

**BETWEEN HISTORY AND THE PAST: (POST-)SOVIET ART OF
RE-WRITING**

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It is completely legitimate to inquire into the dynamics of the cultural process in twentieth-century Russia, yet in the very posing of this question there lurks a contradiction: from the traditional point of view, an understanding of “process” is inextricably linked with an understanding of “development.” But we often find ourselves in situations where this is clearly not the case: we see before us not development, but instead a continuous and unexpected “renewal” of the cultural landscape. Indeed, this “renewal” is not at all concerned with novelty or newness, but instead with a return to old forms. The process is reminiscent of a lizard re-growing its tail. In a similar fashion, revolutionary culture “grew back” in place of the tradition swept away by the revolution. Socialist Realism “grew back” in place of the avant-garde, and post-modernism grew where Socialist Realism once stood; throughout the lizard remains the same. The unceasing desire to view the process as one of development is the result of a failure to understand this system of renewal, as critics have attempted to write the “Soviet and Post-Soviet Case” into the traditional system of understanding. For example, it has been said that the avant-garde “developed into” Socialist Realism (Groys), while others maintain that socialist realism is itself postmodernism (Epstein).

Soviet and post-Soviet history may be conceptualized as a process of ceaseless cultural erasing and re-writing. Both the continuity and the dissimilarity among the stages of Soviet history stem, not so much from a simple reexamination of “cultural heritage,” but from its endless erasing and re-writing. Whether it is the erasing or the re-writing that constitutes the dominant approach at given moment determines the strategy for constructing the past and, consequently, imagining the future, including the production

(and over-production) of social expectations, the creation of what is commonly called "the historical perspective," the whole teleology of social development, and the like.

In the revolutionary culture, for example, the mechanism of re-writing was practically absent. The culture of this period was almost exclusively absorbed by the tasks of erasing the past and creating (emphatically not re-creating) a new world. By contrast, under Stalin the mechanism of re-writing predominated. What was being re-written was primarily the revolution while pre-revolutionary culture functioned as a sort of a warehouse of "tradition" which one could use selectively in order to neutralize particular aspects of revolutionary utopianism. And yet, despite this difference, both during the revolutionary period and under Stalin, the party-state was involved in similar, essentially, utopian projects. More specifically, the culture of the avant-garde, so typical of the revolutionary period and so much oriented toward the "masses," came into conflict with the cultural demands of these same masses and, ultimately, remained "unclaimed" by them, rejected by its primary addressee. The Stalinist aesthetic program involved not only the rejection, or the "overcoming" of the avant-garde and modernism in general, but an attempt to "leap out" of history by re-writing a pre-modernist aesthetic as if modernism had not existed at all.

These two models of cultural construction (revolutionary and Stalinist) combined a comprehensive set of strategies for dealing with the past. And yet, in the post-Stalin period, these strategies progressively lost their effectiveness. As much as the party-state tried, it failed to find a successful combination of re-writing and erasure to hold Soviet culture together: neither the so-called "Thaw" culture, nor Brezhnev's "stagnation" cultural policy, nor the grand compromise of "perestroika" could manage the cultural crisis. Each of these three attempts to carry out modernization and at the same time to

recoup the past have retained both the object of re-writing and re-writing as the dominant strategy for dealing with the past.

A radically new situation has emerged in post-Soviet culture. The cultural trauma of Stalinism has been resolved, history once again began anew. The strategy for dealing with the past has taken the form of a particular kind of nostalgia which is free from the old reflexive actions. By contrast with the "revolutionary situation" of 1917, the collapse of the Soviet system, disintegration of the USSR and the "world socialist system" have rendered the strategies of erasure and re-writing practically useless. In literature and the arts, re-writing of Soviet history is no longer at the top of the agenda (as it was only a few years ago); the strategy of erasing is even less attractive. Post-Soviet nostalgia generates a quasi-postmodernism of sorts, accompanied by a shift in the patterns of cultural construction that are no longer exclusively oriented to Russian (or Soviet) history but replicate those of the West.

What we have here is yet another attempt at modernization of culture. If the first such attempt (the revolutionary period) turned out to be most original and productive, the second (Stalinist, socialist realist) culture, less productive but nevertheless quite original; the third (post-Soviet) is both less productive and less original. Notwithstanding the presence of brilliant individual authors and artists in today's Russia, what is lacking are original ideas and styles. Apparently, the emergence of new cultural patterns in post-Soviet Russia must be preceded by the emergence of new strategies for dealing with the past.

