

Bolshevism and the avant-garde artists (1993)—Part 1

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The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932, at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (September 25, 1992–January 3, 1993) in New York City, was a major artistic and political event. In response, the *Bulletin* newspaper, a predecessor of the World Socialist Web Site, published a seven-part article by arts editor David Walsh, devoted to the issues raised by the exhibition, in February–March 1993. The piece was later republished in the *Fourth International* magazine, Volume 20, Number 1, Winter–Spring 1994.

As the article indicates, the show was originally planned in 1988 when Mikhail Gorbachev was still in power in the USSR. By the time the massive exhibition went on display in New York and other cities, the Soviet Union had collapsed and the organizers made a concerted effort to use the occasion as a means of discrediting or marginalizing the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The 800 items on show, however, told a very different story, of the vibrancy of post-Revolutionary intellectual and artistic life, and the great impetus to creative activity provided by the first seizure of power by the working class in history. The show created considerable interest in the general public, attracting more than a quarter of a million visitors. We are posting the original series in three parts beginning today.

The massive exhibit of Russian and Soviet avant-garde artistic work on display from September 25 to January 3, 1992, at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932*, deserves considerable attention and study. It is of great interest both for the aesthetic quality of the work itself and from the standpoint of the innumerable historical and intellectual questions it raises.

The purpose of this article is not to review the formal qualities of the art as such, but to consider the relationship of those artists generally identified with Russian Futurism and Constructivism to the revolutionary workers state and the tasks it confronted, and the implications of that relationship for the artists' work. [1]

The aim is to address a number of questions: What was the reaction of the left artists to the taking of power by the working class? What was the attitude of the new revolutionary regime to the artists? Was there a “Bolshevik” tendency in art? How was the role of art in the construction of socialism conceived of by the artists and by the revolutionaries? What is the significance of this history for the present period?

The attempt to answer these questions involves, in part, an examination of the unavoidable contradictions and conflicts that arose as artists from the petty-bourgeois bohemia attempted to grapple with the reality of a social revolution, and disciplined, highly-trained proletarian revolutionaries attempted to grapple with the artistic process, in which the unconscious and the irrational play such a significant role.

One figure, more than any other, was able to grasp and master the

contradictions of both fields of activity: Leon Trotsky. In considering the artists and art of this period and their relation to the October Revolution, one is reminded forcefully that penetrating answers to some of the most difficult problems were advanced nearly 70 years ago in Trotsky's writings and remarks.

As we shall see when we examine the contents of the Guggenheim catalog, it was impossible to mount such an exhibit, even in the present political atmosphere, without confronting as a central question the role of Trotsky and his appreciation and critique of early Soviet art. How that confrontation actually took place is a matter that will have to be considered.

The exhibit consisted of some 800 paintings, sculptures, architectural models, stage designs, photographs and posters. Dozens of the artists whose work was included merit and in many cases have received their own individual exhibitions and been the subjects of specialized studies. This is some of the most influential work carried out this century.

The show was originally planned in 1988 at a time when Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and *glasnost* was on the lips of every bourgeois commentator. The exhibit was organized by the Guggenheim in conjunction with the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and the Schirn Kunsthalle of Frankfurt.

The very title of the exhibit, *The Great Utopia*, is indicative of the general attitude of the exhibitors to the artists and their work. In their preface to the show's catalog, the Guggenheim's director and deputy director write: “The term ‘utopia’ carries with it the spirit of the avant-garde's project to place art at the service of greater social objectives and to create harmony and order in the chaotic world around them. Given the course history has taken in Russia in the twentieth century, ‘utopia’ also has connotations of impracticality; idealism is good in theory, but not in practice” (preface in the exhibit's catalog, *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* [New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992], p. x).

Officials at the Russian museums, in their introductory comments, strenuously attempt to distinguish the art from the revolution and its political and social implications. They write: “In a political sense, this exhibition comes perhaps too late. Since the early 1980s, the idea of romantic underpinnings to the revolution has lost popularity. Yet the artistic might of this era, with its gathering of creative energies and investigations, has continued to hold its ground against more short-lived political ideologies and economies. It is therefore that much more important for the public to be able to see for the first time the breadth of Russian avant-garde art without a background of political fervor—to see it in peace and to be able to measure fully its place in the development of art in our world” (preface in the catalog, p. xiii).

