

Caffeinated Avant-Garde: Futurism During the Russian Civil War 1917-1921

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Scholarship on Russian Futurism often interprets this avant-garde movement as an essentially utopian project, unrealistic in its visions of future Soviet society and naïve in its comprehension of the Bolshevik political agenda. This article questions such interpretations by demonstrating that the activities of Russian Futurists during the Civil War period represented a measured response to what was a challenging contemporary socio-political reality. By examining the development of Futurist ideology through this period, considering first-hand Futurist descriptions of dealing with the fledgling Soviet system, and recalling Slavoj Žižek's interpretations of revolution and utopianism, a different image of the Futurist project emerges. Futurism, indeed, was a movement far more aware of the intricacies of its historical period than has previously been recognised.

Vladimir Mayakovsky on How the Soviet System Works

In 1919, on 19 September, the famous Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky sat down to pen a letter — a letter that he did not want to write.¹ The problem, and the reason for Mayakovsky's chagrin, was that the letter in question was to be addressed to someone working within that most famous of amorphous voids: the Soviet bureaucracy. Though ostensibly seeking payment — after several failed first-hand attempts — for work he had been commissioned to produce, Mayakovsky's letter quickly grew into something else altogether, as he expressed his frustration and concern with the convoluted nature of the fledgling Soviet administration. His decision to describe the episode of a state commission gone awry was, in what was a common Soviet epistolary style,² not simply to lament his own situation, but also to address an issue that was of general concern to Mayakovsky and his Futurist peers: that Soviet red tape was having the effect of barbed wire. Taking aim at accusations that young Russian artists — including those working within the Commissariat of Enlightenment's Department of Visual Art — were not fulfilling state commissions, Mayakovsky wanted to illustrate through his own experience that it was in fact the byzantine bureaucratic system of the state institutions that deterred artists from involving themselves with state commissions.

¹ Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF) f. 4390, op. 14, ed. kh. 36, ll. 103, 103ob, 104. A short excerpt from this letter has been published, without identification of the source, in Vasilii A. Katanian, *Mayakovsky, Khronika zhizni i deiatel'nosti* (Moscow, 1985), pp.171-172.

² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism, Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999), pp.175-178 and "Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s", *Slavic Review*, Vol. 55, 1 (Spring 1996), pp.78-105; Lewis Siegelbaum, Andrei Sokolov, eds, *Stalinism as a Way of Life, A Narrative in Documents* (New Haven, London, 2000).

Receiving a commission inevitably meant spending more time chasing payment, and waiting on decisions from various committees, departments and officials, than producing art. Writing to the head of the Commissariat's Department of Visual Art, Mayakovsky explained that he had originally (and somewhat reluctantly) accepted a commission to design a series of posters for a governmental institution. The details of the commission and its origin are described in full: after taking a liking to some of Mayakovsky's earlier works, comrade Berzina (head of the section of People's Houses) had sent an urgent note asking Mayakovsky to design posters for her department for the celebration of the Day of Soviet Propaganda.³ Mayakovsky's negotiations over this commission illustrate his initial apprehension:

When I was asked what my conditions were, I replied that my only request was that the commission is officially confirmed, so that once the work is completed I do not have to deal with new officials, committees and sub-committees that have no understanding of the matter.

Comrade Berzina agreed to this condition and, after discussing topics for the posters, Mayakovsky was left to design and compose slogans for these pieces. Despite the fact that all the details of the commission had been confirmed, however, "subsequent events", as Mayakovsky wrote in his letter, soon took "an incredible turn".

In comrade Berzina's absence, her deputy Sumarkova received Mayakovsky's posters and issued him with a letter that he was to take to the person in charge of finances with instructions for payment. The finance official returned this letter with a note indicating that he had never previously heard of this commission, that he was not going to approve payment for it and that, in fact, he had decided to rescind the commission entirely. In the following days, Mayakovsky found himself being pinballed between Berzina's deputy, the finance office and finally the department's Presidium, which was asked to look into the case. Yet even once the Presidium, albeit reluctantly, confirmed that the artist was indeed entitled to compensation, Mayakovsky was no closer to receiving his payment. The quest continued for days until the department informed Mayakovsky that nothing could be done until the person in charge — comrade Berzina — returned from her dacha. To this resolution Mayakovsky pointed out that he was not commissioned to work for comrade Berzina, but for the section of People's Houses, that the section had accepted his work, and that he ought to be paid for it. The fact that Mayakovsky had received an official statement from the Presidium confirming that he should be paid counted for little, as Mayakovsky's conversation with a department official reveals:

‘On what basis are we supposed to pay you?’ — ‘On the basis that I executed the commission received from the department.’ — ‘We don't know anything about this commission.’ — ‘Ask comrade Sumarkova!’ — ‘We called her before the Presidium, but she did not know anything about it, she was only told about the commission before [Berzina's] departure, and she doesn't know any details about the matter.’ — ‘But I have Sumarkova's letter from which it is obvious that she has perfect knowledge of it.’ — ‘That is none of our business.’ — ‘But I already have a