Yuri Tynianov, in his article "On Cultural Evolution," noted that contemporaries often believe that they are situated in an interval ("v promezhutke") between cultures, yet history, Tynianov tells us, does not actually have such intervals. This sense of being in an

interval between cultures seems to describe the condition of modern Russian culture quite adequately: something has ended, but nothing new has yet taken form in literature, film and the fine arts.

The cultural process, of course, is multi-layered, but we nevertheless must discern the leading tendencies and make them the focus of our attention. That which is found on the periphery does not give birth to style. Only that which gives birth to and represents the stylistic system is important. In his article "Literary Fact" Tynianov noted that "every abnormality, every "mistake", every "irregularity" of the poetic norm is, potentially, a new constructive principle. One needs to keep in mind, however, that there are many "mistakes," "abnormalities" and "irregularities", and there is only one "poetic norm". In each case a picture of the future shows through in the present, along with the stains of the past. It is easy today to find the sources of Socialist Realism in the culture of the 1920s. Sots-art likewise was not born in the age of perestroika, but during the 1970s. But the question remains: why did the "new constructive principle" that was born of the many faces of the avant-garde turn out to be, precisely, Socialist Realism, rather than something else?

When we speak of the past "showing through," we mean, for instance, that the Socialist Realist style is like a palimpsest through which the avant-garde aesthetic is visible. This is distinctly seen in the history of Soviet literature. For instance, Soviet literature's metagenre - the "industrial novel" - had a very avant-garde look in the beginning (recall the history of the rewriting of Fedor Gladkov's "Cement"), and even in the 1930s, during its prime, the aesthetics of this novel could not be understood outside the context of the avant-garde. The avant-garde shows through quite clearly in Erenburg's "Second Day," Shaginyan's "Gidrotsentral," and Kataev's "Time, Forward."

It is seen less clearly in the aesthetic program of Socialist Realism. With Socialist Realism we see a kind of Freudian slip, in that Socialist Realism, though it often applied the avant-garde aesthetic, never exploited that aesthetic consciously.

It is a very different matter with today's so-called Russian "post-modernism." Let us state from the outset that, in talking of modern Russian literature and culture, we mean that which is today called Russian postmodernism. That is, we mean everything that gravitates toward *sots-art*, rather than Socialist Realism or its later derivatives (such as the prose of Solzhenitsyn or the social novels that dominated *perestroika*).

Here we are speaking, first and foremost, about "quotability." As a conscious "constructive principle" of the *sots-art* aesthetic, quotability works on both a pragmatic and an aesthetic level. I will cite an obvious visual example (I purposely choose utterly obvious visual examples), that of the cinema. It is well known that Socialist Realism used the discoveries of the avant-garde, such as montage, to serve its own ends. Take as an example documentary montage. It is sufficient to compare the films of Vertov with the classic portrait of the Cold War, Mikhail Romm's "The Russian Question"; *sots-art* borrows similarly.

Before us we see a well-known Soviet image of America, circa 1947, created solely using the resources of documentary montage. Has *sots-art* added anything to this, something new? One need only watch Vladimir Sorokin's film "Bezumni Fritz" (Mad Fritz) (1994), to become convinced that we are seeing a simple repetition of a previously worked-out aesthetic (if in this case we are talking about the creation of the image of an enemy, then here Sorokin comes closest to the later documentary films of Romm, especially his "Ordinary Fascism" (*Obyknovennyi Fashizm*). Shlick's film "Gardens of the Scorpion" (*Sady Skorpion*) (1991) is a more complex example, but here too Shlick,

in constructing the Soviet subconscious, relies on the very same model - that of wholesale repetition.

In this way, reworked forms prove to be not just secondary, but ternary derivatives. Sots-art exploits Socialist Realism not so much thematically as aesthetically; through Socialist Realism it exploits the hated avant-garde. The point is not that it is impossible to read the poetry of Prigov if one does not know Soviet ideological language, or that it is necessary to have a knowledge of Socialist Realist texts in order to read Sorokin's or Pelevin's prose or that, if you have not seen Piryev's film "The Tractor Drivers" (Traktoristy), then you won't understand "The Tractor Drivers-2", or that a knowledge of Soviet songs is needed if you wish to appreciate the popular television show "Old Songs About the Important Things" (Starye pesni o glavnom), which features modern stars of the Russian stage. These are just thematic and pragmatic concerns. Much more important is the derivative nature of the aesthetic, which is the topic of this talk. There is no longer a need to search for new aesthetics since, as Boris Groys has noted, the public showing of Brezhnev speaking before some congress could, by itself, today be considered a sots-art gesture. This differs radically from the situation in the West, where "pop-art" has "made strange" the objects of everyday life, rather than mechanically reproducing them.

