

Power and Technology as the Political- Aesthetic Project: Towards the Similarity of the Russian Avant-garde of the Twenties and Stalinist Cinema

Andrei Khrenov

Two Utopias

The Western presentation of the revolutionary “Golden Age” by leftist art historians of the *October* journal promotes the concept of liberated, creative labor and “human” technology. This view accords with Peter Burger’s theory that the avant-garde traditionally seeks to break down the boundaries separating art and life.

If the *October* radicals point out that Stalinism liquidated all the social/artistic achievements of the twenties, the theorists of Moscow conceptualism argue that the Stalinist discourse merely incorporated the totalitarian aspirations and utopian methods of Russian experimenters, such as the will to power, mastery over the collective subconscious, or the creation of the New Man as the total work of art. These two paradigmatic approaches, two opposing interpretations of the Russian avant-garde, could not be explained without the other. To some degree, both are but reflections of each other.

The first approach was developed by American leftist theorists and art historians associated with the journal *October*. Its founders, Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss, argue that the brief historical period following the 1917 Revolution was unique in that the radical concepts of the artistic avant-garde coincided, mirrored, and fit in with the challenging social experiment. The artistic practices of El Lissitzky, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, artists whose works have become an integral part of museum collections and the subject for academic research in Europe and North America, replicated the experiment in social construction, somehow “reinforcing” it. Even those works of Western avant-gardists stylistically

close to the Russians (for example, Mondrian’s compositions remind one of Malevich) and not supported by revolutionary social projects, had exhausted their utopian, subversive potential much faster and became incorporated into the technical rationality of the bourgeois society. Starting with a critique of commodity culture, Mondrian gradually became an integral part of it. His radical protest became co-opted by a specific mode of representation that transforms phenomena into commodities ready for consumption. Unlike their Western counterparts, the works of the Russian avant-garde became art objects of high value in every Western museum, while retaining their revolutionary, utopian potential for global changes.

The *October* vision of a revolutionary “Golden Age” promoted the concept of a liberated, utopian society where the division of labor would be abolished and, as Marx put it:

...individuals would be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into a practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in the position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth.

This credo became their only subconscious salvation from the unbearable immanence of the late-capitalist society with its commodity culture. This pathetic “dissident” perception of Russian revolutionary experience ironically coincides with the praxis of the Russian experimenters themselves, who stayed in a country devastated by Civil War to defend their artistic principles and put their “collective utopian impulses” in the service of the state.

Another approach, no less utopian, is shared by the theorists of Moscow conceptualism, a movement which emerged in the 1970s alongside *sots-art*. The vectors of both approaches are somehow aggressively—but not deliberately, of course—aimed at each other, like nuclear missiles on either side of the Iron Curtain. The *October* critics, including their predecessor Leon Trotsky, point out that Stalinism liquidated the social and artistic achievements of the avant-garde and developed a "backward" art in the spirit of nineteenth-century realism. Moscow conceptualism claims that avant-garde practice was originally intended to seize power by any means necessary; in a sense, it was totalitarian even before the advent of totalitarianism. Socialist Realism appears as a continuation of avant-gardist strategies by totally different means.

Most essential for this argument are the purposes of the new, revolutionary power, which were declared to be aesthetic. The Bolshevik state did not organize itself first and foremost as the founder of the Law or "social contract" (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau defined it in the Age of Enlightenment), but was conceived to be the creator of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)—"the New Man, the liberated worker, the true Communist" (Boris Grois). Functionally dressed citizens of this aesthetically perfect utopian society would inhabit the rotating cities of glass and concrete, designed by the radical Constructivists; and art as a method of knowing life would be replaced with art as a method of building life.

As a result, Stalinism became the only discourse to implement this political/aesthetic project. Sensing the threat posed by the avant-garde, Stalin's conservative, despotic regime crushed the true, contemporary revolutionary art. All avant-garde collectives and their activities were disbanded in 1932 by Stalin's decree, which organized artists into "creative unions" modeled on the medieval guilds. The victory over the experiment—to paraphrase Kruchenykh's opera—as well as over the collective subconscious was achieved in the trials and purges of the 1930s.

The mastering of the subconscious through language and the visual arts (architecture, cinema, fine arts, etc.) with its religious nature became one of the central issues for the creators of the New Man. Many artists undertook to reconstruct this "language of the subconscious," as Malevich called it, and to master it consciously. They delighted in linguistic singularity and aberrance. Conventional systems of linguistics and visual representation were to be transgressed, the boundaries were to be exploded and new forms were to emerge out of the pieces. Like Artaud and Breton in France, Russian innovators wanted to expropriate the

"expropriated language." The organizing, "engineering" nature of Khlebnikov's poetry and Malevich's paintings originated in the notion that the subconscious dominates human consciousness and can be technically manipulated to construct a new world.