These two arguments—(1) that the very notion of art contributing to the changing of reality (or the very notion of changing reality in a progressive fashion at all) was *utopian*, and (2) that there was no connection between the revolution and the burst of creative energy which took place in the

1910s and 1920s—are best refuted by the exhibition itself.

In the first place, it documents the extraordinary, almost superhuman, and eminently “practical” achievements of the October Revolution in a number of spheres of human activity. If there were no heritage of the revolution other than the accomplishments of the period 1917-1923 in the fields of culture, education and social planning, it would stand vindicated by history.

Practical contributions of the revolution in the field of art included, among many others, the establishment of the State Free Art Workshops in the autumn of 1918. According to a Russian art historian, this meant that “for the first time in its history art education in Russia was based on the principles of freedom and democracy” (Natal’ia Adaskina, “The Place of Vkhutemas in the Russian Avant-Garde,” an essay in the catalog, p. 284).

There were as well the activities of Izo Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment), the creation of Obmokhu (the Society of Young Artists) in 1919 and its exhibitions, the creation of the Vkhutemas (Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops) in 1920, out of which much of the most experimental work evolved, the work of Kazimir Malevich’s Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art) group in Vitebsk, the establishment of the ground-breaking Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow, the work of the Constructivists and the Production artists, and the efforts by a great variety of artists to contribute to the cultural and intellectual uplifting of the working class and Soviet masses.

But the opposite of “utopianism” is not simply “practical” achievement. In addition to their paintings, poems and sculptures, the Soviet artists contributed, through their theoretical work, to an understanding of objective reality and how its truth might be uncovered. However misguided some of the conclusions which they drew might have been, there is no question that the work carried out in the field of aesthetics in the early years of the October Revolution represents an extremely rich body of knowledge. Much of that work, of course, lay buried for decades as a result of the crimes of Stalinism.

The second argument—that political life and the revolution itself were incidental to the artists’ work—is so intellectually shallow and dishonest that it almost defies a response. In the first place, the artists involved, of the most varied predilections and temperaments, embraced the cause of social revolution and communism. They did so with many initial equivocations and difficulties (we will discuss that question below), but the fact is they identified themselves with the revolutionary workers state.

An anticommunist Russian art critic, Igor Golomshtok (*Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy and the People’s Republic of China* [New York: Icon Editions, 1990]), notes that the list of Soviet émigrés “does not include even one of the champions of the radical transformation of the world through art” (p. 20).

When one encounters such works as Pavel Filonov’s *Formula of the Petrograd Proletariat*, Boris Ender’s *Portrait of Karl Liebknecht*, Natan Al’tman’s *Petrocommune*, Gustav Klutskis’s *Project for a Construction for the Fifth Anniversary of the October Revolution*, El Lissitzky’s *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)*, Aleksandr Vesnin’s *Proposal for a Monument to the Third Congress of the Communist International*—all nonrepresentational works—one is confronted with a process that surely cannot be ascribed to “coercion.”

It is perfectly true, of course, that the first work of artists such as Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Liubov’ Popova predates the October Revolution itself. This is advanced as an argument against considering the 1917 revolutionary overthrow as a decisive event in their careers.

This superficial view ignores the complex relationship of culture and political life that had developed internationally over an entire historical epoch. The Russian Revolution was not merely a product of a spontaneous upsurge of the working class onto which were grafted a few

Bolshevik slogans. Nor did the work of the Russian Futurists, Suprematists and Constructivists emerge simply because these artists had the opportunity to view a few canvases by Picasso, Braque, Matisse and others. [2]

The October Revolution was itself the product of an international struggle for the highest principles and ideals, which took place over a period of decades, including a struggle on the cultural and aesthetic fronts. Conversely, the turning inside out of artistic forms in the first decades of the century would have been inconceivable without the challenge thrown down to capitalist society, intellectually and practically, by socialism and the working class. That the revolution itself provided an impetus for artistic experimentation is hardly an issue for debate.

