Monica Cioli

Art in Revolution

The Russian Avant-garde between Aspirations and Reality

VIELLA

Viella Historical Research
36

Monica Cioli

Art in Revolution

The Russian Avant-garde between Aspirations and Reality

viella

First edition: April 2026
ISBN 979-12-5701-198-7
eISBN 979-12-5701-199-4
DOI https://doi.org/10.52056/9791257011994

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 101022502.

Cover illustration: Giangiacomo Spadari, untitled, private collection.

CIOLI, Monica
Art in revolution : the Russian avant-garde between aspirations and reality / Monica Cioli. - Roma : Viella, 2026. - 144 p., [4] carte di tav. : ill. ; 23 cm. - (Viella historical research ; 36)
Bibliografia: p. [125]-138.
Indice dei nomi: p. [139]-144.
ISBN 979-12-5701-198-7
eISBN 979-12-5701-199-4
1. Arte - Movimenti d'avanguardia - Russia - Sec. 19.-20.
709.04 (DDC WebDewey) Scheda bibliografica: Biblioteca Fondazione Bruno Kessler

viella
libreria editrice
via delle Alpi, 32
I-00198 ROMA
tel. 06 84 17 758
fax 06 85 35 39 60
www.viella.it

Contents

Introduction

> Enough of being carried away, it's time
> to serve reason. And all this, all this abroad,
> all this Europe of yours, it's all just a fantasy,
> and all of us, while we're abroad,
> are just a fantasy […].
>
> Fyodor M. Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

The phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde reiterates the fundamental connection between art and politics, while also highlighting the contradiction at the core of the relationship between artists and the political process in late Tsarist Russia, which had not undergone the rationalistic and individualistic "modernity" that had characterised western Europe since the Renaissance. Hence, although artistic activity in Russia did aim at condemning the old bourgeois (easel) art, it was not concerned with criticising a modernity that had never materialised. Instead, the avant-garde was aligned with a completely new future, inspired by the political discourse of transformation – rooted in a materialistic and revolutionary sense – that was promoted and organised by Vladimir I. Lenin and his followers. One of the main problems of the Soviet Revolution was then the tension between the "lack of modernity" and the need for "socialist modernisation"; in the end, to resolve the issue, Joseph V. Stalin would forcibly impose his vision of realism and not modernity: steel and the new man, but no longer the Soviets and electrification.

This is the starting point of this book, which assigns art and artists the role of contributing to the formation and growth of a new popular and proletarian consciousness, aimed – both during and after the 1917 Revolution – at establishing the new communist society based on equality and solidarity. My hypothesis also relates to other theses analysed in the volume.

The first is that the semantic circle of materialism, materiality, and materials, which had long operated within Russian cultural tradition, ultimately concentrated the active and creative essence of the Russian avant-garde. This enabled it to engage with Leninism's doctrines and practices, initiating a process of aesthetic-formal and practical renewal that fostered dialogue with similar developments underway in the West.

The second argument is that, after the Revolution, the significance of "social organisation" as the aim of the cultural and political role of artistic practice became more apparent. This highlighted the productive aspect of Soviet engagement in the socio-economic field, which was driven by technological advances and planning. However, the "realism" phase also produced its own "truth", increasingly centred on the figure of Stalin, who in the mid-1930s, along with the new Soviet Constitution of 1936, shaped the USSR in a decisive way, offering an interpretation that aligned with the widespread dictatorial and totalitarian practices across many European nations and beyond.

Another aspect explored by this work is the theme of scientific and technological progress, focusing on the aesthetics of the machine and its significance, especially in relation to the Revolution and the impact that Stalinism had on the new realist conception in the 1930s.

The intertwining of these theses has produced results that help us to better understand the process in the artistic realm that accompanied the Revolution, both in the work of the major artists, who regarded this process as a political and cultural reference point, and in the form of socialisation initiated by the work of the constructivists. Furthermore, thanks to these results, we can perhaps also gain a clearer understanding of the clash that emerged after Lenin's death and Stalin's rise to power between different ideas of "socialist truth", with the rapid focus in the Five-Year Plans on the industrial role – as opposed to the social role – even amidst the sudden impact of the Great Depression of 1929, which affected Western capitalism for several years. All this underscores the truly fundamental and constitutional link visible in the events that marked the brief productive period of the Russian avant-garde on the one hand, and the outcome of Stalinist realism on the other.

Continuing my investigation into the role of the artistic component (of artists and their works) in the historical development – also social, economic, and political, i.e. overall "constitutional in a material sense" – of a people or community, after examining the Italian issue of Futurism in its relationship with Fascism, and the entanglements among the European avant-gardes, I chose to explore here the more or less contemporary "case" characterised – albeit in a completely different way – by the revolutionary dynamic of October 1917 Russia. This work aims to demonstrate the fundamental connection between Russian art and revolutionary politics: a connection that was not merely due to their simultaneous existence in time and space, nor resolved by the coercion of political authority on artistic activity. Instead, a committed group of artists (painters, filmmakers, photographers) took the Revolution seriously, shaping their work, for better or worse, to serve the Revolution itself. The outcome was not only a profound transformation of artistic expression, but also the achievement of artistic representations of historical and dialectical materialism. The triad of materialism, matter, and materiality is essential for understanding the work of the Russian avant-garde, which is examined in relation to its cultural tradition and in its tension with Western concepts of modernity and modernism, as well as with Marxist ideas of the Revolution.

Since Camilla Gray's pioneering research into the Russian avant-garde and the revelation of the richness of Russian modern art in 1962,[1] more than 300 exhibitions have been dedicated to this topic across Europe, Asia, the United States, and Russia itself. Ambitious shows held in esteemed museums include "Paris-Moscou 1900-1930" at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1979 and "The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932" at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York and others during 1992-1993 alone.[2]

The value of these exhibitions was to reassess an entire sector of Russian visual culture, which was almost unknown to us until then, in relation to developments in Western art, from French cubism to Italian futurism and German expressionism. In this way, the significance of the theories maintained by the leading figures of the Russian avant-garde – such as Pavel N. Filonov, Kazimir S. Malevich, Wassily V. Kandinsky, and Vladimir Y. Tatlin – was linked to their interest in the new artistic movements in Milan, Paris, and Munich. With the centenary of the October Revolution, interest in the Russian avant-garde has continued to grow.[3]

The debate on the vital issue of the relationship between art and politics is ongoing: one need only consider recent works, such as the catalogue of the exhibition "Revolution. Russian Art 1917-1932", edited by John Milner and Natalia Murray,[4] which examines one of the most significant periods in modern global history through the perspective of its innovative art; or Sjeng Scheijen's work,[5] which provides a narrative biography of the Russian avant-garde art

1. Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922* [1962], London, Thames and Hudson, 2000.

2. *Paris-Moscou 1900-1930. Arts plastiques, arts appliqués et objets utilitaires*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ministère de la Culture de l'URSS, Moscou and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2nd ed., Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1979; *The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle, Stedelijk Museum, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1992.

3. See *Energiia mechty. K 100-letiiu Velikoi rossiiskoi revoliutsii,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Galina V. Lemigova and O.B. Afanas′eva, Moscow, Gosudarstvennyy Istorichesky Muzey (GIM), 2017; *Krasnaia Atlantida. K stoletiiu russkikh revoliutsii*, Exhib. Catal., Nizhny Novgorod, Nizhegorodskiy Gosudarstvennyy Khudozhestvennyy Muzey, 2017; *Red Star over Russia. A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905-1955,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Matthew Gail and Natalia Sidlina, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2017; *Revolution in Art and Innovation in Art Education*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Alexander N. Lavrentiev, Moscow, Study Industrial design at Moscow State Academy of Art and Industry (MGHPA) S.G. Stroganov, 2017; *Russian Revolution. Hope, Tragedy, Myths*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ekaterina Rogatchevskaya, London, The British Library Publishing, 2017; *Mechty o mirovom rastsvete/Dreams of Universal Flowering*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Evgenija N. Petrova, St Petersburg, Palace Editions, 2017; *Iskusstvo v zhizn' 1918-1925,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Evgenija N. Petrova, Ljudmila N. Vostretsova, Elena I. Grushvitskaya, and Irina N. Karasik, St Petersburg, FGBUK Gosudarstvennyi Russkii muzei, 2017; *Radical Russia. Art, Culture and Revolution,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Peter Waldron, Norwich, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2017; *Plakat epokhi revoliutsii,* Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ol'ga Klokova, St Petersburg, FGBUK Gosudarstvennyi Russkii muzei, 2017.

4. *Revolution. Russian Art 1917-1932*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by John Milner and Natalia Murray, London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2017.

5. Sjeng Scheijen, *The Avant-Gardists. Artists in Revolt in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union 1917-1935*, trans. by Brent Annable, London, Thames & Hudson, 2024.

movement that transformed the modern world, tracing the lives and work of key figures as they sparked a revolution in art.

In general, contributions to the subject have not regarded art as a "constitutional factor", an approach this work instead adopts. It views art as a constitutive element insofar as it functions as a form of political education: that is, art has the power to contribute, alongside other factors, to motivating and changing individuals' behaviour and, consequently, their collective actions. However, in its various forms, art has served to construct and convey signals related to individuals' coexistence within the framework of *Sozialdisziplinierung*, identified, following Max Weber, initially by German and subsequently by Italian historiography.[6] In other words, the art of the Russian avant-garde is a "constitutional factor" in the sense that it interprets and represents cultural movements (Marxist materialism in its tension with Alexander A. Bogdanov), Proletkult (Proletarskaya kultura, proletarian cultural-educational organisations), and social and political processes (in populism and then in the revolutionary cycle that began in 1905 and ended in 1936). In my opinion, the innovation and autonomy of forms that characterise the avant-garde cannot be understood except through the intertwining (material constitution) of cultural, political, and social movements. This approach recognises the social and cultural aspect as the materiality of the "constitution" beyond merely its legal and administrative forms. The social element essentially consists of the communicative moment, which must be perceived in every constitution to grasp its origin and destination as a bond of concord and shared commitment.[7]

The use of this methodology enables, for example, a broader and more in-depth exploration of the concept of embeddedness as articulated, for instance, by Karl Polanyi: "[…] the control of the economic system by the market is of overwhelming consequence to the whole organisation of society as an adjunct to the market. Instead of the economic system being embedded in social relations, social relations are embedded in the economic system".[8] Polanyi's position is well known. He argues that because individuals have primarily always been social beings, rather than economic ones, embeddedness is an essential condition of the economy. Embeddedness means that individual preferences, or organisational behaviours, may be better understood when analysed in their social, institutional, or cognitive context. Analysts may differ on the specific forms and effects of embeddedness, particularly regarding what is embedded in what and the consequences that follow.

6. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, *Die deutsche verfassungsgeschichtliche Forschung im 19. Jahrhundert. Zeitgebundene Fragestellungen und Leitbilder*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1961; Winfried Schulze, "Gerhard Oestreichs Begriff 'Sozialdisziplinierung in der Frühen Neuzeit'", *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 14 (1987), pp. 265-302; Pierangelo Schiera, "Disciplina, Disciplinamento", *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico*, 18 (1992), pp. 315-334.

7. See Pierangelo Schiera, "Per la storia costituzionale", *Giornale di storia costituzionale/ Journal of Constitutional History,* 19 (2010), pp. 17-27.

8. Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, New York-Toronto, Rinehart & Company, 1944, p. 57.

Kristin Romberg's work and her concept of embeddedness were particularly important to this book.[9] Beginning with Aleksei M. Gan and questioning his supposed declaration of "death to art", Romberg proposes a new interpretation of Russian constructivism as a movement strongly linked to its social and political environment and best understood as a process or a way of thinking. Thus, constructivism does not appear as an isolated phenomenon but, instead, is deeply embedded in its environment, which is what makes it "modernist". Romberg responds to those who see art and the avant-garde as disconnected from the outside world. Her reference is first and foremost to Clement Greenberg, who influenced artists and art historians through his ideas that art should be distilled down to its purest properties of line, colour, and flat surface.[10] In his view, the avant-garde art of the early 20th century was the only "living culture". At the same time, the emergence of "kitsch", as popular or mass-produced material, was a significant threat to its existence. Stating that "kitsch" imagery was a by-product of the cheap and tawdry industrialised society, he argued that art and literature had to offer a path to a higher truth beyond this language. With "Modernist Painting" (1960),[11] Greenberg returned to his historical interpretation of modernist painting and his analysis of "purity", defining modernism as the tendency towards self-criticism, available in every field of activity, and derived approximately from the "criticism" of Immanuel Kant. In art, such self-criticism involves questioning the nature of each medium. It is reduced to its purity, that is, to what it does not share with any other art form. In painting, this element, or property, consisted of the flatness of the canvas surface. For Greenberg, painting must ultimately be "pure", rejecting any form of reference to the outside world, including emotional expression, illusionism, or any space that recognisable objects can inhabit. Works of art must also be devoid of reference to any other artistic medium, such as sculpture or drawing.

The isolation of art from its context is also referred to by Peter Bürger, who defines the avant-garde as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society.[12] What was denied was not a style but art as an institution, which was not associated with the practical life of the population. The fundamental repeated thesis is that the art-historical avant-garde had failed in its attempt to bring art back to life.

Although Romberg's merit lies in placing an artistic movement within its social and political context, it remains doubtful whether the concept of modernism as a reaction against the crisis of modernity can actually be applied to Russia. In the 19th

9. Kristin Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism. Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2018.

10. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and kitsch", *Partisan Review*, 6 (1939), pp. 34-49.

11. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" [1960], in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O'Brian, 4 vols., Chicago *et al.*, University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993, vol. IV, pp. 85-91.

12. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

century, Russia could not experience modernity,[13] but it was, if anything, attempting to implement a form of modernisation process.[14] This is the impression that arises from the significant research conducted by Orlando Figes, who emphasises the feudal character of the old regime and perceives the actions of Nicholas II as efforts to restore Russia to a 17th-century ideal. He points out that the condition of the peasantry was especially volatile: the revolution of 1905 and the Stolypin reforms clearly showed that the problems in the villages demanded a more far-reaching solution than the government was prepared to offer. In response to land issues, hunger, and under-productivity, some advanced peasants and landed nobility attempted to introduce modern methods of production. However, the solution to rural problems had to be connected with the rapid industrial growth of urban centres. State policies included prioritising economic development (industrialisation and the modernisation of agriculture) while adopting authoritarian politics based on centralised coercion, disregard for the rule of law, and hostility towards civil society.[15] As Stephen Smith argues, while the growth of capitalist industrialisation and civil society from the 1890s indicated that "Tsarism was moving away from an estate society towards a class society", the Revolution came too soon to see these developments reach anything like maturity.[16] This pursuit of modernisation also reflected the views of early supporters of socialism, described by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as "utopian" in the Manifesto of the Communist Party of 1848. The absence of modernity in Russia prohibited the rise of modernism. And it is within the tension between modernity and modernism that the examination of the avant-garde, including the Russian one, must occur. Studies on the avant-garde generally do not consider it in this context.[17]

However, defining modernism remains challenging, as the term is primarily used to describe literary and aesthetic movements. Nonetheless, distinguishing the artistic from the historical and political aspects is often contentious and unproductive. Discussing modernism and describing specific political and cultural changes requires

13. Michael David-Fox explores a synthesis of Soviet history that recognises both "Soviet distinctiveness" and its "shared modernity", that is, its "commonalities with other times and places" (Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders. Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh, PA, Pittsburgh University Press, 2015, pp. 10-11). David-Fox grounds this observation on the question of the rate of modernity, or lack thereof, with which the Soviet system was endowed.

14. These issues are also referred to, from different points of view, in the essay by Silvio Pons, "When Socialism was Modern. Gramsci, Stalin and the Post-War Era as 'Passive Revolution'", in *Traces of Modernism. From the First World War to Totalitarianism*, ed. by Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi and Pierangelo Schiera, Frankfurt am Main-New York, Campus-Chicago University Press, 2019, pp. 205-217.

15. Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy. The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996.

16. Stephen A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution. An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 314.

17. For example, although making a significant contribution to the history of Russian culture, Orlando Figes's work *Natasha's Dance* overlooks or does not fully address the relationship between the avant-garde and modernity (Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2002).

adopting a flexible conceptual tool suitable for understanding a phenomenon beyond 19th-century modernity. My aim here is to identify the characteristics of modernism within the Russian context during the pre- and post-revolutionary years, which is a complex, yet captivating, period in history when people were compelled to "fashion" a new world suited to their new future. The pressing question is how much such an avant-garde existed, leading ultimately to finding some common ground with Lenin's theories and practices, and with Bogdanov.

The discussion on modernity has triggered a lively historiographical debate. For Marshall Berman, modernity is a crucial experience or philosophical stance, rooted in the ideas promoted by the emerging middle classes in Europe from the end of the 17th century, which leads individuals to develop an awareness of personal existence and their place in the world.[18] To be modern, he contends, is to confront all aspects, both losses and gains, within an environment filled with adventure, danger, power, subordination, joy, nostalgia, growth, transformation, and more. Being modern means engaging with the individual across time and space. Berman cites Charles Baudelaire and his essay "The Painter of Modern Life": here, modernity embodies the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent half of art, while the other half represents the eternal and the immutable. Further, for Berman, modernism is a socio-cultural movement of a dialectical nature that draws upon the ideas of modernity to shape an artistic essence through them and simultaneously fosters a devotion to the new for its own sake. Historically, it is argued that Baudelaire was one of the first artists to position modernism ("aesthetic modernity") not only against tradition but also against the practical modernity of bourgeois civilisation. From Baudelaire onwards, the evolving "consciousness of modernity" emerges as the source of beauty, ultimately overshadowing the other aspects of art. Tradition is increasingly fervently rejected, and artistic imagination revels in exploring the realm of the hitherto undeveloped. Thus, modernity has laid the foundation for the rebellious avant-garde.[19] Modernism asserts itself as an "adversary culture" or "other modernity" in opposition to the modernity of industry, science, and technology.[20]

In his avant-garde art theory, the literary critic Renato Poggioli considers modernism to be the nemesis of modernity: it "cheapens and vulgarises modernity into what Marinetti called, encomiastically, *modernolatry*". This is why, in his view, Aldous Huxley's harsh judgement should be accepted as fair: "Modernity snobbery, though not exclusive to our own age, has come to assume an unprecedented importance".[21]

18. Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1982.

19. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987, pp. 4 f.

20. Lionel Trilling, *Beyond Culture. Essays on Literature and Learning*, New York, The Viking Press, 1966, pp. XI-XVIII.

21. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1962], trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968, p. 218.

However, modernism should be extended and included in a broader period, from the late 19th century to the Second World War and its aftermath. Many writers and thinkers of the late 19th century observed the clash between positivism and intuitionism, as well as the interplay between sociology and psychology. It is about a deep sense of perceptual crisis which requires consciousness, when worldviews pluralise, and "dusks and dawns both in the arts and civilisation are much thought of".[22] The result has been a period of remarkable intellectual and aesthetic innovation in ideas and forms, with widespread upheaval even in science and philosophy. All of this had some prophetic or precursor-like relation to both the dislocation of the Great War and the post-war synthesis. Roger Griffin speaks of "alternative modernism" and clarifies the relationship between modernism and fascism as an "aporia".[23] A key element in the genesis, psychology, ideology, politics, and praxis of fascism was played by the "sense of a beginning", the feeling of being on the threshold of a new world. Thus, for Griffin, in Nazi Germany painting, architecture, technology, social engineering, and even the campaigns of eugenics and genocide were to be seen as components of a vast experiment in the creation of a "modernist state" in which not only politics, economics, and education, but also morality, race, civilisation, and history itself would be regenerated. It was this programmatic modernism which encouraged the Nazis to inject eugenics and "race science" into the arteries of the modern nation-state to enable it to transcend a liberal age responsible, in their view, for an epidemic of physical and moral degeneration in Germany.

Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane argue that modernism was an extraordinary blend of the futurist and the nihilistic, the revolutionary and the conservative, the naturalistic and the symbolistic, the romantic and the classical. It was both a celebration of a technological age and a condemnation of it; an excited acceptance of the belief that the old regimes of culture were over, but also a deep despair and fear; a mixture of convictions that the new forms were escapes from historicism and the pressures of their time, and that they were precisely the living expression of these things.[24]

Some authors saw the future as a nightmare of dystopias with destructive volcanoes, maniacal rulers, and deadly diseases that held the people in captivity with phantasmagorical devices. However, others looked at happy utopias with less hard work, cheaper goods, and safe and clean cities. Still others saw a mixture of progress and degeneration, with islands of carefree pleasure and oppressive technocracies. Often, an image of a society almost "unnerved" by the rapidity of its technical progress was proposed. It appeared unable to command the new expansion of its internal structure and was riddled with convulsions that seemed

22. Malcolm Bradbury, "The Nonhomemade World. European and American Modernism", *American Quarterly*, 39 (1987), pp. 27-36: 21.

23. Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a New Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007.

24. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism", in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, New York, Penguin, 1976, pp. 19-56: 46.

beyond analysis. This was because the tools provided by the new sociology were not yet adequate for the task. There was both a sense of disorientation and a general crisis of science and its positional parameters, as well as a new hope for the future. This succinctly describes the picture that unfolds between the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe.

The definition given by the English poet and essayist Stephen Spender is appropriate in this respect. For him, modernism was a sensibility of style and form developed from an unprecedented modern situation that threatened to destroy the "life-memory".[25] Also, the modernists were an "international inter-arts alliance" to transform culture as a whole: the "transformation of the entire civilisation" within a revolutionary vision inspired by art. In this concept of modernism, tradition is not eliminated but recovered in the form of myth. To restore the "life-memory", modernists needed to turn to the past while remaining, however, within a revolutionary vision. Their approach was not to re-propose it but to sift through it to identify the fundamental, mainly mythical, elements of culture. Scott Lash rightly writes:

> Whereas modernity was inaugurated in the 16th and 17th centuries, modernism is generally regarded as a paradigm shift in the arts, which began at the end of the 19th century. However, contemporary arts and social practices, taken more generically, can be understood in terms of modernism. Further, my claim here is that modernism registers a fundamental break with the assumptions of modernity.[26]

In this regard, Pierangelo Schiera's definition of modernism could be helpful. In his interpretation of totalitarianism, he also recalls the concepts of "modernism" and "modernity", considering the latter the figure that has, for some centuries, characterised the history of the individual, constitutional, free but class-based man. Modernism, on the other hand, seeks to transcend, if not entirely overthrow, all of this through a comprehensive vision grounded in strong technological foundations and promises, showing a relative disregard for the beliefs or myths of the individualistic Prometheanism of the liberal-constitutional era, or even the dialectic of the Enlightenment. Schiera proposes an "interpretative turn" within which the totalitarian "political discourse" developed. The peaks of this are given by the advent of the masses on the political scene, the organisation of the old society into elites, and the projection of the elitist criterion onto the masses in search of a "new future".[27] Therefore, when the liberal individuals and their rights are in crisis, it becomes essential to create a new subject, the "new man", as an expression of the new forms of technology, science, and politics.

25. Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963.

26. Scott Lash, "Modernity or Modernism? Weber and Contemporary Social Theory", in *Max Weber. Rationality and Modernity*, ed. by Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, London, Routledge, 2006, pp. 355-377: 355. For the intertwining of modernism with modernity, see *Traces of Modernism*.

27. Pierangelo Schiera, "Misura per Misura. Dalla global polity al buon governo e ritorno", *Scienza & Politica*, Deposito no. 1 (2015), § 91, § 87.

The situation in Russia was particularly unique, with a limited entrepreneurial bourgeoisie and a relatively dominant, heterogeneous nobility that was unable to significantly influence the population. It was mainly agricultural and closely connected to a far from modern army, despite Napoleon's defeat. Therefore, despite attempts at reform based on Nordic "police state" models in the last decades of the 18th century, it proved impossible to keep pace with the significant changes occurring in western Europe, even though there were unavoidable contaminations from the latter. This encouraged the development of joint initiatives among various groups, including members of the academies, the intelligentsia, the expanding city bourgeoisie, early socialist groups, and others, who were increasingly frustrated by Tsarist policies.

The remarkable development of Western "modernity" was clearly recognised by the most cultured elements of the Russian population, including the numerous political exiles compelled to reside for years or decades in western European cities. Interest in this modernity expressed itself through feelings of envy or condemnation of the rationalist and Kantian "spirit" that animated it. Nevertheless, attempting to depict the different views of authors such as Fyodor M. Dostoevsky or Lev N. Tolstoy on the subject would be akin to writing a history of 19th-century Russian literature.[28] It should be noted, however, that literature passionately dedicated itself to feelings that were increasing hostile towards the Tsarist regime in its efforts to imitate Western modernity.

Even before, but mainly as a result of, the popular uprising of 1905, the question arose within the existing Russian socialist sphere as to whether the Marxist framework should be strictly followed or if modifications were necessary, in line with the trends already developing in Western democracies, given the dominance of a backward agricultural sector in the Russian economy and the widespread Marxist hope for an imminent socialist revolution in more advanced countries. Inside the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, the leading group of Bolsheviks, led by Lenin and Bogdanov, prevailed over the Mensheviks. Thus, in Tsarist Russia, 1905 marked a transition between the old and the new, highlighting the confused and overbearing anti-Tsarism of the late 19th century. Even the camp of the most advanced artists should be understood within this context. The artists and Lenin first converged on prominent themes such as matter and materiality, which were the most characteristic aspects of Russian culture. This "materialism" was destined to become increasingly ideological with the October Revolution.

My thesis argues that a connection exists between Lenin's application of Marx's revolutionary doctrine and the groups of Russian artists who explored a future marked by new techniques and speed, in their struggle against traditional art. The revolutionary events of 1917, while to some extent surprising and concerning the most active and committed members of the party, inevitably also created tensions and pressures among artists involved in the institutional

28. See Vittorio Strada, *EuroRussia. Letteratura e cultura da Pietro il Grande alla Rivoluzione*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005; Jeffrey Brooks, *The Firebird and the Fox. Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.

and organisational transformations that Lenin, with the assistance of Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, began to implement and then intensified after the civil war. This included establishing a new cultural bureaucracy to replace the Tsarist "officers" of the Petersburg tradition.[29] However, references to the "Marxist doctrine" in the celebration of objects for consumption in the new communist society could cause some misunderstandings with Marx's clear analysis of the "commodity" in the first chapter of *Capital*, discussing the relationship between fetish and property concerning consumer objects. Indeed, the fact that in the meantime roughly 70 years had passed, which were some of the most intense in the modern era – to the extent that modernity itself had become increasingly akin to the "commodity" of the past, in the sense conceived by Berman – should not be underestimated. This had disruptive effects on both the development of the doctrine and praxis of capitalism, often described as "neo-liberal" or even "ordo-liberal", as well as, and perhaps more significantly, on the theoretical and practical framework of the new Soviet socialism.[30]

My concern is with reconstructing artists' involvement in shaping proletarian culture. The contrasting ideas of Lenin and Bogdanov heavily influenced this. It was also essential to recall the activities of artists within organisations such as Proletkult and Vchutemas (Vysshiye Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskiye Masterskiye, Higher Art and Technical Studios) to understand the relationship between art and the emerging Soviet state during a turbulent period.

The initial step was to emphasise the recoverability of materials themselves as the foundation of Russian cultural materiality. Subsequently, we will observe that, after the Revolution, the importance of "social organisation" as the aim of the political role of artistic practice becomes clearer. This underscores the productive aspect of Soviet involvement in the socio-economic sphere, driven by technological progress and planning. However, this third stage of "realism" finally adopted a new character of authenticity, becoming increasingly centred on the notable figure of Stalin who, with his Five-Year Plans, introduced a concept of socialist reality that emphasised the intensification of industrial production rather than the creation of a society of equal and solidary comrades. This also resulted in very clear directives aimed at reducing the diversity of artistic groups that had characterised the 1920s. It suffices to recall the 1932 decree of the Central Committee of the Party, which dissolved all artistic groups and mandated the formation of a central Artists' Union. But perhaps even more significant was the convening of the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, where the criteria for the new realism that Stalin wanted to promote were established.[31] This was also a

29. Peter Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky", in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941*, Exhib. Catal, ed. by Peter Nisbet, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Art Museums, 1987, pp. 13-52: 17. See also *Revolution. Russian Art 1917-1932* and Scheijen, *The Avant-Gardists*.

30. Adelino Zanini, *Filosofia economica. Fondamenti economici, categorie politiche, forme giuridiche*, Bologna, DeriveApprodi, 2025 (new ed.).

31. Vittorio Strada, "Il primo congresso degli scrittori sovietici", in Vittorio Strada, *Tradizione e rivoluzione nella letteratura russa* [1969], Turin, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 153-202.

significant moment in the constitutive relationship between art and politics, which, although in a negative sense, reaffirmed its importance for controlling public opinion and government.

Thanks also to the major crisis of the capitalist world in 1929, Stalin was able to draw global attention to "socialist industry". By the mid-1930s, this had become the banner for the growth of Russian socialism, also enshrined in the new Soviet Constitution of 1936. The connection between avant-garde art in Russia, Western modernism, and Lenin's revolutionary efforts lost some of its intensity during the so-called "red decade". The conclusion, therefore, is that the commitment of Russian revolutionary artists to a future of equality and solidarity, as opposed to Western attempts at creating a new modernity through critiquing the old, resulted in an insurmountable divide between the West and Soviet Russia. This was indirectly confirmed by Stalin and his system's imposition of a concept of realism wholly focused on industrial production, which was contrary to the original one. It happened, perhaps not by chance, while even in some of the Western "democracies" the temptations, if not the realisation, of totalitarian political solutions were growing.

Vladimir Y. Tatlin and Kazimir S. Malevich were pivotal figures in constructivism and suprematism. Their narratives also highlight a tension which was characteristic of Russian culture, between spirituality, idealism, and materiality. Both Tatlin's and Malevich's works were aligned with the Revolution.[32] The former, through the idea of everyday objects, such as those of constructivists Varvara F. Stepanova, Lyubov S. Popova, and Alexander M. Rodchenko, aimed to address the social and political shift of that period. This was to happen precisely with a profound transformation in the material world of daily life. Moreover, Tatlin's involvement was famously embodied in various models of the *Monument to the Third International* (Fig. 1) and in *Letatlin* (Fig. 2), the flying bicycle. Regarding Malevich, in addition to inventing the black and white squares that permeated art production throughout the 20th century and into the present, he was also dedicated to the Revolution. This is evidenced by his involvement in Unovis (Utverditeli novykh iskusstv, Champions of the New Arts), the school he established in Vitebsk in 1919, according to which the self must be annihilated in the name of the collective and unity.

My work also examines the issue of scientific and technological progress. In this context, as we will see, the aesthetics of the machine and its political importance are central, especially regarding its connection to the Revolution and the influence that Stalinism will exert on the new realist conception in the 1930s. The compass held by El Lissitzky's *Constructor* (1924; Fig. 3) is the new eye of the revolutionary artist, who can see and communicate new things to his proletarian

32. However, from November 1917 onwards, a divided creative community once again depended on the beneficence and regulations of the political elite, in an ironic reflection of the 19th-century Tsarist patronage and control that earlier generations of cultural innovators had sought to escape (see Brooks, *The Firebird and the Fox*).

comrades to encourage them to embark on a new life.[33] This can also be said of Tatlin's bionic eye in *Tatlin at Work on the Model for the Third International* (1922; Fig. 4), again by El Lissitzky.

The camera, cinematography, and photomontage were also reshaping perceptions of reality, emphasising, through the machine, the importance of education and propaganda. This also touched on social organisation: through the camera, the gaze can convey new social models. Rodchenko's depiction of a tree from below, as if it were a chimney, was a revolution in the eyes of the bourgeoisie and traditional landscape lovers. For Dziga Vertov, in the cinema with its motion picture, the camera should not imitate the human eye but should see and catch what it usually misses.

According to Aleksei M. Gan, cinema, as the quintessentially labouring apparatus of social technology, that is, as the extended "organ" of society, was a matter for the proletarian state.[34] Thus, the camera and film transformed art from ornament to structure, and this transformation happened on two sides: that carried out by the artists and that imposed by Lenin.

Gan's reasoning invites further exploration of the possibilities that technological and social advancement present for the needs of proletarian state-building. As a sophisticated tool for analysing social transformation, or even as an "extended" organ of the new society, cinema can perceive more developments on the horizon with its technological eye and suggest manoeuvres and solutions that can precede its evolution. In essence, cinema serves as a platform for deeper analysis of the shifting social and political landscape. Thus, it can become an essential tool for shaping a realism that is less romantic and more intentional than that which had characterised the early post-revolutionary years. This realism is also more attuned to the issues of a "Reality" as complex as that of the Soviet Union under Stalin's rule in the 1930s. In short, it is a question of whether the initial and fundamental artistic engagement on that germinal point of the Russian artistic avant-garde could be maintained.

This book focuses on painting, film, and photography, but it also discusses one politically significant architectural project, namely Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*. However, it was decided to exclude architecture in its entirety, which should have been the realm of artistic creation where the most active and even revolutionary aims for intervention could have been achieved. The fundamental link between art and politics, which is the focus of this research, could also have been explored in other artistic forms, such as theatre, dance, music, and printmaking, which accompanied the development of proletarian

33. Matthew Drutt points out that the compass, which protrudes from Tatlin's eye, signifies "the status of the constructive artist as an engineer whose rational creation of form results in the organization of space" (Matthew Drutt, "El Lissitzky in Germany, 1922-1925", in *El Lissitzky. Beyond the Abstract Cabinet. Photography, Design, Collaboration*, ed. by Margarita Tupitsyn, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 9-23: 12).

34. See Aleksei M. Gan, "Kinematograf i kinematografiia" [1922], trans. by Richard Taylor, in *The Film Factory. Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. by Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 67-68.

culture before, during, and after the Revolution. These omissions stem from the decision to focus the research on a cohesive set of practices characterised by coherent methodologies.

***

Over the years, I have received invaluable support from many individuals. I feel it is my sincere duty to express my heartfelt gratitude to Silvio Pons, Pierangelo Schiera, Maurizio Ricciardi, Oliver Janz, John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler, James Lyons, Tatiana Manykina, Vera Giovannini, and Simona.

1. Avant-gardes and the Crisis of Modernity (Modernism vs Socialism)

1. *The long 19th century*

Modernism represented the zenith and criticism of modernity. The gestation period of modernism was driven by the significant development of the Second Industrial Revolution, especially in the commercial and distribution aspects of commodities and their mass consumption; by the cultural effects of post-Darwinian theories of biological evolution on society; and finally, by the idea of the machine as a "prosthesis" of man, serving as a symbol of growth and evolution. Thus, modernism refers to a cultural residue of material and spiritual elements of modernity. Among them, an idea of the "new" emerges, freed from a positive scientific vision based exclusively on faith in progress, on the spontaneous sense derived from the cultural force of the Enlightenment. It is now the post-Darwinian "evolutionary" intuition that is pressing. Evidence of this is the new "subject", which is a second central component of the "modernist novelty". This itself is understood to be the result of a natural evolutionary law and is therefore capable of using tools from a market that produces goods and machines to compute its actions.

Modernism emerged from the conclusion of two processes, constituting the climax of modernity: the *Sattelzeit,*[1] at the turn of the 19th century, and the Great Transformation.[2] The connection between the two processes is not merely spontaneous, but aims to highlight the very close link (embeddedness) that, in my view, exists between the two dynamic levels on which Western history was set to develop following the accomplishments of the Enlightenment thinkers of the 17th and 18th centuries in favour of rationalist, modern-scientific, and proto-industrial individualism. At the core of these overarching concepts is certainly the significant influence of economic progress and the corresponding science of economics. But on a more abstract and spiritual level of communication and

1. See Reinhart Koselleck, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution. Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848*, Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1989; Christof Dipper, *Die Entdeckung der Gesellschaft. Sattelzeit in Europa 1770-1850*, Berlin, Vergangenheit Verlag, 2023.

2. Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*.

education in new values and ways of thinking, I would like to re-emphasise the importance of the artistic phenomenon, initially expressed through the encounter and clash between romanticism and classicism that swept across Europe from England to Italy, leaving even Tsarist Russia far from unaffected.

The avant-garde was a "constitutional factor" of modernism precisely because it aimed to transform artistic languages through continuous interaction with material life. However, this material life demonstrated a clear tendency towards its own organisation, according to the most valid and efficient criteria of its time. These criteria were already revolutionary, both in a productive and industrial sense within the English framework of the process, and in a political and social sense within the continental framework, starting, of course, with France. At that time, a combination of both factors became structured and was capable of elevating the understanding of events and human needs to a new practical level of intervention, which contrasts with the individualistic and rational modernity of Vita Activa (from Leonardo to Kant). Society became the space for humans' practical performance through work, and the classes became the primary site for organising people's living conditions and their exploitation.

From an iconological point of view, I would point to Eugène Delacroix's great painting, *La liberté guidant le peuple* (1830). It is an emblem of all this, and is the first great figurative work representing the political passion of the French people and the bourgeoisie. In this painting, the "naked maiden who 'leads' can only be Democracy (of which Freedom is probably the Avatar)".[3] It can also be interpreted as a synthetic image of the avant-garde, as a collective political subject that would have played such a role during the 19th and 20th centuries. It was also involved in promoting the most disruptive proposals for social and political change, especially in the hands of artists. It is precisely here, however, that the reaction to the process of limitless progress is also born and develops. The old modernity is criticised, first and foremost, by artists who also reject modernisation with its "class" implications, that is, managed and dominated by the bourgeoisie. But opposing excessive industrial and technological modernisation does not mean abandoning altogether modernity or its fundamental quality, which is the inevitable and necessary drive towards the future. Thus, modernism emerged in various art forms, representing a kind of modernity tailored to human scale, or perhaps, in some more radical versions, to the measure of class.

Modernity and modernism manifest themselves as two interconnected phenomena.[4] They reached their apogee with the formation of the nation-states in Italy and Germany and with the birth and material fixation of the new protagonists of social antagonism, culminating in the Paris Commune of 1871.

3. Pierangelo Schiera, "Liberté & Securitas. L'emergere della Democrazia dalla degenerazione dello Stato moderno. L'Autonomia…", *Giornale di storia costituzionale/ Journal of Constitutional History*, 46 (2023), pp. 21-66: 61; but above all, see Luigi Lacchè, *La libertà che guida il popolo. Le tre giornate del luglio 1830 e le "Chartes" nel costituzionalismo francese*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002.

4. See *Traces of Modernism*.

Society, more than the state, was appearing as the new political space.[5] It was becoming not only bourgeois but also proletarian, resulting in the creation of liberal, democratic, and socialist parties. According to Berman, Marx was the first modernist figure who most emblematically grasped the crisis of modernity. This can be seen in the description he gave in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, written together with Engels in 1848 and translated into Russian by Mikhail A. Bakunin in 1869. The *Manifesto* was written to promote the development of the Communist League in Great Britain. Marx's main work, *The Capital* (1867; 1885; 1894), was instead dedicated to the historical unifying antithesis of work and capital as the essential source of the organisation of power in the modern age. For Marx, the problem of the global domination of capital, producing and confirming power relations, is decisive. According to him, scientific disciplines play a central role in this process, establishing the canon of development and "modernity" that presides over the specific dynamics not only of different political spaces, but also of power structures such as land and property, slavery and race, law and patriarchy, nation and city, technology and the state. Despite some infrequent optimistic assertions and arguments for the radical novelty of the capitalist mode of production over previous ones, Marx soon sees that those previous modes are constantly being reused because of their proven ability to produce discipline and power. Therefore, he focuses on the political task of connecting time with space, and history with geography, in his global research. The difference in historical periods is overcome by capital with the violence of its development, and the revolutionary process must necessarily deal with it. Violence represented a fundamental process for the capitalist appropriation of the state, which, for Marx, is far more relevant than the history built around the democratic and liberal evolution of forms of government.[6]

However, for our topic, it is also essential to examine Marx's positions concerning the historical possibility of establishing communism in Russia. There are two main interpretations. The first, more "traditional", interpretation gives little importance to Russia and considers it to be substantially irrelevant. This is because the country was not yet capitalistically developed, and was therefore unable to spawn a communist revolution without a capitalist mode of production first being fully deployed.[7] The second interpretation is based on Marx's later writings, from 1850 onwards, where the first pre-capitalist form is identified as a natural community dedicated to pastoral farming, founded on the family and

5. See Maurizio Ricciardi, *La società come ordine. Storia e teoria politica dei concetti sociali*, Macerata, Eum, 2015.

6. See Maurizio Ricciardi, "L'operatore teologico. Feticismo e critica della mediazione politica in Marx", in *Religione e politica. Paradigmi, Alleanze, Conflitti*, ed. by Giuditta Bissiato, Dino Galli, Giulia Longoni, Paolo Murrone and Giuseppe Nastasi, Pisa, ETS, 2022, pp. 179-199.

7. See Luca Basso, "From the Commune to Communism? Marx and Russia", in *Global Marx. History and Critique of the Social Movement in the World Market*, ed. by Matteo Battistini, Eleonora Cappuccilli and Maurizio Ricciardi, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2023, pp. 183-195.

the union of families, on the tribe, and based on a direct relationship with the land. The most enduring form of such communities was the *obshchina* (a sort of peasant commune). In an 1881 letter to the Russian revolutionary Vera I. Zasulich, Marx states that his recent studies have convinced him that the commune is the cornerstone of social regeneration for Russia.

Marx was not clear enough on the point: indeed, the Russian *obshchina* represented something unique, which could be saved as an element of the regeneration of Russian society, also from an anti-capitalist perspective. What was needed, however, was a revolutionary intervention at the right time. Marx is highly cautious about the possibility of transition from the Russian commune to communism. He emphasises the need for a workers' revolution throughout the entire West, as summed up in the motto with which the 1848 *Manifesto* concluded: "Proletarians of the whole world unite!" In the 1882 preface to the second Russian edition, Marx closely links the persistent common ownership of land in Russia with the development of communism throughout the world, starting from the Western scenario.[8]

2. *Politics and art in the West*

In the *Mission de l'art et du rôle des artistes* written by the Fourierist Gabriel Désiré Laverdant as early as 1845,

> Art is an expression of society, which manifests at its highest level the most progressive social tendencies; it is both a precursor and a revealer. Now, to determine whether art rightly fulfils its role as an initiator, and whether the artist genuinely leads the way, it is essential to understand where humanity is heading and what the destiny of the species is.[9]

This passage by Laverdant stresses not only the idea of the interdependence of art and society, but also the doctrine of art as an instrument for social action and reform, a means of revolutionary propaganda and agitation. The two avant-gardes, the social and the artistic, seemed to march together until the appearance of the first

8. Karl Marx, "Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party" [1882], in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 50 vols., Digital Edition, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010, vol. XXIV, trans. by Mikhail A. Bakunin, pp. 425-426. See Bruno Bongiovanni, *Le repliche della storia. Karl Marx fra la Rivoluzione francese e la critica della politica*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1989, pp. 171-189; Rolf Hecker, "Nikolaj F. Danielson und die russische 'Kapital' - Übersetzung", in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels Forschung*, *Neue Folge 2013*, ed. by Rolf Hecker, Richard Sperl and Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Hamburg, Argument, 2014. On the persistent common property in Russia, the *obshchina*, see Geroid T. Robinson, *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime. A History of the Landlord-Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1932; Franco Venturi, *Il populismo russo* [1952], 3 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1972; Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, New York, Charles Schribner's Sons, 1974; Jovan E. Howe, *The Peasant Mode of Production. As Exemplified by the Russian Obschina-Mir*, Tampere, University of Tampere, Dept. of Folk Tradition, 1991.