Velimir Khlebnikov, for example, abolished ordinary linguistic forms in order to create utterances (*zaum*) that would work magically upon the reader's mind. He declared himself the "President of the Planet Earth" and the "King of Time," since he believed that he had discovered the laws that delimit time. These linguistic experiments coincided with his remarkable urban visions in his poem "The City of the Future":

**Here we enter the City of Sun,
Where all is balance, order, and expanse
This palace of the people now commands
The covering roof be rolled away,
To contemplate the ranks of constellations
And amplify the law of retribution**

The omniscient, god-like point of view in Khlebnikov's poem provides the visual equivalent to Stalinist art, monumental propaganda and cinema, as we will see later.

The Paths to the Collective Self: Eisenstein's Experience

A significant body of film texts of the twenties and thirties demonstrates this authoritarian coalescence of art, politics and technology, providing a possibility for both approaches mentioned earlier. The patterns of fashioning the social Imaginary were widely explored by the radical filmmakers in the twenties.

Eisenstein's discourse, for example, bridges the artist's conscious self—striving for technological progress and building a better life—with the whole socialist society and such technocratic methods as reconstruction of the subject's subconscious through "visual atomism" (Lev Manovich) and fragmented montage, the concepts of "pathos" and "ecstasy," or totalitarian psychotechnics, borrowed from Loyola, and so on.

The religious nature of art and the task of delivering the ideological message, of grasping the socially demanded idea was an essential component in Sergei Eisenstein's theoretical heritage. The starting point in the filmmaker's research was projection theories of religion, which argue that any form of religion is actually a projection of human wishes and fantasies. Freud, for example, argued that an individual's image of God is related to the individual's early experience of

his/her parents and the need for security. In "The Future of an Illusion" he defined religious belief as "a universal obsessive neurosis of humanity."

The accounts of life in tribal societies provided Eisenstein with materials for his "sensuous thought" theory, which was founded on the mechanism of image-centered thinking. He was also interested in mystical revelations, the participants of which tend to move beyond words, rational thinking and even images to the immediate presence of the Divine Force. Eisenstein's analysis of St. Ignatius Loyola's "Des Graces d'oraison" focuses on the nature of the ecstatic experience: Loyola "saw the Being of the Father, but in a manner that at first he saw the Being and then the Father, and his prayer ended with the Essence before arriving at the Father" (10). Eisenstein points out that in the mystical process the personal experience is "formless and objectless" (some "Essence" in Loyola's case) and can take any form which later will be associated with the doctrines of religious faith, among others. Every religious system, according to him, long before Loyola's observations, combines this "objectless, formless, contentless psychic state" directly with images and concepts connected to a cult, and religion. During rituals, humans as "bundles" of thinking material experience the rhythm of matter, of the Universe. The libidinal (in Freudian terms) energy of the masses here is channeled into the appropriate and socially accepted forms. The mystic's trance, the saint's sermon, the Catholic Mass, and so on, unite the self with a transcendental Other. Eisenstein claimed that revolutionary works of art should utilize this psychotechnics. His 1927 film *October* reveals an abstract idea of God from an atheistic position. A straightforward cinematic syntagm in this film consists of a series of "sacred" images: Catholic crosses are followed by the smiling Buddhist mask and then the wooden effigies of pagan and primitive gods. The inanimate and deliberately ugly deities at the end of the syntagm appear to be mere symbols of the individual's wishful thinking.

Working with the concepts of "pathos" and "ecstasy," he defines how the dialectical process of an art form should be shaped in order to achieve a specific type of emotional involvement called "pathos." This is done to transport the viewer out of the plane of everyday routine (*ex-stasis* means "out of stasis") and eliminate the boundaries between the "self" and the "others." Every revolutionary artist, according to Eisenstein, must follow this path towards collective self provided by an artwork. This "totalitarian psychotechnics," borrowed from Loyola, or targeted

manipulation of the audience's emotions still remains one of the main critical charges against Eisenstein.