Much of the work in the exhibit was stunning. The greater part of the exhibit was devoted to nonrepresentational painting of the Futurist, Cubo-Futurist, Suprematist and related schools. The artists involved, influenced by a combination of artistic, social and scientific revolutions, attempted to make a decisive break with previous trends. There was an awareness, at the center of their work, that it was necessary to reconsider society, man and art in the face of vast, rapid and global changes.

It is not possible within the scope of this article to review the exhibit in any detail, but certain pieces, artists and entire tendencies stand out.

Any consideration of Russian and Soviet art has to recognize the contribution of Malevich (1878-1935) and the Unovis group, including Lissitzky (1890-1941), Il’ia Chashnik, Nikolai Suetin and others. After working through all the major European and Russian trends, Malevich, in the midst of World War I, abandoned completely figurative, representational painting for “non-objective” work. At the O.10 exhibition in 1915, he dismayed critics with his Suprematist *Black Square*—a painted black square in a painted white frame.

According to Malevich “‘reality’ lay concealed behind the world’s objective envelope, and this envelope had to be torn open and the shackles of *predmetnost’* (objectivity) and *razum* (reason) broken in order to ensure the appearance of a new ‘Realism’...” (quoted in Aleksandra Shatskikh, “Unovis: Epicenter of a New World,” an essay in the catalog, p. 59).

Chashnik’s *The Seventh Dimension: Suprematist* and his *Color Lines in Vertical Motion* demonstrate an enormous talent. His *Cosmos—Red Circle on Black Surface* (1925), for example, is an extraordinary work. A giant red circle (sun, planet) hovers in blackness (sky, atmosphere). Under it on the painting’s surface floats a Suprematist-like structure (space station), lines and rectangles arranged horizontally across a central bar. The Suprematist craft—delicate, outweighed, pale in color—is seemingly directed toward the gigantic, perfect red sphere. The enormity of the task, the terrifying emptiness of the universe, the flimsiness of the vessel, are clear to the viewer.

The work of Rodchenko (1891-1956)—painter, Constructivist, designer, photographer—was also prominent in the exhibition. His paintings from the 5 X 5= 25 exhibition in 1921 stood out in particular. Rodchenko also took the path of “non-objective” work. The exhibition includes his “black on black” paintings from 1918; *Hanging Spatial Construction* (1921)—one of the first Constructivist works; an advertising poster: “Shouldn’t We Produce Pencils We Can Use?” (1923); book covers; film posters; textile designs and a number of extraordinary photographs from the late 1920s.

The Great Utopia included the body of work produced by a remarkable group of women artists, a powerful indication of the social revolution’s liberating effect, including Popova (1889-1924), Olga Rozanova (1886-1918), Varvara Stepanova (1894-1958), Nadezhda Udaltsova (1886-1961), Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia (1888-1963), Antonina Sofronova (1892-1966), Vera Ermolaeva (1893-1938), Nina Kogan (1889-1942) and Ksenia Ender (1894-1953).

Rozanova’s *Non-objective Composition* (1916) and Popova’s *Space-Force Construction* (1920-1921) were particularly striking.

The brilliant Tatlin was represented by his “reliefs,” sculptures composed of iron, copper, wood, rope, aluminum, zinc—Cubism (although he publicly rejected the trend) in three dimensions. Unfortunately, none of Tatlin’s paintings was displayed at the Guggenheim because he had already given up painting by 1915. In addition to his reliefs, his costume and set designs for the theater, his prototypes of men’s and women’s clothing and sketches for teapots and creamers were on display.

Also prominent was the work of the relatively unknown Klutskis (1895-1938). His art was represented in a variety of fields: painting, designs for screens, stands and “Radio-Orator No. 5,” posters, book covers and window designs.

In addition, the exhibition contained several remarkable paintings of Filonov (1882-1941), which, in their tribute to natural form, opposed the geometries of the Suprematists and Constructivists. The film posters of the Stenberg brothers, Vladimir (1899-1982) and Georgii (1900-1933), stood out, as did the work of Ivan Kliun (1873-1943), a painter from a slightly older generation, and the work of the Projectionists, a group of younger artists who came of age in the mid-20s.

The Great Utopia also contained sections devoted to Soviet architecture, textile design, porcelain, graphic design and photography.