9. Gabriel Désiré Laverdant, *De la Mission de l'art e du rôle des artistes*, Paris, La Phalange, 1845, p. 4.

small magazine of the modern literary movement, which was significantly entitled *La Revue indépendante*. Founded in 1884, it was perhaps the last organ that fraternally gathered social and artistic rebels under the same flag. These were representatives of advanced opinions in the two spheres of social and artistic thought.

In this book, I will also consider the artistic avant-garde in its "political" sense. In Russia, this avant-garde was accompanied by Lenin's fundamental conception of the need for a political, party-oriented avant-garde to ensure the success of the Revolution. All these avant-gardes were fundamentally focused on altering the material conditions of existence. Therefore, it is this "materiality" that links the artistic and political avant-gardes, and therein lies their core connection.

It is precisely in the revolutionary essence that the difference between decadentism and the avant-garde lies. Indeed, even in the former it is possible to discern polemical anti-bourgeois elements that are nostalgic for a pre-revolutionary state, that is, for a civilisation that has disappeared or is disappearing. If the decadent emerges from the sinister state of tasting death, it is almost always to turn to the most extreme myths of nationalism. Maurice Barrès and Gabriele D'Annunzio come to mind. In contrast, the anti-bourgeois spirit of the avant-garde is often tinged with socialism.

The avant-garde phenomenon started in France, where the revolutionary experience of the Commune of 1871 had unhinged the socio-political achievements since Napoleon. At the same time, mentality changed regarding communication through science, literature, or art. Think of Paul Cézanne as the conduit of ideas, solutions, and proposals towards a new world. With its modernist appearance, the object loses its objectivity in favour of a "material reality". Regarding Cézanne, I would like to emphasise the *fil rouge* in the evolution of his art, that is, matter. This means that he is increasingly attracted to the realistic perspective of the definition of objects as he finds them in nature, and which he represents. In reconstituting the object out of his sensations, Cézanne submits humbly to the object as if in atonement for the violence of his early paintings: "The object has for him the same indispensable role that the devotion to the human body had for the Greeks in creating their classic sculpture".[10] The objects are seen but not interpreted. Cézanne moved from impressionist or post-impressionist realism to an increasingly abstract vision of geometric elements and essential materials in his late works. In his 1905 *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, he paved the way for cubism. According to the Russian art critic Nikolay N. Punin, after the impressionists' brushstrokes, the subject became increasingly deformed thanks to Cézanne's efforts and seemed to disappear beneath the painting; Cézanne focused on volume. The cubists, continuing what Cézanne had begun, posed the actual perception of space as their primary concern: they attempted to incorporate space into the object, dissolving it until it disappeared altogether in some post-cubist, objectless movement.[11]

10. Meyer Schapiro, *Paul Cézanne*, New York, H.N. Abrams, 1952, p. 27.

11. See Nikolay N. Punin, *Noveyshie techeniya v russkom iskusstve,* 2 vols., Leningrad, Izdatelstvo Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeya, 1927-1928, vol. I.

Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger published a small volume in 1912 that, in contrast to Guillaume Apollinaire's *Méditations esthétiques, les peintres cubistes*, wanted to take up the theme of the *liberté* of the artist dedicated to the complete realisation of the painting. They tried to supersede the figure of the Renaissance artist with an individual marked by the ability to know and shape the world in the mode of that "scientific perspective",[12] which is the result of new scientific epistemology and practical philosophy (ethics) that would later be aesthetically dominant until Kant. Gleizes and Metzinger return to Cézanne, writing that "he prophesies that the study of primordial volumes will open up unimagined horizons".[13] Cubism thus appears almost as the outcome of a long journey towards a new realism that is the opposite of decoration.

There is no doubt that Cézanne can be considered one of the initiators of this significant new trend, particularly concerning the cultural shift occurring during his time. He had long been a close friend of Émile Zola, a theorist of naturalism who, like Cézanne, embraced the idea of a realistic depiction of social life in its most straightforward and most tangible forms. The "scientific" inclination to reproduce natural reality sets Cézanne's later works apart from his obvious post-impressionist influences, allowing him to be seen even as a precursor to what would later develop into "cubism". The portrait of Madame Cézanne (*La Femme en Rouge*, 1890-1894) serves as the first illustration selected by Gleizes and Metzinger to present their booklet *Du "Cubisme"* that would mark the fortunes of perhaps the most successful avant-garde movement in all contemporary art.

The pamphlet concerns "cubist painters": a collective term that very concretely demarcates the barely specified idea of "cubism". The illustrations of works that complete and conclude it exemplify a dynamism of form. But an explanatory and popularising intervention was needed because, by 1912, there were as many as 13 editions. In 1913, the international circulation of the text began, with English, German, and Russian translations in St. Petersburg and Moscow. The interest in these translations went together with the developments of cubo-futurism.

It might seem that the birth of cubism as an art movement was a "natural" process, as if nature itself had been stripped of its ornamental appearances during the positive and scientific 19th century; as if Delacroix's *Liberté* had stripped itself of its revolutionary garments to become the "rights of man" proclaimed by all the *Chartes* enacted by the victorious bourgeoisie or by the screaming horse

12. See Fritz Novotny, *Cézanne und das Ende der wissenschaftlichen Perspektive*, Vienna, Schroll, 1938.

13. Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, *Du* "*Cubisme*" [1912], ed. and intr. by Christian Briend, Paris, Hermann éditeur, 2012, p. 15. Alfred H. Barr Jr. wrote that in 1907, 56 of Cézanne's paintings were shown in a memorial exhibition; they made a deep impression on Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, but no deeper than the publication in the same year of a letter written by Cézanne to Émile Bernard. This was the famous sentence: "You must see in nature the cylinder, the sphere, the cone". The influence of this maxim upon Picasso and Braque has perhaps been exaggerated, but it undoubtedly led them to geometrise, to reduce to fundamental geometric forms the disorder of nature (Alfred H. Barr Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1936, p. 30).

in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*. But, of course, this was not the case. There were the rebellions against the mid-century *Salons* and then the secessions, by which the new paths of avant-garde art spread throughout Europe (including Russia) by exporting the most "progressive" artists to all the European capitals. These artists were responding to the call of a new market, driven by talented merchants and increasingly eager capitalists willing to invest in modern artworks and new opportunities. Nor can one reduce the avant-garde to cubism, since there was more than one artistic-cognitive movement that bore the title "avant-garde", and the exchange between them was very intense. It is imperative to start from the different historical-political and cultural contexts of departure. The most obvious case is that of Russia, in which the artistic avant-garde is directly involved in the enormous problem of the proletarian revolution.

3. *Art and culture in Russian populism*

At the height of his fame as a philosophical cosmopolitan, Jean Charles Léonard Simonde de Sismondi became a corresponding honorary member (*socium honorarium*) of the Imperial Academy of Sciences (founded in 1724 in St. Petersburg by Peter the Great). This was mainly due to the success that accompanied his great work, *Histoire des républiques italiennes du Moyen Age* (1809-1818), which would expand to 16 volumes. He was also offered a professorship in the fields of economics and constitutional studies, which he declined. Towards the end of the 19th century, Lenin felt compelled to publish the essay "A Characterisation of Economic Romanticism. Sismondi and Our Native Sismondists".[14] The object of Lenin's criticism was "economic romanticism", as it had developed during the years of populism, mainly due to the profound impact of Sismondi's doctrines. They were still being used, as Lenin shows, in Boris O. Efrusi's 1896 essay "The Economic and Social Conceptions of Simonde de Sismondi", published in *Russkoe Bogatstvo*, the populists' organ, favouring a policy of conciliation with the Tsarist government and the renunciation of any revolutionary struggle. This period in Russia was marked by a complex mix of political ideas and actions that highlighted the notable difference between the national-liberal approach taken and the varying successes in western Europe. The history of Russian populism constitutes a kind of historiographical miracle for Franco Venturi, who has attempted to decipher it in a monumental three-volume work examining the complexity of the Russian Revolution through an archaeological excavation of the democratic and socialist movements in Russia between 1850 and 1881.[15]

14. Vladimir I. Lenin, "A Characterisation of Economic Romanticism. Sismondi and Our Native Sismondists" [1897], in Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 44 vols., Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1960-1970, vol. II, trans. by George Hanna, pp. 129-266. It appeared in the journal *Novoye Slovo* between April and July 1897 while he was deported to Siberia.

15. Venturi, *Il populismo russo*.

Beginning with Alexander I. Herzen and Mikhail A. Bakunin, and then through the reconstruction of the extraordinary figures of Nikolay G. Chernyshevsky, Nikolay A. Dobrolyubov, and the *Sovremennik* magazine, Venturi addressed the question of nihilism and its relationship to Blanquism, the mythopoetic function of the *obshchina*, the first organised forms of political struggle and their ties to action, the birth of Zemlya I Volya (Land and Liberty) and, finally, the formation of the Narodnaya Volya (People's Will). This organisation would succeed dramatically by killing Tsar Alexander II on 1 March 1881.

One can accept the conclusion that populism was not a political ideology in the proper sense, but more like a style, a set of characters, a register. Elements of populism are present in multiple forms, and all of them, with different nuances, appeal to the people to disrupt an established order, to overcome the hegemony of traditional parties, and to break free from the confines of the dominant political discourse. Thus, the issue of Russian populism is not being scrutinised merely to emphasise the backwardness of Russians in the mid-19th century. There is nothing new to add to these aspects if one continues to take Western modernity as the basis for comparison in its post-revolutionary modernisation process. Instead, understanding populism involves trying to restore the conditions in which the Russian Empire found itself after the failure of the Napoleonic enterprise and the subsequent attempt to participate in the so-called Concert of European Nations. These were conditions brought about by a static peasant population which, until 1861, was in a condition of land servitude. However, forces were mobilising it for different purposes. Firstly, the Tsar was driven to participate in the constitutional jubilation of other European countries. Moreover, with him, the nobility was always unempowered, as was the peasantry. Then there were the members of an extraordinary class (intelligentsia), fond of mental exercises inspired by the West and the remnants of Russian Enlightenment culture. However, there was also a social aspect involved in the ongoing debate, particularly in Britain and France, concerning the new economic science, which helped spread the ideas of early socialists in Russia. From there also came the first endeavours to establish a proto-capitalist economy based on Sismondi's ideas. To this was added the memory of the ancient glory of "Mother Russia", at a level between the mythical and the traditional, linked to the specific tradition of her Church, which continued to find an undisputed following in the deep peasant world. Traditional and popular traces of relatively autonomous peasant community management in rural villages also emerged from historical research, particularly in Germany: traces that signalled a future reconstitution of those ancient autonomies, in tune, on the one hand, with the liberation of the peasantry from serfdom and, on the other, with the gradual assumption of socialist theories that were increasingly becoming visible and practicable, thanks in part to the initial circulation of the new doctrines of Marx and Engels.

Populism entailed a persistent faith in the peasant class and its alleged egalitarian mores as a possible model for a future socialist society. The most committed populists believed this could be realised in Russia without passing through the adverse effects of industrial capitalism experienced in the West. At its heart was a new myth to reshape the country's history: that of the simple Russian

people as bearers of communitarian ideals. The populist intelligentsia developed a fondness for the peasantry, leading to a growing interest in ancient traditions, which were repurposed into a kind of enveloping folklore. This folklore increasingly encompassed not only ancient folk festivals and celebrations, but also the natural materials that were a significant part of the ancient household and agricultural objects. It even touched the solemn world of icons and the wood and colours with which they were made. The most attentive members of the intelligentsia filled their libraries with books on folklore and studied myths, proverbs, songs, and the customary law of the Russian peasantry. Filled with guilt over their privilege, they devoted their lives to serving the people's cause. Moving from this loosely defined ideology, populism evolved into a political movement, the first proper socialist movement in Russia. It is a fact that this populism, whose main features I have tried to evoke, represented a fundamental step in the unfolding of a revolutionary process. Its impact on the central issue of proletarian culture cannot be underestimated.

The central question of materials, matter, and materiality in people's lives is also linked to populism, which incorporated the scientific doctrines of the Enlightenment that Carl Linnaeus fully accommodated at the end of the 18th century. Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that in 19th-century Russia there was always intense and widespread interest in scientific research in the university and academic fields, especially in chemistry and physics. For example, Dmitri I. Mendeleev is universally considered the originator of the Periodic Table of Chemical Elements, which he developed in 1869 as part of research that had involved scientists from all over the world for three centuries. We should not forget the outstanding achievements in other fields of contemporary science, such as behavioural psychology, thanks to Ivan P. Pavlov, a 19th-century psychologist and physiologist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in physiology in 1904. Other examples show easily how the most characteristic Russian orientation has been predominantly towards fields closely related to the examination and treatment of matter, demonstrating the profound materiality that, in many respects, was endemic to Russian culture even during Tsarism.

The most interesting case, however, is still to be considered for the present research: the position occupied by artists in the Russian social and institutional world before the Revolution. They had always been protected and supported during the 19th century, even to the point of receiving scholarships from the Academy to participate in the exceptional, late-romantic search for Mediterranean light, Italian in particular, involving most of the northern European countries' new paintings. This should be considered within the context of the more general enthusiasm for the Grand Tour of Italy – Liguria, Rome, and Naples being the favourite destinations. After the mid-century, interest in nature mingled with the everlasting peasant life, accentuating the political-social mixture characterising the search for ways to escape from backwardness towards a relative modernisation of the country.

In 1863, 14 Imperial Academy of Arts candidates protested together by refusing to participate in an annual competition and by withdrawing entirely

from its sphere of influence.[16] They opposed the classical teaching that limited pictorial subjects to mythological or heroic themes of ancient and religious history, preferring to address contemporary Russian subjects. Called the "Revolt of the 14", the rebellion paved the way for a new realism which was freed from traditionalist sentimentalism and aimed at awakening the peasant world and actively participating in the change. It was thus an operation aimed at stimulating the peasants' interest in the varied Russian realities and gathering evidence of life experiences to be brought to evolution.

The students formed an independent artistic society, known as the Petersburg Cooperative of Artists (Artel), to bring art to the people. In 1870, this organisation was mainly succeeded by the Peredvizhniki (Tovarisschestvo peredvizhnykh khudozhestvennykh vystavok, Association of Travelling Art Exhibits), whose members, among others, included Ilya Y. Repin, Alexei K. Savrasov, and Grigoriy G. Myasoyedov; it aimed to give people from the provinces a chance to follow the achievements of Russian art and to teach people to appreciate it. Peredvizhniki rejected the restrictive and foreign-inspired classicism of the Imperial Academy of Arts to form a new realist and nationalist art that would serve the ordinary people. It was a movement that emphasised the original elements of physical and natural life in their material strength, recalling an environment uncorrupted by modernity. The Peredvizhniki painters travelled around Russia to find new examples of this eternity, showcasing the harshness and rudimentary nature of Russian living space and revealing the antiquity of their land to the peasants.[17] Thus came the rediscovery of ancient materiality, which needed to be recovered and bent to new needs. Ancient materials and visualisations of popular values and practices became associated with the rediscovery of the medieval, especially religious, tradition. This rediscovery also touched upon fundamental moments of community life at the local level, with reference to organisations such as the famous *obshchina*. Synthesis was found in the revaluation of the precious form of the icon, at least as a symbol of a Russian specificity before the primacy of Western modernity, which had originated in and dominated since the Renaissance, in what Pavel A. Florensky called the "Euclidean-Kantian" nexus, from which Russian art and culture were effectively excluded.

These were all signs, although sometimes discordant, of the awakening of Tsarist Russia from the general state of languor, socially and culturally, in which it found itself. Since the almost bogus abolition of serfdom by Tsar Alexander II in 1861, the desire to restore the qualities and privileges of the past continued to grow in prominence. This led to the rediscovery of a popular culture which, however, increasingly needed to qualify itself in popular terms. It was the task of

16. According to Jeffrey Brooks, the Great Reforms of the 1860s and 1870s initiated Russia's transformation: the outcome was a revolution in visual culture at all levels (Brooks, *The Firebird and the Fox*, part I).

17. See Elizabeth Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art. The State and Society. The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989; David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006.

socialist experiences to propose a broader and more adventurous articulation of the theme "popular", that being "proletarian". This was attributable to the original interpretation of the doctrine of Marx and Engels provided essentially by Lenin (and Georgi V. Plekhanov), considering precisely the Russian characteristics.

The results of Franco Venturi's interpretation of the period traditionally referred to as "Russian populism" are challenging to grasp in their overall historical significance today due to the new meanings that have been superimposed on the term in recent times. Although the Tsarist regime touched on some key aspects of the Enlightenment mentality during its lengthy history, which coincided with Western modernity, it never aligned itself with the constitutional transformations in western Europe in the 19th century.[18]

This led to the enduring persistence of the peasant population's historical dominance, on which the Tsarist imperial regime was founded, and of the desires for "modernisation" expressed by a diverse class of the "intelligentsia".[19] This class included not only the so-called "Slavists", who were devotees of the Orthodox memory of a distant medieval origin, but also the "Occidentalists", who were fresh devotees of a possible present (and future) enlightened by Reason other than that of the possessive individualism of the industrial West. Gradually, this social magma was augmented by the increasing number of workers in industry which, although trudging and belated, was consolidating in the big cities. Alongside the expansion of delayed capitalism, this stimulated the development of the first socialist political formations. In 1883, the first Russian Marxist organisation, called Emancipation of Labour, was born in Lausanne; in 1895, the Union of Struggle for the Emancipation of the Working Class was founded in St. Petersburg; and in 1898, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was founded in Minsk.

However, the recurring unsuccessful attempts to persuade the Tsar to begin constitutionalising the state gave rise to the extended revolutionary movement at the turn of the new century. During these years, the weakness of the liberal-leaning middle classes and the organisational capacity of the new socialist formations were manifest. The Menshevik and Bolshevik factions arose within the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. They inherited the revolutionary openness of those previous years, bringing it to full expression in 1917 by taking the contrast between idealism and materialism to extremes.

4. *Lenin, Bogdanov, and the proletarian class consciousness*

Lenin could not escape such a debate. In 1908, he published *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* to illustrate his gnoseological, dialectical materialism.[20] Lenin argued that human perceptions correctly and objectively reflect the external

18. See Dieter Groh, *Russland und das Selbstverständnis Europas. Ein Beitrag zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte*, Heidelberg-Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1961.

19. On these issues, see Figes, *A People's Tragedy*; Figes, *Natasha's Dance.*

20. Vladimir I. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism" [1908], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XIV, trans. by Abraham Fineberg, ed. by Clemens Dutt, pp. 17-362.

world and that this sphere can be analysed dialectically. In this way, he contrasted with the view represented primarily by Ernst Mach and Richard Avenarius. In any event, it is well known that his real polemical target was much closer to the political struggle within the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. It was his old comrade-in-arms, Alexander A. Bogdanov, who, between 1904 and 1906, published the three-volume work *Empiriomonism*.[21] Lenin explicitly accused this of being steeped in idealism following George Berkeley's immaterialism.[22] On this point, which is central to the dissemination of the concept and practice of materialism – an idea that I have placed at the core of reconstructing Lenin's work on the Revolution – the famous dispute we have discussed arose. It concerned a widespread aspect of philosophical debate across all fields regarding the relationship between an idealistic as opposed to a materialistic approach to the problems of political and social life.

Bogdanov's most comprehensive and original work would be *Tektology*, which was published at his own expense between 1913 and 1922.[23] In this, he attempted a general theory of nature as a formulation of the organisational principles underlying the structure of all systems, living and otherwise. His proposal founded a new universal (holistic) science that should unify all social, biological, and physical sciences. His goal was thus not only to train effective party cadres but, first, to educate conscious socialists for the Revolution because, according to him, that would only be possible if workers were already ideologically trained. Consequently, political hegemony had to be preceded by cultural hegemony. "Tektology" had the task of conceiving all sciences as tools for organising collective work activity. In such a society, there would no longer be a need for philosophy, since once the monistic, that is, unifying science had been elaborated, it would be able to incorporate the different disciplines.[24]

This is not the place to go into the philosophical merits of the controversy, but its effect, on the concrete political level, was primarily the expulsion of Bogdanov from the Bolshevik faction of the party. This did not mean his withdrawal from social engagement and political struggle, however. Instead, it led him to an even more intense commitment on the organisational level. This

21. Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Empiriomonism. Essays in philosophy* [1904-1906], 3 vols., Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2020.

22. See Jutta Scherrer, "Bogdanov e Lenin: il bolscevismo al bivio", in *Storia del marxismo*, 4 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1978-1982, vol. II, *Il marxismo nell'età della Seconda Internazionale*, pp. 493-546; Avraham Yassour, "Lenin and Bogdanov: Protagonists in the 'Bolshevik Center'", *Soviet Thought*, 1 (1981), pp. 1-32. On Bogdanov, see Dietrich Grille, *Lenins Rivale. Bogdanov und seine Philosophie*, Cologne, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1966; *Alexander Bogdanov. Theoretiker für das 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. by Stefan Plaggenborg and Maja E. Soboleva, Munich, Sagner, 2008.

23. Alexander A. Bogdanov, *The General Science of Organisation* [1922], trans. by George Gorelik, Seaside, CA, Intersystems Publications, 1980.

24. See Giulia Rispoli, "La tectologia di Bogdanov come nuovo paradigma fra la cibernetica e la teoria generale dei sistemi", *Epistemologia*, 36 (2013), pp. 315-330; Arran Gare, "Alexander Bogdanov and Systems Theory", *Democracy and Nature*, 3 (2000), pp. 341-359.

activity was in perpetual opposition to Lenin but enjoyed the support of the other early comrades, such as Lunacharsky. All this confirms the persistent liveliness of the discussion concerning the organisation of that proletarian culture, which would directly affect the formation of the post-revolutionary artistic avant-garde until and beyond Lenin's death. As we shall see, the theme of the active and operational organisation of the proletariat fluctuated between the commitment to establish a network of increasingly close and united relations between comrades, in order to initiate the creation of a new, post-revolutionary communist society, and the need to concentrate the physical energy of those same comrades in factory work – no longer under the capitalist yoke – according to the plans set out and imposed by the new leader, Joseph V. Stalin. Between 1912 and 1917, Bogdanov had already published the three volumes of *Tectology*, which presented all the various sciences (of nature as well as of society) as tools for organising collective labour activity. These volumes also addressed aspects of cultural and artistic activity, as was practised under his inspiration during the brief but fruitful season of Proletkult. Bogdanov can thus serve as a veritable litmus test of the peculiar relationship between art and revolution in the first two decades of revolutionary Russia, beyond the disagreements around the interpretation of Marx: Bogdanovian *Empiriomonism* versus Leninian dialectical materialism (*Materialism and Empirio-criticism*).

By 1903, Bogdanov had joined the Bolshevik Party, refusing to side with the Mensheviks when the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party held its second Congress in hiding between Brussels and London, splitting into two currents. The following year, he made a trip to Switzerland where, in collaboration with the exiles Lunacharsky and Vladimir A. Bazarov, he published an "Essay on a Realist World Conception".[25] There, he met Lenin, becoming his ally against the Mensheviks, and together, in 1905, they founded the first Bolshevik journal, *Vpered* (Forward), which was seen as an instrument of proletarian culture. This culture began with everyday life in the family and in the party, where residues of authoritarianism still existed: husbands towards wives, parents towards children, and party leaders towards members. Bogdanov wanted to elaborate a proletarian philosophy, a proletarian science, and a proletarian art united in a single Culture: the research methods of the different disciplines would have to be clarified to discover the elements that unified them.

In this context, the practical and doctrinaire discussion on the new variant of Russian Marxism also mounted. The long, creeping contraposition between Lenin and Bogdanov also provided the best opportunity to test the impact of the "culture" issue in forming the class consciousness upon which the prospective Revolution was projected. The opposing personalities of the two protagonists render it challenging to reconstruct, but it touched the most exposed nerve of the issue, that is, the very strategy to be adopted for the construction of the preliminary

25. See Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Toward a New World. Articles and essays, 1901-1906. On the Psychology of Society, New World, and Contributions to Studies in the Realist Worldview*, trans., intr. and ed. by David Rowley, Boston, Brill, 2022; Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Art and the Working Class* [1918], trans. and intr. by Taylor R. Genovese, US, UK *et al.*, Iskra Books, 2022.

class consciousness, which was equivalent then to proletarian culture. This came from afar, but it had to be historically intertwined with the reality of the new proletarians who were the future protagonists of the Revolution. The question was whether that entanglement had to be guided at the institutional level or whether it was more appropriate to facilitate the process socially.

Bogdanov entered the debate headlong, coming from a field of interests and studies that was not originally Marxist, or even historical-economic in structure, but was instead based on cognitive-philosophical foundations, which were also applied to medical-physiological studies. He found, in Marx's historical materialism, the necessary starting point for linking his theory of organisation to a political, collective, and universal subject: the proletariat. The systematic organisation of human coexistence, in all its sectors and aspects, would begin here. All this was to happen through the direct and conscious action of the human subjects concerned, who were involved in creating and managing a culture that united all. This culture came from afar and had to be elaborated and projected into the future through an uninterrupted work of reception and learning. The proletariat was thus necessary in its collective and material historical dimension. Furthermore, it had to be directly involved in constructing its operational consciousness.

The question concerned the crucial moment of the transition to socialism and the role to be played in it by the early revolutionaries. Bogdanov's ideas contrasted openly with Lenin's in the increasingly tightly knit group of Bolsheviks during and after the crucial years of the 1905 "first revolution". At that time, the political contradictions and acerbities of the various groupings became evident. Already, during populism, these had failed to peel away the hard crust of the Tsarist regime, either in a liberal-constitutional sense or in a revolutionary perspective.

The issue with the peasantry was even more serious because it involved not only technical matters of production development, but also essential and very old aspects of popular culture, without which no revolutionary effort was allowed. The question, therefore, was a strategic one: should the required new proletarian culture be developed before any attempt at another revolution, or should it be realised only after that revolution had already occurred?

It was no small matter, as the question involved crucial practical and theoretical aspects of Engels' and Marx's historical materialism. It also had to align with intense processes of philosophical change within the complex structure of the German-rooted *Kultur*, which was also well known in Russia. It was a partial recovery from the scientific positivism of the mid-19th century, which encompassed *lato sensu* idealistic positions, mainly by the so-called "right Hegelians", but also by the growth of neo-Kantian thinking movements.[26]

26. These are issues that underpin perhaps the most important book in Marxist circles, on the links between Hegel and Marx: Georg Lukàcs, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics* [1923], trans. by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1971.

5. *Spirituality and materiality*

However, the materiality we are discussing relates to another Russian trait, which we have already acknowledged: the central importance of materials. It is no coincidence that Lenin, in those years, also referred to materiality by emphasising the primordial nature of physical matter. Famously, Marx and Engels had also been inspired by this, transferring their interest from nature to society. As far as Marx's materialism is concerned, his first thesis on Feuerbach is self-explanatory: "Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from conceptual objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. […] Hence, he does not grasp the significance of 'revolutionary', of 'practical-critical', activity".[27]

In *Materialism and Empirio-criticism*, which not only takes up the opposition between idealism and materialism but also contains significant considerations on matter/materials, Lenin writes that "matter acting upon our sense-organs producing sensation" is "materialism". The existence of "matter does not depend on sensation. Matter is primary". If you "do admit physical objects that are independent of my nerves and my sensations and that cause sensation only by acting upon my retina – you are disgracefully abandoning your 'one-sided' idealism and adopting the standpoint of 'one-sided' materialism!" If colour is a sensation only "depending upon the retina (as natural science compels you to admit), then light rays, falling upon the retina, produce the sensation of colour".

> This means that outside us, independently of us and our minds, there exists a movement of matter […], which, acting upon the retina, produce in man the sensation of a particular colour […]. It explains the sensations of various colours by the lengths of light waves existing outside the human retina, outside man and independently of him. This is materialism: matter acting upon our sense-organs produces sensation.[28]

Features such as new, vivid, and dynamic conceptions of form, mass, and colour also dominated the neoprimitivist style and were reminiscent of the indigenous Russian tradition.[29] That is why the works of Cézanne, André Derain, Henri Matisse, and Vincent Van Gogh had a considerable effect on Russian artists. Sergei I. Shchukin and Ivan A. Morozov were two extensive acquirers of contemporary Western painting who had both accumulated collections by the mid-1800s. Their private showings had a highly influential impact on the Russian avant-garde. Nevertheless, there was also an intense backlash against Western art. Neoprimitivists, such as Mikhail F. Larionov and Natalia S. Goncharova,

27. Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach" [1845], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. V, pp. 3-5: 3.

28. Lenin, "Materialism and Empirio-criticism", p. 55.

29. It was at the regular Moscow Association of Artists' exhibition in 1907 that the first definite tendencies towards a neoprimitivist style were presented: it was immediately clear from the vigorous canvases of such contributors as Natalia S. Goncharova, Mikhail F. Larionov, Malevich, Aleksei A. Morgunov, Vasily V. Rozhdestvensky, Alexander V. Shevchenko, and Georgy B. Yakulov (also, incidentally, Wassily W. Kandinsky) that the trend was away from nebulous shapes and allusive subjects, from subdued colour scale and absence of narrative.

were striving to seek new paths for their art, but they ultimately accepted the old maxims: "and of its previous forms we recognise above all, the primitive and the magic fable of the old East". As a point of departure for their art, they took "the *lubok*, the primitive art form, the icon, since we find it the most acute, most direct perception of life".[30]

Goncharova and Larionov declared their alliance with indigenous traditions. The path was towards the source of all arts: the East. Goncharova was convinced that modern Russian art had reached such heights that "within the near future, it will play a leading role in international life. Contemporary Western ideas […] can no longer be useful to us".[31] David D. Burliuk appears to be more involved in the political and social events of the period. He made a distinction between the art of yesterday and that of today: art had begun to live for itself.[32]

The dual attitudes to the Western masters produced two distinct trends within the Russian neoprimitivist movement, especially within the framework of the Knave of Diamonds group. This group, convened by Larionov and Aristarkh V. Lentulov in 1910, was divided into Russian and French trends, provoking the departure of the Russian-oriented Larionov and his sympathisers and their formation of the Donkey's Tail group in 1911. The Knave of Diamonds group retained its original name and changed the organisation from a mere exhibition platform into a formal society. Since it looked to Paris for inspiration, its members were labelled Cézannists and cubists.

It is also possible to identify two different attitudes towards the most precise Russian tradition, for example, regarding the icon tradition.[33] The neoprimitivists observed it as a nationalist element, typical of their religion and the peasant world. In contrast, the "materialist" attitude of a critic such as Punin was different: his interest should be seen in the framework of a general revival of ancient Russian art. In 1913, several events focused public attention on Russian icons and folk art, for example the "Second All-Russian Folk Art Exhibition" in St. Petersburg and the large exhibition of icons – including examples from the collections of Ilya S. Ostroukhov and Stepan P. Ryabushinskyi – organised by the Institute of Archaeology in Moscow.[34]

30. Alexander V. Shevchenko, "Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements" [1913], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde* [1976], trans. and ed. by John E. Bowlt, London, Thames & Hudson, 2017, pp. 41-54: 45.

31. Natalia S. Goncharova, "Preface to Catalogue of One-Woman Exhibition" [1913], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 54-59: 55. See Jane A. Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West. Natalia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

32. David D. Burliuk, "Cubism (Surface-Plane)" [1912], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 69-77: 70.

33. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that not all avant-garde artists were interested in the icon: for example, figures such as Larionov, Ivan V. Kliun, Alexander M. Rodchenko.

34. See Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon. Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition*, Aldershot, Lund Humphries Publishers, 2008; *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art. New Perspectives*, ed. by Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2017; Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square. Russian Modernism*

In *Paths to Modern Art*, Punin aimed at formulating a programme that should have opened new "paths" for contemporary art out of its deadlocked situation: he saw the old Russian icon as the medium and inspirer of this renewal. He wanted to discover traits that would allow him to consider the art of icon painting as a revelation that provides instructions on how to overcome the dead stagnation of European realism.[35] To do this, it was necessary to reject the idea of seeing only the purely painterly qualities, such as colour, style, and drawing, in the icon. He saw it as a living organism, a container of special spiritual values of both beautiful and expressive form. That means that he was not interested in the aesthetics of icon painting because the icon was not just a work of art. Punin distanced himself from a purely aesthetic approach to the icon because the idea of an artistic examination of this sacred art was not new or unusual for modern Russian artists. For example, Goncharova, Kuzma S. Petrov-Vodkin, and representatives of the older generation of artists, such as Mikhail A. Vrubel, Viktor M. Vasnetsov and Mikhail V. Nesterov, had intensively studied icons and adapted their pictorial elements for their new creations.

The Russian language has two different terms for colour: *zwet*, which is closely semantically related to *swet* (light) and primarily denotes colour value, that is, the qualitative aspect of colour; and *kraska*, which denotes colour in its materiality, namely the dye. It is therefore remarkable that Punin always uses the word *kraska* when he speaks of colour as a medium of expression. He attempted to explain the difference between a purely formal (i.e. modern) and a non-formal (i.e. medieval-sacred) relationship between the artist and his work. By "formal", Punin means the view of the impressionists and their successors, who "think of colour only as colour, that is, as the sum of physiological retinal stimuli". On the other hand, a "spiritual" understanding of colour combines a "deep spiritual impression" with the physiological process. Here again, Punin consistently uses the word *kraska* for "colour" and thus refers to its material aspect, which, in the icons and his argumentation, is not in contradiction but closely related to its symbolic content. In 1921, Punin returned to these ideas in the pamphlet *Tatlin (Against Cubism)*.[36] It highlights the materiality of colour, which is typical of the icon. Indeed, one of Tatlin's early paintings, *Buket* (1912), and other flower paintings of that period, show a stark influence of French post-impressionism. However, he is also interested in the surface, in the microstructure, to which he gives an autonomous character.

and the Russo-Byzantine Revival, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.

35. Nikolay N. Punin, "Puti sovremennago iskusstwa (Po povodu Straniz chudoshestvennoi kritiki Sergeya Makovskogo)", *Apollon*, 9 (1913), pp. 44-50. On Punin, see Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde. The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin*, Leiden, Brill, 2012; Natalia Murray, "The Role of the 'Red Commissar'. Nikolai Punin in the Rediscovery of Icons", in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, pp. 213-228. See also Verena Krieger, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie. Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde*, Cologne, Böhlau, 1998.

36. Nikolay N. Punin, *Tatlin (protiv kubizma)*, St. Petersburg, Gos. Izdatel'stvo, 1921. See also Nikolay N. Punin, *O Tatline*, ed. by Irina N. Punina and Vasilii I. Rakitin, Moscow, Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe agenstvo "RA", 1994, pp. 27-42.

The Orthodox theologian Pavel A. Florensky has also appealed vigorously to the driving, powerful force of colour as a material component. In *Ikonostas* he argues that

> in the very procedures of icon painting, in its technique, in the materials used, in its quality, the metaphysics through which the icon is alive and exists is expressed in the consistency of the colour, in the way it is applied to the corresponding surface […] and its remaining *material causes*, that metaphysics, that profound perception of the world that the artist's creative will aims to express through a given work as a whole, already finds direct expression.[37]

However, the icon was not a free medium or pictorial expression, but a prescribed scheme to which the painter had to conform with absolute and unquestioning obedience. These canonical rules were unchangeable, and any attempt to change them provoked some theological controversy and disturbance in the canons of the Church itself. The subject of ecclesiastic painting was preordained. So were the figures in it, and even their places in the whole composition were fixed and defined by the canon. Florensky highlighted the decay of those preordained rules, drawing attention to the icon's demise starting from the 16th century. Western scientific rationalism influenced Russia, even if the attempts of Peter the Great and Catherine II to introduce the Enlightenment essentially failed. Florensky also used this argument to highlight the difference between Western modernity and Russian culture. He explained the connection between the sweet Renaissance roots and their "bitter" Kantian fruits. Kantianism, through its emotional force, was a deeper form of the Renaissance's humanist and naturalistic understanding of life. It also embodied the self-awareness of that historical background, "the new European culture" and, with some justification, "still quite recently boasted of its virtual supremacy". The pathos of modern man is to dismiss all realities so that the "I want" idea shapes the law of a newly fabricated reality, surreal yet confined within predetermined boundaries. Conversely, the pathos of ancient and mediaeval man "is the acceptance, grateful acknowledgement", and affirmation of all kinds of reality as a blessing, for "being itself is a blessing, and blessing is being".[38]

The shift in focus between matter, materiality, and materials in Russia is very significant. I believe this connection is crucial for understanding how Russian artists, already engaged in their struggle against traditional painting, also noted Lenin's materialism and his revolutionary actions. In this way, as we will see shortly, they became willing to participate directly in the immense efforts to carry out the Revolution itself, aiming to build a new society in the future Soviet State.

37. See Pavel A. Florensky, *Iconostasis* [1922], trans. by Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, intr. by Donald Sheehan, Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996, p. 99.

38. Pavel A. Florensky, *Reverse perspective* [1919], trans. by Wendy Salmond, ed. by Nicoletta Misler, London, Reaktion Books, 2022, pp. 216-217. In such icons, John Binns notes, "the lines of perspective are strangely reversed so as to give the effect of drawing the viewer into the icon. The figure itself looks out at the viewer, addressing him and inviting him to look and see face to face" (John Binns, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 103).

6. *Cubo-futurism and beyond*

Based on what has been observed about populism, it should be emphasised that it was not indeed a "movement" (as Franco Venturi perhaps tends to consider it) or even an "ideology", let alone a "political doctrine", but rather a "historical bloc". Within it, with an overwhelmingly peasant population, elements of the past mingled and coexisted with hypotheses about the future that had not been realised or were not immediately apparent to be achievable. However, they were able to keep alive and well awake a feeling that struggled between the regret for a magical past and a future that was not easy to specify. Russia was more than just geographically close to Germany, where the two fundamental modes of thought in the late 19th century were also idealism and materialism. In the latter case, there was the by no means accidental presence of Marxism.

For the first time, the controversies surrounding bourgeois art could focus on a decisive dilemma regarding the role to be assigned to art in the cognitive welter accompanying the indisputable crisis of scientific positivism. Previously, bourgeois art had been able to adapt "impressionistically" to the evolutionary demands of the mid-19th century cultural climate. It navigated between the fears of the Commune and the unexpected fortune of a possible application of Darwinian theses to society.

Wassily W. Kandinsky reduced the fundamental criteria of artistic work to content and form. In both fields, the emphasis should be on artists' subjective intuition and their efforts to express it formally, using language that is communicative and appropriate to the historical context. These movements stimulated the need to assign artistic production to an ornamental role of aesthetic complacency and an actual informational and educational function regarding values and behaviour that the new times – and new men – necessitated. This is equivalent to saying that the cultural-historical mission of artists grew in preparing and proposing their content and forms for the new social and political directions which were underway. Specifically in the Russian context, this also responded to the ongoing demand, repeatedly voiced in the Marxist sphere, to focus on proletarian culture. The inspirational motives could have been, on the one hand, the aspiration to participate in a future that the unstoppable development of science and technology announced as the sign of the times. On the other hand, but only seemingly at the opposite end of the spectrum, emerged the search for the most ancient inspirational motives underlying the national identity characteristics that underpinned the 19th century. This was also true for the immense Russian Empire, which was primarily excluded from the phenomenon of Western "modernity". It found significant historical motivations in tradition, including religious tradition, and in Eastern, that is, anti-Western, and mainly Slavic ethnic-cultural ancestry. All these tendencies were indeed reflected in the space between the two centuries, in manifestations of connection and collaboration among artists who were becoming characterised first of all by French cubism and, with other intentions and results, by Italian futurism.[39]

39. According to Alfred H. Barr Jr., Russian poets and painters "esteemed Italian futurism": they felt the "revolutionary ardour", appreciated its "contempt for the past and bourgeois taste", and shared the "enthusiasm for modern engineering and machinery" (Bryn Mawr Mary Flexner

It does not seem superfluous to me to consider that the two indicated orientations found an occasional fusion in the Russian cubo-futurist grouping. In the first years of the 20th century, it offered an umbrella of reception for artists of different origins and sometimes even more diverse final destinations, but who all aimed at adhering to the work of artistic rehabilitation promoted by the French and Italians.

Cubo-futurism was a cultural *milieu* with a generic social-popular tendency. Artists, hopeful of revolution and involved in a project that demanded a commitment to elaborating and disseminating a culture with solid material and collective impact, found themselves collaborating.[40] More needed to be done to espouse new aesthetic orientations. However, they had to be bent to an entirely new political vision, which had to find its centre in the social formation of the proletariat, according to the dictates of Marxist historical-materialist doctrine. The engagement of artists was crucial in communicating and disseminating the values and tactics to be implemented in order to achieve the goal, which, particularly during the complex phase of populism, the people of the Tsarist Empire had been striving for: the removal of the regime itself and its replacement by an entirely new power apparatus.

It was the Russian futurists who introduced and led the experiment by focusing on a form intended to evoke a rapid and compelling future. They were divided between the experiments of the two most innovative artistic courses, Italian futurism[41] and French cubism, on the one hand, and the recovery of specifically Russian characters, drawn from both the ancient mystical tradition and the Slavic setting that the movement was to have (a millenarian art animated by a futuristic

Lectures, "Dogma and Practice in Modern Art", Museum of Modern Art, New York [MOMA] Archive, Alfred H. Barr Jr. Papers, V. 40, mf 3265: 746 ff.). However, many were little affected by futurism, such as Kandinsky, Tatlin, Marc Z. Chagall, Ivan A. Puni, Malevich.

40. A translation of the book *Du "Cubisme"* by Gleizes and Metzinger, edited by Mikhail V. Matyushin, was published in St. Petersburg in 1913 and was intensively received by Russian artists as the most important theoretical source on cubism. Its Russian variant, cubo-futurism, was developed by Malevich, Alexandra A. Ekster, Popova, and others in 1912 and 1913.