This kind of research was conducted not only in totalitarian Russia. Wilhelm Reich, a German psychoanalyst who investigated the connections between the individual psyche and the material relations of production, took a particular interest in the Eisensteinian approach to art. In a letter to his Russian colleague, Reich raised the question of "how the cinematic sexual politics of the bourgeoisie could be consciously and consistently opposed by a revolutionary one," insisting on the primacy "of personal and especially of sexual life" for the correct "revolutionary cultural politics": *Earth* brilliantly expressed the orgiastic element; in *Battleship Potemkin* one was simply overwhelmed by the rhythm, which is a direct continuation of the basic biological-sexual rhythm. Reich noted that the "rational ideas of communism are most effective in film if they are properly articulated with biological rhythm" (11).

Imagination to Power. Stalinist Architecture and Film

The strategies of reshaping the social Imaginary were also widely explored by Stalinist film. The totalitarian hierarchy of the arts in the thirties abolished the open, relatively uncensored multiplicity of artistic practices of the twenties. Literature took over, while the coming of sound in cinema reassured the primacy of logocentrism, the totalitarian "scriptures," the Word.

Architecture was given the assignment to find iconic and symbolic equivalents to the great slogans, abundant in the thirties, which would be as efficient as Khlebnikov's "zaum" (transrational poetry). Stalinist cinema presented a transhistorical, transtemporal urban space of Moscow as the sacred center of the already achieved Utopia. It required, therefore, characteristics completely different from the montage era of Russian experimenters of the twenties. In fact, the almost mythical spatial-temporal dimensions of this Utopia required a deliberately illusionist, imaginary, fairy-tale hypostasis of the filmic properties which manifested itself through theatrical miniatures, layout and scenery. These films demonstrate that the art of Socialist Realism was in fact not realistic, since it was not mimetic.

Stalin's plan of the reconstruction of Moscow was adopted at the time when, as Boris Grois put it, "the art of the Stalin period, like the culture of Nazi Germany, claimed to be building a new and eternal empire beyond human history, an apocalyptic kingdom that

would incorporate all the good of the past and reject all the bad." A drastic transition between the cosmopolitan, revolutionary, and dynamic architectural discourse of the 1920s and the conservative, hermetic, and static discourse of the 1930s to 50s was accomplished by incorporation of the avant-garde strategies.

The transhistorical temporal/spatial relations determined the coordinates of the four wonders of the Stalinist utopia designed for the city of Moscow which retained its radial structure. Its sacred center, the Palace of the Soviets, symbolized the "vertical" pyramid of totalitarian order with the figure of the leader on top. This non-existent building figured so often in architectural drawings that it was simply imagined into the landscape. The plan of reconstruction was based on the concept of Moscow as the capital of the world. Cinema became one of the most suitable equivalents to the mythological spatial-temporal dimensions of the reconstruction plan.

The very selection of these places was made to shape an image of a futuristic, magnificent metropolis which merged into a "typology of the non-existent." The new city was to preserve the traditional, historical structure of Old Moscow (such as the circumferences around the Kremlin, for example), but its architectural strategy was to be reevaluated according to the utopian ideas when Moscow was perceived as a sacred space which embodied the dream of the future immanent in present. And while the real, actual space of the city did not suit this idea, Moscow was to be drastically converted by different sets, miniatures, sketches, masks, rear-projection and similar devices to arrange an artificial but life-like environment.

When avant-gardists, those dinosaurs of the twenties, tried to pursue their ideals, their efforts to operate on the same "political" territory with the authorities were doomed. The 1937 comedy, *New Moscow* by Aleksandr Medvedkin is emblematic in its depiction of the sacred urban space which is an adequate visual representation of the Stalinist aesthetic project. It is also an example of a "creative" urban space shown with the help of illusionist, Melies-like, special effects. It tells the typical Hollywood romantic story of a happy reunion of two couples with a "love-affair mismatch." The protagonist, an artist specializing in cityscapes, simply does not have time to draw Moscow. The metropolitan organism is being constantly transformed by the Stalinist architect's will and is betraying him day in and day out: the buildings are disappearing, being pulled down and built anew. And it is not only urban reality that the artist loses - his

model, a beautiful girl, leaves him to join an architect who lives in Siberia.

The Siberian architect managed to produce a layout for the modern capital, a city which he has never seen in reality. His powerful imagination helped him to foresee the future of the sacred metropolis from his Siberian remoteness. The Siberian architect's fantasy, infused with the mythologemes of Stalinist culture, acquires the quality of the final, real truth proved by the film's culmination. Therefore, his project of the new City of Moscow, an embodiment of avant-garde aspirations, a physical Utopia with skyscrapers of glass and steel, receives the highest award at the architectural contest. An urbanist artist encounters the new girl, a shock-worker swineherd and a friend of an architect. The happy ending ensues. Thus the choice of the Moscow model in favour of the Siberian, who is loyal to fantasy and imagination, only proves one of the basic utopian paradigms of Stalinist culture, that is, the "typology of the non-existent."