The exhibitors did their best to portray the first years of the consolidated Stalin regime as a direct continuation and natural outgrowth of the early years of the revolutionary regime, but the art speaks for itself. There is a world of difference between the unforced, almost anarchic quality of the work from 1918-1923 and the posters, for example, that begin to appear in the late 1920s, exhorting workers or collective farm members to fulfill industrial or agricultural plans. Particularly ominous is Gustav Klutskis’s poster *For the Building of Socialism under Lenin’s Banner* (1930) in which an unintentionally sinister Stalin looms behind Lenin’s head. Stalin also appears, on his own, in Klutskis’s *The Victory of Socialism in Our Country Is Guaranteed* (1932).

A simple endorsement of the work on display and the acknowledgement of its beauty and intellectual force are surely not adequate at this point in history. The artists themselves would certainly not have proceeded in such a manner. They were divided into tendencies that disputed furiously among themselves on an entire range of aesthetic and social questions.

There has been a predilection to adopt an uncritical attitude toward the Soviet artists and their work. There are a number of reasons for this. First, their fate, for the most part tragic, produced for an entire historical period a natural (and correct) tendency to defend them retroactively against the denunciations of the Stalinist bureaucracy. Klutskis died in the purges. Left art critic Nikolai Punin, the husband of poet Anna Akhmatova, was sent to a labor camp in the late 1930s. Roy Medvedev writes: “It would be hard to list all the writers arrested and destroyed in 1936-39” (*Let History Judge* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1989], p. 446).

Malevich died in 1935, after years in which his work was either ignored or reviled as “formalist” and “decadent.” Lissitzky attempted to become a loyal Stalinist, but his artistic conscience prevented him from joining the school of “Socialist Realism.” He simply faded away. Rodchenko ceased serious work after the early 1930s, at one point turning on his own work and destroying 10 canvases. Tatlin, one of the most extraordinary creators of the twentieth century, worked almost exclusively in theater design after 1934. According to a biographer, “The end of his life was very hard. And when he died there were only seven or eight of us at his funeral” (Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova [ed.], *Tatlin* [New York: Rizzoli, 1988] p. 439).

Second, Stalinist repression and Western indifference or hostility to these artists, under international conditions of political reaction, shrouded their work in obscurity to a large extent, thereby making any examination, critical or otherwise, a difficult task. Under the very contradictory conditions of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the breakup of the postwar order, the artists and their work have emerged in recent years from that obscurity.

Paul Wood’s “The Politics of the Avant-Garde”

Broad and far-reaching issues are raised by a number of the essays which appear in the exhibit’s catalog and which, in one way or another, contribute to a critical approach. The first essay in the catalog, “The Politics of the Avant-Garde” by Paul Wood, attempts to address a problem which is of great interest to Marxists: the relation between the artistic work of the avant-garde and their politics and, more specifically, the possible correlation between the artistic avant-garde and the Trotskyist Left Opposition.

Judging from the sources he quotes approvingly, Wood travels in state capitalist (the British Socialist Workers Party) and Pabloite circles. His essay, which contains some valuable material, is nevertheless informed by the outlook and imbued with the atmosphere of petty-bourgeois radicalism.

Wood speaks of the apparent irony that the recent and sudden availability of the art of the Russian avant-garde coincides with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Characteristically, he addresses himself to the “academic researcher” and suggests that he or she “would do well to remember that Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, Vladimir Maiakovskii, Dziga Vertov, Gustav Klutskis, and the rest, working in conditions of privation to begin with and harsh censorship later, were all, without exception, explicitly committed to working class revolution—out of which a new order of international socialism would arise” (*ibid.*, pp. 12).

He continues, “One should not overlook the paradox that the very research which progressively reveals the contours of the Soviet avant-garde is predicated on the historic defeat of the avant-garde’s social vision” (*ibid.*, p. 2).

It is revealing that Wood identifies the collapse of the Soviet state with the historic (perhaps final) defeat of the perspective of “working class revolution” and “international socialism.”

He then discusses the different approaches art historians and critics have traditionally taken toward the Soviet artists and their politics, dividing the former into three general categories.

