

INTRODUCTION

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On November 8th, 1920, when Vladimir Tatlin exhibited his *Monument to the Third International* a banner on the wall of the Mosaics Studio at the former Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg proclaimed, "Engineers-Bridge Builders! Make Calculations for the Creation of New Forms." In June of that same year, artists gathered in Germany for the Berlin Dada Fair and paid homage to the work of the Russian Constructivist and to the new revolutionary aesthetic. A well-known photograph shows Georges Grosz and John Heartfield holding up the slogan: "Art is Dead! Long Live the Machine Art of Tatlin!" The work of these avant-garde artists employed different methods, yet at that moment in the 1920s it was driven and sustained by a common belief: technology suggested a new way of creating artistic form, a new way of seeing and perceiving culture. More than a rejection or dissolution of the tradition-laden past, these artists conceived technology as a literal origin, a new beginning, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. "We grow out of iron," writes Aleksei Gastev. This parable of absolute self-creation functions as a model for what is meant by technology among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For technology becomes a metaphor of origin and radical change, referring both to formal invention and to sources of life. It functions to declare the modernity of modern art.

Now, from the perspective of technologically advanced cultures of the West, it seems increasingly difficult to avoid the sense that somehow the whole world has changed, has become new again. Thus, for example, Jean Baudrillard can speak of "the mutation of a properly industrial society into what could be called our techno-culture." Technology comes increasingly to be seen as a matter of cultural data and a sense that a change has taken place often seems directly related to a sense of being immersed in a sort of technological complexity—to that commonly observed sense of being in the matrix. This perceived change has frequently been figured in terms of postmodernity, that is, as part of a broader shift from modern to postmodern. But then, the very notions of modernity and postmodernity seem inconceivable without technology.

That is not to say, however, that technology determines modern or postmodern culture. Rather, the changes that have occurred in contemporary culture seem to be based less on technology as such, than on the very concept or essence of technology.

There have been numerous discussions about technology and the way it has transformed, and continues to transform, the way we live, act and communicate. *Wired*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and many other magazines have run articles and covers on cyber-punk, genetical engineering, techno-culture, techno-fetishism, robotics, new media, artificial life, and virtual reality. Nor have scholars ignored the issue, even if their discussions have often taken place under the broader rubric of "postmodern culture" or "techno-culture." Yet, despite the sheer mass of arguments about technology and techno-culture, they seem to have a striking uniformity: technology or some aspect of it is either celebrated or decried, cast as utopian or dystopian, in terms of its capacity to either serve humanity or to threaten it. The repetitiveness of these arguments, I would venture, results from the fact that they take the definition of technology for granted. For all the discussion of the implications of technological change, remarkably little attention has been devoted to possible changes in the concept of technology itself.

What has been left unexamined, I would like to suggest, is precisely Heidegger's "question concerning technology," which is not the question of technology per se, but what he calls "the essence of technology," which "is by no means anything technological."¹ For Heidegger, this "essence" of technology cannot simply be defined in terms of the usual, modern sense of technology as an instrument, a tool, or a machine. He attempts, instead, to broaden the definition of technology into a more general concept of making, or producing, and finds that in the Greek root of technology, *techne* (generally translated as art, skill, or craft),

¹See, for example, R. L. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-3.

technology and art were closely linked. For the Greeks, "it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*," but art, too, "was simply called *techne*." Heidegger's, point, of course, is not that technology's close relationship to art has been lost. Rather, he argues that the modern conception of technology restricts the definition of the technological to the instrumental, and "blinds us to" that broader essence which informs not only the modern view of technology, but also the *techne* of Ancient Greece. Thus, for Heidegger the question concerning technology is a historical question. The history of modernity, he says, can be read as an ever-increasing technological effort to regulate and secure the unsettling, "artistic" aspects inherent in the *techne*—to direct it toward instrumental ends. The very notion of modernity has been defined in terms of an instrumental conception of technology, an instrumental or technological rationality that allows modern humanity to know and control the world. From this perspective, that which is not technological cannot be modern.²

If however, Heidegger questions the "universality" of the instrumental concept of technology by pointing to its historical specificity (as modern), he does not mention the extent to which it is also culturally specific. Modernity, defined in terms of instrumental technology, has long been the basis on which Western, patriarchal cultures have privileged themselves over their "nontechnological others." From this perspective, cultures or discourses—for example, "non-Western" cultures and "feminine" discourses that perceive the world in terms other than those of rational, scientific knowledge are necessarily characterized as anti-modern, irrational, "primitive." Thus, although the sense of change may be specific to "highly technologized" cultures, its implications are not; for if in the new technology the modern concept of technology has changed, so too has the relation of "techno-culture" to those supposedly nontechnological "other" cultures and discourses that modernity has excluded or repressed.

Russia and the Soviet Union provide a vivid context in which to re-examine the relationship between technology and modern artistic production. This context is well described by literary scholar Robert Maguire when he writes about the Prometheanism and life-building of the early Russian twentieth century with their "fervent belief in the positive power of technology, in the human capacity to create, shape, and control one's own destiny." The technologist position is obvious in the work and statements of various artists from the Futurists and the Constructivists to the Smithy writers. As they understood it, the artists of the Russian avant-garde were producing models for restructuring

the world on totally different principles. Technology played a vital role in this restructuring: not simply a promise of utopian bliss, it was mobilized to fulfill the political imperatives of a new socialist society.