³ People's Houses were established in the late nineteenth century by a number of philanthropic societies that created these institutions for workers to socialise, attend lectures, read, and improve themselves in other respects. They later served as a model for workers' clubs (Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "The Shaping of Soviet Workers' Leisure: Workers' Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s", *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No. 56, *Gendered Labor* (Fall 1999), p.79). After 1917, People's Houses became one of a number of institutions initially gathered under the umbrella of the Commissariat of Enlightenment, the governmental body in charge of the arts and education. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment. Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge, 1970), p.23.

statement (*vypiska*) from the department's Presidium with the resolution that the payment needs to be made.' — 'What kind of statement, who could have given you that?' — 'I received it officially two days ago at the department of People's Houses.' — 'They should not have given you this document, and besides, yesterday the Presidium passed another resolution regarding your case.' — 'Can I have the new statement then?' — 'You need to come during office hours.' — 'I have to catch my train and in four days I am going to Petersburg on an official assignment (*komandirovka*), here are my credentials (*mandaty*), I don't know when I'm coming back and I need to receive the payment because I only live off my income and I count on it.' To this I get a typical answer — 'This is none of our concern and please leave and don't disturb us at work, we have far more important things to do, come by in nine or ten days.' — 'Thank you!'

While it must be recognised that Futurism as a movement experienced tense relations with the Soviet cultural administration during this period,⁴ Mayakovsky's experience of "exceptional bureaucratism"⁵ does not differ significantly from the normal experience of Soviet citizens in their dealings with what was a notoriously difficult state apparatus. Indeed, Mayakovsky's ordeal is echoed in many of the anecdotes transcribed by Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov that detail his personal and professional frustration at dealing with "the Soviet system" during the 1930s. Such experiences are also at the core of numerous stories of Soviet émigrés — stories that have formed the basis for studies of "how the Soviet system worked".⁶ It is with these day-to-day realities of Soviet life in mind that we must consider the endeavours of the Futurists.

The Russian Futurist movement — a fundamental component of the Russian cultural scene from the early 1910s through until 1930 — is often, like all avant-garde movements, characterised as being little more than the utopian daydreaming of young artists who, inebriated by the euphoric atmosphere of the revolutionary experience, believed that they had been presented with a historic opportunity to build a better world through artistic endeavour.⁷ This simplistic assessment, however, belies a much more complex and interesting reality. By considering and attempting to understand what exactly was utopian about the Futurist project, and through an examination of some of the theoretical writings that appeared in Futurist publications during the Civil War period, it becomes apparent that much of the Futurist programme was in fact a sensible and measured response to Soviet reality.

⁴ See Bengt Jangfeldt, "Russian Futurism 1917-1919" in Nils Åke Nilsson, ed., *Art, Society, Revolution, Russia 1917-1921* (Stockholm, 1979), pp.106-137. In his detailed study of the art movements and cultural institutions during the period of the Revolution and Civil War, Andrei Krusanov notes that, despite being in conflict with some state institutions, Futurists were in 1919 and 1920 still involved with state projects. See Andrei V. Krusanov, *Ruskii avangard 1907-1932* (Istoricheskii obzor), v 3 t.; T. 2: *Futuristicheskaia revoliutsia, (1917-1921)*, Kn. 1, (Moscow, 2003), pp.38-85.

⁵ *sluchai iskliuchitel'nogo biurokratizma* (GARF f. 4390, op. 14, ed. kh. 36, l. 104).

⁶ Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov, *Bitter Waters, Life and Work in Stalin's Russia* (Boulder, Colorado, 1997); Raymond A. Bauer, Alex Inkeles, Clyde Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works – Cultural, Psychological and Social Themes* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1956); Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*.

⁷ The first Russian Futurist manifesto was published in 1912 (Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca, 1988), p.11). Futurism as an idea went through several metamorphoses, with the figure of Vladimir Mayakovsky connecting all the various phases together; his suicide in 1930 signalled the movement's symbolic end. Officially, however, the end of Futurism (and all other movements) came in 1932 with the State resolution "On the Reconstruction of Literary-Artistic Organizations", which centralised artistic practice and led to sanctioning of Socialist Realism as the only official style (The resolution was passed by Ts.K. V.K.P.(b) on 23 April 1932; it was published in *Pravda* the following day: "O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii", *Pravda*, 24 April 1932, p.1).

This article examines the creation of a theoretical base for artistic production in Russia that would be capable of supporting the emerging Communist society. Beginning with a description of the original Italian Futurist movement and the adaptation of its ideas in Russia, focus then shifts to the key moment when, amid a raging Civil War, progressive artists and critics merged the original Futurist concepts with Marxist principles. As a result of this union, the Futurist programme took on a two-pronged strategy. Progressive artists needed to establish a new creative practice, both to forge a new Communist environment (and subsequently a Communist consciousness), and to protect the future of the Bolshevik project by annihilating old cultural formats, which were representative of an obsolete mentality. Mayakovsky's letter thus serves as a paradigm of this Futurist strategy. His pen was employed simultaneously as both a tool for constructing a new Soviet reality and a sword for attacking the persevering old mentality.