First, Wood describes those who subscribe to the “severance” theory—i.e., critics who simply dissociate the avant-garde from revolutionary politics. He quotes the well-known art historian John Bowlt, who wrote in 1984: “Perhaps the most dangerous rumor concerning the Russian avant-garde has to do with its alleged support of radical politics, and radical political philosophy in general” (*ibid.*). This piece of bourgeois wishful thinking is disputed by historic fact, including the declarations of the artists concerned.

The second approach, which Wood terms “revisionist,” developed in the late 1970s and the 1980s under the general heading of a critique of Modernism and a new social history of art. Christina Lodder in her *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), a groundbreaking work in many ways, attributed the failure of the Russian avant-garde to the “success” of the revolution. She takes as her premises the existence of a repressive party and its preference for a Realist art. Realist art’s supposed popularity and accessibility to the uneducated masses and the harsh material circumstances that aborted artistic experimentation.

Both of these approaches take as their starting point the greatest lie of the twentieth century: that Stalinism was the inevitable outgrowth and continuity of Bolshevism. The first approach regards the revolution as an incidental (and tragic) event, which represented an interruption in the evolution of the artists’ work. It takes for granted that Leninism and Stalinism form one nightmarish continuum.

The second, more sophisticated approach attempts to draw connections between the aims of the social revolution and the artists, but considers the entire enterprise, somewhat regretfully, a failure. It suggests that the

“masses” are inherently philistine and their rise to power is incompatible with experimental art. Stalinism, the implication goes, is what the population either desired or deserved.

The third argument also advances the falsehood that Stalinism equals Bolshevism, but in an even more sinister form. The new approach, manifested in the work of figures like Boris Groys and Igor Golomshtok, essentially accuses the avant-garde artists of complicity with Stalinism or responsibility for its repulsive offspring in the field of culture, Socialist Realism.

Groys, in *The Culture of the Stalin Period* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), asserts Socialist Realism’s “identity with the avant-garde era” (p. 125) and “the unity of their fundamental artistic aim” (p. 126). The reactionary émigré Golomshtok, in his *Totalitarian Art* (London: Collins Harvill, 1990), writes: “If the principal characteristic of totalitarianism is that it proclaims its ideological doctrine as both uniquely true and universally obligatory, then it is the artistic avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s who first elaborated a totalitarian ideology of culture” (p. 21).

Unraveling this piece of reactionary idiocy would take more time than it’s worth, but a few things can be pointed out. Golomshtok has adopted the view, first propounded in the 1930s by ultra-lefts, of the identity of Stalinism and fascism and taken it one step further. He has apparently managed to identify an ideological doctrine that produces totalitarianism.

Taking the sweeping and occasionally monomaniacal declarations of the Futurist artists at face value, he draws a direct connection between them and the brutal Stalinist system of authoritarian dictates. To utilize the artists’ excesses in the immediately postrevolutionary years, against which Lenin and Trotsky strenuously fought, as proof of their responsibility for the crimes of the 1930s is the height of dishonesty. That some of the “left” arguments were utilized by spokesmen for the bureaucracy at a later period and for different purposes is a separate matter, which we will consider below.

Golomshtok’s real intent is to vilify any outlook that claims it is possible to cognize objective truth, suggests that the world can and should be altered and insists that art has a role to play in that process. He, unlike the more liberal-minded critics, has no intention of forgiving Mayakovsky,^[3] Tatlin and others for their support of the revolution. Nor will he dismiss their declarations of support for Communism and world revolution as incidental or accidental.

In the second part of his essay, Wood points to the “decline” of the avant-garde after the end of War Communism—the revolution’s “heroic” phase—and the introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921, reports on its dissatisfaction with the rising bureaucracy and attempts to correlate the activities of this variegated artistic tendency with those of the Trotskyist Left Opposition. Specifically, Wood links the renewed “left” activity in the arts with two “waves” of opposition to the bureaucracy, 1923-1924 (the formation of the Left Opposition) and 1926-1927 (the creation of the Joint Opposition).

He points legitimately, for example, to two reports given by Tatlin in November 1924 on the work of his Section for Material Culture at the Ginkhuk (State Institute of Artistic Culture) in Petrograd. In these reports, Tatlin “set his defense of a planned approach to the design of material culture in a context of ‘anarchy’ reigning in production” (Wood, p. 13). Wood suggests that there was a “natural” affinity of the avant-garde artists for the Opposition at this time because of the latter’s insistence on economic planning.