41. Although Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's futurist *Manifesto* was published in Russia in 1909, and extracts from similar Italian declarations appeared in the review *Soyuz molodezhi* in 1912, Italian futurism was interpreted very freely by Russian artists and, while exerting a certain influence, did not constitute a key element of the Russian avant-garde. Suffice it to say that futurism in Russia came to embrace all extreme movements in art and literature, from neoprimitivism to suprematism. Because of this, Larionov included both futurism and rayonism within a single manifesto. To a limited extent, the Italian and Russian versions of futurism shared one common fundamental element, that is, the concept of dynamism of mechanical movement. This concept, in part, gave impetus to the extreme leftist painters, who quickly condemned the Knave of Diamonds as an academic flower. See John E. Bowlt, "Introduction", in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. XVII-XXXIX; Verena Krieger, "*Dynamismus* in der futuristischen Kunst. Wandlungen auf dem Weg von Italien nach Rußland", in *Das Eigene und das Fremde in der russischen Kultur. Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten der Selbstdefinition in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Beiträge zur zweiten Bochumer Sommerschule vom 3. - 5. Juni 1998*, ed. by Bettina Henn, Anja Kreisel and Dagmar Steinweg, Bochum, Bochum Projekt-Verlag, 2000, pp. 33-55.

vision), on the other.[42] This stands out notably in the spectacular action of the Goncharova-Larionov pair, who initially searched for "primitive", "oriental-like" qualities of indigenous Russian folk art, and intentionally participated in the founding and development of various avant-garde groups and in the transition from the Knave of Diamonds to The Donkey's Tail, before contributing to the closure of the eclectic cubo-futurist experience. This closure was sanctioned in a planned and programmatic way by the intervention of two central artists, Kazimir S. Malevich and Vladimir Y. Tatlin, in "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)" organised by Ivan A. Puni and held in Petrograd in December 1915-January 1916.[43]

The "0.10" was preceded by the exhibition "Tramway V", also billed as "The First Futurist Exhibition of Paintings", organised by Puni and held in Petrograd in March 1915. "Tramway V" was a huge success since it was an exhibition that evoked a flood of responses, although they were almost exclusively negative. The press and the public were equally attentive, but only one work was sold. This was a relief by Tatlin, bought for no less than 3,000 rubles by collector Sergei I. Shchukin. This purchase, and above all the inconceivably large sum, stunned the public: 3,000 rubles for a few pieces of wood and some wire. The public response to "Tramway V" would eventually lead Puni to bring together one last exhibition, the "0.10". There, suprematist compositions took centre stage, and their impact was strengthened both by collective manifestos and by a collective picture painted by Kseniya Boguslavskaya-Puni, Ivan V. Kliun, Malevich, Mikhail I. Menkov, and Puni, all following suprematist principles. The "0.10" was also notable for presenting a second innovation, which was Tatlin's artistic method. Not only was an entire room dedicated to his reliefs, but a pamphlet about his reliefs and counter-reliefs was published simultaneously.

Perhaps that truly futurist title was meant to declare that cubo-futurism was to be concluded, even though it was also profusely exhibited, and some of the artists participating in the event continued to follow it even after 1915. However, there is no doubt that Malevich achieved his true intent by forcing the entry of suprematism into the art world. This started with his signature work *Black Square* (Fig. 5), which was hung in the top corner of the first room, exactly as icons were displayed in traditional Russian homes. Malevich practically forced Tatlin to do the same with his new artistic production, which would later be seen as the outgrowth of "constructivism". Both used the icon and their works to symbolise a new era. The zero form, "I turned into the zero form and came out the other

42. The art of the pre-war Russian avant-garde assimilated, and in turn reinforced, a Slavic cultural revival that was taking place throughout eastern Europe. See Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, New York, H.N. Abrams, 1994; Alexandra S. Shatskikh, *Black Square. Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. by Marian Schwartz, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2012.

43. On the exhibition, see Linda S. Boersma, *0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*, Exhib. Catal., trans. by John Kirkpatrick, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1994; *In search of 0,10. The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Matthew Drutt, Basel, Fondation Beyeler-Hatje Cantz, 2015.

side: 0-1", was for Malevich the beginning of a renewal that had to be brought by the Revolution. The close link between materiality and symbolic content was shown by Tatlin. The icon not only held religious significance, but also served as a symbol of sympathetic and communal devotion for Russians, which gave it its social and political importance. As Punin argued, Tatlin's work, expressed in his counter-reliefs, led on the one hand to the study of materials, of which painting is only a particular case, and, on the other, to an investigation into the quality of the real world, that is, living, authentic space.[44]

The three-dimensionality of his counter-reliefs sets Tatlin apart from Picasso and his reliefs. The two met in Paris in 1914, and when Tatlin returned to Moscow, he took the idea a significant step further. He abandoned painting and, combining cubism with Italian futurism, quickly moved into a realm where Picasso never ventured – total abstraction. Alongside Malevich, Tatlin pushed beyond the most avant-garde experiments in Paris: "Twin astronauts of art, they discovered a world whose riches we have been exploring ever since".[45] This dynamism reveals itself in two channels, which I continually aim to highlight in my research: the material and the spiritual. Both elements coexisted in each artist: while the *Black Square* and the counter-relief echoed the spirituality of the icon, they also addressed the world and depicted the earth. Boris I. Arvatov contrasted Tatlin's "materialism" with Malevich's "idealism",[46] while Punin claimed that Tatlin and Malevich shared "a particular destiny".

> For as long as I remember them, they always shared the world […]: the Earth, the sky, and interplanetary space, establishing their sphere of influence everywhere. Tatlin usually claimed the Earth for himself, trying to push Malevich out into the sky for his objectlessness; Malevich, while not giving up his claims on the planets, would not give up the Earth, fairly supposing that it is also a planet, and therefore can be objectless.[47]

It seems undeniable to me that, in both cases, there was a need for a material re-foundation of artistic activity in this initial phase of building a populist "consciousness". This awareness would be outside and in contrast to the academic world, involving the recovery of elements from the peasant world, which was vast and backwards well into the mid-19th century. Conversely, it was precisely an

44. See Punin, *Tatlin (protiv kubizma)*, pp. 18-19. In other words, his shift into three-dimensionality was intensely indebted to the iconic tradition, both in its espousal of material heterogeneity and its conceptual shift from pictorial to real space. See Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square*, p. 180.

45. "Sticks of Russian dynamite", *The Observer Revie*w, 11 November 1979 (Museum of Modern Art, New York [MOMA] Archive, Alfred H. Barr Jr. Papers, IX.B.106).

46. Boris I. Arvatov, "Dve gruppirovki", *Zrelishcha*, 8 (1922), p. 9. For this issue, see Christina Lodder, "Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich. A Creative Dialogue", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World, International Symposium*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Museum Tinguely, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013, pp. 243-247; Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square*, pp. 182 ff.

47. Nikolay N. Punin, "[Excerpts from Memoirs.] The First Futurist Battles" [1930-1932], in *Kazimir Malevich Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis, ed. by Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko, 2 vols., London, Tate Publishing, 2015, vol. II, pp. 143-146: 145.

investment in the "constituent materials" of that reality, which necessarily had to develop in a reconstructive manner. This laid the groundwork for a new society of individuals, which had to be "the" society made possible by the Revolution foretold by Marx and Engels and realised by Lenin. It was, however, a long journey, with its founding bricks cemented in Russia's popular and religious origins on the other side of the division represented by the Euclidean-Kantian schema of rational and reasonable Enlightenment and bourgeois individualism. The reference materials were those of nature, the same that positive science was studying worldwide, including in Russia. They were the "elements" of the Earth, which Tatlin had chosen as his realm of exploration and artistic endeavour – iron, wood, and glass in their tectonic tensions – but also those of the sky, which was Malevich's domain, where all colours had been absorbed and synthesised with their pigments and were ultimately reduced to the famous *Black Square*.

In the next chapter, the events leading up to the October Revolution will be outlined to provide context for the Russian avant-garde and its impact on proletarian culture. Artists felt they could not simply stand by, but wanted to contribute their energy to the radical reconstruction of life they were witnessing. Therefore, we will revisit the institutions that emerged around the time of the revolutions. This will include a discussion of Lenin's organisation, as well as Bogdanov's.

2. Bolshevism and October 1917

1. *From 1905 onwards*

The early years of the 20th century were crucial to the widespread shake-up of artistic "discourse" in response to the broader social, political, and cultural developments throughout Europe, but even more so in the Russia of the Tsars, as the intensity of the populism had begun to dissolve. Thus, the drive for the emergence and strengthening of the avant-garde was intensified, both politically and artistically, particularly due to the "materiality of existence" that we have just seen grow and expand within the artistic sphere alongside the preparation for the Revolution. This was in line with the contemporary critique of traditional art that was widespread in Western countries, starting with France and Italy.

Berman's book on "modernism" has already provided a reliable picture of the socio-cultural leap that took place in central European countries. This was based on the system of beliefs and practices that had brought the more "civilised" part of the world, western Europe and the United States, out of the exclusive individualistic-rational patterns which had, for centuries, guided individuals, then peoples, and finally nations, to the triumphs of capitalism. Berman also insisted on the famous conclusive phrase placed by Marx and Engels in their *Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind".

There is no mention of Russia in the *Manifesto* or its Appendices, except that, in the mid-19th century, slavery still existed there (as in Hungary and Poland). A few years later, in 1861, the "reformist" Tsar Alexander II abolished slavery, but that did little to improve the living conditions for most of the 48 million peasants, who would still be part of the Red Army under Leon Trotsky's leadership after the October Revolution. They would also participate in the riots that characterised the years after the "first" revolution, which broke out in 1905. Those years were crucial in the revolutionary process, which reached what seemed like its peak in 1917, as they caused extreme instability in the Romanov Tsarist regime. Its last ruler, Nicholas II, came to power in 1894 and lost the throne in March 1917.

Meanwhile, the cracks in the old populist "bloc" had released energies in both the democratic-constitutional and industrial-capitalist fields, as well as in the socialist opposition. In the ranks of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, founded in 1898, tensions between the two factions, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, which had existed from the beginning, intensified. The latter, headed by Lenin, represented the wing most closely aligned with Marxist doctrine. However, due to fundamental philosophical differences, there were various interpretations and practical applications. The dispute produced a lively mobilisation within the ranks of the Bolsheviks. This resulted, after the failure of the 1905-1907 revolution attempts, in the widespread participation of socialist militants and in the concrete definition of the proletariat as the protagonist of a revolution that was becoming increasingly unavoidable.

The situation was complicated by the imminent outbreak of World War I and the unsuccessful conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905. Nevertheless, the decisive factor, which was becoming increasingly clear, was the practical matter of preparing "proletarians" for the new tasks that a victorious revolution would call upon them to undertake. This issue again brought into play the "class consciousness" that, according to Bogdanov for example, proletarians had to own and put into practice before aspiring to victory. At the same time, for Lenin it mattered more to take advantage of the promising opportunity to act, utilising the historical "culture" already available, including that derived from the enemies of the capitalist class. The debate among Bolshevik "initiates" sometimes shifted from the strategic level of political behaviour to the theoretical and doctrinal realm of Marxist orthodoxy.

It is a fact that, within the historical-materialist framework that dominated the scene, discussions and even practical choices regarding what was considered "ideological" – that is, superstructural in the sense of "global" Marxism – were the order of the day. In Russia, this was part of the historical materiality of conceptions and ancient practices that had always been regulated down to the minor details. Thus, they were traditionally well structured, mainly focusing on communication aspects – scientific, political, and religious. This is evidenced by the participation in the debate of groups outside the Marxist camp, such as those of liberal-constitutionalists (Cadet Party), and even theological-religious approaches (Sergei N. Bulgakov, Peter B. Struve, Pavel A. Florensky). It is difficult to say how much Lenin himself was aware of this, or whether he let things run their course according to a strategy that, in its operational pragmatism, did not neglect to take advantage of doctrinal and cultural pluralism. This was still to be found in the later, more appropriately and victoriously "revolutionary" decade of 1917. Not to mention the necessity to consider the legitimate needs of the great mass of peasants who, of all parts of the traditional Russian society, were the most exposed to further aggravation of their conditions.

An intelligentsia then sought to filter out the threatening aspects of the growing Bolshevik movement with appeals to the ethics and logic of the Russian tradition. There was still a "communal" organisation of life within this tradition that was referred to as *obshchina* or the original Christian community. Both philosophical

and institutional perspectives were not only welcomed by the peasant masses but also aligned with the political spirit underlying Bogdanov's revolutionary and authentic "Marxist" commitment. Bogdanov remained dedicated to a more strictly scientific approach – especially concerning the organisation of life – until the very end. He died in 1928, but did not participate directly in the political arena after his expulsion from the party in 1909.

However, his expulsion did not lessen his influence and engagement at the cultural level. This testifies to the broad consensus on his theses regarding the necessity of promoting the formation of a proletarian culture before attempting a revolution, and, therefore, the importance of involving the world of art and communication. This also elucidates the typical Russian phenomenon where artists were institutionally and collectively engaged in educating and training young Russians destined to carry the revolutionary ideas to the factory and society. Discourses on the timing and methods required to bring about the class struggle, or even merely to reform the Tsarist regime, while averting disastrous outcomes such as those of the winter of 1905-1906, were present from the beginning in what some consider the "first Russian Revolution". This movement was characterised by the intertwined elements of a radical liberal change, audacious actions by subversive groups, and intense social struggles reverberating through the vast Tsarist Empire and echoing in western Europe.[1] The varied and independent driving forces behind the revolutionary saga of 1905-1906 should be acknowledged: from workers' strikes to peasant uprisings, from the active participation of the liberal intelligentsia to the efforts of radical parties, and from the revolts of non-Russian nationalities to the mutinies of sailors and soldiers.

World War I was clearly not solely a Russian event, but it profoundly affected Russia, worsening and deepening the issues it was facing. Embittered by the brutal life in the trenches and behind the lines, in the autumn of 1917 peasant and plebeian Russia ignited one of the most violent social wars in human history. The Bolshevism of 1917 was the political and programmatic expression of the extreme dissatisfaction of enraged popular masses. In this too, Lenin's political genius was evident not only because he knew how to organise the armed insurrection in Petrograd at the right time and in the most effective manner, but also because he understood more clearly than any other revolutionary leader the nature and scope of the furious peasant jacquerie then underway. Apart from any ethical evaluation, Lenin's genius combined dynamic tactical pragmatism and ideological strategic intransigence. He was guided by a supreme revolutionary criterion with its "scientific" and quasi-sacred foundation in Marx. It is not improper to call him "Machiavellian" in the sense of a "new prince" who was capable of mastering the

1. See Ettore Cinnella, "Rivoluzione plebea, bolscevismo e società sovietica", in *Rivoluzioni. Una discussione di fine Novecento*. Atti del convegno annuale SISSCO Napoli, 20-21 novembre 1998, ed. by Daniela Luigia Caglioti and Enrico Francia, *Quaderni della Rassegna degli archivi di Stato*, 98, Rome, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali-Direzione per gli archivi, 2001, pp. 69-84.

most difficult situations,[2] such as in the Brest-Litovsk peace talks and the New Economic Policy (NEP) manoeuvring.[3]

Building on this interpretive thread about the years of the "first" revolution, but from a different perspective, the period after 1907 was a time of tactical and strategic re-evaluation for the political forces that had faced their first test in the then-concluded crisis. There were years of reflection for the intellectual groups that had been most present in the recent events. When *Vekhi* (Landmarks), a collection of writings contributed to and promoted by authors such as Nikolai A. Berdyaev, Sergei N. Bulgakov, and Peter B. Struve, was published in 1909, the lively reactions that it produced testify to the topicality of the urgency of charting new perspectives and to the obligatory suspension of any concrete political action. These are significant considerations which give political, as well as cultural, dignity to the role played by the intelligentsia, which already seemed to be transforming itself more simply into the "educated class". Now it comprised the intellectual and professional cadres from the attempts at modernisation, which Peter Struve rightly saw as objectively underway.[4] His thoughts are very significant concerning the role of the intelligentsia in revolution. This relationship alone interested Struve. From his point of view, the intelligentsia only initially manifested itself as a political category in Russian historical life at the time of the reforms, and was finally revealed in the revolution of 1905-1907. But, idealistically speaking, it was prepared in the wonderful epoch of the 1840s, reflecting the mood of the population.

It is not the case here to recall the distinctiveness and dynamism of Bulgakov's political thought, except to emphasise his commitment to dealing dialectically with the relationship between Marxism and idealism. This is a classic theme in the debate, and particularly in the cultural polemic that stirred many actors

2. The reference is to the *Prison Notebooks* by Antonio Gramsci: "Marx and Machiavelli. This topic can give rise to a twofold work: firstly, a study of the actual relations between the two as theorists of militant politics and of action, and secondly a book that would draw an orderly system of actual politics of the prince type, from Marxist doctrines. The subject would be the political party, in its relations with the classes and with the state […] the protagonist of this "new prince" should not be the party in the abstract […] but a specific historical party operating in a specific historical environment, with a specific tradition, in a characteristic and well-identified combination of social forces" (Antonio Gramsci, "Marx and Machiavelli", in *Quaderni del Carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, 4 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1975, vol. I, p. 432).

3. It entailed the restoration of the market as a mechanism for adjusting relations between town and countryside, dismantling the system of rationing, and encouraging limited private enterprise. See *The Cambridge History of* Communism, ed. by Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith, 3 vols., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, vol. I, *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941*, pp. 28-45; Smith, *Russia in Revolution*, pp. 263 ff.; Giovanni Cadioli, *Il monolite e il mutamento. Continuità e trasformazioni nella politica ed economia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1917-1953*, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2022; Giovanni Cadioli, "L'economia di comando prima dello stalinismo: ripensare l'Unione Sovietica degli anni venti", *Storica*, 86 (2023), pp. 57-108.

4. Peter B. Struve, "L'intelligencija e la rivoluzione", in Pier Cesare Bori and Paolo Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia prima della rivoluzione (1900-1917)*, Brescia, Editrice Queriniana, 1978, pp. 233-247.

involved in the Russian revolutionary experience.[5] Suffice it to recall that for Bulgakov, Marxism had the enormous merit of introducing a principle of social and political realism, which, among other things, delivered the *coup de grâce* to the "economic Slavophilism" that had been characteristic of Russian populism. However, the Marxist principle was for him insufficient to understand historical reality, so complex and changeable that no simple scheme could explain it. According to Bulgakov, this was because the fundamental problem couldn't be only the mode of production, but also the individual's soul, head, responsibility, and enigma.

The revolution attacked the autocratic and noble Russian political structure and social form. October 1905 marks the radical transformation of that political structure, which had been formed over centuries. There also followed a series of pogroms that immediately shed light on the meaning of the Manifesto issued by the Tsar.[6] Struve's judgment is definitive, and touches on a theme we have already recognised as central to all revolutionary discourse, including on the Marxist and Bolshevik side: "They had the revolution when the task was to concentrate all efforts on political and self-education. […] The anti-religious repudiation of the state, characteristic of the political worldview of the Russian intelligentsia, also conditioned its political levity and ineptitude".[7] This is a condemnation without remedy, which Struve reiterates with a lapidary conclusion: in the West, the crisis of socialism is much less than in Russia because there is no intelligentsia there, but there are ideas. In truth, the ideas also existed in Russia, as the Capri "laboratory" reveals.

2. *The Capri school*

In I907, political backlash compelled nearly all Bolshevik leaders to leave Russia and spend many years in exile, primarily in Paris and Geneva, or, as for Maxim Gorky, who suffered from tuberculosis, on the Italian island of Capri, which served as a hub for many political and apolitical figures, such as Ivan G. Myasoedov.

It was in exile that the "first" Bolsheviks would split. On the ideological level, this was due to the group around Gorky and Bogdanov's desire to give Bolshevism a philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic dimension and to exceed the narrow framework of orthodox Marxism sustained by Plekhanov and Lenin. The differences between the latter part and the "left Bolsheviks" around Bogdanov concerned fundamental issues such as differing concepts of the intellectuals' leading role. Lenin advocated a centralised party structure admitting only

5. Sergei N. Bulgakov, "Dal marxismo all'idealismo", in Bori and Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia*, pp. 226-232.

6. Tsar Nicholas II issued the "October Manifesto", a pledge to establish a legislative assembly, cease censorship and violations of the freedom of association, and broaden the franchise.

7. Struve, "L'intelligencija e la rivoluzione", pp. 244-245.

professional revolutionaries, an intellectual avant-garde capable of organising and leading the workers' movement. Conversely, Bogdanov believed that the proletariat should have its intelligentsia drawn from the workers themselves. This clarifies Lenin's political conception of the avant-garde, whereas for Bogdanov the essential discussion centred on the necessity of cultivating a proletarian culture, as previously mentioned. My thesis is that the materiality of existence was central to both thinkers, but for Lenin it was solely grounded in the historical-economic reality of the capitalist mode of production. In contrast, Bogdanov's different scientific background allowed the same concept of materiality to expand into the more intricate issues surrounding the natural and social organisation of life during the pivotal historical moment of the Revolution and from a perspective that occasionally flirted with utopia. This swiftly led to Bogdanov being accused of idealism and dependence on Mach and Avenarius, criticisms that Lenin famously elaborated on in his book *Materialism and Empirio-criticism.*

The role of intellectuals lay in this context: some, even if initially part of the bourgeoisie, were to assist the proletariat in its political and economic organisation. Only a new intelligentsia, a workers' intelligentsia that remained connected to the proletariat, could achieve the internal unity of the class psyche. For Bogdanov, the principles of the organisation of the proletariat were identical to the principles of proletariat culture, which was to be introduced into the whole scope of society by the workers. However, to introduce this culture into society it was necessary to integrate the working class's life experiences, practices, and thinking into a unified system. As for the concrete tasks of the proletariat in creating its culture, Bogdanov designated three essential areas: morality, art, and science. The norms of morality, law, and custom, which would be up to the proletariat to develop, would correspond only to the utility they would have for the collectivity and its social needs. New terminology had to be created because terms such as "law", "morality", and "religion" were attributes of absolute authority and would no longer have meaning in a democratic perspective. Even expressions such as "proletarian morality" or "proletarian law" would not have been adequate, since new cultural forms needed new concepts.

Similarly, the new proletarian art had to integrate the experiences of labour collectivity. The proletariat living its own life, not comparable to any other class, needed art, penetrated by its feelings, aspirations, and ideals. Bogdanov vigorously rejected the objections of those who claimed that the challenging conditions of existence of the working class, and the even harsher conditions of its social struggle, could hinder it from taking charge of creating its art. Quite the contrary, he argued, an organisational function in the life of collectivity operates not only in the field of knowledge, but also in the fields of feelings and desires. Through the harmonisation of the feelings and ideals of the masses, art would become the most powerful engine of growth and, finally, the victory of collectivity. Class cohesion would increase because art would occupy a broader field than economics or politics.

Bogdanov did not, however, express himself explicitly on the forms of the new proletarian art: "I leave that to others, who are more knowledgeable about

such matters than I am".[8] But on content, he considered it peculiarly false and naïve to think that proletarian art should depict workers' lives, everyday forms and ways of life and their struggle. The universe of class experiences, which is the proper object of class art, is not limited to anything; it encompasses the whole being and the whole way of life of society, as well as the whole of nature. Since art organises the human experiences of labour not into abstract concepts but into concrete and "living images", it is "more democratic" than science. It is more accessible to the masses and more widespread among them. To facilitate the real emancipation of the working class, it was necessary to encourage the proletariat to create an autonomous culture by opening party schools. Bogdanov's popularity and the support for his ideas by many party members, including Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, Leonid B. Krasin, Grigory A. Aleksinsky, and Vladimir A. Bazarov, seriously risked jeopardising Lenin's central position within the Bolshevik faction, making the conflict between them irremediable.

Beginning in 1907, Bogdanov travelled regularly to Capri, winning the trust and support of Gorky, who became a staunch supporter of *Empiriomonism*. It all began at the workers' school in August 1909. This was intended to train the future leading cadres of proletarian organisations in Russia. The programme reflected Bogdanov's ideas on developing a "socialist culture" from the proletarian point of view "on art, science and ethics". At the end of 1909, the student-workers of the Capri school decided, even before returning to Russia, to establish a second school, along the lines of the first one, in Bologna. For Bogdanov, the struggle for socialism was not just a single war against capitalism or a simple gathering of forces for it. It had to be simultaneously "positive, creative labour, namely the creation of new elements of socialism in the proletariat itself, in its internal relations, in its daily living conditions: it is the elaboration of a socialist proletarian culture".[9] Bogdanov's proposals failed in practice, but it must be recognised as a moment in the development of socialism itself and of the artistic avant-garde.

3. *Lenin and the Revolution*

The events leading up to October 1917 are well known.[10] The degree of development of the Russian economy and society did not lead Lenin to link socio-economic development with revolution mechanically. In other words, no

8. Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Kulturnye zadachi nashego vremeni*, Moscow, 1911, quoted in Jutta Scherrer, "Ortodossia o eresia? Alla ricerca di una cultura politica del bolscevismo", in *Gor'kij-Bogdanov e la scuola di Capri. Una corrispondenza inedita (1908-1911)*, ed. by Jutta Scherrer and Daniela Steila, Rome, Carocci, 2017, pp. 17-200: 164.

9. Quoted in Gabriele Gorzka, *A. Bogdanov und der russische Proletkult. Theorie und Praxis einer sozialistischen Kulturrevolution*, Frankfurt am Main-New York, Campus, 1980, p. 135.

10. In addition to the now classic Edward H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia. The Bolshevik Revolution*, *1917-1923*, 14 vols., London, Pelican Book, 1973, vol. I, see Figes, *A People's Tragedy*; Andrea Graziosi, *L'Urss di Lenin e Stalin. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1914-1945*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2007; *The Cambridge History of Communism,* vol. I.; Mark D.

society is mature enough to render revolution necessary and inevitable. Lenin affirms a concept of society in which the constitutive presence of the struggle between classes prevents "its objectification as a singular space of economic and political advancement".[11] Based on this sociology, for Lenin the reality of Russia's backwards economic and civil conditions did not constitute an obstacle to a possible proletarian revolution. The contrast was between the bourgeois political movement and the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. For Lenin, the Russian revolution of 1905 itself was the most obvious form of this dual dynamic present in every capitalist reality. It was a bourgeois revolution because it was characterised by the drive to obtain constitutional recognition of the now dominant form of appropriation. This drive is embodied in the classical demands for individual and collective freedom and the parliamentarisation of political life. The 1905 revolution, however, was an essentially proletarian revolutionary explosion: marked by strikes and mass demonstrations, and the emergence of the Soviets, which were the structures of autonomous political organisation of workers in large cities. In Lenin's opinion, the simultaneous presence of the two revolutions verified the inconsistency of an organic or structural concept of society.

According to Lenin, the success of a revolution depended on the subjective action of an antagonistic organisation charged with consciously overthrowing the existing social order. The Russian Revolutionary Party played this role. It had the task of indicating to the working class the modalities of an opposition that was not simply a "reactionary revolt" against a specific situation of exploitation. Instead, it had a creative function, which was to introduce the prospect of overthrowing the overall social, economic, and political conditions from outside the class struggle. The Revolutionary Party was to anticipate the conditions of the overall clash between proletarians and capitalists and act as an avant-garde. The Leninist Revolution was not the simple upending of a system that had become untenable. It was the political overthrow and cancellation of the bourgeoisie, and it was to continue over time and become permanent. It was to introduce, externally to class conflict, the possibility of completely overturning social, economic, and political conditions that were still subjugated to the domination of capital. Such a revolution was thus a permanent process and an episode within world revolution.[12]

The system that emerged from the Revolution was transitional towards forming a new society through a proletarian culture. Artists also played a vital role in this process: with a drive to change foreign influences, artists wished to

Steinberg, *The Russian Revolution, 1905-1921*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017; Smith, *Russia in Revolution*.

11. Maurizio Ricciardi, *Rivoluzione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2001, p. 163.

12. Rita Di Leo argues that Lenin was the brutal leader of the people who supported the most brutal acts of popular justicialism, and the politician, from the social democratic school, who managed to invent the mixed economy of the NEP. Lenin was a statesman with Prussian sensibilities, anxious about his party's ineptitude in governing the country. He embodied all this within the political project of socialism-communism (Rita Di Leo, *L'esperimento profano. Dal capitalismo al socialismo e viceversa*, Rome, Ediesse, 2012, p. 35).

contribute to the formation of proletarian culture, which was indispensable for the accomplishment of the Revolution. However, many avant-gardists viewed the Revolution first and foremost as a large-scale social (and in some cases even spiritual) upheaval, not as the victory of any specific party. They believed that the reign of the Bolsheviks would be but one transient phenomenon; others rejected it categorically. Nevertheless, there was also public enthusiasm for the October Revolution. A few of the primary artists were declared enthusiasts of Marxist ideology, although some of them, not least Pavel N. Filonov, Malevich, and Rodchenko, did equate artistic innovation with political radicalism, contending that their artistic boldness had in some way anticipated the political spirit of the October Revolution. Still, it would be inaccurate to assume that all radical artists were sympathetic to the new regime, that all its artistic and literary apologists were avant-garde, or that the cultural ambience immediately after the October Revolution was exclusively "leftist".[13]

As an event, the Revolution served as a trigger for a process in which awareness dominated the work that would be required, and for Lenin, that would touch the deepest foundations of life and custom.[14] It was necessary to fight illiteracy, but, according to Lenin, "We also need a culture which teaches us to fight red tape and bribery". The task of the political education departments was to raise the cultural level and provide political education. This was "much more" than propaganda:

> It means practical results, it means teaching the people how to achieve these results, and setting an example to others, not as members of an Executive Committee, but as ordinary citizens who, being better politically educated, are able not only to hurl imprecations at the red tape – which is very widely practised among us – but to show how this evil can be overcome.[15]

Political education was aimed at creating a new culture, a proletarian one. Lenin was attentive to the political and professional aspects of artistic education. He introduced the following supplement to the 1920 VKhutemas decree (Vysshiye Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskiye Masterskiye, Higher Art and Technical Studios) in Moscow: "Fundamentals of political science and communist philosophy shall be obligatory disciplines in all years of tuition".[16]

13. See John E. Bowlt, "5 × 5 = 25? The Science of Constructivism", in *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, ed. by Aleš Erjavec, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 42-79; Brooks, *The Firebird and the Fox*, part III; Scheijen, *The Avant-Gardists*.

14. See Maurizio Ricciardi, "Il potere senza popolo. Soggetto collettivo e forma politica in URSS (1919-1936)", in *Il governo del popolo. Dalla Comune di Parigi alla Prima guerra mondiale*, ed. by Gianluca Bonaiuti, Giovanni Ruocco and Luca Scuccimarra, 4 vols., Rome, Viella, 2024, vol. III, pp. 195-217.

15. Vladimir I. Lenin, "Second All-Russia Congress of Political Education Departments" [17 October 1921], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXIII, ed. by David Skvirsky and George Hanna, pp. 60-79: 77.

16. Quoted in Svetlana Dzhafarova, "Exhibitions, Museums and Art Education of a New Kind", in *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930. The G. Costakis Collection*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by

In theory, VKhutemas was, after the more spontaneous and popular Proletkult (Proletarskaya kultura, proletarian cultural-educational organisations), the place where, once the civil war was over, the activity of artists was focused on art and its relation to politics. However, VKhutemas itself was, in turn, one of the first products of Lenin's and the Soviets' intervention in the new institutional organisation that the emerging reality of Soviet Russia was adopting. It must therefore be emphasised that it was already in a phase that can be described as "organisational", and we will see that it is precisely the principle of organisation (towards the establishment of a new society) that is added to the principle previously considered, namely restoring the material elements from the very long-standing Russian tradition that had existed well before the Tsars.

In traditional Marxist terms, the authentic protagonists of this purely "ideological" and superstructural affair were the artists who adapted contemporary artistic practices to align with the new revolutionary imperatives. This occurred within a shared language that united the artistic avant-garde with Lenin's political avant-garde, specifically regarding matter and materiality. Indeed, the theme of materiality was central to the growing awareness of the actions required by the artists. This applied not only to Lenin's political avant-garde, but also to those members of the proletariat who viewed culture and art as a moment of new aggregation. This was the delicate yet very powerful point of cohesion for the extraordinary experiment of Proletkult, promoted by Lunacharsky, flanked and supported, albeit unofficially, by Bogdanov.

4. *The Proletkult movement*

In the agitated political atmosphere following February 1917, deciding who should take control of cultural matters was complicated. The National Soviet Congress attempted to formulate a cultural agenda. Faced with an inactive government, it proposed establishing a national commission to oversee education from primary school to university. Others thought that the trade unions should have control over cultural training, since the workers' movement was, among other things, an artistic movement. Only an aware worker could be a convinced socialist and actively participate in the trade union movement. Nevertheless, deciding who should take control of the situation was a laborious process.

The most militant workers' organisations, the factory committees, succeeded in founding a proletarian cultural network. This was thanks to the efforts of cultural activists from Vpered's circle. Lunacharsky united Vpered's theoretical positions with the growing network of proletarian cultural groups, thus creating the basis for Proletkult.[17]

Anna Kafetsi, 2nd ed., Athens, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995, pp. 76-97: 78.

17. On Proletkult, see Peter Gorsen and Eberhard Knödler-Bunte, *Proletkult*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, Frommann, Holzboog, 1974-1975.

Bogdanov and Lunacharsky were the movement's theorists and co-founders. Proletkult first took shape in Petrograd in 1917, just a few days before the sudden explosion of the October Revolution, as a loose coalition of clubs, factory committees, workers' theatres, and educational societies devoted to the cultural needs of the working class. Defining proletarian culture proved to be the most challenging problem. Some people thought that art should only be concerned with proletarian matters and ought to encompass intellectual works only if they met the needs of the working class. They denied that the "bourgeois" culture had anything to teach them.[18] However, others insisted on the importance of the classics in forming the proletariat.

Lunacharsky took a middle stand. He endorsed the idea of a proletarian culture, but reminded workers that they had much to learn from the culture of the past. According to him, the proletariat should develop its independent forms in science and art, utilising all the cultural achievements of the past and present in this task. "The proletariat must continue producing a proletarian culture to create the broadest possible stream of new, definite values that bear the mark of the proletarian thought of the future order of triumphant socialism, which is being prepared everywhere".[19] Nevertheless, proletarians should adopt a critical approach to the old culture. The new order accepts them not as students, but rather as builders who are called to erect bright, new structures using the bricks from the old ones. Lenin and Lunacharsky shared this idea: the latter's "God-Building" idea was to re-Christianise the masses through the new socialist religion.[20]

By 1918, Proletkult had expanded into a national movement with a far more ambitious purpose: to define a unique proletarian culture that would inform and inspire the new society. The October Revolution led to an explosion in new cultural groups and organisations. Independent clubs and societies, cultural sections for unions, soviets, factories, and the Komsomol (Vsesoyuznyy leninskiy kommunisticheskiy soyuz molodyozhi [VLKSM], All-Union Leninist Young Communist League) groups sprang up. The state's educational apparatus financed theatres, meeting halls, and schools, and open lectures abounded on a wide range of themes, from religion to Esperanto. Although prominent avant-garde figures such as Kandinsky, Larionov, Malevich, and Tatlin were not members of Proletkult, the atmosphere that emanated from it had an extraordinary influence on both

18. Lynn Mally*, Culture of the Future. The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990, p. 30.

19. Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, "Die Aufgaben der sozialistischen Kultur", *Russische Korrespondenz*, 6/7 (1920), pp. 91-94: 92.

20. See Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, "Religione e socialismo", in Bori and Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia*, pp. 252-263. Antonio Gramsci defined Lunacharsky as follows in an unsigned article on "Cronache dell'Ordine Nuovo" ("Chronicles of the New Order") dated 11 December 1920: "The Proletarian Culture movement, in the revolutionary meaning given to this expression in Russia by Comrade Lunacharsky […], tends towards the creation of a new civilisation; of new customs; of new habits of life and thought, of new sentiments. It tends towards this by promoting, in the manual and intellectual workers class, the spirit of research in the fields of philosophy and art, historical investigation and in creating new works of beauty and truth".

the proletarian masses and the avant-garde. This was likely due not only to the rapid strategic execution of the October Revolution, but also to the long-standing creative vacuum in the Russian world, caused by the crisis of the Tsarist regime and, above all, by the fracture in social and cultural life that previously populism had maintained. Lunacharsky's and Bogdanov's insight to activate an instrument for unifying proletarian culture exceeded all expectations. It sparked great hopes among both urban and rural populations, but it also presented significant challenges. These included financial issues and, increasingly, the political and decision-making responsibilities for the organisational aspects of the experiment: that is, who was to make decisions and take responsibility for managing the entire operation.

The proletariat saw a steady rise in interclass membership, which consequently caused the organisation to lose its proletarian character. Despite limited funds and basic supplies, at its peak in 1920 Proletkult claimed to have 400,000 members across 300 branches throughout Soviet territory. However, by the end of the civil war, the Communist Party had stripped Proletkult of its independence and placed the organisation under the control of the new state's cultural authority formation. The movement's independence had been in question since its inception. Yet, it became increasingly about independence from the party rather than from the state. The issue was particularly acute regarding Narkompros (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia, People's Commissariat of Enlightenment), a cultural organisation established in November 1917, shortly after the October Revolution, under Lunacharsky's guidance, replacing the former ministry of culture.[21] By its very name, the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment reveals the intention, not merely ideological but primarily formative, of the path pursued by Lenin and Lunacharsky. This again demonstrated that the organisational effort was primarily at an institutional level. The increasing emphasis on art focused on educational and developmental aspects for the younger generation, and reflected the same intention that was evident in the higher-level debates among the artists involved in the constructivist movement.

Narkompros was organised into a complex bureaucratic structure with 17 divisions, which sought to control state schools, universities, concert halls, theatres, and museums. Initially, the Proletkultists had the support of Narkompros because their remit was different from state educational institutions. The more socially diverse Proletkult was, the weaker this argument became. Lunacharsky had been committed to the autonomy of Proletkult and the formation of a proletarian culture. He believed that the proletariat needed to independently re-evaluate new forms in art and new methods in science.

By the end of the civil war, Narkompros's educational workers repeatedly questioned why an organisation that duplicated state programmes felt such a strong need to preserve its autonomy. Furthermore, party leaders began to doubt the wisdom of supporting a large institution that fiercely protected its independence without providing adequate funding. Undoubtedly, the Soviet government

21. On Lunacharsky's activity within Narkompros, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organisation of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.

immediately recognised that education and artistic creation were significant and influential channels for establishing a new political and social order. However, the urgent concern in creating a Russian proletariat was the professionalisation of new individuals who could compete and cooperate with the bourgeois and capitalist elements of the NEP. One of its goals was to exploit the most advanced professional training within the capitalist factories to accelerate the formation and preparation of a Russian working class among its workers and technicians. This occurred against the backdrop of ceaseless scientific research and progress, which had continued worldwide throughout the 19th century. There were also notable achievements in Russia, particularly in the positive sciences, which involved the study of materials and psychic aptitude, utilising cognitive qualities to enhance and improve the work being performed. There were also significant advances in technology.[22] Despite the domestic and internationally unfavourable conditions, it was felt that necessary action could be taken on Russian soil, even in the field of proletarian culture. As noted several times, this had been the bitter battleground between the father of the Revolution, Lenin, and his opponent Bogdanov, since the beginning.

Proletkult art critics launched their sharpest attacks on "futurism", a term broadly used to describe impressionism, cubism, non-figurative artistic forms, and various literary and theatrical style experiments. These styles were rejected not because they were new but because they were old, since they had begun before the Revolution and were promoted by bourgeois artists. A recurrent criticism was that futuristic forms were too complex for workers to comprehend. The intellectual Ilya P. Trainin wrote: "First and foremost, as the positive sum of collective sensibilities, feelings, and experiences, proletarian art is clear and understandable to everyone".[23] Art cannot be collective if the collective cannot grasp it.

Thus, Proletkult did play an "energetic" role in motivating the different components of the population who saw the October Revolution as the beginning of a new era. The Proletkult experiment was characterised by eclecticism in the participants' class composition and its diverse cultural content. With the start and the first positive results of the NEP, the party, beginning with Lenin, increasingly focused on the new ways in which the problem of the specific professionalisation of the workers should be structured in the socialist factory within the new mode of production.

5. *Education and art as a mechanism of the Revolution*

From the culturally generative impulse of the early post-revolutionary years, promoted by Proletkult, came a growing realisation about the new working class

22. On the use of organisation, in theory and practice, of the various techniques of psychological approaches to collective work, see Franziska Baumgarten, *Arbeitswissenschaft und Psychotechnik in Russland*, Munich-Berlin, Oldenbourg, 1924. Baumgarten notes the significance of the project that animated the Soviet institutes, starting with the Central Labour Institute in Moscow, founded in 1920, and headed by Aleksei K. Gastev.

23. Ilya P. Trainin, "Proletarskoe iskusstvo i futurism", *Zarevo zavodov*, 2 (1919), p. 36.

– the proletariat. Its education from school onwards, alongside the most up-to-date technological competence, had to also include a taste for an artistic-cultural orientation in the production of objects destined for everyday "new life". All this corresponded to the new tendencies developing in the most active groups of artists, who, after initially supporting the "futuristic" efforts of the early years, were moving towards a constructivist and, more specifically, productivist vision of their art. The central location where all this found a principle of organisation was the Vkhutemas, the Russian state art and technical professional school founded in 1920 in Moscow, replacing the Moscow Svomas (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskiye, Free State Art Studios).

Along with forming a proletarian culture, educating young people was central.[24] Additionally, for Lenin, assisted by his wife, Nadezhda K. Krupskaya, and Lunacharsky, education and culture were far from being superstructural due to the economic and cultural conditions of the Soviet state. In early Soviet educational policy measures, egalitarian-democratic and proletarian-revolutionary objectives often coexisted, including in higher education institutions. On 2 August 1918, a decree signed by Lenin was promulgated. Its radicalism was characteristic of the "romantic spirit" of the October Revolution and the intention to take the old "bourgeois" university by storm:

> Any person, regardless of class or gender, at least 16 years old, may enter any university as a student without presenting a diploma, certificate, or proof of completion of middle school or any other school. It is forbidden to demand evidence from those entering other than a certificate about their personal details and age.[25]

The education and teaching revolution began in 1918. In the areas reconquered by the Bolsheviks in 1920-1921, the situation had fallen to a material level far below that of 1914. The low point came in 1921-1923, when radical cuts in state spending on education combined with the great famine. The Communist Party was directly involved in the education of young people through the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League Komsomol, which was founded in October 1918, and the Young Pioneers children's groups, which were subordinated to the Komsomol in 1922. With the beginning of the NEP in 1921, the Communist Party increased its efforts to strengthen political and ideological control in the education system, especially in universities, as a counterweight to the necessary concessions to "capitalist elements" in the economic field. The idea was to create a proletarian student body with a communist core, implying a war against illiteracy and an education based on professional and technical training. The official position was

24. For Michael David-Fox, the project of "Enlightenment" – broadly understood to include education, agitation, and ambitious efforts to transform popular consciousness – was the central endeavour of the early Soviet regime. He makes his case by examining elite institutes of higher education, where an aggressive style of partisan learning was invented that profoundly affected the political culture of the Soviet state (Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind. Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1921*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997).

25. Quoted in Oskar Anweiler, "Erziehung- und Bildungspolitik", in *Kulturpolitik der Sowjetunion*, ed. by Oskar Anweiler and Karl-Heinz Ruffmann, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1973, pp. 1-143: 37.

that education for workers should occur in polytechnics and industrial schools. These formed the foundation for a proletarian school system. The education of the proletarian body could be made possible by combating illiteracy and by providing access to polytechnic schools.