This examination of Futurist ideology serves to augment the thesis that while avant-garde movements are often perceived as phenomena that operate in a vacuum (and outside the quotidian), the post-1917 nature of Russian Futurism was a direct function of its conscious engagement with the demands of everyday reality. Yet the "utopian" epithet remains — and it is by considering the related, yet distinct scholarly domains of history and art history that we can see just how the Futurist movement unjustly earned this reputation. In this process Mayakovsky's letter is again of great contextual value, as it shines new light on discussions of avant-garde art, where labels such as "utopian" or "fantastical" immediately fence off the Futurist project from the domain of historical reality. By placing Futurist artists back in their context, this letter is a reminder that — just like other Soviet citizens — Futurist artists lived and worked within challenging social and political conditions, and while certainly forward-looking, they were not purblind when it came to acknowledging these difficulties. It was this reality that informed their programme, a fact that ultimately calls into question whether "utopian" is a legitimate epithet for Futurism.

From Italian Piazzas to Bolshevik Headquarters

Futurism is widely recognised as the first European avant-garde movement.⁸ Originally conceived by Italian *homme de lettres* Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Futurism caused a stir within European intellectual circles upon its public debut. In his *Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* — which appeared on the front page of popular French daily *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909 — Marinetti called for the destruction of all historical heritage, including museums, libraries and academies of any kind.⁹ The Futurist call for a new start, a *tabula rasa* on which a new industrial civilisation could grow, required a cleansing of the old that, in Marinetti's estimation, could only be effectively achieved via the destructive vehicle of war. Characterised by *modernolatria* (idolatry of the machine age), a love of speed and the cacophony of modern life, Futurism was a militant, anarchical, anti-traditional, anti-canonical — and extremely anti-bourgeois movement.¹⁰ For his desire to awaken Italy (and indeed, all of Europe) from its

⁸ Alberto Schiavo, ed., *Futurismo e Fascismo* (Rome, 1981), p.10; Anne Bowler, "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism", *Theory and Society*, Vol. 20, 6 (December 1991), p.763.

⁹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (Boston, 2001), pp.19-24.

¹⁰ Sidney Monas, "Introductory Essay: Nikolay Punin and Russian Futurism" in Sidney Monas, Jennifer Greene Krupala, eds, *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin 1904-1953* (Austin, 1999), p.xi.

antiquarian slumber and his restless promotion of the Futurist cause, Marinetti earned himself the eloquent moniker of “the Caffeine of Europe”.¹¹

Within weeks of the publication of the Futurist Manifesto, the Russian public learned of this new European phenomenon — and in Russia Futurist ideas quickly took root in what was fertile soil. One of the central postulates of Italian Futurism was to reformat the entire experience of human existence, and through what was later termed a “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe”, these young avant-gardists sought to transform mankind (both physiologically and psychologically) and thereby create a new person — a person ready to embrace the industrial and technological era ahead.¹² In Russia, this principle would drive the development of Futurism. Yet in the process of appropriating the Italian Futurist concepts, Russian intellectuals became heavily involved in interpreting and ultimately transforming the original ideas. As a result, Russian Futurism emerged as a cultural entity in its own right.¹³ During the revolutionary period, the basic premises of Futurism were systematically fused with the tenets of Marxist ideology, as Russia’s Futurists sought to channel the anarchical energy of Italian Futurism into a constructive strategy for Communist life-building.

While the atmosphere of pre-revolutionary Russia permitted Futurists scant opportunity to launch this general overhaul of humanity, the Revolutions of 1917 presented a unique historic opportunity for realising the very *tabula rasa* that the Italian Futurists had dreamed of. The Bolshevik Revolution sought to strip Russia of all traditional political, economic and social structures in order to make room for the creation of a completely new, experimental, future-bound society. Russian Futurists understood that this kind of political atmosphere had to be coupled with the right cultural production if the seed of revolution was to grow into a future Communist society.

It would take several years of ferocious Civil War for the social revolution to secure victory. The process of developing and establishing a new social mindset, however, would prove to be an even more challenging feat. Futurists quickly recognised that the success of the Communist project depended not only upon the development of new political and social structures but also — and perhaps more dramatically — on the mental readiness of the Russian people to persevere in the process of building this new society after the revolutionary euphoria had been supplanted by the mundane affairs of everyday life. The challenge was to preserve this revolutionary momentum through what has been recently described as the revolutionary “morning after”.¹⁴ Futurists responded to this challenge by mounting a vast cultural project aimed at taking charge of the domain of arts and culture, and thereby seizing control of those forces that shape the human mind and its surroundings.

¹¹ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Marinetti e il futurismo* (Rome-Milan, 1929), p.23.

¹² Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence, 1996), p.47.

¹³ On the formation of Russian Futurism see Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley, 1968); Cesare De Michelis, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia, 1909-1929* (Bari, 1973); Giovanni Lista, “Futurisme et cubo-futurisme”, *Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne*, No. 5 (September 1980), pp.456-495; Susan P. Compton “Italian Futurism and Russia”, *Art Journal*, Vol. 41, 4 (1981), pp.343-348; Vladimir Pavlovič Lapšin, *Marinetti e la Russia, Dalla storia delle relazioni letterarie e artistiche negli anni dieci del XX secolo* (Milan, 2008).

¹⁴ Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London, 2009), p.266.

An examination of Futurist articles carried in newspapers published by the Commissariat of Enlightenment's Department of Visual Arts¹⁵ between 1918 and 1921 provides an insight into the Futurist method of attempting to create a Communist culture and art by applying Futurist concepts to Marx's economic and political teachings. In considering these methods, it is useful to focus on two elements that became central to the Futurist programme: artistic production as an expression of materialism (as opposed to the art of past eras, which was focused on representing ideas), and the campaign to establish an ideological definition of the cultural field. The former would result in forging a new space and mentality for the new society; the latter was a strategic move aimed at protecting the Bolshevik revolution.