The "typical" is the key issue of that which is not encountered the most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force," according to the speech of Minister Georgii Malenkov at the 14th Party Congress, stressing the most paradoxical oxymoron of Stalinist aesthetics. "From the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical doesn't signify some sort of statistical mean... The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the Party spirit of realistic art." The underlying meaning of the narrative is that the power of imagination, of the collective subconscious must prevail and be ontologically real. That is why the real city, which does not meet the requirements of Stalinist "typology," is sacrificed for the sake of the fantastic/imaginary one. And even this sacrifice was not acceptable—Stalin's selection committee was disappointed with such a straightforward image of the inhumane, militarized technology which consisted of metaphysical, sinister, de Chirico-like cityscapes. *New Moscow* was immediately shelved. The last two reels of *New Moscow* are of particular interest for our binary opposition "imaginary/real." They feature a short demo, presented by a Siberian at the exhibition's contest, a separate "purely architectural" entity that animates a futuristic miniature of reconstructed Moscow in a traditional comedy narrative. The new Moscow appears as an impressive Soviet "Metropolis."

The expected pathos of the seemingly magnificent utopia is undermined by Medvedkin, thus creating a comic effect: due to technical faults, the demo the architect has prepared is projected backwards—the crystal palaces of paradise are followed by a

documentary record of Stalin's "architectural terror." First comes the demolition of Russian religious centers, like Strastnoi Monastery, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Sukharev Tower, etc., and then the temples are fully reassembled from the ruins. The demo then portrays the new Moscow with a standard set of carefully chosen significant places and buildings, for example, the recently built classicist Hotel Moscow, the new buildings on the renovated and expanded Gorky street, the Stalin Waterway.

The last, "futuristic" part of the demo animates the idea of the Palace of the Soviets as the largest building on Earth. The broadness of the radial highways, esplanades and embankments, which radiate from the center, proves the sacred concept. The original design of some architectural constructions-- the Red Army Theater, the Arbatskaya metro station, both modeled on a five-pointed star, or the enormous expanse of the prospect of the Palace of the Soviets—could be viewed and appreciated only by virtue of belonging to Heaven in this Stalinist paradise, either by the Demiurge himself, its statue atop the Palace, or the pilots and aviators who occupied one of the highest ranks in the paradisiacal hierarchy.

Another incredibly comic episode, not intended by the author, culminates in the flight of the aircraft squadron right above the cardboard Palace of the Soviets. The primacy of the totalitarian imagination indulges in the creation of the simulacrum of the city - marble and granite turn into painted cardboard, while the monumental metaphor of Stalin's omnipotence is transformed into decorative scenery that is nothing but a clever screen backdrop.

The almost mythical spatial-temporal dimensions of the Stalinist Utopia required the deliberately illusionistic, imaginary, folkloric hypostasis of the filmic properties which became manifest through theatrical miniatures, layout and scenery by virtue of gratifying the wish-fulfillment of the broad audience. A subject of a totalitarian state could successfully fulfil the functions required by mythological narrative only within the realm of the "de-materialized" architectural theater, its hagiography and demonology. It is a theater of metaphysical space, of a visionary space of deliberately illusionist dream and transhistorical stage which remarkably embodies and illustrates the nation's wish-fulfillment. Visual representation was dominant and therefore adequate to the contemporary cultural demands of the masses. Stalin's artistic discourse became the supreme realization of the avant-garde anticipations, the ultimate authoritarian coalescence of art and politics.

It is worth mentioning here that Sergei Eisenstein planned to explore the temporal simultaneity of the theatrical/urban simulacrum in his project *Moscow 800*, aborted by Boris Shumiatskii, Minister of the Cinema Industry. The historical evolution of the city was intended to be developed through different epochs - the times of Ivan the Terrible, the Napoleonic war, as well as the crucial events of our century—revolutions and World War II in Russia. They would be cemented by the recurring fates of proletarian families, and the film would show the simple people as the real driving force of History and, therefore, of the city of Moscow. The only chance for the film to be made would be the acquisition of the mentioned-above characteristics of the Golden Age. Most scenes were to be filmed in Mosfilm pavilions.

Andrei Khrenov received his Masters degree from the National Film School (VGIK) in Moscow. He has taught classes on Russian film at the School of the Art Institute and at Facets Media in Chicago. He is currently a graduate student in the Department of Cinema Studies at NYU. He is now working on a historical survey of American experimental film.

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