I will cite another classic example - this time from painting - Komar and Melamid's "Lenin Proclaims the Victory of the Revolution (based on Serov's painting." One of the best-known paintings of the Soviet era is Valentin Serov's "Lenin Proclaims Soviet Power," executed at the end of the 1940s. Lenin is depicted here, of course, together with Stalin. Ten years later, during the Khrushchev thaw, Serov redid the painting, placing workers and soldiers in Stalin's place. Five years after that, in a painting

on the same topic, “Lenin’s Appearance at the Second Congress of Soviets”, he depicted proletariat and leaders on stage together. Komar and Melamid’s work reproduces Serov’s first painting. New and terrible faces create the effect - instead of a solemn congress, we see a gathering of conspirators. How did these faces come into being? If we compare all four paintings, we see that Serov strengthened the lighting in the hall from one picture to the next. The hall becomes wider, and more and more chandeliers appear. Komar and Melamid turn off the lights in the hall - the room narrows, and sinister shadows appear on the faces. It might be argued that this is an example of “making strange.” This is not the case, however: the spectrum of color and light is borrowed from Socialist Realism. We need only look at Isaac Brodsky's classic paintings, “Lenin's Appearance Before the Workers of the Putilovsky Factory” and “Lenin in Smolny” - we find ourselves in this same gloomy darkness, be it in a factory courtyard or a government building. What did Komar and Melamid actually create, then? Faces? Yet these faces also came out of Socialist Realism.

On the level of poetics and style, sots-art reproduced the forms previously worked through by the avant-garde and Socialist Realism. We must not confuse this, however, with the aesthetics of “ready-made” text. Sots-art's citation is a stylistic tautology which does not displace the cited reality and does not add a new dimension to it. It is quite clear, for example, that the stories of Vladimir Sorokin, the prose of Pelevin or the poetry of Prigov are functionally no less socially engaging than the traditional social-denunciatory realist novel, and the ironic modus of these texts differs from straight traditional satire, such as that of Vasilii Aksenov, only in its level - here it is not pragmatics (“content”) that is being satirized, but stylistics - the structures of thought, conversational construction, etc. This parodic component is inseparable from sots-art and is the product

of traditional Russian literature, in the framework of which the so-called Russian postmodernism remains.

Sots-art nostalgia is a poorly-concealed yearning for a single Great style.

Sots-art created such a style, the last completed style in Russian literature of the 20th century. This aesthetic is the reflection of Socialist Realism. But socialist realism itself was an aesthetic reflection - in its total realism it reflected a world that had achieved utopia. We see before us a process of self-consumption. This aesthetic “self-consumption” is what I call sots-art. We should recall that Socialist Realism was the heir to the futuristic fantasies of the avant-garde (said differently, the future dominated in the avant-garde, while the present ruled in Socialist realism (recall the famous dictum from the end of the 1940s, that “The Beautiful is our life.”), and the past reigns in sots-art). To use a well-known definition, it can be said that sots-art is “decayed Socialist Realism”. Sots-art is not postmodernism, is not the “logic of late capitalism,” but is instead the logic of late, decaying socialism. Such a conclusion is substantiated by the situation in Russia, where the state capitalism that masqueraded as socialism is disintegrating. Just as the Russian economy simulates a market system, and the political system feigns “Western democracy”, so does Russian culture simulate postmodernism.

Modern Russian literature has developed along two paths - either realism (a derivative of the social novel), or sots-art. Thus the so-called Russian postmodernism can be realized only in sots-art. Why is Russian postmodernism unable to address anything outside of the Soviet space? This is because it is locked into an internal cycle of rewriting, a cycle in which there is no development, but instead endless “renewal” via erasing and rewriting.

Our permanent problem is in our insistence on using the old system of thought, with its emphasis on development, when we contemplate the dynamics of the cultural process, since in fact there is no development at all. If we look at the process from the point of view of permanent “renewal” (or rewriting), then we will understand that each new “development” is really just one in a series of new “tails” on the lizard of Russian culture in the twentieth century (the avant-garde, socialist realism, “postmodernism”), and we will likewise see that now the lizard has lost more than its usual tail. It has lost its head, leaving behind only the tails it had lost along the way already. This is why conversations about modern Russian culture are always retrospectives: the avant-garde or Socialist Realism prove to be more important than modern “development.” One could say that the avant-garde and socialist realism do not belong to Russian culture’s past, but are in fact its present.