Material Materiel

In establishing its own project, Russian Futurism redefined the field of artistic production, translating the original Futurist concepts into the language of Marxist theory, and demonstrating its compatibility with the dominant political and philosophical principles. Artistic creation could no longer merely represent ideas: art needed to transcend into the production of socially relevant things. This revolutionary concept envisaged artists engaging in the creation of the objects and surroundings of everyday life. Instead of an ethereal world of ideas and representations of *fête galante* or reclining nudes, Futurist artists worked to produce real objects that had tangible value in daily life. Traditional aristocratic and bourgeois artistic formats (such as painting or sculpture) were declared obsolete in the proletarian society; instead, artists worked in factories and workshops, designing objects and spaces that would provide for improved living conditions. New living spaces; new practical objects; new, more functional forms of clothing; new powerful forms of mass communication — these were the primary tasks of the Soviet artist.¹⁶

This drive toward directly involving artists in the creation of reality was translated into Marxist terminology by Osip Brik, one of the leading Futurist theoreticians and a frequent contributor to the *Iskusstvo kommuny* newspaper.¹⁷ Brik formulated the establishment of artistic production as material culture within the framework of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, echoing the famous aphorism “all that is solid melts into air”.¹⁸ “The bourgeoisie transformed flesh into spirit”, wrote Brik in the first issue of *Iskusstvo kommuny* published in December 1918: “It turned matter into a gaseous state. Instead of solids — ideological evaporations. The proletariat re-establishes flesh, matter, solids in its right. For the proletariat an idea is nothing if it is not realised, if it is not on the way to being realised.”¹⁹ According to Brik, a proletarian artist created

¹⁵ There were four journals produced by the Commissariat of Enlightenment's Department of Visual Arts in this period: *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, *Iskusstvo*, *Iskusstvo kommuny* and *IZO: Vestnik Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv N.K.P.* This article primarily draws upon material from the journal *Iskusstvo kommuny* (*Art of the commune*; Petrograd, 7 December 1918 – 13 April 1919, nineteen issues). On these publications see Christina Lodder, “The Press for a New Art in Russia 1917-1921” in Virginia Hagemstein Marquardt, ed., *Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940* (Gainesville, 1997), pp.63-99.

¹⁶ “Miting ob iskusstve”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 4 (29 December 1918), pp.2-3.

¹⁷ On the role of Osip Brik see Natasha Kurchanova, “Osip Brik and the Politics of the Avant-Garde”, *October*, No. 134 (Fall 2010), pp.52-73.

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party” in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York, 1978), p.476.

¹⁹ O.M. Brik, “Drenazh iskusstvu”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 1 (7 December 1918), p.1.

solid objects of everyday significance, not representations of hermetic concepts or mimeses of the natural world.

The capability of art to create the material world was then linked by Futurist theoreticians to the Marxist definition of forces responsible for shaping social being. In a number of articles published in the final issues of *Iskusstvo kommuniy* in April 1919,²⁰ Nikolai Punin — deemed to be “the most respected voice of Russian Futurism”²¹ — argued that art had the capacity to be a socially formative force of the same order as other major social determinants. Punin evoked Marx’s famous words: “It is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness”.²² The terminology contained within the Russian translation of Marx’s dictum offers a profound illustration of the Futurist perception of art as a driving force of positive social change. In Russian translation, Marx’s statement makes use of the word *bytie*, described as the *dynamic creative force of life*.²³ Marx’s words are thus translated to read that: “it is not consciousness that determines *bytie*, but *bytie* that determines consciousness”.²⁴ In order to comprehend this evasive term *bytie*, it is important to recognise that the Russian intellectual tradition put this term in conjunction with its polar opposite — *byt* — to describe the two conflicting forces of life. While *byt* represents a mundane routine, *bytie* denotes a creative force, the continual quest for human improvement.²⁵ Artistic production, as an act of perpetual creation, is *bytie*. Furthermore, it is a socially-oriented creation: through the use of its numerous tools and methods, art is capable of shaping the social environment. By providing a new, modern setting for — and the objects of — quotidian life, art was consequently able to engender a new consciousness. By mounting his argument in this manner, Punin would recast artistic production as a pivotal component of the social base within the Communist structure.

This fusion of Futurism and Marxism — modern artistic production fortified with the state ideology of Communist life-building — would become a fundamental principle for the entire avant-garde movement in Russia, in both the visual and literary realms. Indeed, some of the most renowned avant-garde projects, such as the campaigns designed by Mayakovsky and Aleksandr Rodchenko to advertise state enterprises,²⁶ or the architectural blueprints drafted by Konstantin Mel’nikov and the Vesnin brothers for workers’ clubs (spaces created with the intention of promoting development of the proletarian mentality),²⁷ were born of this very same principle. As such, it is no surprise that the term Futurism has long been understood as coterminous

²⁰ N. Punin, “Kommunizm i futurizm”, *Iskusstvo kommuniy*, No. 17 (30 March 1919), pp. 2-3; N. P., “O forme i soderzhanii”, *Iskusstvo kommuniy*, No. 18 (6 April 1919), p.1.