After declaring that he doesn’t want to suggest that “Lef was in any simple sense a cultural ‘reflection’ of the Left Opposition,” Wood proceeds to do precisely that, only not “simply.” (Lef, an acronym for “Left Front of the Arts,” was the name of the journal published by the group, founded in 1923, which represented the general outlook of the Futurists.)

Wood states that the “avant-garde, the left front, is thus related to the Left Opposition. It is so, however, not as a reflection but as kind of relatively autonomous equivalent...it was its ‘historically logical aesthetic correlative’” (ibid., p. 17).

Wood asserts that “on at least four grounds the left front of the arts can be read as the cultural correlative of the predominantly Trotskyist Left Opposition: in terms of hostility to NEP; in terms of a commitment to planning; in terms of a requirement for a level of working class prosperity to consume the goods produced; and in terms of a requirement for industrial democracy to provide an environment in which the artistic-constructor/engineer might function” (ibid.).

There is truth to the proposition that the left artists in general were hostile to the growth of the bureaucracy. And there is no lack of evidence of the sympathy of individual artists for Trotsky personally. Both before and after the revolution, his writings on literature and politics carried enormous weight in intellectual circles. Much of this history has been suppressed by Stalinist and bourgeois historians.

We know, for example, that the experimental theater director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, was very close to Trotsky, that Sergei Esenin, the imagist poet who committed suicide in 1925, admired him highly, that poet Osip Mandelstam made warm comments about Trotsky which were suppressed, etc.

Nevertheless, one must reject Wood’s basic thesis. It has two fundamental problems.

In the first place, the identification of a particular artistic-literary current with the Left Opposition equates art and politics in a thoroughly incorrect manner. The Left Opposition was not simply a group of like-minded individuals who were disturbed by the growth of inequality and the suppression of inner-party democracy. The Opposition was the continuator of genuine Bolshevism and Marxism, the representative of the interests of the international working class.

Wood ignores Lenin and Trotsky’s oft-stated rejection of all efforts by literary groups to be named the officially sanctioned “Communist art.” Trotsky wrote: “And at any rate, the Party cannot and will not take the position of a literary circle which is struggling and merely competing with other literary circles.... If it is not possible to determine the place of any given group today, then the Party as a Party will wait patiently and gracefully. Individual critics or readers may sympathize with one group or another in advance. The Party, as a whole, protects the historic interests of the working class and must be more objective and wise” (*Literature and Revolution* [New York: Russell and Russell], pp. 218-219). This is a question we will return to more than once.

Furthermore, Wood, by “lining up” the left artists with the Opposition in this schematic fashion, ignores the difference, even conflict, between two methods of cognizing the world: the Marxist-scientific and the artistic. That the sympathy of the artists for the revolution was not automatically translated into participation in the activities of the Opposition does not indicate, for example, approval of Stalinism or its dogma of “socialism in one country.”

The very process by which the artist cognizes the world, through images; the close link of his or her realm to sense perception, immediate impressions and emotions; and the greater role of intuition and the unconscious in artistic work—this almost guarantees that the artist “lags behind” the politics of the day. The “reward” is that the extraordinary artist divines and reveals truth that goes beyond the immediate struggles.

A question occurs to Wood: “If indeed Lef was a kind of correlate to...the Left Opposition [which we have just suggested is a false premise], why did not the latter embrace it?” (Wood, p. 17). He concludes, through a brief examination of Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution* and Nikolai Gorlov’s *Futurism and Revolution*, that “what could have been a constructive dialogue” (ibid., p. 19) between the avant-garde and the Opposition had, in fact, begun.

It is in the course of his consideration of *Literature and Revolution* that Wood's ignorance and the "asses' ears" of his petty-bourgeois world outlook truly emerge. He describes Trotsky's work, in the jargon of the postmodern critic, as the "main site" of the "historical confrontation between the avant-garde and the Left Opposition."