Many Russian artists, however, found themselves at the crossroads of aesthetics and technology. In the works and statements of Malevich, Khlebnikov and others, one discerns an attempt to posit an autonomous, utopian aesthetic space—a ground of play, rescue and retreat—separate from the instrumentality of modern technicism and synonymous with artistic freedom. This context helps account for the following statement by Vladimir Tatlin, made in 1932 on the subject of his last significant work—a flying machine called *Letatlin*: "I don't want people to take this thing as something utilitarian," Tatlin says, "I have made it as an artist. Look at the bent wings. We believe them to be aesthetically perfect. Or don't you think that Letatlin gives an impression of aesthetic perfection? Like a hovering sea gull? Don't you think?" Considering this, isn't it possible to suggest that the Berlin Dadaists may have fatefully misread Tatlin's effort, and that despite its insistence on mechanical forms and intended use the *Monument* was intended as a failed machine, an allegory, evident in Tatlin's use of the ascending spiral—a symbol of life itself? Isn't it here that we discern another view of technology, one that has less to do with instrumentality, but with its failure, with the realm of aesthetics and art?

The workshop on "Art, Technology and Modernity in Russia and Eastern Europe" set out to re-examine the relationship between technology and aesthetics. It brought together literary scholars, film and architectural historians to suggest a more nuanced analysis of the role of technology in the artistic and political processes taking place in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and to delineate the differences between the forms of modernity they imagined. The essays selected for the present volume are not limited to a single discipline or theoretical approach. But they are united by an attempt to articulate varieties of relationship between art and technology in Russia and Eastern Europe which are neither utopian and filled with a plenitude that is easy to dismiss, nor equivalent to some kind of alienation as an 'other' to historical modernism.

The need for such a re-examination has been suggested by many critics who see the work of cultural commentary as an effort to reconstitute the broad lines of historical development, rather than privileging particular moments, which have the nostalgic charm of the "Golden Age." Cynthia Simmons is concerned with establishing the overall continuities within which the Russian experience of the twentieth century—so

² *Ibid.*, 3-12.

dramatic in its apparent cultural upheavals—can be made more intelligible. Dispensing with the convenient pretext that a rupture took place—a kind of a cultural lacuna from which we can avert our eyes—Simmons insists on a continuity between Russian Modernism and the official culture of the Soviet period, arguing that “it is specifically the representation and celebration of science and technology” that constitutes the link. This shift in perspective allows her to locate the origin of Russian postmodern thought not in the explorations of intertextuality, but in the collapse of the Soviet modernist/technological agenda. Viktor Pelevin’s *Omon Ra*, she argues, is a wry commentary on the failed promise of Soviet ideology, a “postmodern subversion of Soviet-style modernism with its privileging of technology.”

To some extent, the essays in this volume can be read as a reappraisal of the Soviet critical heritage and as an illuminating and subversive commentary on the brief history of the Western reception of the Russian avant-garde. For example, in modernist history the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii might be said to epitomize modernism’s internationalist, rationally based ideology. And the history of Russian modernism welcomes him as an urbanist and a futurist, committed to technological and social progress. Yet, when Maiakovskii appears in Julia Vaingurt’s essay, it is not as the great propagandist of Soviet technological utopia, but as an artist deeply at odds with his country’s vision of the future. Analyzing Maiakovskii’s travelogue “My Discovery of America,” Vaingurt shows that for Maiakovskii technology and poetry are closely linked: both are ways of communicating, “two modes of mediation between his I and the world.” Maiakovskii’s trip to America unsettles his faith in technology; upon his return Maiakovskii finds himself transformed by the experience and urges his fellow artists “not to sing the praises of technology but to harness it in the name of the interests of humankind.” Vaingurt sees Maiakovskii’s new found humanism as a response to the psychic and sensory overload of the American metropolis. Her essay, significantly, attempts to encompass, rather than repress the conflict integral to the modernists’ attitudes toward technology.

Andrei Khrenov draws attention to the specificity of Soviet cultural practices and exposes the limitations of standard categories of cultural analysis. He shifts the discussion to architecture and cinema and focuses on Aleksandr Medvedkin’s 1937 film, *New Moscow*, which combined deliberately illusionistic and archaic forms of representation to represent Stalin’s plan for the city as a “dream of the future immanent in the present.” The essay provides a sharp sidelight on two opposite approaches which frame the discussion of the period: on the one hand, Boris Groys’s well-known argument that Stalinism was a continuation of the

Russian avant-garde, and on the other, the idea put forward by Western art historians that Stalinism liquidated avant-garde’s artistic achievements. Significantly, Khrenov argues that the validity of these paradigms is circumscribed by their particular cultural contexts, and that the specificity of Soviet visual culture provides unique material for revising and theorizing the functions of the visual in modernity.

Not one set of preconditions governs the range of arguments in this collection; there are, however, discourses held in common. The entire discussion is allied with a certain “anti-foundational” critique, that is, a critique of the historical concepts posited by a discipline (art history, for example) as its natural epistemological grounds. Kimberly Elman’s essay is a vivid example of a critical practice that opens up onto the question of method. Elman traces the architectural production of the Bat’a Shoe Company located in the Moravian town of Zlin from the early 1920s to 1938. She challenges previous analyses which regarded the Bat’a buildings within the context of the “International Style,” arguing that they represent a unique appropriation of the American factory towns, a model which appealed to Bat’a not for its value as an instrument of social change, but simply as that which would generate profit. This analysis leads her to question the categories of “modern” and “avant-garde” as they are applied to the study of interwar architecture in Czechoslovakia and to the general investigations of modernity.

In conclusion, I would like to remark on the dual project of the workshop—to offer distinct approaches to the study of art and technology in the Slavic context as well as a reappraisal of the modernist heritage. I believe that these projects are inseparable and that concrete studies presented here are invaluable for new ways to understand modernity and our contemporary culture.

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