Art was immediately involved in the colossal task, and avant-garde artists engaged with the new institutions, administration, and reviews.[26] Art was regarded as "artistic production" analogous to, and interfering with, every other type of production that the revolutionary was called upon to undertake in his new existence. Thus, there was no longer the exaltation of art as an individual entity of the artist-creator, but the affirmation of a generically universal subject: anyone could make art. And in the same way, everything was artistic, that is, it was possible to make art out of anything. There were, therefore, no longer any places set aside for the creation or enjoyment of art, since art was in everything.[27]

Lunacharsky expressed confidence that the proletariat would find its Marx, which it did not yet possess, in the field of art. According to him: "For the proletarian revolutionary state, for Soviet power, the question of the relationship to art is as follows: Can the revolution give something to art, and can art give something to the revolution?" He expected a great deal from the influence of the Revolution on art – simply put, for the rescue of art from the worst decadence, from pure formalism; the Revolution must lead art back to its true purpose, the

26. The *Gazeta Futuristov* (The Journal of Futurists) and the *Iskusstvo Communy* (The Art of the Commune) were founded in 1918. The organisational effort of artists became more intense with the creation of the Levyi Front Iskusstv (Left Front of the Arts) in 1922 and the appearance, the following year, of its journalistic organ, the *Lef*. Outside the civil war and wartime communism, the artistic world tended towards and succeeded in finding new ways of consolidating groups and movements in a direction supported by the government itself (and primarily by Lenin) towards the coexistence of positions that were actually different but politically subordinate in the pursuit of the full realisation of the post-revolutionary phase. This was also made possible by the space created by Inkhuk (Institut Khudozhestvennoy Kultury, Institute of Artistic Culture), founded in Moscow by Izo (Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv Narkomprosa, Department of Visual [Plastic] Arts) in 1920. The journal *Anarkhiia* was a Russian weekly, then a daily newspaper published by the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups (MFAG), edited by German Askarov. It was first launched in September 1917 and was published from the headquarters of the MFAG in the "House of Anarchy", formerly the Chamber of Commerce. *Anarkhiia* was suspended during the chaos following the Bolshevik seizure of power. It reappeared in March 1918 as a daily newspaper, expressing anarchist fury over the Bolshevik acquiescence to German Imperialism in the Brest-Litovsk Treaty. From 1918, the paper had a section devoted to *Tvorchestvo* (creativity). It featured many prominent Russian avant-garde artists such as Aleksei M. Gan, Kazimir S. Malevich (pen name Anti), Alexander M. Rodchenko (pen name Alexander), Aleksei A. Morgunov, Ivan V. Kliun, Olga V. Rozanova, and Nadezhda A. Udaltsova. See Nina A. Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy. Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.

27. See Luigi Magarotto, "Introduzione", in *L'avanguardia dopo la rivoluzione. Le riviste degli anni Venti nell'URSS: «Il giornale dei futuristi», «L'arte della Comune», «Il Lef», «Il nuovo Lef»*, ed. by Luigi Magarotto, Naples, Edizioni Immanenza, 2016, pp. 25-77. This is reflected in Decree No. 1 on democratising the arts, 1918, where it is written: "1. From today, with the destruction of the Tsarist kingdom, the presence of art in the repositories, repositories of human genius, in palaces, galleries, halls, libraries, theatres, is abrogated".

powerful and stirring expression of significant thought and great experience. In addition, the state had another ongoing obligation in its cultural initiatives: to promote the revolutionary way of thinking, feeling, and acting across the country. "Can art be helpful in this matter? The answer is self-evident: if the revolution can give art its soul, then art can become the mouth of the revolution".[28]

To quote the German review *Das Kunstblatt*:

> Today, we have received authentic news about artistic endeavours in Russia, which should interest German art lovers. In November 1917, under Lunacharsky's leadership, a Commissariat for People's Enlightenment was established as one of the People's Commissariats, bringing together all the artistic endeavours of the Soviet Republic. The Commissariat enlisted the cooperation of the young, radical artists united in the artists' collective.[29]

The review referred to Izo (Otdel izobrazitelnykh iskusstv Narkomprosa, Department of Visual [Plastic] Arts), which had been established in Petrograd on 29 January 1918 as part of Narkompros. The president was the painter David P. Shterenberg. A department of Izo was also set up in Moscow. It was distinguished from that in Petrograd by including a more significant proportion of members from the more extreme sections of the avant-garde. Tatlin remained head of the Moscow Izo until May 1919. According to Kandinsky, a founder of Izo, the artists would actively participate in all areas of artistic life. The link between art and production was strong, and the democratisation of the arts was central to the Revolution's cultural project, promoted by left-wing artists. The Izo programme maintained the abolition of classifying distinctions, such as those between sculptor and plasterer, painter and sign painter, thereby elevating craftsmanship to the level of art. A new order would separate crafts and specialities, but combined both under art.

Art academies and societies were transformed into free state art workshops in 1918. Their freedom consisted, firstly, in the principle of free access for all applicants, regardless of national education and proof thereof; secondly, in their openness to all artistic directions, the eligibility of every artist as a teacher, and the free choice of teacher by the students. In May 1920, Inkhuk (Institut Khudozhestvennoy Kultury, Institute for Artistic Culture) was founded at the Izo department of Narkompros. Inkhuk Institute was a crossroads of theoretical debates, artistic practices, and experimentation in industrial production, but it was not without its share of divergences and divisions. As early as 1921, reports of the institute's activities revealed irreconcilable differences. Kandinsky's spiritualism

28. Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, "Die Revolution und die Kunst" [1920-1922], in Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, *Die Revolution und die Kunst. Essays, Reden, Notizen*, Dresden, VEB, 1962, pp. 26-31: 26-27.

29. "Das Kunstprogramm des Kommissariats für Volksaufklärung in Rußland", *Das Kunstblatt* [1919], Nendeln, Kraus repr., 1978, pp. 91-93: 91. For an overview of the revolutionary components in Europe after the end of the war, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes. The Short 20th Century 1914-1991*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1994. On the German situation, see Heinrich August Winkler, *Weimar 1918-1933. Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie*, Munich, Beck, 1998.

and psychologism clashed with the views of the "Socialist Object" proponents, leading to his departure and the entry of new members, including Alexander M. Rodchenko and his wife Varvara F. Stepanova, marking a new phase in the institute's journey. This direction was not to make art but to affect everyday life and transform it. Without this stated aim, Inkhuk artists would never have started. The institute closed in 1924.[30]

Lunacharsky had personally approached artists the year before the foundation of the institute, attempting to involve them in all fields and in all artistic disciplines: from propaganda to the organisation of contemporary culture; from museums to the Academy; from film to theatre; and from photography to literature. Tatlin actively responded to Lunacharsky's call by taking part in a programme involving artists in the development of a proletarian consciousness to support the Revolution (including the "Lenin's Monumental Propaganda Plan", which was launched to replace the Tsarist statues and monuments being removed at the time).

This is also a significant detail of the new direction for art, which Lunacharsky promoted. Tatlin's intervention can be seen as a kind of "manifesto" for the future direction of proletarian art. His *Monument to the Third International* was intended to be a showcase, an exhibition of natural and industrial materials combined, and already formed into a complete and finished product, though in the form of a model. It was an original and contemporary conception by the artist, utilising the most advanced technical solutions to evoke process, movement, and occupation of space, while clearly indicating not only social but also political functions. This reflects the realisation of the Revolution that had just occurred, where the unity of proletarians worldwide was still regarded as the precondition for its very existence and future. Indeed, the Tower was meant to house all the operational "structures" of the Comintern, which was founded in 1919 in Moscow and active until 1943. Its function was to coordinate communist parties worldwide with the goal of promoting a global revolution.

Conceived to be approximately 400 metres high, it would utilise the transparency of new materials such as iron and glass to transform the concept of a plastered and silent architecture into a powerful communication tool. To quote El Lissitzky: "Iron is as strong as the will of the proletariat, glass is as transparent as its conscience". Words would never be sufficient to illustrate the genius of the "project" (what better term could there be?). To summarise, from the very

30. On Inkhuk, see Margit Rowell, "Constructions: The Moscow INKhUK", in *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia. Selections from the George Costakis Collection*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Margit Rowell and Angelika Zander Rudenstine, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981, pp 25-31; Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1983, esp. pp 78-98; Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Inkhuk i ranniy konstruktivizm: nauchnoye izdaniye*, Moscow, Architectura, 1994; Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Arkhitektura sovetskogo avangarda*, Part I, Moscow, Stroiizdat, 1996; Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer. Russian Constructivism in Revolution,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005; Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2005. See also Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism*, ch. 2.

beginning, the constructivist commitment was concentrated for just a few years at the Inkhuk. But these were enough to illustrate the extraordinary dedication with which the new Soviet education system organised artistic tuition during a dramatic period.

6. *The Vkhutemas laboratory*

The Vkhutemas school significantly contributed to the artistic renewal I am describing. Its story begins with the foundation of the Svomas and continues with its successor, the Soviet educational reform in 1918. A decree on the Moscow Higher State Artistic-Technical Workshops was ratified by the Council of People's Commissars on 29 November 1920, and signed by Lenin the following 19 December. In 1926-1927, the school was transformed into Vkhutein (Vysshiy Khudozhestvenno-Tekhnicheskii Institut, Higher Art and Technical Institute), as part of a more significant shift in political and economic development brought about by incipient industrialisation. The reform aimed to bridge the gap between the educational process and the growing needs of the industrial sector. Students had to work professionally at various factories and production facilities as part of their studies. The Vkhutemas/Vkhutein's story ended with the school's abrupt shutdown by Stalin's government in 1930.[31]

Conceived as a specialised educational institution for advanced artistic and technical training, Vkhutemas was established to prepare highly qualified artist-practitioners for modern industry.[32] An essential mission of the cultural revolution was to create a new educational model capable of training the masses to replace the traditional academies for the elite. The idea was not to produce a new type of human, but to construct a social individuality integral to an emergent Soviet nation. Lunacharsky maintained that the genuine proletarian concept was the word "we" (*my*). For him, pedagogy had to become the basis for forming a collective body capable of establishing a proletarian culture, thanks to the new method of teaching and learning, itself collective. In this way, the "body" necessarily comes into being and develops in a collective sense, providing the material human basis for producing a proletarian culture that is both collectively and materially oriented. This naturally follows because the collective body is formed through the solidarity work of those who share common goals. This was especially true in the attention to, and management of, the practical and concrete matters of everyday

31. The task of transforming the traditional academic model into a modern one was not undertaken solely by Vkhutemas; it was enabled by various institutions, such as the Zhivskulptarkh (Komissiya zhivopisno-skul'pturno-arkhitekturnogo sinteza, Commission for Painterly Sculpture and Architectural Synthesis), Inkhuk, and the Rakhn (Rossiiskaia Akademiia khudozhestvennykh nauk, Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences).

32. Vkhutemas graduates earned the title "engineer-artist" or "artist-technologist", indicating a specialization in a certain industry, such as woodworking or metalworking. However, most students and faculties preferred "pure" disciplines. In the early to mid-1920s, painting remained the most popular department, followed by architecture and graphic design.

existence. It can be said that the "cultural" policy of merging art, life, and labour was fundamental to building a new "classless society".

Izo Narkompros was committed to equal participation in artistic life for all movements, and allocated quotas for them in workshops. The decree was silent on the graduation of "pure" artists, which was historically the main aim of art education. Instead, it focused on artistic and technical training. Nevertheless, the production departments lagged significantly behind. As a result, in 1926 the administration sought to consolidate them in a constructivist outpost where Rodchenko and Lissitzky were teaching.

Vkhutemas had eight faculties, Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Graphics, Textiles, Ceramics, Woodworking, and Metalworking, and each included a preparatory (or basic) division. The preparatory Basic Course was where the formal-analytical disciplines were first employed and developed as an introduction to architecture and non-objective painting. Later, the orientation shifted towards production art and was rethought and adapted to encompass all varieties of artistic work, incorporating the principles of realist figurative art into its teaching. The Basic Course became the universal foundation of art education. Vkhutemas gathered the most prominent representatives of the avant-garde trends of the 1910s. Several of these artists, including Alexander V. Shevchenko, Anna S. Golubkina, Alexander D. Drevin, Kandinsky, Petr P. Konchalovsky, Boris D. Korolyov, Pavel V. Kuznetsov, Aristarkh V. Lentulov, Ilya I. Mashkov, and Robert R. Falk, were allocated their own workshops within the Painting and Sculpture faculties. Others, such as Vladimir D. Baranov-Rossiné, Nadezhda A. Udaltsova, Ivan V. Kliun, Alexander A. Vesnin, Lyubov S. Popova, Alexander M. Rodchenko, Alexandra A. Ekster, and Alexander A. Osmerkin, received workshops in the Basic Division.

The organisation of the studios was based on Kandinsky's objective and subjective approach, which remained even after he left the school. By that time, art critics and historians had advanced numerous theories. For example, Nikolai M. Tarabukin (also a member of Inkhuk) had written his *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (*Toward a Theory of Painting*, 1916), in which he defined the study of the history of art as the analysis of the elements of artistic creation. Punin also engaged in the debate on artistic culture, asserting that it was a concept developed by theorists of the Russian avant-garde based on the practice of new artistic movements. Its values were described as purely professional – the result of the "sustained artistic labour" of "various schools". Analysis became the chief principle and organisational method of artistic life, museums, exhibitions, and art education. Vkhutemas exhibitions did not merely gather painters, architects, and sculptors, but also combined art forms. Joining forces in Vkhutemas's Basic Course, painters, sculptors, and architects developed teaching methods based on their shared conceptions, notably those of Rodchenko, Popova, Anton M. Lavinsky, Vladimir L. Khrakovsky, Nikolai A. Ladovsky, and Vladimir F. Krinsky, among others. In 1920, Ladovsky independently developed "psychoanalytical" techniques in the Obmas (United Left Workshops of the Architecture Faculty). In 1920-1921, an attempt was made in the Basic Division to assign successive

phases in the study of form painting, that is, colour, volume, and construction, to different workshops.

While Kandinsky studied the laws of artistry, embracing both the spatial and the temporal arts, Vkhutemas confined itself to the former. However, under Vladimir A. Favorsky's rectorship, the two avant-garde principles – the organic and the mechanical – collided. In 1922-1923, the artists worked at systematising programmes and student work, having added "volumetric" and "spatial" disciplines to the "painterly" ones. Ladovsky, together with Krinsky and Nikolai V. Dokuchaev, developed the "space" discipline, a propaedeutic system that offered hundreds of students training in art and architecture. His ability to bring out the creative potential in every student primarily relied on his rigorous theoretical approach.

Rationalists aimed to define laws governing the spatial form in architecture, which would replace the classical order. Ladovsky developed an objective, psychoanalytical method in design that focused on the perception of spatial form rather than on the mind's internal processes. The rationalist theory of space in architecture paralleled Lissitzky's theory, which sought to establish an objective approach to representing space in art by tracing its development from planimetric to time-based concepts. Perhaps the most precise articulation of these ideas is in El Lissitzky's essay "Art and Pangeometry" (1925). Ladovsky's dedication to systematically exploring space was matched by Alexander Rodchenko's work in industrial and graphic design. His Graphics course, like the Space course, was designed as a comprehensive programme of sequential exercises, offering students a set of universal methods and a compositional framework for working with abstract form.[33]

By late 1922 to early 1923, a new preparatory course emerged, focusing on the analytical study of form based on a clear distinction between surface flatness and spatial volume, with the aim of nurturing production artists. Rodchenko, Alexander A. Vesnin, Lavinsky, and Popova presented Vkhutemas's directors with a plan to convert the Basic Division into a design faculty with a two-year introductory programme and a two-year course in production art. This was conceived at that moment to include street and interior decoration, industrial graphics, clothing design, and so forth. In the middle and late 1920s, constructivist tendencies were strong in the Metalworking faculty, where Rodchenko and Tatlin were teachers; in the Woodworking faculty, where Lissitzky had been teaching since his return from Europe; and in the Textile faculty due to Varvara F. Stepanova's influence. The production faculties were a significant innovation site under the guidance of leading artist-constructors such as Rodchenko, Tatlin, Lissitzky, and Stepanova. "The constructivists started the struggle for new types of artistic work […] in 1920", wrote Aleksei M. Gan in 1926. According to that author, constructivism's "ideological content" needed to diverge from the "metaphysical essence of idealistic aesthetics and take the path of consistent

33. See Anna Bokov, *Avant-garde as Method. Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920-1930*, Zurich, Park Books, 2020.

artistic materialism".[34] Although limited by the "technical backwardness" of the period, Gan maintained that the materialist foundations of constructivism were so strong that even under these "difficult circumstances" it could develop a "practical voice".

With the adoption of formal analytical studies and the synthesis of avant-garde ideas into art education, these values became an integral part of the artistic consciousness of the Vkhutemas's graduates and of succeeding generations.

Malevich and Tatlin actively contributed to shaping proletarian culture. Through these two artists, the typical Russian dichotomy of spirit and matter is revealed. This was a common feature of the entire so-called "modern civilisation", which emerged after the great Enlightenment, alongside the two parallel processes of industrial and political revolution. Reinhart Koselleck explained the historical transition of the *Sattelzeit*, spanning the 18th and 19th centuries. Very interesting findings emerged from it, mainly because of the dichotomy I have just mentioned, with the human at the centre of the two principles of idealism and materialism, both influenced by the new technical and scientific momentum. They had different effects on the realms of economic production and socio-political coexistence; however, this led to the widespread adoption of the "scientific" method in both spheres. The emergence of a new art form in pursuit of a new "modern" aesthetic also reflected these broad characteristics of the period. This art form represented an essential aspect of observation as to how its "constitution" evolved at that time in terms of the various facets it took on in response to the complexity of the changes occurring around it.

I will revisit this statement in the next chapter, aiming to demonstrate that the artistic and social moments were inextricably linked, and that this was perhaps what made the realisation of the entire constructivist experience so challenging.

34. Aleksei M. Gan, "Konstruktivizm v armature povsednevnogo byta", *Sovremmenaya arkhitektura*, 2 (1926), quoted in Bokov, *Avant-garde as Method*, p. 438.

3. Heaven and Earth in the Soviet Avant-garde

1. *Kazimir S. Malevich's* Black Square

Kazimir S. Malevich's *Black Square* is one of the most astonishing – and perhaps the most notable – works from the trajectory of art during its "modernist" phase in the early part of the 20th century. However, the most remarkable fact is that its "invention" took place in a specific space and time: it was created in the old land of the Tsars, yet became one of the most inspiring revolutionary hypotheses ever. Therefore, its swift disappearance, which occurred almost simultaneously with the rise of one of the most brutal dictatorships in history, was quite surprising. Between the mid-1930s and the late 1980s, even mentioning the name "Malevich" was taboo in the Soviet Union. Only a few of his works were known in the West when they arrived in the United States in the 1930s.[1]

Malevich was one of many artists who reached the boundaries of abstract art in the early 20th century. However, none of his contemporary revolutionaries created a manifesto, an emblem as capacious and unique as *Black Square*, which came to embody both the essence of Russian avant-garde art and a milestone on the road of world art. This was also the result of Malevich's ability to masterfully manage the curve of his artistic development, from impressionism, cubism, and futurism to suprematism. He even resorted to the falsification of a few dates, such as 1913, to which he attributed the "creation" of *Black Square*, which instead took place only in December 1915, at the opening of the "epoch-making" "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)" in Petrograd.

Exhibitions were then the artists' only means of self-promotion. It was natural that they should follow one another, even in such tragic times, amidst a world war that brought misery and the jagged, poorly planned itinerary of uprisings and revolts. Since 1905, they had supported the fabric of a revolution to be carried out

1. On the *Black Square*, see Shatskikh, *Black Square*; See also Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*; Irina A. Vakar, "New Information Concerning the *Black Square*", in *Celebrating Suprematism. New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich*, ed. by Christina Lodder, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019, pp. 11-28; Éva Forgács, *Malevich and Interwar Modernism. Russian Art and the International of the Square*, London, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022.

by the Bolsheviks, or, more precisely, by a movement for reform and political-constitutional change, comprised of various opposition groups. In 1915, for example, another exhibition, entitled "Tramway V: The First Futurist Exhibition", opened in Petrograd on 3 March. Here, Malevich exhibited a work entitled *Cow and Violin*, which holds an essential place in his artistic itinerary as an innovator. This work aligned with the fevralists, who were drawn to the dadaist movement and aimed to oppose "aestheticism" and "beauty" in art. *Black Square* became the pivot for Malevich's transition into the new path of non-objective art: it was the point of arrival of the previous action and the point of departure for a new course. It was a suprematist prototype, and it would be wrong to interpret it simply as a derivation from cubism, futurism, and cubo-futurism, as it belonged to an independent art system.[2] Malevich baptised the large exhibition "Tramway V" simply by clarifying that it was the "first" Futurist exhibition. According to the artist's account, suprematism was conceived in his mind in 1913; *Black Square* – initially called *Black Quadrilateral* – became its first form, originally envisioned as a sketch for a curtain for the December 1913 performance of *Victory Over the Sun*. The painted translation of it was only performed in 1915 at the previously mentioned Petrograd exhibition. Also, of great significance in all of this is the circumstance that this first appearance occurred in an exhibition of decorative material at the Lamersie Moscow Gallery. Therefore, the invention of the new "space/non-space" did not arise from architectural studies, but rather from abstract geometric painting, demonstrating the enormous morphogenic potential of suprematism.

Then, again in 1915, the "0.10" exhibition tells us that there were two lines of commitment and development of avant-garde art in Russia, based in Petrograd and Moscow. These were suprematism and Tatlinism, respectively. The former, with Malevich, Ivan A. Puni, Mikhail I. Menkov, Ivan V. Kliun, Kseniya Boguslavskaia-Puni, and Olga V. Rozanova, proclaimed to have waged a struggle to liberate entities from the obligation of art. The latter, under Tatlin's very authoritative but less dedicated leadership, had, as its primary aim, to limit the growth of suprematism. It wished to maintain cubo-futurism as the mainstream of the necessary artistic renewal.

Malevich defined *Black Square* as the "icon of our times", naked without a frame. He saw himself as a moment, a "stage" in the worldwide development of art. The matter was so serious that Malevich wanted to remove himself and his creature from the crush of "isms" and no longer spoke willingly of suprematism, but invented a new term that somewhat ennobles the matter. He spoke of "Supremus", of "*his* Supremus", in which a little bit of everything was gathered, including painting, drawing, theoretical interpretation, and organisational activity. In the non-objective complex, from painting to the journal *Supremus*, the artist attempted to incorporate various elements, including painting, literature, music, theatre, decorative sections, letters, aphorisms, and more. It was 1917, and the journal had not been issued. Nevertheless, a society of that name had been

2. See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia)*, Moscow, Arkhitektura-S, 2007, p. 35.

formed, in which prominent women from the suprematist movement (Popova, Rozanova, Nadezhda A. Udaltsova, and Alexandra A. Ekster, amongst others) campaigned against the distinction between high and low art and pursued an art of "colour". Malevich invented the term "colour-painting" during the Supremus era as a synonym for "suprematism of painting", which meant the dominance and supremacy of colour conditioned by the strength of its implied energy.

Yet everything had occurred by chance in Malevich's head. However, he had immediately understood the profound symbolic significance, as well as the operational meaning, of that black plane that then formed a square. This fortunate act once again highlights the Russian avant-gardist's prophetic ability to perceive and embody in artistic expression one of the most paradoxical ambitions of 20th-century art. When the Revolution was complete, the sense of realism of proletarian culture returned. This is why suprematism was challenged by rational and pragmatic constructivism, which followed on from cubism, and could also explore the third dimension by utilising the "material culture" of Tatlin's counter-reliefs. Constructivism became the leading movement of the new "system" to be established.[3]

Malevich's final response was a blank canvas, white on white, representing space without colour but full of speculation around the possible system of the new world consciousness. In 20th-century art, this was the first conceptual monochromatic canvas. Due to its dominant whiteness, it was also an "empty canvas", the new absolute Zero, which, however, was "equal to Everything".[4]

2. *Materialism and creativity*

Kazimir S. Malevich, El Lissitzky, and Ilya G. Chashnik arrived in Vitebsk at the beginning of November 1919. New pupils and disciples such as Nikolai Suetin, Anna A. Kagan, and Vera M. Ermolaeva soon joined them. Together, they formed Unovis (Utverditeli novykh iskusstv, Champions of the New Arts), a group of creative artists under Malevich's direction at the Vitebsk Free Art Workshops.[5] With their strong sense of unity and collective spirit, this group

3. On constructivism, see Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*; Christina Lodder, "Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s", in *Art into life. Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Richard Andrews, Seattle, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1990, pp. 99-116; Catherine Walworth, *Soviet Salvage. Imperial Debris, Revolutionary Re-Use, and Russian Constructivism*, University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2017; *Russkaia revoliutsiia ornamenta*, ed. by. Irina V. Korotkikh, Moscow, Severnyi palomnik, 2020; *Yurii Annenkov. Revoliutsiia za dver'yu*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Anastasiia Vinokurova, Moscow, Muzej russkogo impressionizma, 2020; *1922 Konstruktivizm. Nachalo*, Exhib. Catal., Moscow, Zotov Centre, ABC, 2023; *Logos: golos konstruktivizma*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Olga Muromtseva, Moscow, Zotov Centre, 2023; *Rabotat' I zhit': Arkhitektura konstruktivizma 1917-1937*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Polina Streltsova, Moscow, Zotov Centre, 2024.

4. Shatskikh, *Black Square*, p. 271.

5. See John E. Bowlt, "Malevich and His Students", in *Soviet Union. Union soviétique*, 5 Part II (1978), pp. 256-286; Alexandra S. Shatskikh, "Unovis: Epicentre of a New World",

swiftly took control of the workshops. The Unovists adopted the "revolutionary arts" of cubism, futurism, and suprematism for their new system and programme, "because in them lies a course of events leading to a united creative sign". Cubism and futurism "have destroyed the old world of things", and we "have emerged into non-objectivity".[6] In other words, the complete shedding of the old to progress towards the utilitarian and dynamically spiritual suprematist world of things. Unovis was a new art school conceived not merely as a teaching establishment, but also for scientific research and as a general art office-cum-workshop engaged in practical work. The group's concept embraced the arts in every sphere of life. The school evolved into a comprehensive institution for the arts, encompassing painting, architecture, applied design, sculpture, and graphics – a unified artistic approach to design for living.

The new art should be taught to both artists and non-artists: the aim was to create a new world by integrating art into life.[7] These were, as we know, the years of Proletkult, but also of the underlying controversy over the role of art in the Revolution, based, or not, on the principle of proletarian culture.

> For action, votes and movement, we call not only upon those responsible for the arts but also upon our comrades – the smiths, fitters, braziers, concrete pourers, foundry men, carpenters, machinists, aviators, stone cutters, miners, textile workers, tailors, dressmakers and all who make useful things in the world at large, so that under the common flag of Unovis we may together dress the earth in clothes of new shape and purpose.[8]

Unovists believed in collaborating on all forms of visual imagery while setting aside their individual interests and styles for the moment. Even this level of collectivity was seen as a step, or a stage, towards a more comprehensive dissolution of the self.[9]

in *The Great Utopia*, pp. 53-64; Alexandra S. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk. The Life of Art*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2007; Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras and Irina N. Karasik, "Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality", in *Celebrating Suprematism*, pp. 105-125.

6. Creative Committee of Unovis, "Propaganda leaflet", n.d., in Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich. Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. by Alexander Lieven, New York, Thames and Hudson, 1982, pp. 297-299: 298.

7. Christina Lodder argues that, according to Unovis, the abstract artistic language of pre-revolutionary suprematism – characterised by coloured planes floating and interacting spatially against pure white backgrounds – could and should serve as the correct aesthetic equivalent of the new social order. The ultimate form of human society, which now seemed imminent, deserved to be matched by the final and supreme expression of art, which is exactly what suprematism appeared to be for Malevich and his followers. Such art was meant to be universal in its impact on viewers as well as in its potential application beyond the narrow boundaries of traditional artistic practices to the design of posters, books, everyday objects, and buildings. See Christina Lodder, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism", in *Situating El Lissitzky. Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. by Nancy Perloff and Brian M. Reed, Los Angeles, CA, Getty Research Institute, 2013, pp. 27-46.

8. Creative Committee of Unovis, "Propaganda leaflet", p. 299.

9. Malevich wrote in Unovis's "Almanach 1" in June 1920: "[…] the self must be annihilated, just as religious fanatics annihilate themselves in the face of the divine, so the modern saint must annihilate himself in the face of the 'collective', in the face of that 'image'

Malevich's insistence on suppressing the "self", in turn, represents a new facet in the landscape of views accompanying the discussion of collectivism in Marxist circles. Within Unovis, this issue concerned the individual side of the problem more than its destination for the group-class action relating to the organisational outcome of the class struggle in a revolutionary key. It is clear from the outset that the most crucial aspect of the question was human subjectivity, which needed to be purified of the self-representational component (specifically, the self) to enable it to fully participate in the formation of the new cultural and social totality made possible by the victorious Revolution. Still, all was yet to be created, including, and primarily, through art.

This also helps us to better understand the entry into the language of Unovis and Malevich of the concept of "economy", which, rather than referring to the materialistic dimension of the Marxist cognitive system, brought up the very significant issue regarding limiting the waste of energy relating to studies of physics and chemistry. For a long time, "human creativity has been trying to escape" from weaving confused patterns and designs to "the simple *economic expression* of the action of energy", so that all forms of this action are composed not of "*aesthetic*" but of "*economic necessity*".[10]

"Economy" and "collective", as defined above, were the key terms in Unovis's self-reflection: previously, art was based on aesthetic beauty, but now one must pursue a purely creative path driven by economic movement. The economy in motion is the same for everyone; however, people have different artistic tastes and tend to move towards unity rather than division and separation. Contemporary life leaves this behind through communism. The transition of the Unovis group from individuality to collectivity directly resulted from its belief in communism. It maintained that unity was essential for humanity, not for obtaining rights and liberty or for building a utilitarian life, but for advancing towards a single unity and wholeness, on the path of universal movement as its primary and, indeed, only goal by safeguarding bodily needs. For the group, the unity of all humanity was essential for a newly single man of action. All individuals "have been freed from their fences – the boundaries of their settled way of life and development have been removed", with the result that "all their inventive wisdom" flows along one path, gaining perfection in the "unity

which perfects itself in the name of unity, in the name of coming together" (quoted in T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 226).

10. Kazimir S. Malevich, "On New Systems in Art" [1920], in Kazimir S. Malevich, *Essays on Art. 1915-1928*, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. by Troels Andersen, 4 vols., Copenhagen, Borgen, 1968, vol. I, pp. 83-119: 84. "I declare Economy, so Malevich, to be the new fifth dimension which evaluates and defines the Modernity of the Arts and Creative Works. All the creative systems of engineering, machinery and construction come under its control, as do those of the arts of painting, music and poetry, for they are systems of expressing that inner movement which is an illusion in the tangible world" (*ibid*., p. 83). On economy, see Kazimir S. Malevich, "Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost' ili vechnyy pokoy" [1922], in Kazimir S. Malevich, *Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost*', 5 vols., Moscow, Gilea, 2000, vol. III.

of action".[11] All these new tasks can only be achieved through the leadership of a well-organised and united Unovis Party – one that would overthrow the old worlds of art and establish a new world, a new structure, and new forms of culture, a culture for all, within the framework of the new commune. "We are the Plan, the System, the Organisation!, so Unovis Party, Direct your creative work in line with Economy".[12] Or, in other words, Unovis was a party which had put the economy as its basis. Thus, art would become closely linked to the communism of humanity's economic well-being.

According to Malevich, man has divided his life into three paths: the spiritual or religious, the scientific or industrial, and that of art. These paths represent perfection, and man progresses along them. He advances as a perfected principle towards his ultimate conception, that is, towards the absolute. Each path views itself as of prime importance and as the proper way to God. The religious person in his church believes that being on the correct path leads to the real God, and considers all that the man outside the church says perishable. Art believes itself to be the most essential path because nothing can be higher or more perfect than beauty.

The factory refutes art and the Church, and says:

> 'I am rebuilding the world and its body; I am changing man's consciousness, and I shall make him omnipresent by the comprehension of perfection within me; by my system, the world will be reincarnated in me, and I shall be omniscient; I shall be God, for God merely knows the affairs of the universe. […] When all is said and done, the world is simply an unsuccessful technical attempt on the part of God, which I shall build up in perfection'. Who speaks so boldly through the mouth of the factory? Suddenly, it is God himself shouting with his lips.[13]

God speaks through the factory, where man has become the machine's priest. The factory, which has replaced the Church, becomes God's new dwelling place. This is the new path for man's accomplishment and attaining knowledge, totality, and the absolute. The factory "equals Materialism. It equals the Marxist dream of totality".[14] Now, proletarians can collectively use the machine to produce solidarity objects.

It is not easy to follow Malevich in his imagining of man's encounter with God in the name of perfection, but on closer inspection, this is where the challenge lies. Man does not accept God's offer of a serene and perfect life, without risk, in the earthly paradise; he wants knowledge, whatever the cost, and

11. Kazimir S. Malevich, "The Question of Imitative Art" [1920], in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 165-182: 168. The individual "is freed from his luggage, for his creative invention becomes a common part in the world machine. In this way, he receives maximum freedom, and is only now able to develop extraordinary strength, for there are no longer any obstacles: no longer the confined chest in which he used to have to live and develop; he no longer has acres, but the whole world and the infinity of space" (*ibid*., pp. 168-169).

12. Creative Committee of Unovis, "Propaganda leaflet", p. 297.

13. Kazimir S. Malevich, "God is not cast down. Art, Church and Factory" [1922], in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 188-223: 218.

14. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, p. 237.

is punished. Thus, his choices are between a perfect yet unsatisfactory passive life and activity, between materiality and ideals, always with a view to, and in the name of, humanity. This is perhaps the highest phase of art, known as the creative space, which signals not only destiny but also the specific duty that man, now liberated from God, must fulfil: in the working factory, where he acts as priest, and in creative art. This is the dark place where he precipitates everything and erases himself, only to rediscover himself as the sum and centre of all activity and knowledge:

> Adam transgressed the forbidden limit, and this was enough for his entire line to be punished with banishment. Here began the history of its human suffering, sweat, callouses, bloodshed, the history of labour. This was God's terrible punishment for man. Paradise fell apart and everything scattered and grew wild. Heavenly bliss disappeared, and all that Adam had had to do was to contemplate the eternal and beautiful movement, not even thinking, since God had already thought everything out.[15]

3. *Spirit and materials in suprematism*

Malevich's ideas of perfection and creativity are connected to each other and, in turn, to the Revolution achieved in 1917 and the subsequent remodeling of society. In art and political-economic life, perfection is purification from what was old, whereas reactionary elements dig up and bring out into the street the remains of past perfection, showing them to the masses. Initially, the political and artistic avant-garde was characterised by a combative and destructive approach under the banner of economics, politics, rights, and freedom. Then, the creative army that appeared after it generated forms for the whole utilitarian and spiritual world of things. As the supreme being in nature, creativity is the essence of man, and everyone should engage in this activity. People who were previously considered revolutionaries have now become counter-revolutionaries: a similar phenomenon occurs in art. Malevich goes against Academicism in art and against all who think revolution has been accomplished. He maintains that revolution is an "uninterrupted" phenomenon:[16] one should go further to fulfil a communist society. Just as many people have been unable to conceive clearly the form of the "commune" up to now, so many have failed to see form in new art; but those who have seen it have also seen a new world for their lives.

> In the logical course of 'communist construction, the church should be closed as soon as possible, as should private trade, as organisms not using the power of the masses for the necessary realisation of new action'. They are conflicting with the new awareness of our leadership over nature and diverting forces away from the unified tension of collective action. Communist consciousness is acquired differently: by educating youth 'in a non-

15. Malevich, "God is not cast down", p. 200.

16. See Maurizio Ricciardi, "Un problema di tempi. Tradizioni, anacronismi, rivoluzioni", in *Congetture politiche. Scritti in onore di Maurizio Merlo*, ed. by Giulia Angelini, Giuditta Bissiato, Alvise Capria, Mauro Farnesi Camellone, Padua, Padova University Press, 2022, pp. 249-266; Maurizio Ricciardi, "Il potere senza popolo".

> church or religious spirit, leaving this to the home'. Even having a family is a concession, because to follow conformity to its logical end, one should disband the family, since everyone born in a communist society automatically belongs to the society and its upbringing. Just as in the old days the West, East, and South 'oppressed us economically, so it was in art'. Now, we have an army faithful to a new principle in economic life and the avant-garde of art. The economic life of the New World has produced the commune. The creative construction of the new art has produced the suprematism of the square.[17]

In his essay on Lenin's death, which was published in German and translated by El Lissitzky, Malevich explores the connection between the afterlife and material existence – Heaven and Earth. He emphasises Lenin's spiritual presence and potency in the Gestalt, contrasting it with his physical form (the "little he") to detach him from material objectification or "mummification" and elevate him to a non-representational immortalisation. "In this way, he passes into the Gestalt, that is, the state of illusion, which is physically-materially indestructible, indivisible, outside the elements, free from science. In this detachment, a material reality is replaced by a Gestalt".[18] In the Gestalt, he transitions from the materialistic being into the sacred, placing himself above the materialistic action plan. Consequently, the deceased's small, materialistic "he" is transformed into the great "He" of the "new teacher". It is, once again, the annihilation of the self – the small "he" – in favour of collectivity, the great "He"; or, in other words: Lenin becomes the collectivity itself, which fully identifies with him.

Malevich argues that, as Christ is represented in the icon, so Lenin will be depicted, but the representation will not coincide with reality. "He" is eternal. Later, an image of Lenin will emerge, and the communists will believe in and regard his artistic form as a real fact. His material shell, however, is beyond the reach of art. Thus, his doctrine and artistic image diverge. Lenin's doctrine will continue to influence the world after his death: he remains spiritual and abstract, but his ideas will be reflected in the material world.

Material had always been central to Malevich's relationship with art from the very beginning. However, this underlying materiality – his interest in the peasant world – emerged in the intense symbolism of his suprematism. It culminated in the *Suprematist Composition*: *White on White* of 1918, in which the perfect fusion of form and colour reveals the need to consider art as the veil that must be lifted from those who must return to work. This marks the realisation, indeed, the "creation" of the revolution itself. It will also be infused with elements of idealism and materiality, shaping a philosophical system that is stark, cold, and unsmiling, yet propelled by energy, active everywhere, especially in man, in connection with the spiritual evolution of mankind. Energy, coordination, and system are simply three forms of the manifestation of man's positive presence in the world.

17. See Malevich, "The Question of Imitative Art", pp. 174-175, 178, 180.

18. See Kazimir S. Malevich, *Lenin* [1924], trans. by El Lissitzky, repr., Frankfurt am Main, biermann und boukes, 1971, p. 3. See also Kazimir S. Malevich, "Lenin (Aus dem Buch *Über das Ungegenständliche*)", *Das Kunstblatt* [1924], trans. by El Lissitzky, Nendeln, Kraus repr., 1978, pp. 289-293.

This was the basis on which Malevich and Theo van Doesburg met as early as 1919, in the pages of *De Stijl*, which had been founded three years earlier and four years after the exhibition of *Black Square*. They shared the idea that individual artistic creation was outdated and that modern times demanded a new universal plastic language employing a new "abstract" art, which, however, had to express the concreteness of the new life.[19] Malevich was still head of Ginkhuk (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kultury, State Institute of Artistic Culture), where he stimulated the interest and participation of art in everyday life, giving architecture all the space it needed. His suprematist works are perceived as being like Doesburg's compositions (counter-compositions) and the result of a common *Weltanschauung*, or perception of the world: the fact that this purely artistic perception was arrived at simultaneously, and yet independently, by these two artists may have been understood as further proof of the universal nature of pure plastic language. After years of Russia's isolation from the rest of the world, a review appeared in *De Stjil* in September 1922 entitled "Assessment of the New Plastic Russia". It accompanied the famous "First Russian Art Exhibition", which opened shortly thereafter in October of the same year. And it should not be forgotten that 1922 was also the year of the International Congress in Düsseldorf, which was a possibly over-ambitious attempt to compare, if not to associate with each other, the avant-gardes already at work in the various European countries.[20]

A few years, from 1918 to 1930, would be enough to revoke the inventive claim of Malevich and his "Supremus", and not only on Russian soil. Even *De Stjil* would crush Malevich's "constructivist" orientation in 1926-1927 with the insult "BAZAR, BAZAR, BAZAR, BAZAR" printed in capital letters. Hence, Malevich's fall from grace may have preceded Stalin's preference for the more direct realism established from the first Five-Year Plan onwards.[21] It must be

19. See Linda S. Boersma, "Malevich, Lissitzky, Van Doesburg: Suprematism and De Stijl", in *Rethinking Malevich*, pp. 223-236.

20. The congress, called to clarify the nature and actual role of the avant-garde in the new world that had emerged from the conflict, failed. The real clash concerned the individual versus the collective, but also the universal relationship in art. The latter was the position strongly advocated by Theo van Doesburg, who, in abstract art, only identified the possibility of the artistic, universal generality since progressive abstraction from the object to be illustrated led to common roots and, thus, harmony. The members of the Synthès group, Karl Zalit, Ivan Puni, and Arnold Dzirkal, strongly opposed the influence of an artistic community on the aesthetics of the individual artist. Between the extreme positions of van Doesburg and the dadaist Raoul Hausmann on the one hand, and the Synthès group on the other, were those who aimed to mediate between the collective and the individual in art. For El Lissitzky, for example, artists, intellectuals, engineers, and workers had to cooperate so that, with diverse knowledge and experience, an attempt could be made to solve the question of society: the artist did not act alone, but his artistic individuality remained intact. See *Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft*, *1922-1927. Utopien für eine europäische Kultur*, ed. by Bernd Finkeldey, Stuttgart, Hatje, 1992; Monica Cioli, *Anche noi Macchine! Avanguardie artistiche e politica europea (1900-1930)*, Rome, Carocci, 2018, pp. 110 ff.

21. See Maurice Herbert Dobb*, Socialist Planning. Some Problems*, London, Lawrence & Wishart,1970; Stephen F. Cohen, "Stalin's Revolution Reconsidered", *Slavic Review*, 32 (1973), pp. 264-270; Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power. The Revolution from Above*, *1928-1941*,

traced back to the persistent misunderstanding by certain "professional" Marxist and revolutionary cadres of the idealistic and spiritual traits that could not have failed to emerge from a world as unprincipled – from the official Marxist point of view – as that of art. One thinks of the hostility of the Assotsiatsia khudozhnikov revolutsionnoi Rossii (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia, 1922-1928) as being among the difficulties that drove Malevich to shelve his "Supremus". Since the association was opposed to the non-realist innovations of the avant-garde, it quickly became the most influential artistic group in Soviet Russia. In 1928, it was renamed Assotsiatsia khudozhnikov revolutsii (Association of Artists of the Revolution, 1928-1932) and established the journal *Iskusstvo v massy* (*Art to the Masses*) in 1929. Now, the paths of the political avant-garde, from Lenin to Stalin, and those of the artistic avant-garde were converging and nearly overlapping. Stalin's influence on the troubled development of the constructivist movement emphasises an evolution towards a more political form of realism.

Malevich's suprematist conviction was so profound, deep-seated, and long-standing that he could recover old elements of his art that were closely tied to the peasant component of his extensive revolutionary experience. These allowed him to incorporate realistic and material motifs that were increasingly on the agenda in the official line being established. This was not least because it was precisely the peasantry that continued to bear the brunt of the effort to implement the results of the October Revolution, also during the civil war and the NEP. Thus came the extraordinary flowering of Malevich's last production, which was also attentive to the surrealism of Giorgio De Chirico and his mannequins. This work positively exploded from being full of attention and understanding, from the physically heavy and material representation of work in the fields, and from the intrinsic force and ancestral energy of human labour. And here too, the use of the materiality of colour was not merely an ornamental motif, but the true reflection of the reality of life, in a way like the seemingly metaphysical lightness of the much-contested monochromes.