²¹ Monas, “Introductory Essay”, p.xi.

²² Karl Marx, “Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*” in Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p.4; discussed by Punin in N.P., “O forme i soderzhanii”.

²³ For Punin’s definition of *bytie* see N. P., “O forme i soderzhanii”.

²⁴ *Ne bytie opredeliaetsia soznaniem a soznanie – bytiem*.

²⁵ For explanation of *byt* and *bytie* see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places, Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994), p.29. For comment on *byt* and *bytie* with regard to Futurism see also Sergei Tret’iakov, “Otkuda i kuda? (perspektivy futurizma)”, *LEF*, No. 1, 1923, pp.200-201.

²⁶ Randi Cox, “*NEP Without Nepmen!*, Soviet Advertising and the Transition to Socialism” in Christina Kiaer, Eric Naiman, eds., *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia, Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, 2006), pp.133-134; Christina Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions, The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005), pp.143-196.

²⁷ Siegelbaum, “The Shaping of Soviet Workers’ Leisure”, pp.81-84.

with the Russian avant-garde in general.²⁸ While Marx's theory was a catalyst for the Futurist concept of how art should be produced, this theory was also seminal in explaining why this transition was critically important if the revolutionary project was to succeed.

Ideological Stratagem

Their avant-garde tendencies notwithstanding, Futurists understood that the implementation of their artistic theory within the new society — insofar as it would require a radical and complete departure from all known cultural canons — would be a difficult endeavour. Just as the Red Army had simultaneously fought against the forces of the old system and against those with competing ideological and political programmes of revolution, Futurists were aware of the need to take on omnipresent and persistent cultural traditions while simultaneously tackling definitions of proletarian culture that did not accord with their own revolutionary mentality. On the first battlefield, Futurists campaigned against artists who regarded the proletariat simply as a new patron — artists who wished to continue using old forms, retouched to represent the proletarian world. In the hands of these artists of the old mentality, a figure of a victorious St. George was refurbished with the adequate paraphernalia to represent a worker, and public celebrations of Bolshevik victories very closely resembled the traditional Easter procession (albeit with the portraits of Bolshevik leaders being paraded instead of religious icons), while melodic conventions of liturgical music and traditional folk songs were revamped into agitational and antireligious pieces.²⁹ Futurists were unrelenting in their criticism of these artists, who simply reprogrammed their established artistic practices to serve the new cause.

At the same time, Futurists campaigned heavily against the emergence of “proletarians’ art”, which sought to do away completely with professional artists, whether traditional or revolutionary, and dictated that any text or work of art made by a worker or a peasant automatically gained the status of proletarian art.³⁰ The Futurists opposed amateurism, believing that only work of a high standard was befitting of the future Communist society. They were also wary of the tendency of amateur artists to use the old, easily recognisable forms of the past. Amateur artistic production was accordingly regarded as conceptually passé and utterly incongruent with the mentality of the Bolshevik revolution, a revolution that strove toward the birth of a new world.³¹

²⁸ While Futurism may represent only one facet of the entire Russian avant-garde movement, its concepts forged at the dawn of the avant-garde period were profoundly influential and as such its principles are present in later avant-garde phenomena such as Constructivism and Production art, as well as in the literary domain. The terminology is complicated by the fact that contemporaries and later scholars employed the term ‘Futurist’ to denote all avant-garde (or leftist) tendencies in visual and literary arts. (See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, London, 1983), p.48). In this article the term “Futurism” is employed in its narrow meaning, as a movement with a set of progressive intellectual concepts that originated in Italy and was adopted in Russia.

²⁹ Victoria E. Bonnell, “The Iconography of the Worker in Soviet Political Art” in Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet, Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca, 1994), p.356; James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920* (Berkeley, 1993), pp.79-80; Amy Nelson, *Music for the Revolution, Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia* (University Park, PA, 2004), p.26.

³⁰ On development of proletarian art see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future, The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990).

³¹ The key article that considered problems with the concepts of “art for the proletariat” and “proletarians’ art” was penned by Osip Brik: O.M. Brik, “Khudozhnik proletarii”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 2 (5 December 1918), p.1.

In voicing their concerns, however, Futurists did far more than simply express a desire for redefinition of the artistic profession and its tasks. A central tenet of Futurist logic was the concern that a recasting of old artistic forms that served the bourgeois world inevitably led to an adaptation of the mindset, logic and ideology of the world these forms used to depict — and therefore opened a path for these old systems of thinking to penetrate and endanger the Communist cause. The need for a surgical removal of past forms from the process of building the Communist future was driven not just by the fact that avant-garde artists wanted to build the artistic and cultural domain *ex nihilo*, but more pertinently by the fear that these old forms represented an ideological Trojan horse: with old forms, old content had an avenue by which to sneak in. Artist Natan Al'tman in a contribution to *Iskusstvo kommuny* explains: “This art that represents the proletariat is as much of a proletarian art, as a member of Black Hundreds³² with a Communist party membership card is a Communist”.³³ These words become all the more profound when we recall Lenin’s lament — several years later — at the inefficiency of the Soviet administration. In Lenin’s view, this inefficiency was caused by the fact that the old bureaucratic apparatus was simply re-cast as new; that instead of reconstructing it radically, Communists only added a superficial new coat of paint while underneath the old, obstinate administrative mentality persisted.³⁴