Trotsky devoted 60 dense and thoughtful pages to the problems raised by Futurism and Formalism. Prefacing a reference to Trotsky's critical remarks on Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem *150 Million* and Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, Wood remarks condescendingly, "It has to be remembered that Trotskii was not an art critic and, at this date, was not overly familiar with the products of the European avant-garde.... Given the unfamiliarity of that avant-garde's devices and the threat these must have posed to a consciousness raised on the norms of Enlightenment/classical culture, it is Trotskii's bias in favor of toleration rather than dismissiveness that deserves our attention" (ibid., p. 18).

Clearly, *Literature and Revolution* and its "tolerant," but critical, bias does not satisfy Wood. He is particularly unsettled, one senses, by Trotsky's remark that Futurism is "in some respects, a Bohemian revolutionary offshoot of the old art...." (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 13).

Searching for more uncritical admirers, Wood happens on the writings of Nikolai Gorlov, an Old Bolshevik, who wrote a pamphlet in 1924 entitled *Futurism and Revolution*. Wood asserts that Gorlov "is more perspicacious than Trotskii about the relations of existing art with bourgeois society. In particular, his technical grasp of the avant-garde's innovations exceeds Trotskii's...." (Wood, p. 18).

Trotsky refers to Gorlov's work in *Literature and Revolution*, stating that it "violates a historic perspective and identifies Futurism with proletarian poetry" (p. 144). At the same time, he praises the pamphlet for "thoughtfully and weightily" summarizing the achievements of Futurism in art and form.

Gorlov's work (included in *The Futurists, the Formalists and the Marxist Critique*, [London: Ink Links, 1979]) is valuable in regard to its analysis of Mayakovsky's poetry in particular. It suffers, however, from an oversimplified and uncritical identification of Futurism with Bolshevism.

Gorlov, in a typical effusive comment, states: "The futurists struck against the taste (and therefore, the life-style) of the bourgeoisie, while we Bolsheviks struck against their order" (ibid., p. 191). Again: "The futurists, as I've already said, made the same revolution as we Bolsheviks, but made it from the other end" (ibid. p. 194).

The actual relation between Futurism, and the avant-garde in general, and the October Revolution is very much an issue in Trotsky's work. The complex social and artistic issues involved, and their profound treatment by Trotsky, were not grasped by Gorlov, and Wood is incapable of even referring to them.

In *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky provided his readers with a detailed and critical overview of Futurism, not simply taking the often extravagant, if entertaining, claims of Mayakovsky and his colleagues at face value. He explained that Futurism was a European phenomenon that reflected, from a sociological point of view, the contradictory development of capitalist society beginning in the mid-1890s.

While Europe experienced two decades of unparalleled prosperity, elaborating "new standards, new criteria of the possible and impossible," and urging "people towards new exploits" (*Literature and Revolution*, p. 126), official society continued to move in the same stagnant channels.

"The armed peace...the hollow parliamentary system, the external and internal politics based on the system of safety valves and brakes, all this weighed heavily on poetry at a time when the air, charged with accumulated electricity, gave signs of impending social explosions. Futurism was the 'foreboding' of all this in art," he wrote (ibid.).

To be continued

Footnotes:

[1] Futurism: An artistic tendency that obtained its fullest expression in Italy and Russia. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), a poet-editor and subsequent Mussolini supporter, published the *Manifesto of Futurist Painters* in 1909. The Futurists invoked a Utopian vision of humanity invigorated by technical progress, particularly the new potentials for speed and harnessed energy. Motion itself was one of their chief subjects. [back]

Constructivism: An artistic tendency that emerged in the Soviet Union in 1920-1921. It stressed construction (technology, maximum utility, "scientific principles") versus composition (self-expression, intuition, individualism). One of its proponents declared that "real construction is utilitarian necessity."

[2] Suprematism: One of the first purely abstract trends in painting, identified with Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1878-1935). The first Suprematist works were exhibited in 1915. Malevich reduced his Suprematist "figures" to the pure plane, the square, circle and cross; he meant them to form the basis of a new artistic language that could express what he called an "entire system of world-building." [back]

[3] Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930): Outstanding Russian and Soviet poet, a sympathizer of the Bolsheviks as early as the 1905 Revolution. One of the strongest Russian adherents of Futurism. An early and ardent supporter of the October Revolution. After his suicide, he was turned into the official poet of Soviet society by the Stalinist bureaucracy. Trotsky devoted considerable attention to his work in *Literature and Revolution*. [back]

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