For Malevich, the focus on creativity as a fundamental aspect of human activity was not just relevant to artists and artistic creation, but also to all those who believed in the Revolution as the basis for building a communist society. This highlights the profound significance of "all black" and/or "all white" suprematism. It is essential to note that this intellectual stance, although it may seem to conflict with Tatlin's aesthetic-social view, actually aligns fully with it, providing the most authentic – and I would also call it "revolutionary" – expression of the entire constructivist movement. We should then consider that all this was happening, on the one hand, amidst Stalin's "planning" efforts, and on the other, in relation to a "bubble" of Western economic, productive, and commercial development that would, in a few years, lead to the Great Depression of 1929. In so doing, we gain a clearer understanding of the "renewing" aspect of the "art in life" proposals devised

New York-London, Norton, 1990; Cadioli, *Il monolite e il mutamento*; Cadioli, "L'economia di comando", also for its extensive bibliography.

by the Russian constructivists, but also, conversely, of the challenges these projects faced in real life and the "realism" they had to contend with, even in Russia.

4. *The visionary Vladimir Y. Tatlin*

"Tatlin, a visionary of the blades / And a stern bard of the propeller / From the team of sun-snarers":[22] so the poet Velimir C. Khlebnikov celebrated Vladimir Y. Tatlin. Technique and art, rationality and dreams, form and function come together in a portrait that effectively introduces us to the motives behind his passionate research. Tatlin was a devotee of materials, but also of dreams, as skillfully expressed in his counter-reliefs, in the objects of everyday life, in the *Monument to the Third International*, and, last but not least, in the *Letatlin*, the bird he invented to project his last dream: that of the man who flies away and becomes completely autonomous in his "beautiful" life.[23]

The significance that Tatlin himself attributes to his entire experience is striking, as evidenced by the various summaries he compiled over the years to accompany his complex career. This began, after the early death of his parents, with the solitary life experience as a deckhand on sailing ships and steamships in the Black Sea and then in the Mediterranean (for a few years, from the age of 14). He experienced the air, the wind, waves, sails, and even steam. When he left, he was only a young boy travelling the world, but he certainly grasped the tension between the wind on the sea and the ship's sails. Modernity has been built on that tension in its various forms since antiquity: travel, trade, conquests, and discoveries. The energy present in nature has no harsher and more direct expression than that arising from the clash between wind and water, which in ancient times

22. Velimir C. Khlebnikov, "Tatlin" [1916], in *Tatlin*, trans. by Paul Filotas, Mária Julian, Eugenia Lockwood, Doris Macknight, Eva Polgár, Colin Wright, ed. by Larissa A. Zhadova, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1988, p. 336.

23. Troels Andersen suggests that Tatlin's earliest reliefs may have been a stimulus to Malevich's movement from illusionistic to non/objective form (Troels Andersen, "Notes on Tatlin", in *Vladimir Tatlin*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Troels Andersen, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1968, pp. 6-16: 6). According to John Milner, Tatlin was both a practical man and a dreamer, the lyricist of construction (John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1983, p. 235). Julia Vaingurt contends that by putting "on the wings of *Letatlin*, a human being would become at once a cyborg and a bird, destroying the breach between the artificial and the natural, or perhaps exposing their inseparability. […] Technology ungoverned by the aesthetic principle is harmful, antagonistic to human beings, who are part of the organic, living world" (Julia Vaingurt, *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde. Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2013, p. 108). According to John Bowlt, Tatlin's projects for the *Monument to the Third International* and *Letatlin* were driven not only by reason, but also by fantasy, not simply by astronomy, but also by astrology (John E. Bowlt, "Vladimir Tatlin and the Space Race", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 281-286). On *Letatlin,* see also Jyrki Siukonen, "The dissident Bird. Remarks on Tatlin's Fliegekunst", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 287-290; Andreas Broeckmann, "Escaping Gravity. Letatlin and other Utopian Flying Machines in Twentieth-Century Art. Five Marginalia", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 291-295.

was governed by gods, who later became symbols of political government. On that tension (made of matter and technique), Tatlin builds his worldview as a young boy, which must "necessarily" be utilitarian, but precisely for that reason, is also beautiful and "material". This view is part of the revolutionary programme, offering the proletariat a way to make life more livable by realising a new style. It would make relations between comrades smoother and more accessible, from factory production to society's consumption, thanks to the construction of objects that were both more straightforward and more rational.

According to Sergey K. Isakov, it was obvious to anyone that before him were the results of some serious, thought-consuming effort "to resolve an extraordinarily difficult problem: *material* and *tension*".

> To combine various kinds of material so that their juxtaposition would be justified by an innate artistic intuition; to shape their surfaces in this particular, and not any other way […], this is, in a few words, the essence of working with material. It contains the solution to the 'surface tension' problem. There is a tremendous tension, a tremendous amount of potential energy in the way a sheet of iron is bent, and a sheet of aluminium is pressing on it at an angle.[24]

The passion for the air and sails, to dominate and govern them, is also at the basis of Tatlin's last astonishing feat, which claims, with *Letatlin*, to go beyond the "earthly", or rather the "materially" earthly, phase of human life, by designing in the tiniest detail a flying machine allowing humans to use their limbs to move freely through the air in the direction and towards the destinations they choose. Here, too, the references to mythological tradition are evident, as is the apparent allusion to the aeronautical techniques in expansion in those years, as well as to a specific, not secondary, literary production of a utopian type in the direction of interplanetary travel, which certainly existed not only in Russia. We find the materialisation of the utopian dream of Tatlin and the constructivists, an object harkening back to the struggle of the counter-reliefs to break away from the painterly plane into the third dimension, and the aspiration to create a work that is art and technology in equal measure.

Tatlin approaches the art of ancient Russia with a "material culture" orientation. This corresponds to the highest point of the revival of interest in, and study of, the art of ancient Russia, particularly regarding icons. Larionov organised his exhibition on original icons and folk engravings in 1913, and two major official exhibitions on the art of ancient Russia also took place.

In 1914, Tatlin had travelled to Paris to develop his technical knowledge at several private ateliers (including that of Pablo Picasso). He then returned to Moscow before the outbreak of war, participating in "Futurist" exhibitions and being active in the artists' union. In 1919, he was appointed head of the Painting Department at the Free Studios in Moscow, and he subsequently served as an instructor at the Free Studios in Petrograd. His workshop was called the "Studio for volume, materials, and construction".

24. Sergey K. Isakov, "On Tatlin's Counter-Reliefs" [1915], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 333-335: 334.

Experiencing the tactile qualities of materials, studying their particularities as the prerequisites of form, and comparing and combining different forms, materials, colours, and textures, Tatlin arrived at the construction of organised space and thus at the design of the *Monument to the Third International*. He placed "the eye" under the "control of touch". Material culture refers to the entirety of the creative possibilities for processing the image carrier and its surface with various materials and pigments, thereby designing both its optical and its haptic qualities in equal measure. *Faktura* primarily describes the "madness" of the work and places emphasis on the intrinsic value of the material.[25] An analogous term had not emerged in the West, so it is often translated merely as "texture".

The design is not solely an arbitrary act of the artist, but a reaction to the material's properties. The material determines its treatment possibilities, or, as the avant-garde theorist Nikolai M. Tarabukin outlines, it dictates the forms and not the other way around: in "its forms, as in its construction and material, the artist creates a *genuinely real* object".[26] *Faktura* was the main distinguishing feature of that specific world of specially constructed objects, "the totality of which we call art". There is a profound difference between the word in art and the word in life: "Its role in life is that of a counter in the abacus, whereas in art, it has a *faktura* and a sound; it is fully articulated and perceived in full measure". In reality, "we are flying through the world like Jules Verne's characters flying to the moon in a cannon-ball. But *our* cannon-ball has no windows". The whole effort of a poet and a painter is aimed first and foremost at creating a continuous and thoroughly "palpable object, an object with a *faktura*".[27]

Even before the realisation of industrial design, the search for the object characterises Tatlin's work and is part of a passionate debate on this topic in the 1920s, to which we will return. This is true of how he relates to materials and deals with space problems, from his counter-reliefs to the *Monument to the Third International*. Concerning the counter-reliefs: their triggering of the object-space problem, in this case the "corner". For the *Monument*, the internal-external bond is the central moment of the project's dialectics. Constructivist objectivity supplants classicist objectivism.[28] Dealing with the spatial organisation of the corner counter-

25. Vladimir I. Markov emphasises that Tatlin's reliefs of 1914-1915 were sophisticated and hybrid works. They moved away from French cubism or Italian futurism towards a far-reaching exploration of material qualities, *faktura*, and the construction that arises from their interplay (Vladimir I. Markov, "Faktura: Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh" [1914], trans. by Maria Laakso, in *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930. The G. Costakis Collection*, pp. 495-509).

26. Nikolai M. Tarabukin, "From the Easel to the Machine" [1923], in *Modern Art and Modernism. A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison with the assistance of Deirdre Paul, New York, Routledge, 1982, pp. 135-142: 137.

27. Viktor B. Shklovsky, "On Faktura and Counter-Reliefs" [1920], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 341-342: 341.

28. See Michele Ray, *Tatlin e la cultura del Vchutemas (1885-1953/1920-1930)*, Rome, Officina, 1992, p. 24. Keith Tribe's challenging book *Constructing Economic Science. The Invention of Discipline, 1850-1950*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2022, displays two of Tatlin's drawings of his Tower model on its cover. This is because Tatlin is regarded by the

reliefs, Magdalena Dabrowski highlights their three-dimensionality, which is built from a corner and bridges the intersection of two walls. Tatlin stretched between the walls, actively encroaching upon the viewer's space and transforming the environment. Unlike the counter-reliefs, the corner counter-reliefs were disengaged from the planar ground of the picture-like format, allowing the artist much greater freedom in the manipulation of composite parts, such as employing different axes (vertical, diagonal, or both) to enhance the spatial ambiguity and dynamic interaction of elements.[29]

The reunified dichotomy of spirit and matter seems to characterise Tatlin's art: a triumph of the intellectual and the material, the denial of the rights of the spirit to isolated autonomy, a quintessence of today's reality – of sovereign technology – of victorious materialism. This is how one must explain "counter-relief art" that first placed the "holy words" such as "art", "painting", and "image" in inverted commas.[30]

5. *The* Monument to the Third International

In 1919, the People's Commissar for Public Education, Lunacharsky, commissioned Tatlin to prepare a "form-matter" project in honour of the Comintern (1919-1943). By 1921, the project was finished and presented to the public, first at the Academy of Arts in Petrograd and then at the Moscow House of Trade Unions. Later, a second model of the monument to the Comintern was also sent to Paris for the "International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts" in 1925. However, the *Monument to the Third International* was never realised.

Planned as a 400-metre-high structure, the monument conveys its symbolic message by a constructed spiral of metal, probably designed to evoke the Tower

author as the main proponent of that constructivism which, after the 19th century, defined the role of artists in the new society in a technical manner, viewing them as "builders" for the direct benefit of the proletariat. Tribe attributes this interpretation to a significant book by Camilla Gray (*The Russian Experiment*), who argues that in becoming useful, art ceases to exist. On the other side, Tatlin and the ardently communist Rodchenko insisted that the artist must become a technician; that he must learn to use the tools and materials of modern production in order to offer his energies directly for the benefit of the proletariat. The artist-engineer must build harmony in life itself, transforming work into art, and art into work. "Art into life!" was their slogan, shared by all future constructivists, but not in the naive and sentimental way in which the "Wanderers" and the Abramtsevo colony had taken "art to the people", by idealising the peasant and his crafts as the source of life. Instead, they aimed to utilise and welcome the machine. The machine, as the source of power in the modern world, would free man from labour, transforming it into art. The engineer must develop his feeling for materials, through the method of "material culture", and the artist must learn to use the tools of mechanical production (See Gray, *The Russian Experiment*, pp. 247-248).

29. See Magdalena Dabrowski, *The Russian Contribution to Modernism. "Construction" as the Realisation of Innovative Aesthetic Concepts of the Russian Avant-garde*, PhD diss., New York University, 1990.

30. Konstantin A. Umansky, "Neue Kunstrichtungen in Rußland. I. Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst", *Der Ararat*, 4 (1920), pp. 12-13: 12.

of Babel and the Eiffel Tower. Oriented toward the cosmos, it would not defy merely the hierarchy of traditional architectural and sculptural styles, but the force of gravity itself. Its dramatically open, spiral shape represents the movement of humanity's liberation, challenging the old-fashioned figurative allegory of the Statue of Liberty.[31]

The monument's design consists of three large glass structures erected by a complex system of vertical struts and spirals. These halls are located one above the other and are contained within different, harmoniously related forms. Special mechanisms ensure their motion at various speeds. The lowest hall, in the shape of a cube, moves around its axis once a year and is designed for legislative purposes. It can accommodate international congresses and legislative conferences. The next room, designed for executive purposes (the Executive Committee of the International, secretariat and other executive organs), is pyramidal and revolves around its axis once a month. The upper cylinder, rotating at the rate of one turn per day, accommodates informational centres: an information bureau, a press and publishing centre, a printing press for pamphlets, manifestos, proclamations, and other materials. In other words, the entire range of mass media is used to disseminate information to the world proletariat. This also included telegraphs, film projectors, and a radio station above the monument. It embodied Tatlin's idea of combining art and technology, beauty and utility.

Tatlin addressed the collective: he saw his role as a creator and inventor for the community. The artists Tatlin, Iosif A. Meerzon, Pavel M. Vinogradov, and Tevel M. Shapiro came together in an association, a "creative collective", and developed the project in every detail and built the model for it. A "social revolution does not change artistic forms but provides an environment that slowly alters art forms. The idea of propaganda through monumental art has not changed sculpture or sculptors but shifted the very principle of plastic expression reigning in the bourgeois world".[32] The *Monument* is made of glass, iron, and revolution in the form of a spiral.[33]

31. See Svetlana Boym, *"*Ruins of the avant-garde. From Tatlin's Tower to Paper Architecture*"*, in *Ruins of modernity*, ed. by Julya Hell and Andrea Schönle, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 58-85. See also Svetlana Boym, *The Off-Modern*, New York-London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

32. Nikolay N. Punin, "The Monument to the Third International (A Project of the Artist V.E. Tatlin)" [1920], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 344-346: 344. See also Ilya G. Ehrenburg, "Ein Entwurf Tatlins", *Frühlicht*, 3 (1922), pp. 92-93.

33. See Gabriele Werner, "The Curved Lines as Form, Metaphor, and Policy", in *Unbuildable Tatlin?*, ed. by Klaus Bollinger and Florian Medicus, Vienna-New York, Springer, 2012, pp. 67-75; Georg Glaeser, "The Theory of Spirals", in *Unbuildable Tatlin?*, pp. 76-83. Interestingly, Tatlin's spiral construction aligns with Lenin's own perspective on forms of knowledge: "Human knowledge is not (or does not follow) a straight line, but a curve, which endlessly approximates a series of circles, a spiral" (Vladimir I. Lenin, "On the Question of Dialectics" [1933], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXVIII, trans. by Clemens Dutt, pp. 357-361: 361).

The "Revolution must not be criticised; it has to be supported, and we must strive forward to promote its weight and speed".[34] The spiral was the ideal expression of liberation: with its heel pressed into the soil, it escapes the ground and becomes, as it were, a sign of liberation. The *Monument* also had the objective of fomenting revolutionary agitation abroad. Signaling "communist evangelism to the whole world", Tatlin's tower would also be a giant lighthouse for Petrograd, emulating the Pharos of Alexandria.[35] Tatlin interpreted the monument as a marker that orients us in space and history. By focusing on this power of orientation, he discovered an irreducible remnant of art in the problems of contemporary architecture. Tatlin's work realises his utopian vision of constructing a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a Total work of art, in that the dimensions, forms, and movements of its architectural bodies show a variety of connections to the human world, to the globe. He conceived the Tower not as a contemporary building but as a monument and as a project for a future society in memory of the beginning of a new epoch in the development of art and society.

Tatlin resolved culture's most complex problem by turning a utilitarian form into a purely artistic form. The utilitarian purpose was none other than organising the content. Forms lacking practical significance were unorganised forms. Perhaps, the principle of organisation had, for the first time, been fully realised in art. For Tatlin, the research into material, volume, and construction made it possible to combine purely artistic forms with utilitarian goals, as, for example, in his *Monument*. According to him, material is far more empirical and traditional, but even so, it is not primarily a utilitarian means of embodying something, but an object to which an artist must apply his creative impulses.

Here we touch upon Tatlin's profound conception of the material, which also explains that the material is precisely the basis of the spirit of materiality to which I have so often referred in order to characterise its specific significance for the Russian artistic avant-garde. The material is not merely an instrument for creating the art object. It is, by its natural structure, the "object" of art itself, which is intrinsically embedded in the materiality of the Russian cultural tradition. This is also evident from the words used by Trotsky to frame Tatlin's work:

> Tatlin is undoubtedly right in discarding from his project national styles, allegorical sculpture, modelled monograms, flourishes and tails, and attempting to subordinate the

34. Viktor B. Shklovsky, "The Monument to the Third International" [1921], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 342-343: 343. "Before the Revolution, so Tatlin, I was active socially, organising the left artists; I was also president of the artists of the 'Left-Wing Federation', which later became included in the Union of Painters, where I continued this work right up to the split of the Union. In 1917, I was active socially, participating from the beginning in the organisation of the Union of Art Workers', Peasants' and Red-Army Deputies" (Vladimir Y. Tatlin, "Autobiography" [1929], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 264-265: 264).

35. See Norbert Lynton, *Tatlin's Tower. Monument to Revolution*, New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2009; Maria Gough, "Model Spectacle", in *Tatlin*, ed. by Museum Jean Tinguely Basel, pp. 253-257.

> entire design to correct constructive use of material. This has been the way that machines, bridges and covered markets have been built, for a long time.[36]

The proposal is for an "art of the day", indeed not "major art", but also not to be regarded as "minor" considering the role it plays in the public life of all: the conditions of contemporary Russian life brought to the forefront with particular vigour those forms of art that were most closely linked to the practical aspects of daily life. Posters, newspapers, placards, and advertisements were produced for practical purposes. "They are not forms which 'express' an artist's creative strivings but are the means by which specific goals may be reached".[37] This indication by Tarabukin of the functionality of Tatlin's monument concerning the practical needs of the proletariat for instruments of agitation and propaganda, for the daily realisation of the October Revolution, helps us understand that the work of art is not merely of utopian significance. In fact, the *Monument* could visually demonstrate the possibility of achieving the result of the global revolution, as expressed in the creation of the Comintern, an international communist organisation for achieving the revolution against capitalism in all countries of the world. According to classical Marxist doctrine, a global revolution constituted a necessary premise for the completion of the class struggle in Russia itself.

Materiality, objectivity, collectivity, and functionality appear to converge in the approach that Tatlin established as the foundation for his 1919 Comintern *Monument* model, which was was often regarded as merely utopian. These characteristics succinctly define the Russian artistic avant-garde movement, which was dedicated to a vision of reality centred on the new figure of the proletariat and its "new life".

Beyond the basic philosophical questions, which often only served to mask irreconcilable positions, both at the strategic level and in the tactics to be applied in setting up the revolutionary struggle, the real problem regarded the role to be entrusted to the proletariat. This concerned the creation and management of the new "culture" which, as "proletarian", had to distinguish itself from that constructed and imposed by the ruling classes in the previous regimes. The material basis of the question lay in the "form of life" that was then necessary to enable the proletariat to successfully perform the function that history, through revolution, had assigned it. It was a matter of building a new way of life, which demanded, first and foremost, the creation, availability, and use of new objects. They could no longer be those produced by a market hostile to the everyday needs of the new proletarian class, but had to be, in turn, new, as was the new way of life. For Tatlin, the artist was crucial in this process and was called upon to be an actual organiser of the new form of life.

36. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* [1924], trans. by Rose Strunsky, Michigan *et al.*, University of Michigan Press, 1960, p. 246. Trotsky, however, objected that the purpose of Tatlin always came in second place, and that the model was excessively characterised by its free artistic aspects.

37. Nikolai M. Tarabukin, "The Art of the Day" [1925], trans. by Rosamund Bartlett, intr. by Maria Gough, *October*, 93 (2000), pp. 57-77: 59.

6. *Objects for everyday life*

This new form of life had to be "collective" in a natural way: it is in this sphere that the problems of the relationship between man and object must be resolved. And it is here that a new form of reasoning is introduced, that of the "culture of materials", which can only be ensured through the direct participation of the artist in production. Tatlin's discourse on the material culture managed by the artist in a productive key for the new life might sometimes border on the banal. Nevertheless, it was always framed within a vision of Russian life as superior to that of the West. This is because in Russia, the production of objects did not aim at their aesthetic-fetishistic appearance as a function of the market, but always tried to meet the requirements of "organic form". According to this, objects do not have a life independent of one another, but rather relate to each other and thus also live in the spatial dimension managed by architecture, within which everyday life must always take place. The relationship between man and object allowed the exploitation of all the possibilities that modern technology offered by the various "arts", but above all, it respected the values and suggestions of living nature. Tatlin articulated the principle of organic forms based on human anatomy and individual psychological differences. He presented standardised examples, but also emphasised that the artist must be able to find the necessary material for the object, which can be adapted to our climatic and economic conditions. The discourse on the complementarity of the technical problems inherent in the different "arts" allows us to better understand the complexity of the "utilitarian object" theme, which can refer to consumer products of simple and immediate use in everyday life as well as to constructions that are so complex and articulated that they are not easily realisable. They are always, however, placed within a collective and material context. It also aids in understanding projects imbued with hope for a better future for mankind, when the artist-production worker directly participates in organising the object. In 1923, Tatlin started to design objects for everyday use with the slogans: "Not the old, not the new, but the necessary" and "Not to the left, not to the right, but to the necessary". He designed stoves and heating equipment, constructed new beds, made models of clothes and dishes. The overwhelming majority of artists considered this activity as the degradation of the sublime tasks of art to the level of artisanship. Tatlin, however, persisted in implementing his creative programme "Art into Life".

The principles of further developing material culture were expressed in their definitive form in two of Tatlin's later articles: "The Artist as an Organiser of Everyday Life", which appeared in 1929, and "The Problem of the Relationship between Man and the Object", in 1930. "Working in [the field of material culture] since 1914, so Tatlin, first alone and then with a group of students, I became convinced that our industry will be able to produce high-quality objects only when the artist-production worker directly organises the object".[38] The

38. See Vladimir Y. Tatlin, "The Problem of the Relationship between Man and Object. Let us Declare War on Chests of Drawers and Sideboards" [1930], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova,

Thing would result in the creation of the new man but, above all, it would foster a collective way of life.

When Tatlin designed objects for everyday use, he followed the traditions of the given cultural environment. For instance, his wood stove design exemplifies the distinct characteristics of Russian culture. And Tatlin's stoves were technically superior to the iron stoves in widespread use during those challenging years, which were smoky and whose flames readily died out quickly. Tatlin's stove designs already contained a design tendency which later became universal: in modern apartments, technical appliances had to be designed as part of the furnishings. Tatlin's stoves evoke the Russian village hut, yet at the same time they resemble a cube; he sought to create modern forms from traditional originals. The stove caused "fear in some people, and laughter, irony and ridicule in others" only because it was made by Tatlin. However, for Punin, he was "the most gifted artist of our generation". The art critic did not wish to insist on the "aesthetic" significance of Tatlin's stove, and the only purpose in starting this discussion was to show that there were no formal reasons to deny Tatlin's stove the status of a work of art; in other words, there was no ground for denying its aesthetic value.

Tatlin's slogan "Not to the left, not to the right, but to the necessary" means that there is a chasm between life as Tatlin perceives it and art, and that this chasm cannot be justified by the artists' "leftness" or "rightness". He is focused on everyday life, but not on its higher levels, not on the surplus which crosses the borderlines of day-to-day existence and serves as its superstructure and embellishment, but on its lower existence of daily human needs.[39]

In contrast to Tatlin's practical quotidian point, the more official Soviet art criticism approached the subject of "everyday objects" in a more dogmatic manner according to the classical canons of Marxist ideology. In *Byt i kul'tura veshchi,* Boris I. Arvatov observes that the "great majority of Marxists" who address the problem of proletarian culture see it on a purely ideological level, or at the very least, take ideology as the point of departure for their investigations. A peculiar ideologism characterises views on culture dominant within the Marxist sphere.

> Whenever comrades are called upon to explain social processes, including cultural ones, they begin with the production of material values. However, as soon as they attempt to explain the organisational connection between different *forms* of culture, they abandon their usual historic-materialist position.[40]

pp. 267-268: 268; Vladimir Y. Tatlin, "The Artist as an Organiser of Everyday Life" [1929], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 266-267.

39. Nikolay N. Punin, "Routine and Tatlin" [1924], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 403-406: 405.

40. Boris I. Arvatov, "The Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" [1925], trans. by Christina Kiaer, *October*, 81 (1997), pp. 119-128: 119. Arvatov refers to the "Marxist comrade" Leon Trotsky's essay "Proletarian culture and proletarian art". Published in 1923 as part of his book *Literature and Revolution*, in it Trotsky argues that the notion of proletarian culture is meaningless because the current "dictatorship of the proletariat" is only a temporary, short phase toward an eventually classless communist society (*ibid.*, p. 119, note 1).

Thus, for them, social consciousness as a form of culture takes pride of place, while material culture is relegated to the sidelines. In the most extreme case, they analyse the technical system of society only in the sense of a system that forms economic relations as society's driving force. Arvatov stresses the concept of "material culture", including technological production, distribution, and consumption. Material culture is the "Universal System of Things" where the relation of the individual to the Thing is the most defining of the social relations. The Thing was a cult, and the pursuit of the object aligned with what El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg in Berlin had also defined through the magazine *Veshch/ Gegenstand/Objet*.[41]

In the hands of the bourgeoisie, the Thing was characterised by a "private" but socially and psychologically dominant relation to the world, in the sense that this relation became deeply ideological, subjective, and taste-determined. In a communist society, the matter was different: the Thing becomes something functional and active, "connected to human practice as a co-worker. Mechanization + dynamization led to the machine-isation of the Thing, to its transformation into a working instrument". The Thing of consumer *byt*, once fundamentally distinct from the thing in production, from the factory machine, once static and dead, has now subordinated itself through its construction and function methods to the "productive thing". The Thing, as the fulfilment of the organism's physical capacity for labour, a "force for social labour", an instrument, and a "co-worker", does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie. Understanding the developing tendencies of material *byt* means being able to direct them, to transform them systematically, that is, to turn *byt* from a conservative force into a progressive one. This guarantees the progressive "reformation of two other areas of *byt*: the social and the ideological".[42]

Unlike Arvatov, who used the term "co-worker" to describe the potential of the Things in socialist culture, Alexander M. Rodchenko emphasises the emotion they evoke, the faith in "our things in our hands" that will be "equals, comrades".[43]

41. The magazine *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* was founded by El Lissitzky and Ilya G. Ehrenburg in Berlin in 1922 to establish contacts between the Russian and Western worlds. The first two issues appeared together (March-April), and the third and final one in May of the same year. See Roland Nachtigäller and Hubertus Gassner, "3x1=1 *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*", in *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet, Kommentar und Übertragungen / Commentary and Translations*, ed. by Ilya G. Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky, repr., Baden, Lars Müller, 1994, pp. 7-27; On Lissitzky in Germany, see Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky. Life, letters, texts,* trans. by Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittal, Greenwich, CT, New York Graphic Society, 1968.

42. Arvatov, "The Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing", p. 121. See also Gian Piero Piretto, *Il radioso avvenire. Mitologie culturali sovietiche*, Turin, Einaudi, 2001, pp. 15, 21-25. Leon Trotsky, too, argued that the great ideals of the Revolution would never be realised if people did not change how they lived their lives at the most basic, everyday level, in their homes and within their families. To this end, he called for the liberation of women from domestic slavery; the socialisation of childcare; and the liberation of marriage from private property relations (Leon Trotsky, "Problems of everyday life (Voprosy byta)" [1923], in Leon Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life and other writings on Culture and Science*, New York, Monad Press, 1973, pp. 15-91).

43. Quoted in Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 34.

However, in another essay in 1926, Arvatov addresses "the 'emotionality' of things", in a language that resonates with Rodchenko's:

> There exists the opinion […] that the course toward expediency (*tselesoobraznost*) murders the so-called humanity of things, deprives things of 'emotionality' or, what's the same thing, of their harmonious sociality. Such an opinion can only be maintained by those for whom the thing in and of itself, in its rational functioning, cannot be the embodiment of human thought, of the human relation to the object world and to his social existence.[44]

Thus, a theory of the "socialist object" was developed that, while opposed to capitalism, acknowledged the affective power of modern mass-produced objects. In anticipation of the future socialist culture that had not yet arrived, transitional socialist objects were to replace the pleasure of commodity possession, not with austerity and material renunciation but with something far more specific and psychologically powerful: the material object as an active, animate participant in social life. Not only did the artists take an active part in constructing socialist culture, but usefulness, a key premise of their work, served as the foundation for creating everyday, egalitarian objects that were generally equal for everyone.

On closer inspection, the question of the thing or object sparked a wide-ranging debate in the 1920s that once again focused on materials, matter, and materialism. Like Arvatov, figures such as Gan or Tarabukin did not concentrate intensely on the properties of the object itself, but instead on its creation as a "social construct". Thus, for Gan, the work of art was not so much seen as an object but, rather, as a working process through which a new audience and new modes of sociality were constituted. Gan expanded on and elaborated the three terms, or rather "disciplines", of the artwork movement: *faktura*, tectonics, and construction. Explicitly based on a Marxist concept of practice, the movement is founded on the idea that the material object, its creator, and the surrounding context are interconnected within a process of co-production.

Faktura defined the process of working the material in its entirety, involving the intentional use of the material, namely its selection and processing, and the nature of its processing for a specific object. It is to the relationship between maker and material that Gan refers, denoting a new relationship between labour, free in the new revolutionary society, and product.[45] By working the material, the constructivist flattens the hierarchy, making demands on the material but also responding to the material's demands. In this way, Gan emphasised the importance

44. Boris I. Arvatov, "Segodniashnie zadachi iskusstva v promyshlennosti"*, Sovetskoe iskusstvo,* 1 (1926), p. 86, quoted in Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, p. 35.

45. This position is also held by Osip M. Brik: "By artistic production we mean simply the conscious, creative attitude to the process of production. We want each worker to know why he renders an object in a particular form and a particular color. We want the worker to cease being an executor of some plan unknown to him. He must become a conscious, active participant in the creative process of making the object. We'll not need artist-decorators then. Artistic merit will become part and parcel of making the object" (Osip M. Brik, "Our Agenda" [1921], in Osip M. Brik, "Selected Criticism 1915-1929", trans. by Natasha Kurchanova, *October*, 134 (2010), pp. 74-110: 83). So, the production process was an endless source of creativity.

of the worked materials and the fact that the new world, built by communism and constructivism, was to be the product of human labour. The significance of the labour lay not in the production of the thing but in the production of a relationship in which the matter of the material and the consciousness of the maker were intertwined.

As Kristin Romberg has noted, Gan formulated an "embedded" attitude towards tectonics, which is understood as the way in which objects are formally linked to their context:

> Tectonics, or the tectonic style, is organically smelted and forged from the qualities of communism itself, on the one hand, and from the purposeful use of industrial material, on the other […]. As a discipline, tectonics must lead the constructivist in practice towards synthesising the new content with the new form. He must be a person educated in Marxism, who has completely rejected art and really got to grips with industrial material.[46]

While tectonics involves the merging of ideological and formal elements to create a unity of idea, *faktura* describes the state of the material, and construction pertains to the process of structuring itself. Therefore, the third discipline was the one that shaped the concept of construction using refined material.

In his 1923 work "From the Easel to the Machine", Nikolai M. Tarabukin also discussed the object, which should possess not only a utilitarian aspect but also a social one. For him, the issue of productivist art was not resolved by an external link between art and production, but through their organic connection, by the link within the very process of work and creation. From this close collaboration between artist and producer, the essence of art could be found in factory work. Through the connection of art to work, of work to production, and of production to life, a social problem of extreme complexity was addressed in everyday existence.

Productivist art, which encompassed all stages of product manufacturing, initially transformed the work associated with production. It exerted influence not only on the products but also on their producers, the workers. Art conceived in this way could transform daily life because it changed work, making it inventive, joyful, and creative. So, the art of the future would be a transformed work. For Tarabukin, the artist in the factory had to explain to the worker-producers that the object is social. Consequently, the artist would set aside artistic competence for a moment and become an artist-engineer. In other words, it was necessary to educate him/her.

Like Gan, Tarabukin focused on the process of creating the object. If one views art as a process and considers any manufactured product – whether an "object" or an "implant" – as a work of art, one adopts a typically productivist basis for theoretical argument, since the concept of production is inherently processual. Productivist art is functional, constructivist in form, and collective in the creative process.

The constructivist program, stemming from the brief, most intense period of productivist activity from 1923 to 1925, included Tatlin's primitive prototype

46. Alexei M. Gan, *Constructivism* [1922], trans. and intr. by Christina Lodder, Barcelona, Tenov, 2014, p. 61.

designs for everyday objects such as pots, pans, overcoats, benches, and stoves;[47] Popova's and Stepanova's fashion and sportswear designs (Figs. 6 and 7) and mass-produced textiles;[48] Rodchenko's packaging and advertisements for Soviet state-owned businesses, made in collaboration with the revolutionary poet Vladimir V. Mayakovsky (Fig. 8); and his most famous constructivist object, the design for the interior of a workers' club (Fig. 9) that he displayed in Paris in 1925, at the "International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts", and which he left as a gift to the city because of the great appreciation it had aroused.

This list alone demonstrates the scope of the horizon that the group of early Russian constructivists was aiming at, reaffirming the predominantly social nature of their artistic and productive efforts. It is also important to emphasise that the theme of the 1925 Paris exhibition highlighted the transitional phase towards a new understanding of the relationship between industry and art, as it still reflected the traditional view of a sharp distinction between "decorative" and "industrial" arts. There was not yet full evidence of the new scope that international capitalism had acquired during those years in Paris, including its shift to other planes, especially those of finance and international competition. This shift also raised another issue within individual states: the role of workers in the emerging society, due not only to the Russian Revolution but also to the impact of new theories and consumer goods production practices in the more economically advanced Western countries.

All this merely increased the materialistic element, which, as it turns out, was at the very core of the Russian constructivists I have discussed so far. It is therefore crucial not only to emphasise the rest of the world's interest in their bold theses about the "social object", but also to recognise that, in the background, there were partly coincidental sentiments between the two parts of the world we are referring to, particularly in the vital area of industrial production in relation to ongoing social change. Later, we shall see that the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange and the onset of the Great Depression of 1929 were not far off, interfering significantly with Russia's new industrial planning and furthering the Stalinist aim of emphasising, in an increasingly "realistic" manner, the materialism that enveloped the constructivist experience.

47. Tatlin told his friend Nikolay N. Punin: "The time for 'Americanized' stoves in the conditions of our Russian everyday life (*byt*) has not yet arrived. We need things as simple and primitive as our simple and primitive *byt*" (quoted in Christina Kiaer, "Into Production! The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism", available online).

48. Popova and Stepanova knew that their work at the Soviet state-owned factory would have to respond to the NEP market for fashion; when they demanded that factory management allow them to participate in production, they also demanded "contact with tailors, fashion ateliers and magazines" and "work on promoting the products of the factory in the press, advertising and magazines ... [and] work on designs for window displays" (Varvara F. Stepanova and Lyubov S. Popova, "Memo to the Directorate for the First State Cotton-Printing Factory", unpublished manuscript, 1924, The Rodchenko-Stepanova Archive, Moscow, quoted in Kiaer, "Into Production!").

4. Revolution and Social Technology: Towards New Realism

1. *International attention and the Russian laboratory*

It may be worthwhile to consult a short paper by the most outstanding British economist of the time: John Maynard Keynes. In 1925, after marrying the dancer Lidija V. Lopuchova, he travelled to Russia to represent his Cambridge University at the bicentenary celebrations of the Imperial Academy of Petersburg, now known as the Leningrad Academy of Sciences. Keynes wrote three articles for an English newspaper, which he later combined into a booklet entitled *A Short View of Russia* (1925). He writes in the preface: "They are merely the impressions, for what they are worth, of an observer, whose prejudices were not specially calculated to distort his sight, endeavouring to convey, as best he can, how Russia struck him". This is certainly not an analysis of Russian economic conditions in the year after Lenin's death, but a disillusioned interpretation of them, as far as the theoretical foundations of Marxist criticism and economic science are concerned, which he otherwise regarded as entirely false. "The games are played", Keynes writes in the end, and there is no turning back. However, his conclusions are as follows:

> If I were a Russian, would I contribute my quota of activity to Soviet Russia rather than to Tsarist Russia? […] I should detest the actions of the new tyrants not less than those of the old. But I should feel that my eyes were turned towards, and no longer away from, the possibilities of things; that out of the cruelty and stupidity of Old Russia nothing could ever emerge, but that beneath the cruelty and stupidity of New Russia some speck of the ideal may lie hid.[1]

Shortly before, Keynes had written that even mere chance places greater emphasis on what is happening in Russia than on what is happening ("let us say", comments Keynes) in the United States. This is what artists were trying to do during those years, especially in relation to technological development within Stalinist planning, which was also aimed at completing socialist industry.

Keynes's view is not secondary evidence, given the importance of not only the scientific, but also the political attention being given to Russian events after the completion of the Revolution. We are in the midst of what has been called the

1. John Maynard Keynes, *A Short View of Russia*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1925, pp. 5, 28.

"Red Decade", that heady time when sizeable numbers of intellectuals suddenly became enamoured with the Soviet Union, trooping off on carefully guided tours around the country and breathlessly recounting their experiences upon their return. I am also referring here to the journey made in 1932 by those two renowned British scholars, Mr and Mrs Sidney Webb, who were prominent advocates of British socialism as it evolved into Fabianism. The trip – which they undertook without specific scientific preparation or objectives – led to a two-volume work, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?,*[2] which was immediately reviewed in *The New York Times* (8 March 1936). It was a negative review, sprinkled here and there with an irritating irony that contrasted with the overly optimistic judgments within the book. In 1897, the two Webbs had authored a soon-to-be-famous work titled *Industrial Democracy (Theory and Practice of Trade Unions)*, translated into Russian as *Theory and Practice of English Trade-Unionism* by Lenin himself. All that was to prevent Westernisation – in a social-democratic sense – through the use of overly soft union tactics. This objective also continued to be pursued during the grand celebrations that Stalinism organised around 1935 in honour of socialist industry and the new Constitution of 1936.

Beyond criticism (Keynes) or celebration (Webb), all recognised the significant innovations emerging in the USSR. This is also confirmed by the famous meeting between Max Weber and Joseph Schumpeter in a Vienna coffeehouse in 1921, where they heatedly discussed the historical importance of the recent events of the October Revolution.[3]

On the Russian side, it is also notable that there was a commitment to engaging with Western artistic movements. This is particularly true for El Lissitzky, who was very active both in participating in debates and in promoting and linking artistic doctrines and practices. In Düsseldorf, he attempted to foster joint initiatives with various European artists involved in the 1922 Congress of Progressive Artists, although without success. But it should not be forgotten that a few years earlier, in 1919, El Lissitzky had created perhaps the most renowned icon of the October Revolution – *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* – using, among other techniques, lithography to symbolise what still appeared to the world as a mysterious and potentially perilous event: the Reds' victory over the Whites at the end of the civil war.

It is worth quoting an excerpt from the "Declaration to Congress" by the Editorial Board of the magazine *De Stijl*:

> IV. Simultaneously, we have discovered that the progress of art can only occur in a society that moves towards new forms of organisation.

2. Webb, Sidney and Beatrice, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?,* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

3. Schumpeter believed it was wonderful: socialism was no longer something to debate in theory but an experiment to observe in practice. Instead, Weber was outraged by this cavalier attitude: Russian communism would be a catastrophe, a laboratory filled with corpses (see Randall Collins, "Review: Rediscovering Schumpeter", *Contemporary Sociology*, 2 (1992), pp. 171-175).

> VI. The new art will be founded on a basis that is not subjective but collective, much like science, and it is constructive by its very nature. It unites not only representatives of so-called pure art but also all those on the fringes of the new culture. The artist is the companion of the scientist, the engineer, and the worker.
>
> IX. We see an International of Progressive Artists as a stronghold of the fighters for the new culture. Here, art in its old forms of manifestation must be overcome; as the product of creators, it is to be related to universality.

Lissitzky's engagement can also help to clarify his revolutionary commitment, which was aligned with his intense focus on the theme that "in reality" guided those years. This issue was increasingly becoming the very idea of "realism", understood as an awareness of the successes that, even in the face of the growing difficulties faced by the Western capitalist world, Soviet Russia was achieving in industrial production and international trade competition.

2. *El Lissitzky and the Revolution*

Underlying Lissitzky's elusive identity – El – may be his conception of himself as a European and Russian avant-garde artist, as well as a loyal "propagandist" of Soviet ideals to Germany.[4] In the early 1920s, constructivism began its westward migration, undergoing progressive changes in its underlying concept. Indeed, Lissitzky proudly claimed that the most significant change after the Russian Revolution of 1917 was that artists had "stepped into the ranks of those organising life, and not into the ranks of those embellishing it", the result being that the art of painting became like a preparatory exercise during organised participation in life. A crucial step in the internationalisation of constructivism was the establishment of the International Faction of Constructivists in May 1922 at the International Congress of Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf.

Lissitzky starts from Malevich's suprematism, but sees it as a springboard to go further, in various directions, all of which are more creative (due to the forces of the Revolution). To go beyond the old painting in a process that will lead to architecture, including the design and building of townhouses and large industrial plants, and to involve an increasing number of subjects as recipients and users of the creative act. The principles of Malevich inspired Lissitzky's architectural experiments. However, unlike his teacher he did not stick to the idea of a flat surface but created the impression of absolute space and the sensation of the universe within the picture. Essentially, architect Lissitzky differed from painter Malevich.

4. See Nancy Perloff, "The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity", in *Situating El Lissitzky,* pp. 1-23. Lissitzky began his career illustrating Yiddish children's books to promote Jewish culture in Russia. In formal or visual terms, his experience with Jewish book design "initiated him to the expressive potential of a modulated pen-and-ink line, or (in this case Hebrew) script, something he would capitalize on in his later typographic experiments" (Margit Rowell, "Constructivist Book Design: Shaping the Proletarian Conscience", in *The Russian avant-garde book 1910-1934*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Margit Rowell, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2002, pp. 50-59: 53).