Futurist theoreticians harbored the general concern that the socialist revolution would be compromised through ideologically less defined domains such as science and the arts. Futurists cautioned that victory would not “be brought solely by [...] bayonets”, but would be equally dependent upon the firmness and purity of the revolutionary consciousness, as “art, the same as science, more than anything affects our consciousness even when we do not notice it”.³⁵ It was therefore with a sense of great urgency that they sought to warn the proletariat that the use of old artistic forms was a perilous practice; that without a radical restructuring of the cultural field, the entire revolution would be endangered. In one of his famous inflammatory articles for *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Brik voiced this exact concern calling for the proletariat to extend its political radicalism to the cultural domain:

It is strange to see when a merciless terrorist, who is ready to kill hundreds of White guards and hostages, who is prepared to eradicate entire villages and cities in the name of Communist victory; when this ruthless revolutionary who knows no compassion, with white foam coming from his mouth, protects Pushkin, Raphael, Michelangelo and other *holy fathers* of art from *blasphemous* Futurists.³⁶

Brik further tied his argument to Marx’s writing from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just when they seem engaged with revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that

³² Black Hundreds was an ultra-nationalist group that formed in Russia in 1905. It was loyal to the Tsar and the Orthodox Church and held extreme reactionary, xenophobic and anti-Semitic views.

³³ Natan Al'tman, “Futurizm i proletarskoe iskusstvo”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 2 (15 December 1918), p.2.

³⁴ Lenin, “Kak nam reorganizovat' Rabkrin”, *Pravda*, 25 January 1923, p.1.

³⁵ Proclamation by the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Department of Visual Arts, “Otdel Iskusstva Komissariata Prosveshcheniia, K rabochim i khudozhnikam”, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI) f. 665, op. 1, ed. kh. 3 [1918-1919], l. 8.

³⁶ O.M. Brik, “Utselevshii bog”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 4 (29 December 1918), p.2; This article has been translated into English by Natasha Kurchanova in “Osip Brik: Selected Criticism, 1915-1929”, *October*, No. 134 (Fall 2010), pp.80-82.

has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.³⁷

Futurists recognised the paradoxical thread within a revolutionary process where, while aiming to destroy the past and create the future anew, the very legitimacy of a revolution depended upon the establishment of a link with some past model. Accordingly, they took aim at this paradox within the cultural domain, in line with a strategy perhaps best described in Marx's words from the aforementioned essay: "[...] a beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he has assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new".³⁸

More intimately than any other revolutionary group, Russian Futurists were acutely aware of the dangers posed by the powerful bourgeois culture — understandably, as they were themselves offspring of Italian Futurism, a movement that demonstrated the power of bourgeois culture for self-criticism and self-renovation. When Italian Futurism launched its irreverent attack on every aspect of society — a society that had become comfortable in its own set of boundaries and as a consequence had stagnated — the hope was that destruction would rejuvenate their world. As such, Italian Futurism represented an attempt by the most advanced segment of the bourgeoisie to eliminate its own impotence, and to infuse new energy into its listless culture. It is therefore little wonder that the writings of Karl Marx, which described the nature of the bourgeois class as innovative, audacious and in possession of visionary entrepreneurship, and as a class that had historically been central to any revolutionary cause³⁹ reverberated strongly with Russian Futurists — for these words affirmed their fears that bourgeois culture, like bourgeois politics and economics, was a powerful enemy.

The Futurists, then, were not simply wild rebels who naïvely championed an idealistic cause, and Futurism was no riot on an empty street. Rather, their project represented a sound strategic effort to conceptualise a form of artistic production that would satisfy the social and ideological demands of contemporary society. As their writings and theoretical musings demonstrate, Russian Futurists sought to use the cultural domain both as a protection against the surreptitious influence of the bourgeois mentality, and for creating their own Communist consciousness — without which, they believed, revolution would not be sustainable in the long run. As such, the Futurist attempt to mobilise the cultural domain in order to secure Bolshevik victory and a Communist future — coming as it did at a time when the Red Army was still fighting the remains of the old tsarist army — was clearly more shrewd than eccentric.

This analysis of Russian Futurism as an integral component of the revolutionary process resonates with recent historical writings on the role of the cultural domain in the formative stages of Soviet governance. In his study on higher education during the early Soviet period, Michael David-Fox notes that the start of the 1920s was a time when the revolutionary project was introduced into the "third" — the cultural — front. This new battlefield, David-Fox argues, "was widely proclaimed the next locus of

³⁷ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York, 1963), p.15.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

³⁹ Marx and Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party", pp.469-500.

revolutionary activity in the wake of Bolshevik victories on the first two ‘fronts’, the Party’s military and political struggles in the civil war”.⁴⁰ Comprised of the domains of culture, science, education and ideology, this new front was focused upon remodeling the entirety of human life, and upon forging a “New Man”.⁴¹ Similarly, Sheila Fitzpatrick notes in her work on social identity during the period of New Economic Policy (1921-1928) that, for Bolsheviks, “proletarian” was more than simply a synonym for a member of the working class: a real proletarian was someone who had *proletarian consciousness*.⁴² Clearly, the cultural sphere was to be *fons et origo* of the new Communist consciousness; as such the “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” represented a sound strategy well before the very same logic became a crucial component of official Soviet policy. Why then does the notion that Futurism was utopian persist?

