this view, the freedom of Soviet art is higher than the pseudofreedom of the Western market. It is the freedom to ignore the tastes of the people and create for the state a new individual and consequently a new people. Although it is with rare exceptions expressed in ethical and political terms, the highest goal in the building of socialism is thus aesthetic, and socialism itself is regarded as the supreme measure of beauty.[37] Before this culture could be regarded from a truly aesthetic perspective, it had to fail and become a thing of the past.

Chapter Three

POSTUTOPIAN ART: FROM MYTH TO MYTHOLOGY

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE to describe Stalinism as an aesthetic phenomenon, as a total work of art, without discussing its reception as such in the unofficial or semiofficial Soviet culture of the 1970s and 1980s. By reflecting it and revealing its internal structure, this reception completed Stalin's project, enabling it for the first time to be grasped in its entirety. The retrospective view taken in the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, is anything but extraneous to the culture of the Stalin years. It represents not simply the next stage in the history of Russian art, but is vital to an understanding of the internal logic and true nature of the Stalinist project and demands analysis if the real historical place of that project is to be determined.

After Stalin's death in 1953 and the beginning of what in the West is known as "de-Stalinization" and in the Soviet Union is called the "struggle with the consequences of the personality cult," it became obvious to all that the consummation of world history and the construction of a timeless, millennial apocalyptic kingdom had in reality been based on a chain of demoralizing atrocities and a propagation of ignorance and prejudice that in the cultural respect had turned Soviet society back by decades. The barricades against bourgeois progress that were supposed to protect the country from the flood of historical change now crumbled as the Soviet Union sought to return to history. Some time passed before it was realized that there was nowhere to return to, for history itself had in the meantime disappeared. The entire world entered the posthistorical phase when—and here Stalin's experiment played a part—it lost its faith that history could be overcome. For when history no longer strives toward consummation, it disappears, ceases to be history, stagnates.

scious, the technologists of desire, the social magi and alchemists that the Russian avant-gardists aspired to become and that Stalin actually was. The privilege of the context over the text, the unconscious over consciousness, the "other" over the subjective, or all that is known as the "unsaid" (*non-dit*) and "unthought" (*impensé*) over the individual human being merely means the dominance of the person who speaks about, or even more precisely, the person who actually works on, this context, this unconscious, this other, this unsaid. If such work succeeds in creating an artificial unconscious, an artificial context, and new and as yet unseen machines of desire called, say, "Soviet people," then these persons will suddenly be able to lead lives and generate texts that do not differ from natural ones, rendering irrelevant both the distinction between natural and artificial and all the effort expended on it. And these amazing beings with an artificial unconscious but a natural consciousness will also be capable of deriving aesthetic pleasure from contemplating this unconscious of theirs as a work of art created by someone else. In the most tasteless petty-bourgeois tradition, they will thereby transform the avant-garde's unique and horrible feat—the creation of Stalinist art—into an object of frivolous amusement.

NOTES

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The Culture of the Stalin Era in Historical Perspective

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2. Kazimir Malevich, "Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting," in his *The Non-Objective World*, trans. from German by Howard Dearstyne (Chicago, 1959), pp. 18–20.
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15. For the texts of these polemics, see Hubertus Gassner and Eckhart Gillen, *Zwischen Revolutionskunst und sozialistischem Realismus* (Cologne, 1979), pp. 52–56.

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33. The texts on Lenin's style are in *LEF*, no. 1 (5)(1924): 53–104.

34. See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 141–45, and A. Siniavskii, "Stalin—geroi i khudozhnik stalinskoi epokhi," *Sintaksis*, no. 19 (1987): 106–25.

35. L. Reingardt, "Po tu storonu zdravogo smysla. Formalizm na sluzhbe reaktsii," *Iskusstvo*, no. 5 (1949): 77–78.

36. Cf. Martha Rosler, "Lookers, Buyers, Dealers, and Makers: Thoughts on Audience," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984), pp. 311–40.

37. N. Dmitrieva, "Esteticheskaia kategoriia prekrasnogo," *Iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1952): 78.

Chapter Three
Postutopian Art

1. Cf. B. Groys, "Der Paradigmawechsel in der Sowjetischen inoffiziellen Kultur," in D. Beyrau and W. Eichwede, eds., *Auf der Suche nach Autonomie* (Bremen, 1987), pp. 53–64.

2. Livshits, *The One-and-a-Half-Eyed Archer*. See also Rodchenko's vehemently "anti-Western" letters from Paris in "Rodchenko v Parizhe," *Novyi LEF*, no. 2 (1927): 9–21.

3. For reproductions of Bulatov's works, see *Katalog Erik Bulatow* (Kunsthalle Zurich, 1988). See Boris Groys's interview with Bulatov in *A-Ia*, no. 1 (1979): 26–33.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Aphorism 125), in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York, 1980), p. 95.

5. Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism," in John E. Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* (London, 1988), p. 118.

6. Erik Bulatov, "Ob otnoshenii Malevicha k prostranstvu," *A-Ia*, no. 5 (1983): 26–31.

7. B. Grois, "Kartina kak tekst: 'Ideologicheskoe iskusstvo' Bulatova i Kabakova," *Wiener Slawistischer Almanakh* 17: 329–36.

8. B. Grois, "Albomy Il'i Kabakova," *A-Ia*, no. 2 (1980): 17–22. For reproductions and a general description, see *Katalog Ilya Kabakov "Am Rande"* (Kunsthalle Bern, 1985).

9. Il'ia Kabakov, "Semidesiatie gody" (manuscript).

10. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1982), p. 18.

11. Cf. the title of Kabakov's Bern exhibition, "Am Rande."

12. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London, 1987), pp. 60–61.

13. On the function of white in Kabakov, see *A-Ia*, no. 6 (1984).

14. For reproductions and a general introduction, see Melvyn B. Nathanson, ed., *Komar & Melamid: Two Soviet Dissident Artists* (Carbondale, Ill., 1979), and *Komar and Melamid*, Museum of Modern Art Catalogue (Oxford, 1985).

15. V. Komar and A. Melamid, "A. Ziablov (Etiud dlia monografii," in *Russica-81. Literaturnyi sbornik* (New York, 1982), p. 408.

16. Ibid., p. 404.

17. Ibid., p. 407.

18. Cf. Komar and Melamid's *Yalta 1945—Winter in Moscow 1977*, in *Documenta 8* (Kassel, 1987), vol. 2, pp. 132–33.

19. Interview with Noemi Smolik, *Wolkenkratzer*, no. 6 (1987): 48–53.

20. D. Prigov, *Literaturnoe A-Ya* (Paris, 1985), pp. 84–94.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. See, for example, Jouri Mamleiev, *Chatouny* (Paris, 1986), and two of his stories in *Akzente*, no. 3 (1988): 244–59.

25. V. Sorokin, "Otkrytie sezona," in *Literaturnoe A-Ya* (Paris, 1985), pp. 60–62.

26. V. Sorokin, "Proezdom," in *Literaturnoe A-Ya* (Paris), pp. 65–67.