Lissitzky brought to life Malevich's theory, which states that suprematism pushes the ultimate point of the visual pyramid of perspective into infinity. We can only understand "space if we break away from the earth, if the fulcrum disappears". Thus, "geometrical, three-dimensional shapes float like rockets shot from the earth in the infinite space of Lissitzky's pictures". It is the embodiment of the idea he expressed in a letter to Malevich in 1919: "Our lives are now being built on a new communist foundation, solid as reinforced concrete, and this is for all the nations on earth. On such a foundation – thanks to the *Prouns* – monolithic communist towns will be built, in which the inhabitants of the world will live".[5]

All this was made possible not only by technological progress but also by human historical evolution, which, with the Revolution, should have produced more evolved individuals, that is, endowed with superior intuitive and inventive capacities. These developments were due to two enormous cultural leaps: collectivism and materiality, both characteristic of the modernist era worldwide but particularly intense in the Soviet case due to the hegemony of the proletariat. For Lissitzky, it was a matter of "reasons" (domestic and international, artistic and economic, and so on) to see constructivism as a further phase in the long development of human history once the inequalities and conflicts of the capitalist mode of production had been overcome. From this perspective, the issue of his relationship with Stalin is lessened since Stalin was also involved in the process, ensuring Russia's full competitive participation in the global development. In this context, the architect's role encompasses elaborating projects that could be published in books and newspapers, and be helpful in propagating artistic, constructive, and alternative skills, as the efforts of large Western capital became very significant. Within this arena, certain qualities (in addition to the two already mentioned of "material" and "collective"), which Lissitzky took from the experience of the Russian artistic avant-garde, stood out. Firstly, organisation, of which the project is the fundamental instrument with a view both to the call to work of all interested proletarians and to the increase of organisational functions. Secondly, celebration of the "constructive" success of the Soviet Union, as a kind of "soft power" that would anticipate the Cold War.[6]

Lissitsky was always at the forefront of the process, making available both his ideas and artistic skills (dating back to Malevich's suprematism) as well as

5. Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 20-21. *Proun* (Proekt utverzhdenia novogo) is, in Lissitzky's words, "the interchange station between painting and architecture". It was not by chance that Lissitzky gave one of these *Prouns* the title *The Town.* This was shown at the first Russian Exhibition in Berlin in 1922 and illustrated in the catalogue. The ideas behind the *Proun* later served as outlines for building projects.

6. The fact that, starting from the NEP, large American manufacturers, in particular from Detroit, had been invited to operate in the Soviet Union, designing large factories and equipping them with modern machinery to facilitate the Russian industrial take-off, should not be underestimated. This take-off in fact took place, thanks to Stalin's Five-Year Plans, giving Russian constructivism a certainly very different turn, also linked to the nationalistic imprint resulting from the doctrine of "socialism in one country" (see David E. Greenstein, "Assembling 'Fordizm'. The Production of Automobiles, Americans, and Bolsheviks in Detroit and Early Soviet Russia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2 (2014), pp. 259-289).

his willingness to forge internal and international connections and relationships, seeking bridges and collaborations with groups and movements that shared his interests. He set new goals and boundaries for artistic production, both culturally and socially. A well-rounded figure of Lissitzky emerges, with all the contradictions that accompanied him in life. His artistic and technological versatility allowed him to act as a great assembler and distributor of the many motivations and reasons that led to the complex constructivist movement. It evolved between more formalist and more materialist options, only to be diluted in the growing wave of realism, which had been present in the proletarian revolutionary experience from the outset.

3. *The machine and organisation*

> The birth of the machine signaled the onset of the technological revolution, which destroyed handicrafts and played an essential role in the rise of large-scale modern manufacture […]. 1917 marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution and the opening of a new page in human society's history. The basic elements of Russian architecture are tied to this social revolution rather than the technological revolution.[7]

This is how El Lissitzky begins his book *Russland. Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion*. He does not dispute the power of the machine, which is science and technology, in the accomplishment of the Russian Revolution. "Our art belongs to the age of science. We employ the methods of our age – we analyse". Recalling his *Prouns*, Lissitzky argues that the new creative forces in art have uncovered the basic elements of three-dimensional design through a process of analysis. In producing his self-portrait, *The Constructor* (1924), he desired to be a kind of Vitruvius of the machine age. The hand in the photomontage collage is the most compelling symbol or metaphor of Lissitzky's supposed *machinisme*.

According to the graphic designer Jan Tschichold, Lissitzky ensured his place in the history of photography once and for all with his self-portrait, composed in Switzerland in 1923, in which he simultaneously used several different processes (multiple copying, the photogram technique, drawing the circle). Here, the intention, technique, and final form coincide perfectly. "The self-portrait is his finest and most important work", says Tschichold.[8] *The Constructor* is a prime example of the ambivalence and ambiguity inherent in Lissitzky's work and its constant interplay between point and counterpoint. The two main forces in it are the eye and the hand, which represent the more abstract ideas that fascinated Lissitzky throughout his life: vision versus touch, space versus surface, and composition versus construction. These concepts can be linked to the contrasting worldviews of Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. The fact that the hand

7. El Lissitzky, *Russia. An Architecture for World Revolution* [1930], trans. by Eric Dluhosch, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1970, p. 27.

8. Quoted in John E. Bowlt, "Manipulating Metaphors: El Lissitzky and the Crafted Hand", in *Situating El Lissitzky,* pp. 129-152: 131.

manipulates the composition is also demonstrated by the stubbornness with which Lissitzky repeated the image in his preparatory photographs and drawings for *The Constructor* before adding the graph paper and the head in the final resolution. However, both the head above the turtleneck sweater and the graph paper also appear in the initial, separate self-portrait. Lissitzky made several prints and a silvered photogram of that entire composition. But it is the hand that captures his imagination: the constructor oversees his destiny through this hand. The artist is the engineer, that is, the constructor of a new way of life. Thus, the self-portrait also reveals Lissitzky's adherence to the Revolution: the artist works actively to bring about the new order, with his quasi-divine role indicated by the halo drawn by the architect's compass.

Nevertheless, the use of the compass can also evoke other suggestions. Indeed, it is an instrument of measurement and technical drawing that dates back to the ancient practice and theory of geometry, which became a symbol and emblem of new scientific thought through the humanistic translations of the opening modernity. The most famous example is the compass engraved by Albrecht Dürer in his *Melancholia I* in 1514. It stands absent-mindedly, as if abandoned, between the fingers of the melancholic angel's right hand, about to fall to the ground amidst other craft tools already at her feet. The simplest explanation is that what Dürer aimed to highlight – regarding the treatment of "genius" in the Renaissance debate on human reason – was the connection between "black bile" and science. The former is a cause of madness and despair, while the latter is an effect of genius and modernity. The "highest" reference to the compass is Problem XXX, 1, attributed to Aristotle.[9]

El Lissitsky's interpretation of the compass, consciously or unconsciously, is entirely different. It is the new eye through which the revolutionary artist can see with absolute confidence. Thus, he appreciated and communicated new concepts to his proletarian comrades, enabling them to embark on a new life with all the optimism of the situation – no longer melancholy, but filled with great confidence and certainty in the future. This is evidenced by one of the most representative works of El Lissitsky's varied personality, the illustration he created for the 1922 book *Six Tales with Easy Endings* by Ilya G. Ehrenburg: *Tatlin at Work on the Model for the Third International* (1921-1922). Here, he portrays none other than Tatlin himself in the act of building the model of his Tower. He is standing and looking up towards the top of the model of the tower, which would have reached 400 metres, but, as we all know, was never built. Tatlin is taking measurements, looking towards a future that concerns the fate of the October Revolution through the reference to the Comintern. His sight is elongated by a compass acting as a telescope, making him bionic. The gaze is directed upwards towards the topmost edge of the sheet, which features a horizontally positioned female head. In my

9. See *[Aristotele] Problema XXX, 1. Perché tutti gli uomini straordinari sono melanconici*?, ed. by Bruno Centrone, Pisa, ETS, 2018, pp. 9-51. On Dürer's engraving, see, among the vast existing literature, at least Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* [1964], Montreal-Quebec, Mc Gill Queen's University, 2019.

view, this depicts an "iconic" face, that of an ancient icon, to suggest that the anticipated revolutionary future also encompasses the cultural and even antique, but now too silent, tradition of Mother Russia: from a bionic eye to an iconic face.

The joyful, rather than melancholic, approach that I am attempting to give to the imperious step taken by Lissitsky beyond suprematism towards architecture is reflected in two aspects of his worldview, which are central to the "ideology" of the variegated Russian artistic avant-garde. These are, once again, the materiality on which constructivism was based and the proletarian collective that justifies the transition from the plane to space. Both were seeking, through the growth of the "constructivist" debate, a translation suitable to the times in the principle of organisation, which was itself connected, through technological development, to the great theme of the machine.[10] Any attempt to understand how the two elements play a role in the new "constructivist" perspective, in both the Russian and international senses, also involves examining the broader discourse surrounding the machine. In the illustration *Tatlin at Work,* Lissitzky combines his vision of the mechanical age with that of Tatlin, which, independently of the rational and scientific methods of technology but with the intuitive and artistic mastery of materials, would lead to inventions based on which objects could be constructed.

Lissitzky attributes an organisational power to the measuring instruments, that is, the ruler and the compass, which function as the machine prostheses of the individual:

> Those of us who have stepped beyond the confines of the picture take ruler and compasses – following the principle of economy – in our hands, for the frayed point of the paintbrush is at variance with our concept of clarity. If necessary, we shall take machines in our hands as well because in expressing our creative ability, paintbrush and ruler and compasses and machines are only extensions of the finger which points the way.[11]

The persistent reference to the theme of organisation appears to be immersed in a particularly intense conception of "art", to the point of ascribing to the artist himself, as a proletarian worker, the capacity to complete the political revolution, albeit not in a precise and differentiated manner. From this point of view, the reference to the "machine" as an extension of the "finger" pointing the way is essential. While praising the qualities of precision, economy, and efficiency, Lissitzky, in *Suprematism in World Reconstruction*, as in his *The Constructor*, seems to be arguing that the mission of the new artist may be to overcome art but not to overcome the artist, whose hand and mind must continue to guide the artistic process.

According to Lissitzky, Tatlin was the master of materials but did not construct works with a purpose or a useful task. However, in Lissitzky's view one thing that Tatlin's art did accomplish was to break the old concept of art, thereby beginning the process of conquering the new one. It was the economy of the age that created the machine that "showed us movement and circulation. It showed us

10. It was not exclusive to Soviet Russia. See Cioli, *Anche noi Macchine!*

11. El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction" [1920], in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 331-334: 333.

life and how it vibrates and palpitates from the forces that flow through it". The merit of "Tatlin and his colleagues lies in the fact that they accustomed the painter to working in actual space and on contemporary materials". They approached "constructive art" but "forgot the necessity of creating a new plan".[12]

Instead, Lissitzky aimed to find the "object", as did the French purists, and his goal was to identify "Things" that could organise people's lives, which appears to reference the Bogdanovian concept of organisation. Perhaps this reflects the thinking that was also common in the constructivist debate of the 1920s in the Inkhuk. Conversely, the meaning of the term "organisation" could also suggest Lissitzky's reference to the purist movement of Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret [Le Corbusier]. The object might be an industrial product, a poem, a painting, or a building. But, above all, in each case, it served as a social mechanism. For Lissitzky too it was understood as a fundamental tool for fostering solidarity among those who used it, encountering each otheand developing collaborative relationships and communal living, in accordance with the principles of ancient Marxist resonance and more recent Malevichan intonation. Indeed, after Lenin's death and the end of his suprematist phase, Malevich argued, as we have seen, that it was essential to continue realising the October Revolution through active and creative participation in the life of the new society to be built collectively.

4. *Organism and machines*

> In all ages and with all people, man has created objects of prime necessity for his use, which responded to his imperative needs; these objects were associated with his organism and helped complete it. In all ages, for example, man has created containers: vases, glasses, bottles, and plates, which were built to suit the needs of maximum capacity, maximum strength, maximum economy of materials, and maximum economy of effort.[13]

For the French purists, economy, machine, and organism extended well beyond an industrial discourse. They seem to reflect the post-Darwinian theories, in which the machine is not an instrument but a "prosthesis of man" and a symbol of growth and evolution. It is in this sense that Ozenfant and Jeanneret refer to "natural selection" and "mechanical selection": Man, and organised beings, are products of "natural selection". In every "evolution on earth", the organisms of beings are increasingly adapted and purified; therefore, the entire forward march of evolution is a function of purification. The human body seems to be the highest product of natural selection. The law of the evolution of species continues in human action: it is what they call "mechanical selection". Indeed, it all started

12. El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art. A lecture" [1922], in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 334-344: 337-338.

13. Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and Amédée Ozenfant, "Purisme" [1920], in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas,* ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, rev. edition, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2003, pp. 237-240: 239.

in the early days of history, when humans first began to extend their capabilities through the use of tools. Natural selection and mechanical selection are congruent phenomena. From this moment on, still lifes, in their timelessness, are the focus of purist images: glasses, vases, and bottles that depict their relationship to the modern spirit and the machine.

Ozenfant and Jeanneret are not interested in painting mechanical objects. Instead, they focus on objects subject to the laws of the human body (which is itself developing) and equally to those of machines. This is why their still lifes closely resemble the works of engineers. The modernism of Ozenfant and Jeanneret lies in the technical and mathematical, forward-looking, mechanical order composed of bridges, factories, and dams, where the engineer's role is central. However, it is a technological order applied to society that does not reject tradition but does not imitate it either – neither the rigid styles of Syrians and Egyptians, nor the classical styles of ancient Greece or Rome.

A similar interdependence between machine and organism can be found in Lissitzky's work. Oliver A.I. Botar has captured the emergence of a "biocentric turn" in Lissitsky's writings between 1923 and 1925.[14] This twist mainly stemmed from the study of the work of the Austro-Hungarian micro-biologist and cultural scientist Raoul Heinrich Francé, who had launched a new field of research called *Biotechnik* which was the application of biological methods and systems found in nature to the design of engineering systems and modern technology. It is a matter of considering every biological form as a dynamic configuration of elements (*Gestaltung*) that are interrelated and in a mutually active relationship with their surroundings. This establishes new relationships between aesthetics and life sciences (thus primarily also between art and politics) in the first decades of the 20th century. Lissitsky's adherence to these hypotheses suggests his return to considering the human individual as both a biological and a political subject. A new "vision", which can be linked to the latest "optics" imposed by photography as a privileged means of formulation and theoretical verification, lends itself to this consideration. The construction of the famous self-portrait, *The Constructor*, would also rest on this theoretical-aesthetic basis, in which the instrumental organs of his body (mind, eye, and hand) are projected (figuratively) outwards, finding a natural continuation in the technical instrument (in this case the compass). But here "the hand is 'Werkzeug der Werkweuge' (the instrument of instruments)".[15]

The *Prouns,* too, started to become an organic machine in which experiences of biological life could be inscribed in a mechanical world, making it possible for them to be spatialised in an organic relationship to nature rather than in an

14. Oliver A.I. Botar, *Prolegomena to the Study of Biomorphic Modernism. Biocentrism, László Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision" and Ernő Kállai's "Bioromantik"*, PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998, pp. 424-427.

15. Carlotta Castellani, "El Lissitzky biocentrico: la fotografia come nuova sintesi tra organismo e meccanismo", *Rivista di Studi di Fotografia*, 11 (2020), pp 20-39: 21. See also Carlotta Castellani, "El Lissitzky and the Biocentric Project '1=1'", *Getty Research Journal*, 16 (2022), pp. 91-118.

anthropocentric way of thinking. This was facilitated by the intensified exchange between the new mass technologies and everyday life, and is vividly exemplified by the remarkable evolution undergone in those years by the camera.

El Lissitzky, who was directly influenced by Francé's philosophy, argued against claims that the machine had surpassed nature. He suggested that, by contrast, the machine was, in essence, nature itself, because natural organisms, namely humans, made it. In 1924, Kurt Schwitters and Lissitzky wrote: "Nature, from the Latin *nasci*, means to become, to come into being, i.e. everything that by its power develops, forms and moves".[16] That is why "the machine has not separated us from nature". On the contrary, through it, "we have discovered a new nature never before surmised". Stating that they were weary of hearing people shouting "machine, machine, machine" everywhere, they proposed to bring nature, with its generative forces, back into art, following the principles of the biocentric turn. The machine was simply a brush: modern art, like science, has reduced the form to its basic elements, reconstructing it according to the universal laws of nature. Every form was the frozen, instantaneous picture of a process. Thus, an artwork was a stopping point on the journey of becoming and not the fixed end. In this way, Lissitzky attempted to reconcile faith in technical progress with an interest in the functioning of the organism, indeed turning towards the idea of "art as a fusion of the biological and the technological" – as well summarised by Christina Lodder.[17]

It is difficult to define the place Lissitzky occupied in the spread of "constructivist" ideas worldwide, not least because of his intolerance of being framed in a precise movement. It was also impossible to define "artistic movements" as individual or group attitudes. Furthermore, aesthetic statements are only related to provisional and transient moments of artistic and social dynamics in different countries. However, it is impossible not to emphasise the widespread and persistent climate of trust that the "modernist" world showed towards the development of "techno-science" at the turn of the Great War. Its revolutionary achievements in the pure sciences, starting with physics, were joined with the nagging needs of everyday life that concerned the great popular masses coming onto the scene. All this can be found in the journey that Lissitsky himself took. Emerging from suprematism's elemental breakdown of shapes, colours, and abstract figures, constructivism saw the universality of this artistic programme and applied it to the mass utility of art for social change. Constructivists aimed to create these abstract forms to mirror their social reality and address the rapidly increasing needs of the industrialising Soviet Union.

16. Cover of *Merz*, 8-9 (1924), ed. by El Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters. On this matter, see Leah Dickerman, "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus", in *Situating El Lissitzky*, pp. 153-176.

17. Christina Lodder, "Revolutionary Photography", in *Object. Photo. Modern Photographs. The Thomas Walther Collection 1909-1949*, ed. by Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner and Maria Morris Hambourg, An Online Project of The Museum of Modern Art, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2014, pp. 1-12: 5.

5. *The new experimentations: photography, photomontage, cinema*

Walter Benjamin begins his preface of the famous *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit* with a quotation from Paul Valéry's *Pièces sur l'art*:

> […] the amazing growth of our techniques, the adaptability and precision they have attained, the ideas and habits they are creating, make it a certainty that profound changes are impending in the ancient craft of the Beautiful […]. For the last twenty years, neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art.

Benjamin recalls Valéry again at the beginning of his essay: "Just as water, gas, and electricity are brought into our houses from far off to satisfy our needs in response to a minimal effort, so we shall be supplied with visual or auditory images, which will appear and disappear at a simple movement of the hand, hardly more than a sign".[18] Benjamin argues that, in the 1930s, technical reproduction had reached a standard that allowed the totality of past works of art to be dealt with, consequently acquiring its own place among the various forms of artistic procedure. He comes to "mass" conclusions about the role that art could and should play in the new society that began with the Great War and the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Cinematography and photography were born as technically reproducible arts, without this leading to the "loss of aura", as it does for some, or could have done for others, of the more traditional arts. The film on which they are based is, by its very nature, a medium that allows and provides for it to be copied. This entails something that had hitherto only been touched upon in art, namely its emancipation from its existence in the realm of ritual: "[…] the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed" as to how art is perceived.[19] As was clearly stated by Aristotle, art has always had a social function, initially based on ritual, now increasingly on politics. This represents a quantum leap for Benjamin, which is only feasible in part; however, the sense of ritual is profoundly transformed, but certainly does not disappear from art, no matter how political it may be.

Benjamin probably emphasises the contemporaneity of photography and socialism. This is due to the "reproducibility of the work of art" (after the invention of lithography and after daguerreotypes and photography itself), which overcomes the individual enjoyment of the work of art (aura) and favours its collective use/function.

18. Paul Valéry, *Pièces sur l'art. La Conquête de l'ubiquité*, 1928, quoted in Paul Valéry, *Aesthetics. The Conquest of Ubiquity*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, New York, Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series, 1964, pp. 225-226.

19. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1935], in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books, 1969, p. 6.

The shattered masses make the works of art their own: this applies above all to architecture, the oldest and most inclusive of the arts. This is in addition to the new link established between the masses and the works of art at the time of technical reproducibility. There is then the problem of art being capable of mobilising the masses, and this can be done above all by the new art technique of the cinema, which can reproduce and manage *Kultwert* in public. Benjamin's conclusion is that communism is committed to politicising art, whereas fascism is committed to the aestheticisation of politics.

It cannot be merely coincidence that, with the Directive on Cinematic Affairs of 17 January 1922, Vladimir Lenin himself aimed at creating a Soviet film industry that would effectively inculcate communist values through newsreels and propaganda films. The directive also stipulated that photographs of propaganda interest should be shown with the appropriate subtitles.[20] Official support for photography implied the assumption of Lissitzky, Gan, and other avant-garde figures that, as a machine created the photograph, and this could then be mass-produced without losing its unique qualities, photography itself was preeminently suited to be the art form for the working class, as a social product of industrial development.

In 1922, Gan, who had written the "Programme of the First Group of Constructivists" in 1921, suggested, in the first issue of *Kino-Fot*,[21] that film, and by extension photography, should now replace painting as the art form appropriate for the new proletarian society. He argued that everything previously done in an amateurish manner through the arts of painting, sound, and movement to organise our emotions is now automatically handled by the extended organs of society, via technology, and in this case, by cinema. Cinema, as the quintessentially industrious apparatus of social technology, functioning as the extended "organ" of society, was a matter for the proletarian state.

Like Lenin, Gan believed that photography was a vital tool and a perfect adjunct to cinema, which had been described as "living photography". In the first issue of *Kino-Fot*, published in 1922, Dziga Vertov and Lev V. Kuleshov declared their commitment to producing a new Soviet cinema, based on the principles of montage, which they considered to reflect the essential reality of the proletarian state. Photomontage was the alternative to traditional art and the appropriate art form for the new society,[22] enabling fragments of different realities to be

20. Vladimir I. Lenin, "Directives on the Film Business. January 17, 1922", dictated 17 January 1922, first published in *Kinonedelja*, 4 (1925), in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XLII, trans. by Bernard Isaacs, pp. 388-389: 388.

21. Gan conceived and published the magazine *Kino-Fot*, or *Cinema-Photo*, subtitled *The Journal of Cinematography and Photography*. This was launched as a weekly journal, with the first issue appearing on 5-31 August 1922. However, in total only six issues were published, with the final issue appearing on 8 January 1923. Despite the allusion to photography in its name and a few articles relating to photography and some notifications of important inventions, such as a machine for developing prints and the potential of ultraviolet rays, *Kino-Fot* was primarily about cinema.

22. See Christina Lodder, "Promoting Constructivism. *Kino-Fot* and Rodchenko's move into Photography", *History of Photography*, 4 (2000), pp. 292-299. In 1922, Rodchenko was

combined into a powerful, poetically and politically effective image. Therefore, the camera and film transformed art from mere decoration to a structural form. It is essential to recognise that this change occurred from two perspectives: those of the artists and those of Lenin. Their combined efforts demonstrate that the drive for increasingly intense realism grew stronger. This shift, especially with the Five-Year Plan, was driven by pure industrial productivism, which effectively ended the constructivist "utopia" of nurturing and organising interest and commitment within everyday proletarian life. Gan speaks of the "organisation of emotions", carried out directly by those "extended organs of society" who are the artists in their various aggregations of work and struggle, thanks to the technologies made possible by the age of the "reproducibility" of the works of art. It thus becomes possible – using this new social machine, that is, the photo-reproducible communication (a veritable *machine à penser* as I would like to call it) – to apply the new aesthetic visions generated by Leninism to the "agitprop" aims necessary for building the post-revolutionary phase. This unites various subjects into a single agitational whole. Lenin, as is well known, liked to symbolise technology with the locomotive and the railway network, but then came the celebration of new inventions in the field of electrical communication, from telegraph to telephone to radio. The basis (and effect) of it all, on the imaginary plane of the new world, was the myth of the "Man-Machine" as "collective" operator, and simultaneously user, of reality. This could mean, in short, that, as we have already seen, the invention of photography and the emergence of socialism can also be viewed as analogous phenomena. What was needed above all was discipline. In the field of artistic performance, this entailed the subordination of aesthetics to specific utilitarian objectives, driven by clearly defined social, material, and technological needs. Again, it occurs to me that a similar discipline was necessary in the new proletarian society to achieve the objectives it had set after the October Revolution, towards an organised materiality which – it cannot be denied – was also suitable for the success of Stalin's planning. The hand serves the brain, supported by the compass and the dual eye: the "organic" human eye and the "mechanical" camera eye. The entire process demands discipline from both the artist and the audience, who are members of the "collective" – the proletariat, a new form of post-revolutionary society that requires discipline to be fully organised and effective. This theme was not only of a philosophical and political nature, but it also fit perfectly into the increasingly realistic atmosphere of the era, which faced agricultural and industrial production as one of its most immediate and pressing challenges.

The avant-garde artists, who now adopted photography, did not approach the medium as professionally trained photographers, but were interested in probing its potential as they had previously investigated painting and sculpture. Rodchenko epitomised this approach: taking his first photograph in 1924, he adapted devices and practices, which he had adopted in his abstract paintings, to photography,

closer to the film phenomenon, collaborating on the *Kino-Foto* periodical, until he designed the poster for Sergei M. Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* in 1925.

including three-dimensional constructions, collages, and photomontages. Rodchenko and Lissitzky's photographic works of the 1920s display a great degree of experimentation and innovation. Rodchenko never stopped exploring and expressing his core desire to experiment, something that his photographic investigations reveal.[23]

Like Vertov, Rodchenko used the camera to create a new vision of the world: "The lens of the camera is the pupil of the eye of cultured man in socialist society". It was necessary "to look at the shot from below, raising it above your head parallel to the ceiling".[24] He aimed to photograph a tree from below, looking upward as if it were an industrial structure, like a chimney, which could appear revolutionary to the bourgeoisie and old-fashioned landscape lovers. To teach someone to see from new perspectives, Rodchenko needed to photograph ordinary, familiar objects from entirely unexpected angles and positions, providing a comprehensive impression of the object.

Rodchenko was fascinated by the idea of the "Cinema-eye" formulated by Vertov:

> I am Kino-eye; I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility; I am in constant motion. I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb onto them, I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an aeroplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies […] My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.[25]

Here, the idea of constant movement emerges, corresponding to the vision of an infinite revolution. Such was the orientation of the artistic avant-garde, which, as mentioned, aimed, through its leading exponents, to bring about the revolution through action, movement, and the "construction" of a new life. The operational-functional aspect prevailed over the political-ideological one, a characteristic of the more strictly political avant-garde. Since the early years after October 1917, the latter had been engaged in serious conflicts between the party leaders concerning the succession to Lenin. Following the movement and transformation of "Things" in a revolutionary sense also involved identifying new perspectives and employing new tools for observing reality. This was facilitated by the innovative techniques introduced by the camera, in both film and photography, as well as the new processes of recording and editing captured material.

For Vertov, the cinema and the motion-picture camera should not imitate the human eye, but rather see and capture what it usually misses.

23. See John E. Bowlt, "Introduction, Long Live Constructivism!", in *Alexander Rodchenko. Experiments for the future. Diaries, essays, letters, and other writings*, ed. by Alexander N. Lavrentiev, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2005, pp. 11-21: 19.

24. Alexander M. Rodchenko, "K foto v etom nomere", *Novyi Lef*, 3 (1928), quoted in Lodder, "Promoting Constructivism", p. 297.

25. Dziga Vertov, "Kinoki. Perevorot" [1923], in *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov,* trans. by Kevin O'Brien, ed. by Annette Michelson, Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1984, pp. 14-15.

> The cinema and the photographic lens can show us things from a different point of view, in an unusual setting: this possibility must be exploited. […] A. Rodchenko has made this kind of experiment, taking pictures of a house in Moscow from an unusual visual angle. The results have been extremely interesting. A familiar object (the house) has been turned into a construction never seen before; the fire escape turns out to be a marvellous construction, and the balconies look like the towers of an exotic architecture.[26]

The mobile viewpoint aligns with the Bolshevik socio-political vision of societal development. Rodchenko – engaging in the long-standing debate that emerged in the early 20th century between Lenin and Bogdanov – hypostatised "organisation" as the guiding principle of both contemporary life and artistic struggle: "As we see in the life of the RSFSR [USSR], he declared, everything leads to organisation. And so, in art, everything has led to organisation".[27] Scientific and visual analysis were seen as a mechanism, as a tool for organising the awareness of the masses so that they might liberate themselves, an intervention that the photography of analytical sequences was also to defend several years later in the processes of collective agreements. In so doing, it complied, at least in tendency, with Tarabukin's demand that photographic experiments be firmly linked to the art of agitation.[28]

The main "cine-photographic" constructivists' achievement, in technical-artistic and even "revolutionary" terms, was the development of photomontage. At the beginning of the 1920s, the realisation of productivist aesthetics occurred to a large degree with the help of various forms of mechanical reproduction, including lithography, photography, and the printing of photomontage designs.[29] Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Gustav G. Klutsis occupied a prominent place in this field.

Still, in a more general vision, the founding idea was to subordinate the search for new representative "means" to a collective refusal of the "laws" of Euclidean geometry, which were perceived as an individualistic-rational Western "imposition" belonging to the Vitruvian-Kantian nexus of Renaissance inspiration, against which Marxist criticism and denunciation had been raised (think in particular of the Florensky attitude). This persisted up until Lenin's Revolution itself. As Osip M. Brik states in the critical 1928 article "Ot kartiny k foto" ("From the Painting to the Photograph"), reality was a single collective. According to Brik, in contemporary consciousness an individual can only be understood and evaluated in relation to all other people, including those previously considered by

26. See Osip M. Brik and Nikolai N. Aseyev on the subject of Rodchenko, the photographer, in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko. The Complete Work*, trans. by Huw Evans, intr. and ed. by Vieri Quilici, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1986, pp. 294-295: 295.

27. Quoted in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp. 88-89.

28. See Hubertus Gassner, "Analytical Sequences", in *Rodchenko. Constructing the Future*, Exhib. Catal., Barcellona, Caixa Catalunya Obra Social, 2008, pp. 186-197; Hubertus Gassner, *Rodčenko. Fotografien*, Munich, Schirmer-Mosel, 1982.

29. Painting seemed to be at the point of no return. And yet, in the early 1930s, when the party managers and the brigades of editors began increasingly to manipulate the formal aspects of the works of art that were made for mechanical reproduction, it was painting that deceptively loomed on the horizon as the hope for avant-garde artists. See Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina. Photography and Montage after Constructivism*, New York, International Center of Photography, 2004.

pre-revolutionary consciousness as being in the background.[30] Consequently, art itself must be the result of a "socially conceived work of art", above all for the means and techniques it employs, primarily photography and cinema, with their possibilities of "assembling" a "reality" that need no longer be only the fixed one of nature, as observed and perceived with the naked eye. However, it can and must address society in its movement and evolution, which could be, but above all should also be, oriented and guided by the directive "on cinematic affairs".

Gustav G. Klutsis, who was perhaps the artist with whom the photomontage technique peaked, followed this path, while referring to early constructivist principles and hopes. Together with his wife and colleague Valentina N. Kulagina, Klutsis was committed to channelling these methods into the agitation and education of the masses and applied them in various areas, including books, posters, exhibition designs, and street decorations. In "Fotomontazh kak novyi vid agitatsionnogo iskusstv" ("The Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitation Art", 1931), he analyses its most modern features, noting how the photograph captures a frozen, static moment. The photomontage instead illustrates life's dynamism, developing the theme of a given subject. Since it can simultaneously organise various formal elements such as photo, colour, slogan, line, and surface, it can quickly achieve the maximum impact of expression. Between 1919 and 1921, following extensive laboratory and industrial experimentation, Klutsis laid the groundwork for photomontage as a new form of art. Thanks to him, the first work of photomontage in the USSR saw the light of day, the so-called *Dinamicheskiy gorod* (Dynamic City), in which the photo was used as an element of texture and representation and was composed into a montage on the principle of different scales, destroying centuries-old canons of representation, perspective, and proportion.

6. *From "magical and abstract" to "effective" realism*

In film, Kristin Romberg has identified an emblematic case of the evolution of the concept and practice of realism in the relationship between art and politics.[31] It concerns an experimental action conducted by Gan and Vertov in the making of twin films on the life of the Western Young Pioneers' Corps, a Soviet youth organisation for children aged 10 to 15, founded in 1922 on the model of the Boy Scouts. In Gan's *Ostrov yunykh pionerov* (*Island of the Young Pioneers*) and Vertov's *Kino-Glaz* (*Kino-Eye*), made in 1924, the authors, both rooted in the constructivist experience of the 1920s, wanted to demonstrate the effectiveness that the technical medium of filming could play in recording the "everyday life" of young Russians in their formative journey as proletarians in the new Soviet

30. Osip M. Brik, "From the Painting to the Photograph" [1928], trans. by John E. Bowlt, in *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. by Christopher Phillips, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 227-233: 231.

31. Kristin Romberg, "Labor Demonstrations: Aleksei Gan's Island of the Young Pioneers, Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye, and the Rationalization of Artistic Labor", *October*, 145 (2013), pp. 38-66.

system. It was, therefore, a "technological" endeavour, as it aimed to evaluate the results of the new filming (and representation) technique with respect to the goals and values of the now victorious proletarian culture.

However, the outcome of the operation generated more objections and problems than it did positive results, specifically concerning the concept of "realism" to which the two authors had referred. Vertov ensured the theme of direct truth (cinema-truth) by favouring the use of candid camera, without the intervention of script and direction;[32] Gan, instead, pointed to the need for a literary script and even professional actors. The conflict ultimately spilt over into various art forms, touching the heart of the debate between "realist" and "formalist" artists and contributing to the victory of the former.

The same kind of issue happens in Rodchenko, who, in the early 1930s, had all but suspended his work as a designer, having identified the camera as an indispensable tool to pursue a type of research that, in his eyes, was becoming increasingly collective. This involved the need to adopt multiple and diversified techniques to achieve results which were appropriate to the new times and demanded qualified specialists in specific fields. Rodchenko became an excellent photographer and, as such, further enhanced his contribution to the development of a new architecture. His early photographic experiments possess undeniable formal and aesthetic merit. Yet, the thematic, propagandistic photographs of the 1930s also carry a powerful emotional resonance. His images of mass gymnastics, street demonstrations, and the circus, with their swift movements, blinding sunlight, and daring trapeze and animal acts, evoke the rhythm and fervour of the Soviet mass song, the sweeping murals of bountiful harvests, and the rhetoric of Stalin's speeches. During a period of severe repression, these healthy bodies and cheerful faces were, at best, perhaps optimistic symbols of the future, but they had little connection with the present. Rodchenko was among many artists compelled to smile while navigating the increasingly perilous balance of daily life.[33]

Within the plan, photography had already become an essential means of propaganda and was therefore subject to official control, as evidenced by the founding declaration of the "October" group in 1928. It declared loyalty to the Communist Party and expressed the conception of the "artist" as an active fighter on the ideological front of the proletarian revolution.

32. For Vertov, the search, with the camera, for a new vision of reality by means of the "film-eye" method was significant. This method dealt with "life facts" as they appeared in external reality and used all available cinematic means to recreate a new visual structure (the "film thing") that was not only phenomenologically different from its prototype, but also much more revealing of reality itself. See Vlada Petrić, *Constructivism in film. The Man with the Movie Camera. A Cinematic Analysis*, 2nd ed., Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012. See also Malcom Turvey, "Between the Organism and the Machine", *October*, 121 (2007), pp. 5-18; Annette Michelson, "Introduction", in *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, pp. XV-LXI. Michelson describes the new society depicted in *Man with a Movie Camera* as an "organic continuum rather than as a machine" (*ibid*., p. XXXVII).

33. On Rodchenko in the 1930s, see Aglaya K. Glebova, *Aleksandr Rodchenko. Photography in the time of Stalin*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2022.

In 1931, Stalin declared that the USSR had now laid the foundations for a socialist economy and shifted his focus from identifying with the hard-working and productive workers to promoting the growing strength of Soviet industry as a function of state power. Klutsis illustrated Stalin's reorientation in several photograms showing his torso absorbing "superindustrial" sites. This instance of the superimposition of the product of proletarian labour on the body of the political leader is fundamentally different from the corporeal bond between Lenin and workers that Klutsis had presented in a 1929 photogram. It indicates a shift from visual representations of the leader as a living myth (Lenin) to images of the leader actively creating a myth for himself. Accordingly, a decree issued by the Central Committee of the Communist Party in 1932 emphasised the politicisation of all types of agitational material. However, since all photomontage production at that time was already inherently political, the new decree meant that it would now move from a purely documentary approach to a more mythologising form of political agitation. The figure of Stalin, of course, remains obligatory.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to provide "comprehensible" explanations for the extraordinary transformation that occurred with Stalin's rise to power, without falling into a reductive reading of the historical-material consequences of launching the Five-Year Plans. That is one of the reasons why, during this research, the analysis of the Russian revolutionary event was conducted with particular attention to a component that is often somewhat overlooked by interpreters more focused on historical-political events. Indeed, it was of interest here to present the historical-artistic moment following 19th-century Russian populism. This was not primarily about the search for harmony with other western European phenomena of contestation and rejection of traditional "easel" ornamental art (modernism), but rather about considering it as one of the "constitutional factors" that were decisive in shaping the course of Russian history. The October Revolution was, of course, central. However, it seemed appropriate to emphasise that, despite predictions to the contrary by the Marxist socialists themselves – beginning perhaps with Marx and Engels – the breach was also achieved in Russia on "historical-materialist" foundations, as Lenin had foreseen, supported, and organised throughout his life. It was a "materialism" always imbued with "realism", that is, with attention to what was happening in the concrete reality of individuals' lives, even and especially during the "proletarian" transformation. This is also true for Bogdanov, who applied his scientific interest in the central theme of organisation from the natural world to the social world. However, he recognised in Marx's discovery of historical scientific materialism the right catalyst to make the principle of organisation serve class struggle, revolution, and the creation of a new communist society.

In the Western, but certainly also in the Russian, tradition, reality has always had a dual origin: a scientific-experimental and an ethical-doctrinal one. It is no coincidence that Lenin's philosophical and political commitment to this dualism had almost immediately led him to criticise Bogdanov's "idealistic" vision with his more "realistic" *Empirio-criticism*. The application of the historical-materialist method to revolutionary analysis and practice necessarily implies recourse to a

"realist" perspective, that is, one aimed at the concrete historical reality being addressed, and this "reality" can only be brought out by applying the "truth" principle.

The work of the Russian artistic avant-garde of the early 20th century was also subjected to such a process within the broader context of what we have defined as "modernism". However, as we have repeatedly seen, the usual reference to the "crisis of modernity" does not apply to Russia, since no form of modernity has ever historically taken hold there. The present work has sought to explain this by describing how the (possibly utopian) artistic-revolutionary dream faded in the USSR after Stalin rose to power. I believe that once again, the key factor was the shift in the very concept of truth during that turbulent period: a shift from the aim of constructing a new society on a horizontal level for a *novyi byt*, to that of achieving a level of goods production in competition with the West.

The "truth" sought or imagined by Malevich and Tatlin even before the Revolution, and the "truth" underpinning the various constructivist and suprematist programmes and projects of the 1920s, were inspired by different concepts of coexistence and revolutionary practice. This partly corresponds to the different techniques that became available over the years, especially in the field of communication and transmission, both political and artistic. However, the "truth" that was progressively established after Lenin's death took on even further alternative aspects, relying on a new concept of propaganda and political agitation that was far more inclusive than the one that had guided the heroic phase of the Revolution.

One has only to look closely at the cases of some of the most representative artists, as Pietro Montani did with Dziga Vertov, to confirm how quickly the problem manifested itself. Already challenged and kept on the sidelines in the 1920s, Vertov found himself involved in the general reorganisation of the ideological apparatuses controlled by the party in the name of the State. In 1932, all cultural groupings were disbanded, and two years later, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, the Zhdanov-Radek line (inspired by Stalin) decreed the official acceptance of socialist realism, indicating its norms. The centralisation of cultural power was now a *fait accompli*. Vertov knew how to make films, having started using the cine-camera as early as 1918, and the new line of cultural power seemed to favour him. His 1934 film on Lenin, *Tri pesni o Lenine* (*Three Songs on Lenin*), was received encouragingly by the critics, so much so that it earned him the prestigious decoration of the "Red Star", which was awarded to masters of Soviet culture – provided, however, that they remained silent and did not insist on working independently, perhaps pursuing old "formalist" temptations. For 20 years, until 1954, Vertov was isolated, boycotted, and condemned to the decline of his reputation as a filmmaker.

From the very beginning of constructivism, according to its general principles, there were two main expectations: political propaganda and its civilised premise, literacy. Together, they imposed the class point of view, outside of which there could be no truth. According to Montani, literacy was a "process of cognitive appropriation in which the proletariat and the peasant masses can finally

be the authentic protagonists".[34] This implied a form of class and ideological expropriation, rejection, and demystification of the models inherited from the bourgeoisie. But more broadly, it represented the same dialectic of the artistic avant-garde, in terms of cultural communication rather than aesthetics, which was to become the subject of the 13 reels of the *Istoriya grazhdanskoy voyny* (*History of the Civil War*).

The search for truth is also the culture of the Thing: the fulfilment of the "organism's physical capacity for labour", a "force for social labour", an "instrument", and a "co-worker" of the 1920s. But in the 1920s, the objects produced by industry were different from the heavy industrial objects of the 1930s. The truth of the 1920s was perhaps nearer to the realism of the "solidarity" object, in contrast to the "socialist" one of the 1930s. The influential AKhRR (Assotsiatsia Khudozhnikov Revolutsionnoi Rossii, Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), 1922-1928, belonged to realism. It promoted figurative easel paintings on socialist themes. It was an association often seen as leading that reactionary wave, which fought to re-establish realistic art as the norm and politically correct portraits and genre scenes as the proper way to engage with the Revolution. Christina Kiaer takes a different view, looking at realism as one of the components that was already part of the avant-garde in the 1920s.[35] She argues that AKhRR, allied with RAPP (Rossiyskaya Assotsiatsiya proletarskikh pisateley, Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), promoted "heroic realism" and would enjoy the broadest support of critics and state-supported commissions until the Central Committee decree of 1932 dissolved all artistic groups and mandated the formation of a central Artists' Union. So, now we are shifting from "criticism" of reality to viewing reality as "legitimisation".[36] Indeed, Stalin, with his first Five-Year Plan, promptly initiated the monumental creative and productivist phase of socialist "industry", with workers bearing clenched fists, going to work, and even perishing there as true "heroes of socialism". But, despite its prominence, AKhRR (later known as the Assotsiatsia Khudozhnikov Revolutsii, Association of Artists of the Revolution, or AKhR, 1928-1932) was only one point within the wider landscape, and its members varied considerably in their degree of painterly experimentation; the eventual dominance of the group's most conservative and distinctly anti-modernist visual styles, unified into a reformed socialist realism by the end of the 1930s, was not predetermined.[37]

This victory could not have been achieved without the growing decline and near exhaustion of the artists and movements that had promoted and participated in the genuinely constructivist debates and initiatives since the early 1920s. As we have seen, these mainly involved rejecting the old bourgeois art and integrating artistic activity into the everyday life of the proletarians liberated by the Revolution.

34. Pietro Montani, *Dziga Vertov*, Milan, Il Castoro, 1975, Kindle version, pos. 392.

35. Christina Kiaer, *Collective Body. Alexander Deineka at the Limit of Socialist Realism*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2024.