Reconsidering Utopia

In his seminal essay “The Politics of the Avant-Garde”, Paul Wood gives a comprehensive overview of art history scholarship on Russian and Soviet avant-garde art, exploring the discipline’s predilection for the “utopian” designation. As Wood argues, art historians systematically deracinated the Russian avant-garde from its historical context and linked it, through aesthetic comparison, with other modern movements elsewhere. Such clean, a-historical modernism was furthermore deemed “utopian” (as a synonym for “oblivious”) to indicate that while avant-gardists openly supported the Bolshevik cause, they were in fact unaware of its true nature.⁴³ It is noteworthy that these evaluations often cite the open hostility of many Bolshevik leaders regarding modernist projects — and, in particular, Lenin’s well-known disdain for Futurists’ works — as incontestable proof that the avant-garde in general misunderstood the prevailing political conditions. Certainly, Lenin’s call for the recruitment of “trustworthy anti-Futurists”,⁴⁴ who would be capable of countering (and defeating) Futurist efforts left no doubt as to what his sentiments toward the group were. Yet it does not follow that Lenin’s distaste for their programme meant that Futurists were incapable of understanding their political reality, and constructing an ideologically sound strategy in response. Nevertheless, there has undoubtedly existed a tendency by scholars of art history to apply the label of “utopian” to the Russian avant-garde in general (and Futurism in particular), thereby securing its exceptional artistic achievements against any charge of participation in the Bolshevik project — a project that, of course, stands as one of the history’s bloodiest episodes. As a result, the avant-garde movement has been characterised as ethereal and otherworldly; its lofty artistic ideals ultimately pulverised between cogs of heavy political machinery.

Such a “severance” approach in studies of Russian avant-garde recalls Slavoj Žižek’s concept of a “decaffeinated revolution”. In his work *In Defense of Lost Causes*,

⁴⁰ Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind, Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca, 1997), p.2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴² Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, Richard Stites, eds., *Russia in the Era of NEP, Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington, 1991), p.15.

⁴³ Paul Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde”, *The Great Utopia, The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, Exhibition catalogue, (New York, 1992), pp.1-21.

⁴⁴ Lenin’s note written in 1921 to M.N. Pokrovskii, Deputy People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, V. I. Lenin, *O literature i iskusstve* (Moscow, 1986), pp.330-331.

Žižek highlights how liberal-democratic critics dissociate terror from revolutionary projects, “throwing out the dirty water of terror, while retaining the pure baby of authentic socialist democracy”.⁴⁵ Žižek argues that terror comes as an organic part of any revolutionary upheaval, and that revolutionary ideas and causes cannot be separated from the aggressiveness with which they are realised. In considering and evaluating the French Revolution, the October Revolution, Stalinist and Maoist regimes and the events of May 1968, Žižek asserts that “[...] what the sensitive liberals want is a decaffeinated revolution, or a revolution which does not smell of a revolution”.⁴⁶ Certainly, whether “sensitive liberals” or not, art historians have often exhibited a tendency to disregard the political profile of their studied subjects. While the artistic achievements of the Russian avant-garde may be held aloft as modern and innovative, the call for merciless and unconditional annihilation of the past is left alone, as are their vitriolic criticisms of their contemporary adversaries.

A wave of “revisionist” studies would challenge this “severance” approach by examining more closely the link between avant-garde art and its historical context, but these equally bestowed no historical agency to the avant-garde.⁴⁷ It would be the works by scholars such as Boris Groys and Igor Golomstock, facilitated by the emerging body of work on the culture of the Stalinist period, that reconsidered the supposed political innocence of the avant-garde, and in fact drew direct connections between avant-garde concepts and Stalin’s creation of Socialist Realism.⁴⁸ Indeed, Groys’ study *The Total Art of Stalinism* stands as a watershed in this scholarship and a point of reference for any future consideration of the avant-garde. He asserted that the postulates of the avant-garde did not disappear entirely from the stage of history, but rather that the ideas of creating a total environment for Communist society were in fact built into Stalin’s Socialist Realist aesthetic paradigm, albeit not entirely in the way that its proponents had hoped.⁴⁹ Significant within this assessment is the positioning of the avant-garde not as naïve and easily misled, but as a fully conscious participant in the contemporary socio-political reality. Groys further developed this argument in his article “On the Ethics of the Avant-Garde”, asserting that the avant-garde possessed such an acute understanding of its political reality that the movement must bear historical and moral responsibility for its political aspirations.⁵⁰

Groys’ assertions have not, however, ever enjoyed universal embrace. Some Western scholars have characterised Groys’ proposition as a radical “unitary narrative”⁵¹ that seeks to enforce “rhetorical violence on intellectual dialogue”.⁵² Others might reluctantly admit that there is “unhappy plausibility to this argument”, while highlighting the disappearance of a number of these artists in Stalin’s Terror, implying absolution for any sins that they may have committed.⁵³ Whatever the reaction, however, it must be acknowledged that Groys has certainly — and irrevocably —

⁴⁵ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.158.

⁴⁷ Wood, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde”, pp.4-5.

⁴⁸ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism, Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1992); Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People’s Republic of China*, (London, 1990).

⁴⁹ Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, p.9.

⁵⁰ Boris Groys, “On the Ethics of the Avant-Garde”, *Art in America*, Vol. 81, 5 (1993), pp.110-113.

⁵¹ Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions*, p.27.

⁵² Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects”, *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer 1997), p.118.

⁵³ Monas, “Introductory Essay”, p.xxvi.

shifted the way we perceive the political profile of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde. He has given this discussion a “shot of caffeine”, and brought into question the perpetual characterisation of the Russian avant-garde as indiscriminately utopian.

Interestingly, if we cross from the art history and cultural studies of the early Soviet period into history scholarship, the reading of Futurism takes on a different hue. Historians of the Soviet period often cite Futurism as an exemplar of the omnipresent revolutionary fervour that also infected progressive artists and theoreticians alike, and as such Futurism is again often referred to as utopian. This characterisation by historians, however, represents a significantly different contextual description, for the simple fact that many historians have long argued that the entire Russian Revolution and Communist project carried a certain air of utopianism.⁵⁴ In her study *The Russian Revolution*, Fitzpatrick notes that:

There was a wildly impractical and utopian streak in a great deal of Bolshevik thinking during the Civil War. No doubt all successful revolutions have this characteristic: the revolutionaries must always be driven by enthusiasm and irrational hope, since they would otherwise make the common-sense judgement that the risks and costs of revolution outweigh the possible benefit.⁵⁵

The entire project of the Russian Revolution — and the surreal atmosphere of the postrevolutionary years — was utopian and irrational, and full of over-ambitious plans and an utter disregard for the conservative approach. Within this farrago, Futurism was no particular standout: against all theoretical odds, Socialist revolution in Russia did occur, and it was from this very real platform that Futurism launched its project for a total overhaul of human existence. Fitzpatrick also asserts that revolutionary thinking “was bold and excitingly modern as Futurist art”, and that the Civil War was a time when intellectual and cultural experimentation flourished.⁵⁶ This assessment demonstrates that the Revolution and the Civil War promoted the formation of the wildest of ideas. After a proletarian revolution had taken place in a predominantly peasant country, the gates to the impossible were wide open.

What emerges from historians’ reading of this period is essentially a more adequate approach to interpreting the Russian Futurist project — if there is a utopian component within the Futurist project, it is a legacy of the larger historical utopianism of Communism, rather than some Sisyphean battle between a humanist avant-garde and the brutal Soviet political system. Futurism, that is, was a product of its time. If the entire Communist era is to be termed utopian, then Futurism was utopian too. By this assessment, the argument where Futurism was utopian because it lived in its own bubble and was incompatible with the Soviet reality is essentially untenable.

There is, however, an interpretation of utopianism that does not contradict — but in fact illuminates — the true nature of the Futurist cause. In his discussion on contemporary issues, Žižek proposes a different definition of utopia:

The true utopia is when the situation is so without issue, without a way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible, that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space.

⁵⁴ See Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture, Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution* (Bloomington, 1985); Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams, Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989).

⁵⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 2008), p.84.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.84-87. A significant contributor to this discussion is also James C. McClelland, “Utopianism versus Revolutionary Heroism in Bolshevik Policy: The Proletarian Culture Debate”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 39, 3 (September 1980), pp.403-425.

Utopia is not a kind of free imagination, utopia is a matter of innermost urgency — you are forced to imagine it as the only way out.⁵⁷

This is *in nuce* the definition of the entire Futurist project. Their reinvention of the cultural domain was not free imagination; it was precisely because post-revolutionary society, having lost all the coordinates of the possible in the revolutionary process, had to invent a new space that the Futurist project must be read as a phenomenon that, just like the social, political and military projects at this period, was born out of the sheer need for survival. After all, creating a new space for Communism would not have been possible if new coordinates were not established to support it.

By creating posters that the Commissariat's section of People's Houses would use to celebrate the Day of Soviet Propaganda, Mayakovsky helped to set the coordinates of the new Communist reality. With his written complaint he simultaneously attacked a potent adversary looming over this project: the persistent mores of yesteryear. In composing his letter Mayakovsky produced coincidentally a document that embodied both the Futurist project and the reality of the historic moment in which the Soviet system was slowly and obstinately coming into existence. In recent years scholarship on the Russian avant-garde has interpreted this phenomenon through closer readings of its connection with the socio-political fibre; this appraisal has seen a move away from the oversimplified utopian paradigm, particularly in studies concerned with avant-garde projects born within the atmosphere created by the New Economic Policy.⁵⁸ Aligned with this logic, this article has demonstrated that as early as the Civil War period the stalwarts of Futurism were intent on providing solutions for the contemporary socio-political reality. By skillfully merging Futurist ideals with Marxist teaching, Russian Futurists created a conceptual platform from which later attempts at establishing a total union between art and society and the creation of a Communist New Man would be launched. From a utopian haze created by the past scholarship, Futurism thus emerges as a conscious and driven component of the ideological force that shaped Russia's twentieth century.

⁵⁷ The quote is taken from a lecture Slavoj Žižek delivered at the University of Buenos Aires, recorded in the documentary film *Žižek!* (Astra Taylor, 2005).

⁵⁸ Maria Gough, *Artist as Producer, Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley, 2005); Kiaer, *Imagine no Possessions*.