36. See Rita Di Leo, *Il modello di Stalin. Il rapporto tra politica ed economia nel socialismo realizzato,* Milan, Feltrinelli Economica, 1977.

37. Kiaer, *Collective Body*, p. 13.

Therefore, the new art was to focus on everyday life, engaging with and helping to organise it. To this end, "objects" of everyday use that fostered social encounters and exchanges were also to be produced. That is, they were egalitarian and based on solidarity, bringing together, in various social settings, the new post-revolutionary proletarians in actions and orientations capable of developing the new class consciousness according to the principles of Marxist doctrine.

Alexander A. Deineka represents perhaps the leading figure in this regard and, for Kiaer, is "one of the inventors of Socialist Realism", which makes him "a particularly appropriate figure for conceptualising Socialist Realism beyond familiar categorisations such as totalitarianism or kitsch".[38] His path indicates that socialist realism is better understood as a practical and theoretical art system that is part of the legacy of modernisms of the 1920s, even if that legacy would be brutally distorted. Deineka did not aim to document an existing class with already recognisable techniques of bodily comportment, but rather to create the emotional spectacle of an imagined proletariat, from which an actual proletariat would take shape. In so doing, he drew much strength from constructivism, even though the balance of forces would shift, and his figurative rendition of revolutionary art would establish dominance in the evolution of the collective art system that ultimately became socialist realism.

Kiaer's work supports the opinion that this socialist realism was a system that was at least partly created and sustained by the artists themselves, and certainly not, as in the totalitarian imagery, by Stalin alone. This point of view contradicts Boris Groys's notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion.* He maintains that the Russian avant-garde was motivated by an undemocratic will-for-power rather than by genuine socialist ideals; that it aimed to destroy the past and recreate the world in its technological image and that it opportunistically collaborated with Soviet power to implement its "unitary artistic plan" for subjecting the population to its "total and boundless" aesthetic system; and that in all of this, it prepared the way for the eventual triumph of the total art of Stalinism: "Under Stalin, the dream of the avant-garde was, in fact, fulfilled, and the life of society was organised in monolithic artistic forms, though, of course, not those that the avant-garde itself had favoured".[39]

38. *Ibid*., p. 14.

39. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* [1988], trans. by Charles Rougle, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 9.

Conclusions

The aim of this book has been to explore the scope and reach of the artistic avant-garde, which operated around and within the monumental experience of the Russian Revolution during the first half of the 20th century. My initial curiosity stemmed from the idea that art is one of the oldest ways found by humans to communicate feelings and impressions. Therefore in Russia, as in all other cases, art must have also served to create and send signals related to the emergence of a new human social order of coexistence. This may encompass ideas and practices related to styles and ways of life, in their various expressions, extending to political life, and in the two extreme but complementary forms of peace and war, with the possibility of revolution in between.

Nevertheless, further considerations are necessary regarding the political-artistic shift of the Russian avant-garde after Stalin's succession to Lenin in the early 20th century, because this led to significant consequences affecting even the Soviet revolutionary experiment. After the October Revolution, the civil war, and the NEP, a new constitutional structure was needed to justify the Five-Year Plans. The 1936 Constitution was a response, not only in terms of the political-legal aspects, which I prefer not to examine here, but also towards the eventual final legitimisation of Stalin's established autocracy. Therefore, I see it as the turning point that marked the Russian artistic avant-garde from Lenin's death onward.

Neither does my study consider the social aspects of proletarian life after October 1917. However, it refers to evoking a new post-revolutionary "everyday life" founded on the principles of equality and solidarity, expressed in the Marxist perspective. Constructivism was a key element of a new Russian cultural life. There was always tension between the collective, with its organisational class options, and individual artists' interests, if not passions, for the growing technological developments, which were applied to propaganda and agitation communication as understood in a productivist sense.

Nevertheless, more extensive and far-reaching changes in scenery also shaped and influenced the original Soviet "experiment". These included "historical forces" lurking within the unfolding international scene, on which the politics of the years between the two world wars depended.[1] Briefly, the main novelties related to two

1. See Silvio Pons, *The Global Revolution. A History of International Communism 1917-1991*, 2012, trans. by Allan Cameron, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

very significant issues. One was a growing (fascist) totalitarian tendency towards which some Western countries were drifting, such as the Kingdom of Italy and the German Reich, as well as Spain and, partially, France and the UK. The other was a form of (capitalist) necessity among the major great powers to expand globally through imperialistic and colonialist policies. The USSR could not escape the influence of these "forces", which often operated in opposing and conflicting directions, making any space for autonomy impossible for the countries involved, whether for expansion or survival.[2]

It has therefore been necessary to attempt to understand the specific version of the "truth-reality" nexus that emerged in Russia after the breakdown of 19th-century populism and the progressive establishment of socialist theories and practices with a Soviet imprint. The issue is complex and can be traced back to the very emergence of Bolshevism, in the initial diatribe that never subsided between Lenin and Bogdanov and was sublimated by the famous "chess game" between the two in Gorky's Capri villa in 1908. "Human experience", wrote Bogdanov, "only becomes a reality in collective practice: Marx also knew this, and he speaks of it in his swift critique of Feuerbach's Theses".[3] Bogdanov continues: "Whether a genius or a simple worker, an individual is always a point of application of social forces: nothing more, nothing less". He ends his Fourth Dialogue of the *Ocerki* with these words: "Does it not seem honourable enough to you to be considered a part of nature, or to feel that you are a cell of the great organism, which has survived for millennia by battling against overwhelming elements?"[4] This is the hidden "natural" underlying "realism" in Bogdanov's organicist doctrine. I wonder how much this vision could have, at least in part, also inspired the Russian artists who were involved in the making of the Revolution, including their experiences with Proletkult, up to the triumph of human activity in the fields of technique, social practice, scientific research, and beyond art.[5]

Continuing the examination of the profound content of Bogdanovian *Tectology*, we can see that it cannot be considered merely as a theoretical or classificatory exercise because it does not simply observe experience but embraces

2. See Zanini, *Filosofia economica*; *Crisis in the Global Economy. Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios*, ed. by Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2010.

3. These are Bogdanov's words in the Fourth Dialogue of the *Ocerki*, in Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Quattro dialoghi su scienza e filosofia*, ed. by Felice Accame, with writings by Ernst von Glasersfeld, Massimo Stanzione, Silvano Tagliagambe, Rome, Odradek, 2004, p. 28.

4. *Ibid*., p. 58.

5. According to Silvano Tagliagambe, this is, schematically summarised, the itinerary that, starting from Bogdanov's *Empiriomonism*, and passing through the idea of the opposition between bourgeois and proletarian culture, leads to the attempt to elaborate a knowledge that scientifically gathers and systematises the entire organisational experience of humanity within itself. This is an attempt developed over several years, and which therefore traverses Bogdanov's entire process of theoretical reflection (Silvano Tagliagambe, "Bogdanov tra costruttivismo e scienza dell'organizzazione", in Bogdanov, *Quattro dialoghi su scienza e filosofia*, pp. 95-137: 111).

it, makes it its own, modifies it, and extends it. In short, in a certain way, it creates it. For Bogdanov, this corresponds to the content of the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: "Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it". The extent to which this inevitably involves one of the most vital and misunderstood themes of Marxist doctrine – the relationship between structure and superstructure – is not relevant here. It is sufficient to recall the importance of ideology in carrying out the Revolution, particularly among art and technology practitioners, who are the primary focus of this book. This certainly relates to the issue of realism I just mentioned.

It is not impossible to conceive that the "specific style of thinking" characteristic of Russian constructivism had to become a key element of a new realism. This was ready to dictate the activity required of the proletarian-citizen-worker until the arrival of the mythical Stakhanov in the 1930s, as a miner committed to achieving the goals of Stalin's Plans. The supreme guardian of those goals was Stalin, as suggested by Alexander A. Deineka's monumental painting *Goalkeeper* (1934, 119 x 352 cm). A reference to Bertolt Brecht's character Me-ti is interesting here: regarding Ni-en (Stalin), Me-ti (Brecht) wonders whether it is better to use "Great" or "Useful" to define Ni-en. He concludes with "Useful" if it is recognised as the premise of "Great", which Brecht was perhaps not entirely sure of:

> Me-ti suggested that Ni-en should not always be called the Great, but rather the Useful. It was still, however, too early for praise of this kind. Useful people had remained for too long without fame of any kind, such that to say now that he is useful would not cause anyone to trust that he was capable of leading. Leaders had always been recognised for being useful to themselves. Me-ti soon realised his suggestion was unworkable. He said [to] himself: What I really wanted was for the useful ones to be recognised as great. But that's exactly what's happening now with Ni-en.[6]

As far as Lenin is concerned, the organisational concept that guided him throughout his revolutionary operation was different before, during, and after October 1917. For him, it was necessary to have a theoretically founded programme:

> At the present time, the urgent question of our movement is no longer that of developing the former scattered 'amateur' activities, but of uniting – of organisation […]. The programme must formulate our basic views, precisely establish our immediate political tasks; point out the immediate demands that must show the area of agitational activity; give unity to the agitational work, expand and deepen it, thus raising it from fragmentary partial agitation for petty, isolated demands to the status of agitation for the sum total of Social-Democratic demands.[7]

6. Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht's Me-ti. Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things* [1965], trans. and ed. by Antony Tatlow, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, Kindle version, p. 140.

7. Vladimir I. Lenin, "A Draft Programme of Our Party" [1899], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. IV, trans. by Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, ed. by Victor Jerome, pp. 227-254: 230.

Lenin would develop his conception of the relationship between objective situation and revolutionary initiative in all its theoretical articulation in the work that finally came to terms with his "Economism": *What is to Be Done?*, written between May 1901 and February 1902.

For Lenin, as for Marx, it was not a matter of grasping abstract economic, social, and political categories, but of using precise economic arguments to understand and interpret the historical process. "We know no other science than history", Marx and Engels had written on this subject in *The German Ideology*. Also, for Lenin, the theory represented the awareness of historical experience. That is why he outlined his own party's theory by reflecting on the origins of revolutionary theory itself in its historical process. The Leninist party set itself the task of organising revolutionary militants around the communist programme by forming "revolutionary tribunes" capable of actively playing the role of agitators and propagandists among the masses to raise their political consciousness.

Lenin was clear that the "objective need for communism" arising from the class struggle should become organised consciousness, involving a revolutionary profession. Thus, the worker, the student, and the peasant communists would become revolutionary cadres, and the party would become the political place to guide their militancy in a revolutionary direction. Lenin's organising principles were thus aimed at creating a centralised revolutionary party consisting of "professional revolutionaries" at the head of a collective organisation. Lenin believed that reality determines consciousness, and therefore that it was necessary to seize power by any means in order to build a socialist society that, by subverting social relations, would later gradually contribute to changing culture. This realism was fully expressed by Deineka's 1925 illustration for the anti-religious monthly *Atheist at the Workbench*, with the unequivocal title *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*. An enormous black fist rises from a factory, holding threads that control and direct dozens of figures of workers, all employed within various governing bodies – all of which are more or less connected to the party.

I recall all of this to underline that such "organisation" problems were not the only ones for Leninist socialism. There was still a need to consider the new trends of "socialisation" of life that had begun in all Western countries after the revolutionary age (*Sattelzeit*) between the 18th and 19th centuries. With the end of the *Ancien Régime*, the principles of a more material and positive conception of life gained the leading role in the new state's post-revolutionary "liberal-constitutional" form. Combining the principles of the French Revolution with the immediate results of the Industrial Revolution provoked a rapid switch away from the naturalistic and rationalistic "Renaissance" understanding of reality, on which the Enlightenment had built its fortune,[8] towards a more pragmatic and technical modality of considering nature and society and acting within them while respecting the principle of individual freedom. The radical critique brought by Pavel Florensky to the "Euclidean-Kantian Space" of Western modernity in the

8. See Antonio Negri, *Political Descartes. Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project* [1970], trans. and intr. by Matteo Mandarini and Alberto Toscano, London-New York, Verso, 2006.

early 1920s is well known. However, referring to Deineka, Christina Kiaer argues that even among avant-garde artists, concerns and questions arose about the harsh relationship between their claim to "sunny freedom" and the inevitable socialist project of collective art.[9]

Perhaps this was also Tatlin's hidden thought, which was always present in the highlights of the Russian avant-garde. At a particular stage in his career, while he was overseeing the Material Culture Section of Ginkhuk (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kultury, State Institute of Artistic Culture), Tatlin believed that his final decision to apply constructivism to industrial production through the creation of everyday objects would enable him to fully collaborate with the factory system. His offers of cooperation at that level were rejected, with the advice to turn instead to his institute laboratory. He was the director there and aimed to improve the preparation of those who would teach technical drawing to the students (future artist-engineers). The efforts of both Popova and Stepanova had a similar outcome, as they were unable to go beyond offering a few women's dresses, which were more or less competitive within the simulacrum of the "market" made possible by the NEP.

Tatlin also created some sketches and wore clothes he had designed for advertising purposes, but his dream was something else: to actually escape reality. Thus arose the idea of the *Letatlin*, the flying bicycle, conceived precisely in 1932, simultaneously with the Soviet directive against the organised persistence of individual groupings in art. "It is the last outcome (in chronological order) of 'material culture', of the attempt to make machines out of art and not mechanised art".[10] The idea was to bring the technical object into the artistic field, overturning the conventional viewpoint that required beauty to be distinct from utility. Aesthetics, or taste (which Tatlin identifies as his guiding category), then becomes the means of controlling the *faktura*, the mechanical and ideological realisation of the object. It is an art that considers the mathematical aspects, the strength of the

9. Kiaer, *Collective Body*, pp. 6-7. As Kristin Romberg states in her study of Aleksei M. Gan, for his constructivism to promote both freedom and equality, it would need to be "about the freedom to make a collective choice about forms of unfreedom" (Romberg, *Gan's Constructivism,* p. 8).

10. Ray, *Tatlin e la cultura del Vchutemas,* p. 112. Enrico Crispolti highlights the most significant and innovative phases in the Russian and Soviet art that is examined here: these are all stages that Tatlin also experienced. The beginning is in the post-cubist climate, in the early part of the first decade, situated between the evocative lyrical and fabulously symbolic lightness of the Armenian Sarian, the visionary approach of Pyotr S. Utkin, and the expressionism of Murnau's Alexej G. von Jawlensky. However, during this initial decade, two main trend lines emerged: one that deepened the post-cubist tradition towards a more solid modern figuration, and another that, through more experimentally daring and restless exploration, culminated in the early to mid-1910s at the core of the cubo-futurist movement. This paved the way, in the latter half of the decade, for the suprematist movement, and then, between the end of the decade and the early 1920s, for the constructivist movement (Enrico Crispolti, "L'occasione di un'ottica trasversale", in *Avanguardia russa. Dalle collezioni private sovietiche. Origini e percorso. 1904-1934*, Exhib. Catal., Bergamo, Edizioni Bolis, 1989, pp. 11-15: 13-14).

materials, and the surface of the wings, but which, nevertheless, in its organicist osmosis, is not concerned with engineering verifications. *Letatlin* remained a dream: Tatlin's "machine" was often displayed in the starkness of its skeleton or cloaked in the silk that served as its skin, illustrating that aesthetic forms are always the most economical.

The affirmation of the historical avant-gardes took place in the awareness of a profound desire to be coherent not only with the processes of productive society, but with the dimension of popular imagination itself. This occurred in an arc that passes through two crucial decades, from the prosaic and simple, popular intentions of Larionov and Goncharova in the second half of the first decade of the 20th century, to the post-revolutionary, productive formative commitments of the productivists, including Rodchenko and Stepanova in the first place.

Taking Rodchenko as his example, the constructivist theorist Osip M. Brik maintained, in an article in the first issue of the Russian avant-garde journal *Lef* in 1923, that he was an abstract artist, becoming a constructivist and a production artist – not just in name, but in practice. "Rodchenko knows that you won't do anything by sitting in your own studio, that you must go into real work, carry your own organisational talent where it is needed – into production".[11]

A similar argument must be employed for those with a "productivist inclination", such as Tatlin, Karl Ioganson, Stepanova, Popova, and, *of course*, Rodchenko. On various occasions, they sought to enter the world of mass production, experiencing growing expansion after the NEP. They were interested in theorising new types of useful material objects that could transform the everyday life of the proletariat under socialism. However, the only example of an artist-engineer that can be reported is the sculptor Ioganson, who was brought to attention by Maria Gough. He became a worker at the Krasnyi Prokatchik factory in Moscow, inventing a metal-cutting machine on the workbench that increased labour productivity by up to 150 per cent.[12] He was a true artist-producer, just as the most ardent productivists, starting with Nikolai M. Tarabukin, intended. However, Ioganson was a unique case that neither Rodchenko nor Tatlin could replicate, as was emblematically testified by the fate of Tatlin's 1919 *Monument to the Third International*. In 1924, Tatlin published an article in the popular periodical *Krasnaia panorama* with numerous illustrations of prototypes of common objects of new everyday life (*novyi byt*) at the lowest level of popular (proletarian) necessities, but adapted to the production capacities of Soviet life ("We need things as simple and primitive as our simple and primitive *byt*").

Undoubtedly, different forms of realism clashed: on one side there was the enthusiasm for camera technology, as seen in the work of Rodchenko or Vertov, while on the other there was the realism of Stakhanovist production in the 1930s. But this was not the only conflict. In Kiaer's reconstruction of the "Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Tecniques dans la Vie Moderne" in Paris in 1937, two opposing examples of politically motivated artistic realism coexisted: the

11. Quoted in Kiaer, "Into Production!".
12. See Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, pp. 151 ff.

aerial destruction of *Guernica*, with the following written on the back of the postcard reproducing the painting: "The Collapse of the World in the Horror of War"; and, in stark contrast, the joyful parade of Deineka's *Illustrious People of the Land of the Soviets* who, dressed in white, were discreetly building Stalin's "dictatorship". Of *Guernica*: the specific episodes of suffering experienced by animals and humans, particularly those of women, scattered across the expansive canvas form a collective critique of fascism and its use of mass death technologies which, by then, had already defined the 20th century. While "the effect of *Guernica* is in the register of horror, tragedy, and grief, that of Deineka's mural is in the register of joy, even as Stalin's government was at that very moment perpetrating one of the twentieth century's most egregious crimes of mass death in the nominal defence of Soviet Communism".[13]

Deineka's fate also illustrates the "realism" of the "reality" parable: his commission for the 1937 exhibition went through numerous bureaucratic hurdles until he was not even invited to the show's opening in Paris. His celebration of the regime no longer enthused anyone. Different styles were employed in the Spanish Republic and the USSR, and different methods in Picasso and Deineka. The difference in their approaches to creating public art at the Paris exposition clearly highlights the contrast between two systems: modernism and socialist realism, between the Western focus on individual creation within the art market and the Soviet emphasis on collective production. Picasso only responded to his vision, genius, and the market. In contrast, Deineka was subservient to the Russian Exhibition Committee's realistic officiality.

However, as I anticipated at the beginning of this study, another factor must be considered as a basic assumption of the research. Even before Stalin and his "socialist realism", the "revolutionary" drive of the Russian avant-garde lacked the momentum for a radical critique of the old "reasonable" and "ideologised" modernity that the Western avant-garde ("modernism") had recognised and practised from the mid-19th century. This is manifest in the sum of the organisational activity initiated in 1935 to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the October Revolution two years later. It all began with the convocation of the Seventh Congress of the Comintern in Moscow from all over the world to participate in Stalin's proposal for the new Constitution of the Soviet Union in 1936, the following year.

One cannot underestimate the effects of the coincidence of these enthusiastic manifestations with the disastrous economic situation provoked by the Wall Street crash of 1929, which was having brutal consequences in the capitalist world. An echo of all this can also be seen in the speech given on that occasion by Dmitrii Z. Manuilsky, a renowned Bolshevik and deputy secretary of the Comintern's executive committee from December 1935 until its dissolution in May 1943: "Speech delivered at a meeting of the active members of the Moscow Organisation

13. Kiaer, *Collective Body*, pp. 231-232. On *Guernica*, see *Pity and Terror. Picasso Path to Guernica*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by T. J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner, Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2017.

of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, September 14, 1935". Here is the opening:

> The Seventh Congress of the Communist International gathered on the verge of a great change in the lives of peoples, of a change in the relation of forces between the socialist world and the capitalist world, a change in the mutual relations between capitalist states, a change in the disposition of class forces in each country, a change in the world working class movement and in the liberation movement of all the masses of toilers.[14]

It should be noted that, in 1935, El Lissitzky completed a work consisting of seven notebooks filled with photographic and lithographic material, all housed in a single artistic case, which he did not hesitate to honour with the title *The Industry of Socialism*. In 1937, this same striking title was used to organise the major exhibition – subsequently delayed until 1939 – on the state of Soviet art 20 years after the October Revolution. From these premises, it is undeniable that the prevalent image, or the image that Stalin and the Soviets sought to promote both within Russia and internationally, was of a burgeoning Russian socialist society, including sectors of industry and production, amidst the Western crisis of capitalism. The exclusive reference point had to be "socialist realism", a useful indicator of the successes following the first two Five-Year Plans and 20 years after the Revolution.[15] There were no "avant-gardists" among the 28 artists and officials called to the exhibition, and the general climate of the operation centred on the disagreement between formalism (or even naturalism) and realism. This was also fomented at a popular level by the newspapers: for example, at that time, the *Pravda* attacked Shostakovich's music for its formalism.

The Seventh Congress of the USSR Soviets was held in February 1935 as Stalin presented the proposed reform of the 1918-1924 Constitution, which would be approved in 1936 and remain in force until 1977. It incorporated the more formal aspects (parliamentary democracy, equal representation of city and country dwellers, direct and secret voting) and the underlying ideological motivation, which was again the "Industry of Socialism".[16]

14. Dmitrii Z. Manuilsky, *The Work of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International*, New York, Workers Library Publishers, 1936, p. 5.

15. See Susan E. Reid, "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror. The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935-1941", *The Russian Revue*, 60 (2001), pp. 153-184. The preparation of the first All-Union art exhibition, "Industry of Socialism", was initiated in 1935, a year after the First Congress of Soviet Writers adopted the doctrine of socialist realism. Conceived as a celebration of the achievements of socialist industrialisation, it was intended to open in the autumn of 1937 to commemorate the completion of the first two Five-Year Plans and the 20th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. The opening was delayed, however, until March 1939.

16. The universalist rhetoric of the Soviet state was revived when the 1936 Constitution came into effect, portraying the USSR as a defender of peace and Enlightenment values threatened by fascism and seen as irredeemably lost by bourgeois and liberal civilisation (see Pons, *The Global Revolution*, p. 87). Together with the "ethnic deportations", the Constitution, the "most democratic in the world", was perhaps the main legacy of the ambiguous stabilisation of those years. It granted equal rights to all citizens, including the equal and secret vote, which was also extended to the hitherto electorally discriminated peasants, in principle eliminating the

The years from 1936 to 1938 are known unanimously as the "Stalinist terror years".[17] This period was preceded by various episodes of intolerance and unjustified repression by the public power that had been increasing since the time of Lenin and the victorious Revolution. During his first Five-Year Plan (1928-1933), Stalin also had to manage the international effects of the Great Depression, which affected the entire financial and economic system after the New York Stock Exchange crash in 1929. Although not directly involved, Soviet Russia was also heavily affected by the collapse of the global trade market, which impacted its prospects for rapid industrial development. Although an overall judgement is complex, it can be assumed that the costs to the Soviet Union were certainly less than the benefits it enjoyed indirectly. The international crisis favoured the transfer of thousands of Western experts (mainly American and German) to Russian territory to contribute to training specialised technicians and workers that the Russian industry needed.[18] Furthermore, the transfer of machines, or even of entire industrial complexes, also became possible, substantially contributing to the acceleration of production and industrial growth envisioned by Stalin's planning. Without going into details, it is undoubtedly true that the comparison between the state of crisis of Western capitalism and the well-publicised growth of the Soviet economy was entirely favourable to the latter.

In 1937, the Soviet Union was recognised by the organisers of the "Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne" in Paris as one of the most prominent new countries on the international scene following the 1929 crisis and subsequent problematic recovery. The stunning photographs of the exposition feature the Russian pavilion, topped by a renowned steel sculpture by Vera I. Mukhina depicting the male Worker and female Kolkhoz statues, armed with a hammer and a sickle, respectively. This contrasts with the German pavilion, located just in front, which is topped by the imperial eagle of the Third Reich clutching the Nazi swastika in its talons. In the background, between these two structures, rises the Eiffel Tower, which has long been a symbol of progress for the entire world since the "Exposition Universelle" of 1889. The air one breathed was, therefore, all new. Overshadowing that, not far away, in the Republic of Spain's small pavilion, was Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, which is, perhaps, the most representative picture of the art and history of the 20th century. The title of the 1937 exposition indicates a confirmation in the planners' thinking: the fundamental shift from "universal" to "international". "Art" and "science" no longer exist as absolute, that is, universal, values: "art becomes

"category of ci-devant" which had been used to choose whom to target, and guaranteed freedom of religion and conscience, etc. (see Graziosi, *L'URSS di Lenin e Stalin*, p. 395).

17. See Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror. A Reassessment* [1968], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers*. *Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2007; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *On Stalin's Team. The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.

18. See Jean-Louis Cohen, *Building a New World*. *Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture*, trans. by Luba Markovskaia, Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2020, pp. 19-22.

artisanship, science becomes technology". However, the following comment is more significant: "The value of art and science derives from its social utility, the exposition planners announce at Paris 1937. Application to daily life is the highest measure of worth". [19]

The utilitarian trend is now taken to the extreme. Both the right and the left wings of political life in the 1930s conspired to confine art and science to these subservient roles. This "philosophy" was as congenial to fascist Italy as to democratic France or communist Russia. But it was of course in Russia that the orientation of the Soviet artistic avant-garde, in which the appeal to everyday life had constituted an essential focal point for the constructivist movement, came to fruition. The encounter between art and science and the social utility of everyday life, during a growing interest in technique and proletarian objects, may have rendered the Stalinist policy more acceptable. And this was achieved without hindering the outcome of "socialist realism" which would be officially proclaimed in 1934 and which – beyond any purely aesthetic considerations – somehow certified, if not the extinction, then at least the progressive exhaustion of the artistic constructivist avant-garde movement. However, its actual demise was perhaps marked by the 1939 exhibition in Moscow, where even Deineka, who had showcased the ambiguous beauties of socialist realism worldwide, was deemed not to be sufficiently aligned with the new trend. He had to wait until the post-Soviet era to secure an honourable place in the history of 20th-century Russian art.

The aim of my research was not to offer another interpretation of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. Instead, I aimed to assess the role played in it by art, represented, as in much of Europe, by the avant-garde, which was born and developed in late post-Tsarist Russia, but rapidly became open to influences from other, more modern European countries ranging from France to Italy and from Germany to Holland. My main concern was to derive the interpretation to be given to an essential episode in the convulsive history of the 20th century. I am satisfied with the historiographical framework that I have reconstructed, knowing, however, that it requires further investigation, both regarding sources and the examination of the various ideological and institutional options. Consequently, I would like to present some questions that remain open beyond the traces of answers that I have tried to set out.

The first concerns the Russian proletariat's capacity to develop a revolutionary culture independently of the prior absence of capitalism in Russia. The second concerns the affinities and divergences between the theory and practice of Russian artists and the avant-garde that emerged in the (Western) world, advocating for new ideas about life and art. This connects to the third question, which may be seen as the crux of my research, regarding the appropriateness of using the

19. Arthur Chandler, "The Exposition internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, 1937", *World's Fair*, 1 (1988), https://www.arthurchandler.com/paris-1937-exposition.

term “modernism” to classify and understand not only the forms but also the contents of the new Soviet Art in the less-than-20 years following October 1917. My answer is largely negative, given the absence in Russian history of a phase of “modernisation” that could serve as a catalyst for the Revolution, despite the “Enlightenment” efforts of Peter and Catherine and the vaguely romantic presence of “utopian” socialists such as Sismondi.

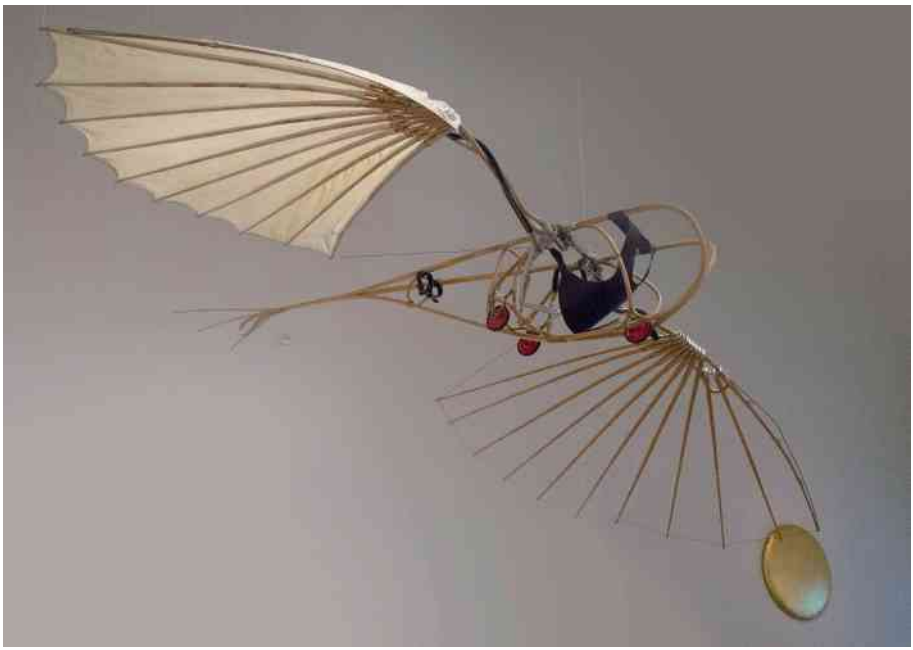
This is no small, albeit provisional, conclusion. Therefore, the answer to the most critical question remains unresolved: whether one should, or even could, consider the Russian artistic avant-garde a significant component, if not a “factor”, of the Russian Revolution.

This book does not aim to condemn the Soviet experience wholesale or to rehabilitate all or part of it, as has become common in the debate between Marxists and anti-Marxists, especially since the end of the Second World War. Nor is it a detailed account of the many twists and turns over the roughly 40 years during which the relationship between art and politics has been shaped and reshaped in Russia. My aim has been more to emphasise the importance of the participation of numerous Russian artists, both before and after the 1917 Revolution, in the great avant-garde upheaval against “modern and bourgeois” easel art within the broader movement later called “modernism”. Their involvement cannot be understood without reference to the major Leninist and subsequent Stalinist experiments, which each had significant but different effects. The approach responds to a methodological principle that is certainly not new in the field of historiography, but it does not limit itself to the various concepts of the “social history of art”. Instead, it aligns with research directions promoted by the so-called “cultural studies” and, more explicitly, with the claims of a “constitutional history” that, in its “material” approach, goes beyond simply seeking economic and social elements of historical development and aims to highlight components with a cultural background, such as artistic aspects.

These aspects should therefore be identified and studied not only in their overall (or disciplinary) complexity, but also in terms of the roles they may have played in relation to individual, social, and political behaviours across various historical contexts. Without wanting to explain everything at all costs, it seems to me that, despite its brevity, the debate that unfolded in the 1920s on the meaning and content to be attributed to the new communist society deserves serious consideration. In fact, it sought to emphasise the objectives that, in the view of the most dedicated artists, represented what seemed to be the primary outcome of the Revolution. Thus, the actions and reasoning of Malevich, or the commitment of Tatlin (as well as Popova or Stepanova) to the “objects” of solidarity they designed and produced, reflected the dream of a *novyi byt* capable of fostering a more humane and supportive proletarian society. At the same time, however, technical discussions and applications were also evolving during those years, with the use of new machines. Other great artists, such as Lissitzky, Rodchenko, and Vertov, were interested in these developments and saw photography and cinema as a new “social eye” in a revolutionary context. This mixture proved incendiary

because, under Stalin's leadership and his promotion of the Five-Year Plans from 1928, he supported the emergence of a new principle of reality that overlapped with the previously described constructivist approach, and effectively surpassed it. This led to a different art policy which, in the name of a new "realism", reaffirmed the "constitutive" relationship – albeit in a different, actually opposite, sense – between art and politics.

Figure 1. Vladimir Y. Tatlin, *Model for the Monument to the Third International*, 1920, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/ Scala, Florence).



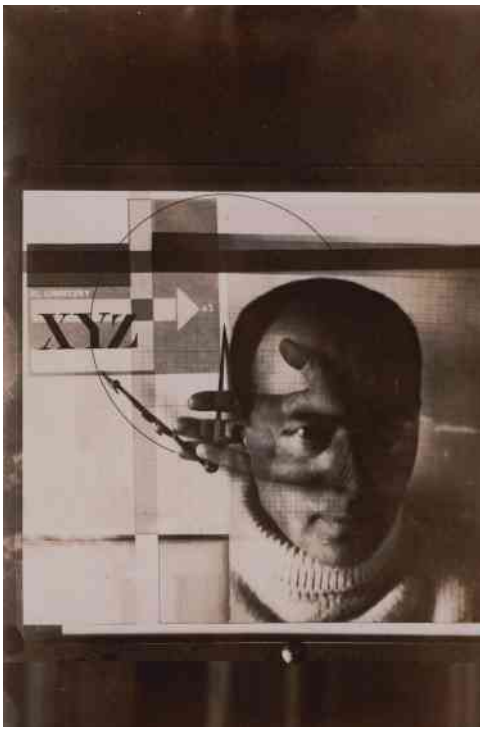
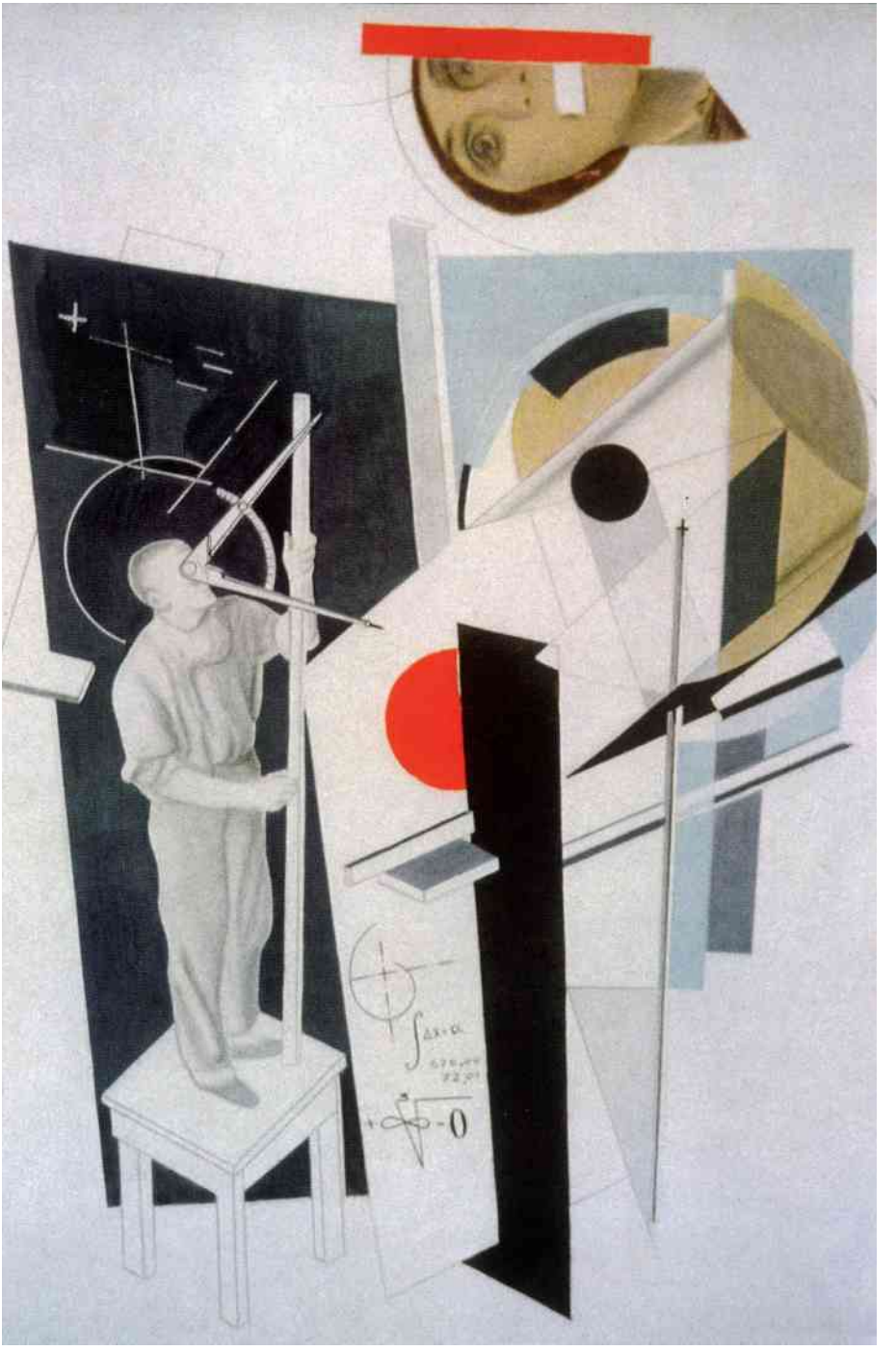


Figure 2 (above). Vladimir Y. Tatlin, *Letatlin*, 1932, Private Collection (Photo Scala, Florence/Heritage Images).

Figure 3 (left). El Lissitzky, *The Constructor*, 1924, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence).

Figure 4 (right). El Lissitzky, T*atlin at Work on the Model for the Third International*, Illustration for the book *Six Tales with Easy Endings* by Ilya G. Ehrenburg, 1922, Private Collection (Album/Scala, Florence).



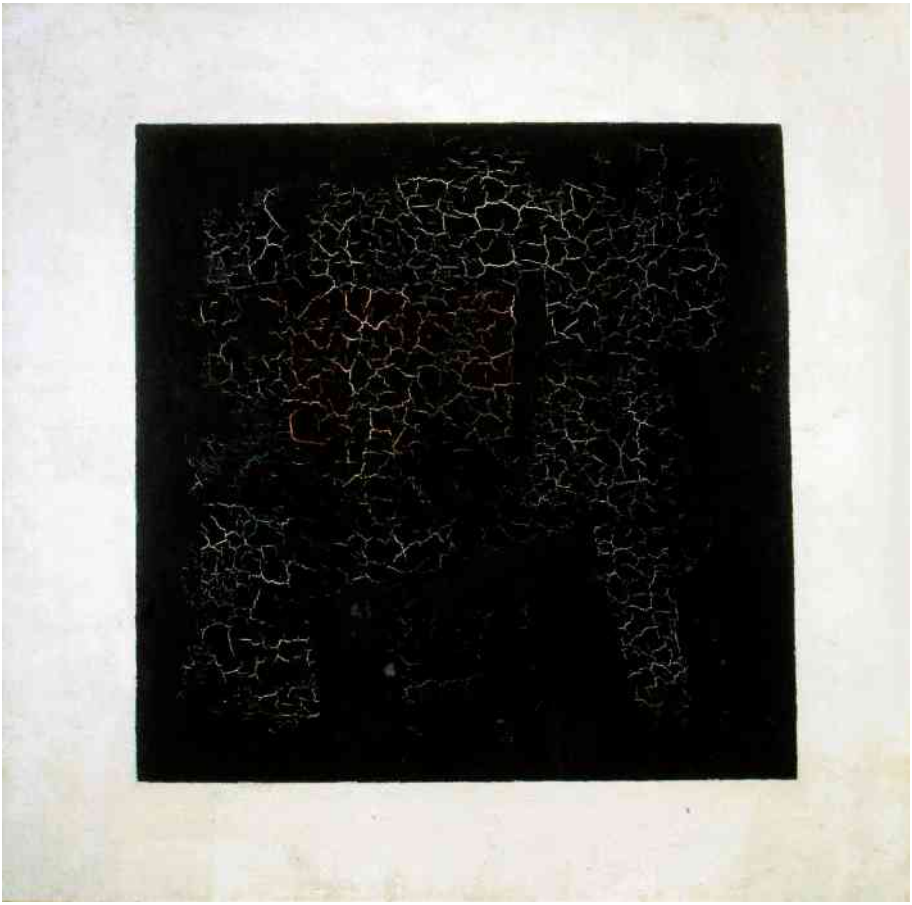


Figure 5 (above). Kazimir S. Malevich, *The Black Suprematist Square*, 1915, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Photo Fine Art Images/Heritage Images/Scala, Florence).

Figure 6 (right). Lyubov S. Popova, *Dress sketch*, 1923-1924, Indian ink and gouache on paper, 24 x 10.4 cm, Private Collection, Moscow (Photo Scala, Florence).

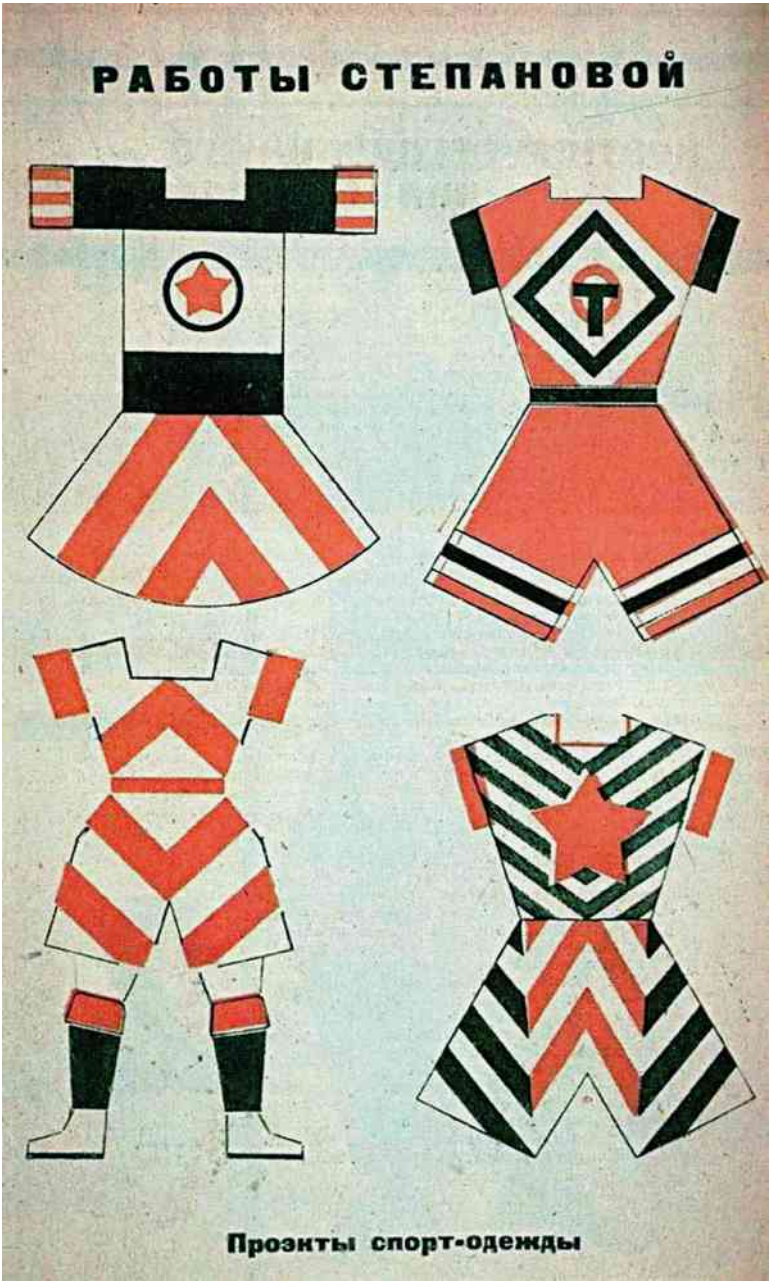


Figure 7. Varvara F. Stepanova, Designs for sportswear, LEF no. 2, 1923, Russian State Library, Moscow (Album/Scala, Florence).

Figure 8. Alexander M. Rodchenko and Vladimir V. Mayakovsky, *Advertising poster for Red October Factory biscuits*, Private Collection (Album/Scala, Florence).

Figure 9. Alexander M. Rodchenko, *U.R.S.S. Workers' Club at the International Exhibition*, Paris, 1925, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York (Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence).

Bibliography

Sources

Arvatov, Boris I., "Dve gruppirovki", *Zrelishcha*, 8 (1922), p. 9.

Arvatov, Boris I., "The everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" [1925], trans. by Christina Kiaer, *October*, 81 (1997), pp. 119-128.

Barr, Alfred H., Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art*, New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1936.

Baumgarten, Franziska, *Arbeitswissenschaft und Psychotechnik in Russland*, Munich-Berlin, Oldenbourg, 1924.

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1935], in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, ed. by Hannah Arendt, New York, Schocken Books, 1969.

Bogdanov, Alexander A., *Art and the Working Class* [1918], trans. and intr. by Taylor R. Genovese, US, UK *et al.*, Iskra Books, 2022.

Bogdanov, Alexander A., *Empiriomonism. Essays in philosophy* [1904-1906], 3 vols., Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2020.

Bogdanov, Alexander A., *The General Science of Organisation* [1922], trans. by George Gorelik, Seaside, CA, Intersystems Publications, 1980.

Bogdanov, Alexander A., *Quattro dialoghi su scienza e filosofia*, ed. by Felice Accame, with writings by Ernst von Glasersfeld, Massimo Stanzione and Silvano Tagliagambe, Rome, Odradek, 2004.

Bogdanov, Alexander A., *Toward a New World. Articles and essays, 1901-1906. On the Psychology of Society, New World, and Contributions to Studies in the Realist Worldview*, trans., intr. and ed. by David Rowley, Boston, Brill, 2022.

Brik, Osip M., "From the Painting to the Photograph" [1928], trans. by John E. Bowlt, in *Photography in the Modern Era. European Documents and Critical Writings, 1913-1940*, ed. by Christopher Phillips, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1989, pp. 227-233.

Brik, Osip M., "Our Agenda" [1921], in Osip M. Brik, "Selected Criticism 1915-1929", trans. by Natasha Kurchanova, *October*, 134 (2010), pp. 74-110.

Bulgakov, Sergei N., "Dal marxismo all'idealismo", in Bori and Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia*, pp. 226-232.

Burliuk, David D., "Cubism (Surface-Plane)" [1912], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 69-77.

Creative Committee of Unovis, "Propaganda leaflet", n.d., in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich. Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. by Alexander Lieven, New York, Thames & Hudson, 1982, pp. 297-299.

Ehrenburg, Ilya G., "Ein Entwurf Tatlins", *Frühlicht*, 3 (1922), pp. 92-93.
Ehrenburg, Ilya G., *Six Tales with easy endings*, Moscow-Berlin, Gelikon, 1922.

Florensky, Pavel A., *Iconostasis* [1922], trans. by Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev, intr. by Donald Sheehan, Crestwood, NY, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996.
Florensky, Pavel A., *Reverse perspective* [1919], trans. by Wendy Salmond, ed. by Nicoletta Misler, London, Reaktion Books, 2022.

Gan, Aleksei M., *Constructivism* [1922], trans. and intr. by Christina Lodder, Barcelona, Tenov, 2014.
Gan, Aleksei M., "Kinematograf i kinematografiia" [1922], trans. by Richard Taylor, in *The Film Factory. Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896-1939*, ed. by Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1988, pp. 67-68.
Gleizes, Albert and Metzinger, Jean, *Du* "*Cubisme*" [1912], ed. and intr. by Christian Briend, Paris, Hermann éditeur, 2012.
Goncharova, Natalia S., "Preface to Catalogue of One-Woman Exhibition" [1913], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 54-59.
Gorsen, Peter and Knödler-Bunte, Eberhard, *Proletkult*, 2 vols., Stuttgart, Frommann, Holzboog, 1974-1975.
Gramsci, Antonio, "Marx and Machiavelli", in *Quaderni del Carcere*, ed. by Valentino Gerratana, 4 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1975, vol. I, p. 432.

Isakov, Sergey K., "On Tatlin's Counter-Reliefs" [1915], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 333-335.

Jeanneret, Charles-Édouard and Ozenfant, Amédée, "Purisme" [1920], in *Art in Theory 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, rev. ed., Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2003, pp. 237-240.

Keynes, John Maynard, *A Short View of Russia*, London, The Hogarth Press, 1925.
Khlebnikov, Velimir C., "Tatlin" [1916], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, p. 336.
Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov, trans. by Kevin O'Brien, ed. by Annette Michelson, Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1984.
Klutsis, Gustav G., "The Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitation Art" [1931], trans. by Cathy Young, in Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina*, pp. 237-240.
"Das Kunstprogramm des Kommissariats für Volksaufklärung in Rußland", *Das Kunstblatt* [1919], Nendeln, Kraus repr., 1978, pp. 91-93.

Laverdant, Gabriel Désiré, *De la Mission de l'art e du rôle des artistes*, Paris, La Phalange, 1845.
Lenin, Vladimir I., "A Characterisation of Economic Romanticism. Sismondi and our Native Sismondists" [1897], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. II, trans. by George Hanna, pp. 129-266.
Lenin, Vladimir I., *Collected Works*, 44 vols., Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1960-1970.
Lenin, Vladimir I., "A Draft Programme of Our Party" [1899], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. IV, trans. by Joe Fineberg and George Hanna, ed. by Victor Jerome, pp. 227-254.
Lenin, Vladimir I., "Directives on the Film Business. January 17, 1922", dictated 17 January 1922 [1925], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XLII, trans. by Bernard Isaacs, pp. 388-389.

Lenin, Vladimir I., “Materialism and Empirio-criticism” [1908], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XIV, trans. by Abraham Fineberg, ed. by Clemens Dutt, pp. 17-362.
Lenin, Vladimir I. “On the Question of Dialectics” [1933], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXVIII, trans. by Clemens Dutt, pp. 357-361.
Lenin, Vladimir I., “Second All-Russia Congress of Political Education Departments” [17 October 1921], in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. XXXIII, ed. by David Skvirsky and George Hanna, pp. 60-79.
Lissitzky, El, “Art and Pangeometry” [1925], in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky,* pp. 352-357.
Lissitzky, El, “New Russian Art. A lecture” [1922], in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 334-344.
Lissitzky, El, *Russia. An Architecture for World Revolution* [1930], trans. by Eric Dluhosch, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1970.
Lissitzky, El, “Suprematism in World Reconstruction” [1920], in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 331-334.
Lissitzky-Küppers, Sophie, *El Lissitzky. Life, letters, texts*, trans. by Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittal, Greenwich, CT, New York Graphic Society, 1968.
Lukàcs, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics* [1923], trans. by Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1971.
Lunacharsky, Anatoly V., “Die Aufgaben der sozialistischen Kultur”, *Russische Korrespondenz*, 6/7 (1920), pp. 91-94.
Lunacharsky, Anatoly V., “Religione e socialismo”, in Bori and Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia*, pp. 252-263.
Lunacharsky, Anatoly V., “Die Revolution und die Kunst” [1920-1922], in Anatoly V. Lunacharsky, *Die Revolution und die Kunst. Essays, Reden, Notizen*, Dresden, VEB, 1962, pp. 26-31.

Malevich, Kazimir S., *Essays on Art. 1915-1928*, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, ed. by Troels Andersen, 4 vols., Copenhagen, Borgen, 1968.
Malevich, Kazimir S., “God is not cast down. Art, Church and Factory” [1922], in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 188-223.
Malevich, Kazimir S., *Lenin* [1924], trans. by El Lissitzky, repr., Frankfurt am Main, biermann und boukes, 1971.
Malevich, Kazimir S., “Lenin (Aus dem Buch *Über das Ungegenständliche*)”, *Das Kunstblatt* [1924], trans. by El Lissitzky, Nendeln, Kraus repr., 1978, pp. 289-293.
Malevich, Kazimir S., “On New Systems in Art” [1920], in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 83-119.
Malevich, Kazimir S., “The Question of Imitative Art” [1920], in Malevich, *Essays on Art*, vol. I, pp. 165-182.
Malevich, Kazimir S., “Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost’ ili vechnyy pokoy” [1922], in Kazimir S. Malevich, *Suprematizm. Mir kak bespredmetnost*’, 5 vols., Moscow, Gilea, 2000, vol. III.
Manuilsky, Dmitrii Z., *The Work of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International*, New York, Workers Library Publishers, 1936.
Markov, Vladimir I., “Faktura: Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh” [1914], trans. by Maria Laakso, in *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930*, pp. 495-509.
Marx, Karl, “Preface to the Second Russian Edition of the Manifesto of the Communist Party” [1882], trans. by Mikhail A. Bakunin, in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. XXIV, pp. 425-426.

Marx, Karl, "Theses on Feuerbach" [1845], in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. V, pp. 3-5.
Marx, Karl and Engels, Friedrich, *Collected Works*, 50 vols., Digital Edition, Lawrence & Wishart, 2010.
Museum of Modern Art, New York [MOMA] Archive, Alfred H. Barr Jr. Papers.

Novotny, Fritz, *Cézanne und das Ende der wissenschaftlichen Perspektive*, Vienna, Schroll, 1938.

Punin, Nikolay N., "[Excerpts from Memoirs.] The First Futurist Battles" [1930-1932], in *Kazimir Malevich Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism*, trans. by Antonina W. Bouis, ed. by Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko, 2 vols., London, Tate Publishing, 2015, vol. II, pp. 143-146.
Punin, Nikolay N., "The Monument to the Third International (A Project of the Artist V.E. Tatlin)" [1920], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 344-346.
Punin, Nikolay N., *Noveyshie techeniya v russkom iskusstve*, 2 vols., Leningrad, Izdatelstvo Gosudarstvennogo Russkogo Muzeya, 1927-1928, vol. I.
Punin, Nikolay N., *O Tatline*, ed. by Irina N. Punina and Vasilii I. Rakitin, Moscow, Literaturno-khudozhestvennoe agenstvo "RA", 1994, pp. 27-42.
Punin, Nikolay N., "Puti sovremennago iskusstwa (Po povodu Straniz chudoshestvennoi kritiki Sergeya Makovskogo)", *Apollon*, 9 (1913), pp. 44-50.
Punin, Nikolay N., "Routine and Tatlin" [1924], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 403-406.
Punin, Nikolay N., *Tatlin (protiv kubizma)*, St. Petersburg, Gos. Izdatel'stvo, 1921.

Robinson, Geroid T., *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime. A History of the Landlord-Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917*, Berkeley-Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1932.

Shevchenko, Alexander V., "Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements" [1913], in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 41-54.
Shklovsky, Viktor B., "The Monument to the Third International" [1921], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 342-343.
Shklovsky, Viktor B., "On Faktura and Counter-Reliefs*"* [1920], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 341-342.
Struve, Peter B., "L'intelligencija e la rivoluzione", in Bori and Bettiolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia*, pp. 233-247.

Tarabukin, Nikolai M., "The Art of the Day" [1925], trans. by Rosamund Bartlett, intr. by Maria Gough, *October*, 93 (2000), pp. 57-77.
Tarabukin, Nikolai M., "From the Easel to the Machine" [1923], in *Modern Art and Modernism*. *A Critical Anthology*, ed. by Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison with the assistance of Deirdre Paul, New York, Routledge, 1982, pp. 135-142.
Tatlin, Vladimir Y., "The Artist as an Organiser of Everyday Life" [1929], in Tatlin, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 266-267.
Tatlin, Vladimir Y., "Autobiography" [1929], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 264-265.
Tatlin, Vladimir Y., "The Problem of the Relationship between Man and Object. Let us Declare War on Chests of Drawers and Sideboards" [1930], in *Tatlin*, ed. by Zhadova, pp. 267-268.
Trainin, Ilya P., "Proletarskoe iskusstvo i futurism", *Zarevo zavodov*, 2 (1919), p. 36.

Trotsky, Leon, *Literature and Revolution* [1924], trans. by Rose Strunsky, Michigan *et al.*, University of Michigan Press, 1960.
Trotsky, Leon, "Problems of everyday life (Voprosy byta)" [1923], in Leon Trotsky, *Problems of everyday life and other writings on Culture and Science*, New York, Monad Press, 1973, pp. 15-91.

Umansky, Konstantin, "Neue Kunstrichtungen in Rußland. I. Der Tatlinismus oder die Maschinenkunst", *Der Ararat*, 4 (1920), pp. 12-13.

Valéry, Paul, *Aesthetics. The Conquest of Ubiquity*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, New York, Pantheon Books, Bollingen Series, 1964.
Vertov, Dziga, "Kinoki. Perevorot" [1923], in *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, pp. 14-15.

Webb, Sidney and Beatrice, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?,* New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936.

Literature

1922 Konstruktivizm. Nachalo, Exhib. Catal., Moscow, Zotov Centre, ABC, 2023.

Alexander Bogdanov. Theoretiker für das 20. Jahrhundert, ed. by Stefan Plaggenborg and Maja E. Soboleva, Munich, Sagner, 2008.
Andersen, Troels, "Notes on Tatlin", in *Vladimir Tatlin*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Troels Andersen, Stockholm, Moderna Museet, 1968, pp. 6-16.
Anweiler, Oskar, "Erziehung- und Bildungspolitik", in *Kulturpolitik der Sowjetunion*, ed. by Oskar Anweiler and Karl-Heinz Ruffmann, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1973, pp. 1-143.
[Aristotele] Problema XXX, 1. Perché tutti gli uomini straordinari sono melanconici?, ed. by Bruno Centrone, Pisa, ETS, 2018, pp. 9-51.
Art into life. Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Richard Andrews, Seattle-New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1990.

Basso, Luca, "From the Commune to Communism? Marx and Russia", in *History and Critique of the Social Movement in the World Market*, ed. by Matteo Battistini, Eleonora Cappuccilli and Maurizio Ricciardi, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2023, pp. 183-195.
Berman, Marshall, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1982.
Binns, John, *An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Böckenförde, Ernst-Wolfgang, *Die deutsche verfassungsgeschichtliche Forschung im 19. Jahrhundert. Zeitgebundene Fragestellungen und Leitbilder*, Berlin, Duncker & Humblot, 1961.
Boersma, Linda S., *0.10. The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting*, Exhib. Catal., trans. by John Kirkpatrick, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 1994.
Boersma, Linda S., "Malevich, Lissitzky, Van Doesburg: Suprematism and De Stijl", in *Rethinking Malevich*, pp. 223-236.
Bokov, Anna, *Avant-garde as Method. Vkhutemas and the Pedagogy of Space, 1920-1930*, Zurich, Park Books, 2020.

Bongiovanni, Bruno, *Le repliche della storia. Karl Marx fra la Rivoluzione francese e la critica della politica*, Turin, Bollati Boringhieri, 1989.
Bori, Pier Cesare and Bettiolo, Paolo, *Movimenti religiosi in Russia prima della rivoluzione (1900-1917)*, Brescia, Editrice Queriniana, 1978.
Botar, Oliver A.I., *Prolegomena to the Study of Biomorphic Modernism. Biocentrism, László Moholy-Nagy's "New Vision" and Erno˝ Kállai's Bioromantik*, PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1998.
Bowlt, John E., "5 × 5 = 25? The Science of Constructivism", in *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, ed. by Aleš Erjavec, Durham, Duke University Press, 2015, pp. 42-79.
Bowlt, John E., "Introduction", in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp. XVII-XXXIX.
Bowlt, John E., "Introduction, Long Live Constructivism!", in *Alexander Rodchenko. Experiments for the future. Diaries, essays, letters, and other writings*, ed. by Alexander N. Lavrentiev, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2005, pp. 11-21.
Bowlt, John E., "Malevich and His Students", *Soviet Union. Union soviétique*, 5, Part II (1978), pp. 256-286.
Bowlt, John E., "Manipulating Metaphors: El Lissitzky and the Crafted Hand", in *Situating El Lissitzky*, pp. 129-152.
Bowlt, John E., "Vladimir Tatlin and the Space Race", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 281-286.
Boym, Svetlana, *The Off-Modern*, New York-London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.
Boym, Svetlana, "Ruins of the avant-garde. From Tatlin's Tower to Paper Architecture", in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by Julya Hell and Andrea Schönle, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 58-85.
Bradbury, Malcolm, "The Nonhomemade World. European and American Modernism", *American Quarterly*, 39 (1987), pp. 27-36.
Bradbury, Malcolm and McFarlane, James, "The Name and Nature of Modernism", in *Modernism 1890-1930*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, New York, Penguin, 1976.
Brecht, Bertolt, *Bertolt Brecht's Me-ti. Book of Interventions in the Flow of Things* [1965], trans. and ed. by Antony Tatlow, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016, Kindle version.
Broeckmann, Andreas, "Escaping Gravity. Letatlin and other Utopian Flying Machines in Twentieth-Century Art. Five Marginalia", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 291-295.
Brooks, Jeffrey, *The Firebird and the Fox. Russian Culture under Tsars and Bolsheviks*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2019.
Bürger, Peter, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Calinescu, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987.
Cadioli, Giovanni, "L'economia di comando prima dello stalinismo: ripensare l'Unione Sovietica degli anni venti", *Storica*, 86 (2023), pp. 57-108.
Cadioli, Giovanni, *Il monolite e il mutamento. Continuità e trasformazioni nella politica ed economia dell'Unione Sovietica, 1917-1953*, Milan-Udine, Mimesis, 2022.
The Cambridge History of Communism, ed. by Silvio Pons and Stephen A. Smith, 3 vols., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017.
Carr, Edward H., *A History of Soviet Russia*. *The Bolshevik Revolution*, *1917-1923*, 14 vols., London, Pelican Books, 1973, vol. I.

Castellani, Carlotta, “El Lissitzky and the Biocentric Project ‘1=1’”, *Getty Research Journal*, 16 (2022), pp. 91-118.

Castellani, Carlotta, “El Lissitzky biocentrico: la fotografia come nuova sintesi tra organismo e meccanismo”, *Rivista di Studi di Fotografia*, 11 (2020), pp 20-39.

Celebrating Suprematism. New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich, ed. by Christina Lodder, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2019.

Chandler, Arthur, “The Exposition internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, 1937”, *World’s Fair*, 1 (1988), https://www.arthurchandler.com/paris-1937-exposition.

Cinnella, Ettore, “Rivoluzione plebea, bolscevismo e società sovietica”, in *Rivoluzioni. Una discussione di fine Novecento. Atti del convegno annuale SISSCO Napoli, 20-21 novembre 1998*, ed. by Daniela Luigia Caglioti and Enrico Francia, *Quaderni della Rassegna degli archivi di Stato*, 98, Rome, Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali-Direzione per gli archivi, 2001, pp. 69-84.

Cioli, Monica, *Anche noi Macchine! Avanguardie artistiche e politica europea (1900-1930)*, Rome, Carocci, 2018.

Clark, T.J., *Farewell to an Idea. Episodes from a History of Modernism*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1999.

Cohen, Jean-Louis, *Building a New World. Amerikanizm in Russian Architecture*, trans. by Luba Markovskaia, Montréal, Canadian Centre for Architecture, 2020.

Cohen, Stephen F., “Stalin’s Revolution Reconsidered”, *Slavic Review*, 32 (1973), pp. 264-270.

Collins, Randall, “Review: Rediscovering Schumpeter”, *Contemporary Sociology*, 2 (1992), pp. 171-175.

Conquest, Robert, *The Great Terror. A Reassessment* [1968], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Crisis in the Global Economy. Financial Markets, Social Struggles, and New Political Scenarios, ed. by Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra, Los Angeles, Semiotext(e), 2010.

Crispolti, Enrico, “L’occasione di un’ottica trasversale”, in *Avanguardia russa. Dalle collezioni private sovietiche. Origini e percorso. 1904-1934*, Exhib. Catal., Bergamo, Edizioni Bolis, 1989, pp. 11-15.

Dabrowski, Magdalena, *The Russian Contribution to Modernism. “Construction” as Realisation of Innovative Aesthetic Concepts of the Russian Avant-garde*, PhD diss., New York University, 1990.

David-Fox, Michael, *Crossing Borders. Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union*, Pittsburgh, PA, Pittsburgh University Press, 2015.

David-Fox, Michael, *Revolution of the Mind. Higher Learning among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1921*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1997.

Dickerman, Leah, “El Lissitzky’s Camera Corpus”, in *Situating El Lissitzky*, pp. 153-176.

Di Leo, Rita, *L’esperimento profano. Dal capitalismo al socialismo e viceversa*, Rome, Ediesse, 2012.

Di Leo, Rita, *Il modello di Stalin. Il rapporto tra politica ed economia nel socialismo realizzato,* Milan, Feltrinelli Economica, 1977.

Dipper, Christof, *Die Entdeckung der Gesellschaft. Sattelzeit in Europa 1770-1850*, Berlin, Vergangenheit Verlag, 2023.

Dobb, Maurice Herbert, *Socialist Planning. Some Problems*, London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1970.

Douglas, Charlotte, *Kazimir Malevich*, New York, H.N. Abrams, 1994.
Drutt, Matthew, "El Lissitzky in Germany, 1922-1925", in *El Lissitzky. Beyond the Abstract Cabinet. Photography, Design, Collaboration*, ed. by Margarita Tupitsyn, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1999, pp. 9-23: 12.
Dzhafarova, Svetlana, "Exhibitions, Museums and Art Education of a New Kind", in *Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930*, pp. 76-97.

Energiia mechty. K 100-letiiu Velikoi rossiiskoi revoliutsii, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Galina V. Lemigova and O.B. Afanas'eva, Moscow, Gosudarstvennyy Istorichesky Muzey (GIM), 2017.

Figes, Orlando, *Natasha's Dance. A Cultural History of Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2002.
Figes, Orlando, *A People's Tragedy. The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1996.
Figes, Orlando, *The Whisperers*. *Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, London, Allen Lane, 2007.
Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organisation of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1970.
Fitzpatrick, Sheila, *On Stalin's Team. The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.
Forgács, Éva, *Malevich and Interwar Modernism. Russian Art and the International of the Square*, London, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2022.

Gare, Arran, "Alexander Bogdanov and Systems Theory", *Democracy and Nature*, 3 (2000), pp. 341-359.
Gassner, Hubertus, "Analytical Sequences", in *Rodchenko. Constructing the Future*, Exhib. Catal., Barcelona, Caixa Catalunya Obra Social, 2008, pp. 186-197.
Gassner, Hubertus, *Rodčenko. Fotografien*, Munich, Schirmer-Mosel, 1982.
Glaeser, Georg, "The Theory of Spirals", in *Unbuildable Tatlin?*, pp. 76-83.
Glebova, Aglaya K., *Aleksandr Rodchenko. Photography in the time of Stalin*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2022.
Gorzka, Gabriele, *A. Bogdanov und der Russische Proletkult. Theorie und Praxis einer sozialistischen Kulturrevolution*, Frankfurt am Main-New York, Campus, 1980.
Gough, Maria, *The Artist as Producer*. *Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.
Gough, Maria, "Model Spectacle", in *Tatlin*. *New Art for a New World*, pp. 253-257.
Gray, Camilla, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922* [1962], London, Thames & Hudson, 2000.
Graziosi, Andrea, *L'URSS di Lenin e Stalin. Storia dell'Unione Sovietica 1914-1945*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2007.
The Great Utopia. The Russian and Soviet Avant-garde, 1915-1932, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Schirn Kunsthalle, Stedelijk Museum, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1992.
Greenberg, Clement, "Avant-garde and kitsch", *Partisan Review*, 6 (1939), pp. 34-49.
Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting" [1960], in *Clement Greenberg. The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. by John O'Brian, 4 vols., Chicago *et al.*, University of Chicago Press, 1986-1993, vol. IV, pp. 85-91.
Greenstein, David E., "Assembling 'Fordizm'. The Production of Automobiles, Americans, and Bolsheviks in Detroit and Early Soviet Russia", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 2 (2014), pp. 259-289.

Griffin, Roger, *Modernism and Fascism. The Sense of a New Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler*, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2007.
Grille, Dietrich, *Lenins Rivale. Bogdanov und seine Philosophie*, Cologne, Verlag Wissenschaft und Politik, 1966.
Groh, Dieter, *Russland und das Selbstverständnis Europas. Ein Beitrag zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte*, Heidelberg-Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1961.
Groys, Boris, *The Total Art of Stalinism. Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* [1988], trans. by Charles Rougle, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992.
Gurianova, Nina A., *The Aesthetics of Anarchy. Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde,* Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012.

Hecker, Rolf, *"*Nikolaj F. Danielson und die russische 'Kapital'-Übersetzung", in *Beiträge zur Marx-Engels Forschung. Neue Folge 2013,* ed. by Rolf Hecker, Richard Sperl and Carl-Erich Vollgraf, Hamburg, Argument, 2014.
Hobsbawm, Eric J., *The Age of Extremes. The Short 20th Century 1914-1991*, New York, Pantheon Books, 1994.
Howe, Jovan E., *The Peasant Mode of Production. As Exemplified by the Russian Obschina-Mir*, Tampere, University of Tampere, Dept. of Folk Tradition, 1991.

In Search of 0,10. The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Matthew Drutt, Basel, Fondation Beyeler-Hatje Cantz, 2015.
Iskusstvo v zhizn' 1918-1925, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Evgenija N. Petrova, Ljudmila N. Vostretsova, Elena I. Grushvitskaya and Irina N. Karasik, St. Petersburg, FGBUK Gosudarstvennyi Russkii muzei, 2017.

Jackson, David, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2006.

Khan-Magomedov, Selim O., *Arkhitektura sovetskogo avangarda*, Part I, Moscow, Stroiizdat, 1996.
Khan-Magomedov, Selim O., *Inkhuk i ranniy konstruktivizm: nauchnoye izdaniye*, Moscow, Architectura, 1994.
Khan-Magomedov, Selim O., *Rodchenko. The Complete Work*, trans. by Huw Evans, intr. and ed. by Vieri Quilici, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1986.
Khan-Magomedov, Selim O., *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia*), Moscow, Arkhitektura-S, 2007.
Kiaer, Christina, *Collective Body. Alexander Deineka at the Limit of Socialist Realism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2024.
Kiaer, Christina, *Imagine No Possessions. The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2005.
Kiaer, Christina, "Into Production! The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism", 2000, https://transversal.at/transversal/0910/kiaer/en.
Klibansky, Raymond, Panofsky, Erwin and Saxl, Fritz, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* [1964], Montreal, Quebec, Mc Gill Queen's University, 2019.
Kokkori, Maria, Bouras, Alexander and Karasik, Irina N., "Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality", in *Celebrating Suprematism*, pp. 105-125.
Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-1927. Utopien für eine europäische Kultur, ed. by Bernd Finkeldey, Stuttgart, Hatje, 1992.

Koselleck, Reinhart, *Preußen zwischen Reform und Revolution. Allgemeines Landrecht, Verwaltung und soziale Bewegung von 1791 bis 1848*, Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch, 1989.

Krasnaia Atlantida. K stoletiiu russkikh revoliutsii, Exhib. Catal., Nizhny Novgorod, Nizhegorodskiy Gosudarstvennyy Khudozhestvennyy Muzey, 2017.

Krieger, Verena, "*Dynamismus* in der futuristischen Kunst. Wandlungen auf dem Weg von Italien nach Rußland", in *Das Eigene und das Fremde in der russischen Kultur. Kontinuitäten und Diskontinuitäten der Selbstdefinition in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Beiträge zur zweiten Bochumer Sommerschule vom 3. - 5. Juni 1998*, ed. by Bettina Henn, Anja Kreisel and Dagmar Steinweg, Bochum, Bochum Projekt-Verlag, 2000, pp. 33-55.

Krieger, Verena, *Von der Ikone zur Utopie. Kunstkonzepte der russischen Avantgarde*, Cologne, Böhlau, 1998.

Kulturpolitik der Sowjetunion, ed. by Oskar Anweiler and Karl-Heinz Ruffmann, Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1973.

Lacchè, Luigi, *La libertà che guida il popolo. Le tre giornate del luglio 1830 e le "Chartes" nel costituzionalismo francese*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2002.

Lash, Scott, "Modernity or Modernism? Weber and Contemporary Social Theory", in *Max Weber. Rationality and Modernity*, ed. by Sam Whimster and Scott Lash, London, Routledge, 2006.

Lodder, Christina, "Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s", in *Art into life*, pp. 99-116.

Lodder, Christina, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism", in *Situating El Lissitzky,* pp. 27-46.

Lodder, Christina, "Promoting Constructivism. Kino-Fot and Rodchenko's move into Photography", *History of Photography*, 4 (2000), pp. 292-299.

Lodder, Christina, "Revolutionary Photography", in *Object. Photo. Modern Photographs. The Thomas Walther Collection 1909-1949*, ed. by Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daffner and Maria Morris Hambourg, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2014, pp. 1-12.

Lodder, Christina, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1983.

Lodder, Christina, "Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich. A Creative Dialogue", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 243-247.

Logos: golos konstruktivizma, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Olga Muromtseva, Moscow, Zotov Centre, 2023.

Lynton, Norbert, *Tatlin's Tower. Monument to Revolution*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2009.

Magarotto, Luigi, "Introduzione", in *L'avanguardia dopo la rivoluzione. Le riviste degli anni Venti nell'URSS: «Il giornale dei futuristi», «L'arte della Comune», «Il Lef», «Il nuovo Lef»*, ed. by Luigi Magarotto, Naples, Edizioni Immanenza, 2016, pp. 25-77.

Mally, Lynn, *Culture of the Future. The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990.

Mechty o mirovom rastsvete / Dreams of Universal Flowering, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Evgenija N. Petrova, St. Petersburg, Palace Editions, 2017.

Michelson, Annette, "Introduction", in *Kino-Eye. The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, pp. XV-LXI.

Milner, John, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 1983.
Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art. New Perspectives, ed. by Louise Hardiman and Nicola Kozicharow, Cambridge, Open Book Publishers, 2017.
Montani, Pietro, *Dziga Vertov*, Milan, Il Castoro, 1975, Kindle version.
Murray, Natalia, "The Role of the 'Red Commissar'. Nikolai Punin in the Rediscovery of Icons", in *Modernism and the Spiritual in Russian Art*, pp. 213-228.
Murray, Natalia, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde. The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin*, Leiden, Brill, 2012.

Nachtigäller, Roland and Gassner, Hubertus, "3x1=1 *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet*", in *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet, Kommentar und Übertragungen / Commentary and Translations*, ed. by Ilya Ehrenburg and El Lissitzky, repr., Baden, Lars Müller, 1994, pp. 7-27.
Negri, Antonio, *Political Descartes. Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project* [1970], trans. and intr. by Matteo Mandarini and Alberto Toscano, London-New York, Verso, 2006.
Nisbet, Peter, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky", in *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941*, Exhib. Catal, ed. by Peter Nisbet, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Art Museums, 1987, pp. 13-52.

Paris-Moscou 1900-1930. Arts plastiques, arts appliqués et objets utilitaires, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ministère de la Culture de l'URSS, Moscou and Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2nd ed., Paris, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1979.
Perloff, Nancy, "The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity", in *Situating El Lissitzky*, pp. 1-23.
Petrić, Vlada, *Constructivism in film. The Man with the Movie Camera. A Cinematic Analysis*, 2nd ed., Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
Pipes, Richard, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, New York, Charles Schribner's Sons, 1974.
Piretto, Gian Piero, *Il radioso avvenire. Mitologie culturali sovietiche*, Turin, Einaudi, 2001.
Pity and Terror. Picasso Path to Guernica, Exhib. Catal., ed. by T.J. Clark and Anne M. Wagner, Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2017.
Plakat epokhi revoliutsii, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ol'ga Klokova, St. Petersburg, FGBUK Gosudarstvennyi Russkii muzei, 2017.
Poggioli, Renato, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1962], trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1968.
Polanyi, Karl, *The Great Transformation*, New York-Toronto, Rinehart & Company, 1944.
Pons, Silvio, *The Global Revolution. A History of International Communism 1917-1991*, trans. by Allan Cameron, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.
Pons, Silvio, "When Socialism was Modern. Gramsci, Stalin and the Post-War Era as 'Passive Revolution'", in *Traces of Modernism*, pp. 205-217.
Pons, Silvio and Smith, Stephen A., "Introduction", in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, vol. I, *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941*, pp. 28-45.

Rabotat' I zhit': Arkhitektura konstruktivizma 1917-1937, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Polina Streltsova, Moscow, Zotov Centre, 2024.
Radical Russia. Art, Culture and Revolution, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Peter Waldron, Norwich, Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2017.

Raeff, Marc, "The Well-Ordered Police State and the Development of Modernity in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Europe. An Attempt at a Comparative Approach", *The American Historical Review*, 80 (1975), pp. 1221-1243.

Ray, Michele, *Tatlin e la cultura del Vchutemas (1885-1953/1920-1930)*, Rome, Officina, 1992.

Red Star over Russia. A Revolution in Visual Culture 1905-1955, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Matthew Gail and Natalia Sidlina, London, Tate Gallery Publishing, 2017.

Reid, Susan E., "Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror. The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition, 1935-1941", *The Russian Revue*, 60 (2001), pp. 153-184.

Rethinking Malevich. Proceedings of a conference in celebration of the 125th anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's birth, ed. by Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, London, Pinsar Press, 2007.

Revolution in Art and Innovation in Art Education, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Alexander N. Lavrentiev, Moscow, Study Industrial design at Moscow State Academy of Art and Industry (MGHPA) im. S. G. Stroganova, 2017.

Revolution. Russian Art 1917-1932, Exhib. Catal., ed. by John Milner and Natalia Murray, London, Royal Academy of Arts, 2017.

Ricciardi, Maurizio, "L'operatore teologico. Feticismo e critica della mediazione politica in Marx", in *Religione e politica. Paradigmi, Alleanze, Conflitti*, ed. by Giuditta Bissiato, Dino Galli, Giulia Longoni, Paolo Murrone, Giuseppe Nastasi, Pisa, ETS, 2022, pp. 179-199.

Ricciardi, Maurizio, "Il potere senza popolo. Soggetto collettivo e forma politica in URSS (1919-1936)", in *Il governo del popolo*. *Dalla Comune di Parigi alla Prima guerra mondiale*, ed. by Gianluca Bonaiuti, Giovanni Ruocco and Luca Scuccimarra, 4 vols., Rome, Viella, 2024, vol. III, pp. 195-217.

Ricciardi, Maurizio, "Un problema di tempi. Tradizioni, anacronismi, rivoluzioni", in *Congetture politiche. Scritti in onore di Maurizio Merlo*, ed. by Giulia Angelini, Giuditta Bissiato, Alvise Capria, Mauro Farnesi Camellone, Padua, Padova University Press, 2022, pp. 249-266.

Ricciardi, Maurizio, *Rivoluzione*, Bologna, il Mulino, 2001.

Ricciardi, Maurizio, *La società come ordine. Storia e teoria politica dei concetti sociali*, Macerata, Eum, 2015.

Rispoli, Giulia, "La tectologia di Bogdanov come nuovo paradigma fra la cibernetica e la teoria generale dei sistemi", *Epistemologia*, 36 (2013), pp. 315-330.

Romberg, Kristin, *Gan's Constructivism. Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2018.

Romberg, Kristin, "Labor Demonstrations: Aleksei Gan's Island of the Young Pioneers, Dziga Vertov's Kino-Eye, and the Rationalization of Artistic Labor", *October*, 145 (2013), pp. 38-66.

Rowell, Margit, "Constructions: The Moscow INKhUK", in *Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia. Selections from the George Costakis Collection*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Margit Rowell and Angelika Zander Rudenstine, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981, pp. 25-31.

Rowell, Margit, "Constructivist Book Design: Shaping the Proletarian Conscience", in *The Russian avant-garde book 1910-1934*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Margit Rowell, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2002, pp. 50-59.

Russian Art of the Avant-Garde [1976], trans. and ed. by John E. Bowlt, London, Thames & Hudson, 2017.

Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1930. The G. Costakis Collection, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Anna Kafetsi, 2nd ed., Athens, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, 1995.

Russian Revolution. Hope, Tragedy, Myths, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Ekaterina Rogatchevskaya, London, The British Library Publishing, 2017.
Russkaia revoliutsiia ornamenta, ed. by. Irina V. Korotkikh, Moscow, Severnyi palomnik, 2020.

Schapiro, Meyer, *Paul Cézanne*, New York, H.N. Abrams, 1952.
Scheijen, Sjeng, *The Avant-Gardists. Artists in Revolt in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union 1917-1935*, trans. by Brent Annable, London, Thames & Hudson, 2024.
Scherrer, Jutta, "Bogdanov e Lenin: il bolscevismo al bivio", in *Storia del marxismo*, 4 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1978-1982, vol. II, *Il marxismo nell'età della Seconda Internazionale*, pp. 493-546.
Scherrer, Jutta, "Ortodossia o eresia? Alla ricerca di una cultura politica del bolscevismo", in *Gor'kij-Bogdanov e la scuola di Capri. Una corrispondenza inedita (1908-1911)*, ed. by Jutta Scherrer and Daniela Steila, Rome, Carocci, 2017, pp. 17-200.
Schiera, Pierangelo, "Disciplina*,* Disciplinamento", *Annali dell'Istituto storico italo-germanico*, 18 (1992), pp. 315-334.
Schiera, Pierangelo, "Liberté & Securitas. L'emergere della Democrazia dalla degenerazione dello Stato moderno. L'Autonomia…", *Giornale di storia costituzionale* / *Journal of Constitutional History*, 46 (2023), pp. 21-66.
Schiera, Pierangelo, "Misura per Misura. Dalla global polity al buon governo e ritorno", *Scienza & Politica*, Deposito no. 1 (2015).
Schiera, Pierangelo, "Per la storia costituzionale", *Giornale di storia costituzionale/ Journal of Constitutional History*, 19 (2010), pp. 17-27.
Schulze, Winfried, "Gerhard Oestreichs Begriff 'Sozialdisziplinierung in der Frühen Neuzeit'", *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 14 (1987), pp. 265-302.
Sharp, Jane A., *Russian Modernism between East and West. Natalia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde,* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006.
Shatskikh, Alexandra S., *Black Square. Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. by Marian Schwartz, New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2012.
Shatskikh, Alexandra S., "Unovis: Epicentre of a New World", in *The Great Utopia*, pp. 53-64.
Shatskikh, Alexandra S., *Vitebsk. The Life of Art,* New Haven-London, Yale University Press, 2007.
Situating El Lissitzky. Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow, ed. by Nancy Perloff and Brian M. Reed, Los Angeles, CA, Getty Research Institute, 2013.
Smith, Stephen A., *Russia in Revolution. An Empire in Crisis, 1890 to 1928*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.
Siukonen, Jyrki, "The dissident Bird. Remarks on Tatlin's Fliegekunst", in *Tatlin. New Art for a New World*, pp. 287-290.
Spender, Stephen, *The Struggle of the Modern*, Berkeley *et al.*, University of California Press, 1963.
Spira, Andrew, *The Avant-Garde Icon. Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition,* Aldershot, Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2008.
Steinberg, Mark D., *The Russian Revolution, 1905-1921*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017.
Strada, Vittorio, *EuroRussia. Letteratura e cultura da Pietro il Grande alla Rivoluzione*, Rome-Bari, Laterza, 2005.
Strada, Vittorio, "Il primo congresso degli scrittori sovietici", in Vittorio Strada, *Tradizione e rivoluzione nella letteratura russa* [1969], Turin, Einaudi, 1980, pp. 153-202.

Tagliagambe, Silvano, “Bogdanov tra costruttivismo e scienza dell’organizzazione”, in Bogdanov, *Quattro dialoghi su scienza e filosofia*, pp. 95-137.
Taroutina, Maria, *The Icon and the Square. Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival*, University Park, PA, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019.
Tatlin, trans. by Paul Filotas, Mária Julian, Eugenia Lockwood, Doris Macknight, Eva Polgár, Colin Wright, ed. by Larissa A. Zhadova, New York, Rizzoli International Publications, 1988.
Tatlin. New Art for a New World, *International Symposium*, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Museum Tinguely, Ostfildern, Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013.
Traces of Modernism. From the First World War to Totalitarianism, ed. by Monica Cioli, Maurizio Ricciardi and Pierangelo Schiera, Frankfurt am Main-New York, Campus-Chicago University Press, 2019.
Tribe, Keith, *Constructing Economic Science. The Invention of Discipline, 1850-1950*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2022.
Trilling, Lionel, *Beyond Culture. Essays on Literature and Learning*, New York, The Viking Press, 1966.
Tucker, Robert C., *Stalin in Power. The Revolution from Above*, *1928-1941*, New York-London, Norton, 1990.
Tupitsyn, Margarita, *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina. Photography and Montage after Constructivism*, New York, International Center of Photography, 2004.
Turvey, Malcom, “Between the Organism and the Machine”, *October*, 121 (2007), pp. 5-18.

Unbuildable Tatlin?, ed. by Klaus Bollinger and Florian Medicus, Vienna-New York, Springer, 2012.

Vaingurt, Julia, *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde. Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2013.
Vakar, Irina A., “New Information Concerning the *Black Square*”, in *Celebrating Suprematism*, pp. 11-28.
Valkenier, Elizabeth, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society. The Peredvizhniki and Their Tradition*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1989.
Venturi, Franco, *Il populismo russo* [1952], 3 vols., Turin, Einaudi, 1972.

Walworth, Catherine, *Soviet Salvage. Imperial Debris, Revolutionary Re-use, and Russian Constructivism,* University Park, PA, Penn State University Press, 2017.
Werner, Gabriele, “The Curved Lines as Form, Metaphor, and Policy”, in *Unbuildable Tatlin?*, pp. 67-75.
Winkler, Heinrich August, *Weimar 1918-1933. Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie*, Munich, Beck, 1998.

Yassour, Avraham, “Lenin and Bogdanov: Protagonists in the ‘Bolshevik Center’”, *Soviet Thought*, 1 (1981), pp. 1-32.
Yurii Annenkov. Revoliutsiia za dver’yu, Exhib. Catal., ed. by Anastasiia Vinokurova, Moscow, Muzej russkogo impressionizma, 2020.

Zanini, Adelino, *Filosofia economica. Fondamenti economici, categorie politiche*, *forme giuridiche*, new ed., Bologna, DeriveApprodi, 2025.

Index of Names

Finito di stampare
nel mese di aprile 2026
da The Factory s.r.l.
Roma