Designing a Communist Consciousness:
Ideenological Evolution within Russian Futurism
between 1905 and 1930

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Abstract

This thesis examines the political and ideological evolution of the Russian Futurist movement between 1905 and 1930. Drawing on a range of both archival and published sources – and bridging the usual pre- and post-1917 divide – this research explores how Russian Futurism, by engaging directly with its socio-political environment, evolved from an antagonistic origin to become a powerful contributor to the Soviet cultural paradigm.

Russian Futurism has often been regarded as an expression of utopian daydreaming by young, irrational, and enthusiastic artists and writers who were unrealistic in their visions of future Soviet society and naïve in their comprehension of the Bolshevik political agenda. In contrast to this view this thesis demonstrates that Futurists in fact took a very calculated and systematic approach in addressing their contemporary socio-political reality: by considering Italian Futurist concepts through the lens of Marxist philosophy, Russia’s Futurists devised a unique artistic practice that would become integral to the project of creating the Soviet subject. In so doing they demonstrated a keen understanding of Russian society.

The development of Russian Futurism is traced through three major historical stages: the period between the Revolution of 1905 and 1917 (Chapter One); the Revolutions of 1917 and Civil War years (1917-1921) (Chapter Two); and the era marked by the implementation of the New Economic Policy (1921-1928) (Chapter Three). Considered within the specific context of each of these periods, it is evident that the dominant political and ideological trends in early modern Russia had a direct and profound influence upon the formulation and expansion of the Futurist movement. The final chapter (Chapter Four) considers the Futurist program from a different perspective: Bolshevik officials Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky take centre stage as their views on the Futurist project are examined. Through this consideration of Russian Futurism, the phenomenon reveals itself to have represented a concerted yet flexible effort to establish a creative method capable of making a lasting contribution to the ultimate Soviet project: forging a distinctly modern and Communist consciousness.
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The Library of Congress system has been used for transliteration of Russian words throughout this thesis, excluding well-known names (such as for example, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Leon Trotsky, Anatoly Lunarcharsky) where the more common form of spelling has been retained. The use of apostrophes to designate the Russian soft sign has been excluded in the transliteration of the names of individuals for stylistic consistency.

f., fond (collection)

D., deloproizvodstvo (record; a volume of a fond)

op., opis’ (inventory)

d., dd., delo, dela (file, file); the designation d. (delo) has been used throughout the thesis, although some archives use e.kh., edinitsa khranenia (storage unit) instead of d. when referring to a file.

ch., chast’ (part)

l., ll., list, listy (folio, folios or sheet, sheets)

ob, oborot (back side of a folio)
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Introduction

From outside all this might have seemed to be just crazy, but in reality it was the creative tension of people who thought that through their efforts the world would eventually be moved away from its ageless canons and “enter a New Renaissance.”

Nikolai Punin

On the eve of the Revolution, leading Futurist theoretician Nikolai Punin took to his diary and made a personal record of the works being produced by his colleagues in an avant-garde studio in Petersburg. The power of their creativity; the ambition of their ideas; the audacity to start anew, to completely disregard the past – to this day, these characteristics continue to attract scholars from a multitude of disciplinary backgrounds to the phenomenon of Russian Futurism.

Often, however, the objectives, achievements, artefacts and heroes of Futurism have found themselves examined in isolation, divorced from the context of the movement’s own contemporary reality. The result of this “outside” approach has largely created – as was unwittingly predicted by Punin – a perception that Futurism and its proponents were “just crazy.” Consider the commentary of historian Richard Pipes:

Their declared intentions notwithstanding, artists of this school continued to turn out artistic objects – what else could they do? – and rather than mingle with factory workers, amused themselves, as artists have done since time immemorial, in studios and cafés in the company of fellow artists. Behind their creations it is difficult to discern any common principle except the desire to be different and to shock.²

Yet in his blunt assessment of Futurism, Pipes offers scholarship a challenge: passing fair judgement on Futurism is not possible unless it is approached “from inside,” and its efforts analysed within the context of its historical reality.

Much of the existing scholarship on Russian Futurism has interpreted this avant-garde phenomenon as an essentially utopian project – unrealistic in its visions of future Soviet society, and naïve in its comprehension of the Bolshevik political agenda. Examination of the intellectual evolution of Russian Futurism from 1905 to 1930, however, allows Futurism to be considered from a different perspective. The following investigation will demonstrate that the Futurist program was directly informed by the politics and ideology that dominated Russian life during this period. Conventional interpretations contend that Futurism was blindly idealistic: ultimately impractical, it was eliminated by a Soviet political machine that regarded traditional formats of cultural production as more appropriate for and supportive of the official worldview. In more recent times, however, works in the growing field of Soviet cultural studies have recognised a number of elements of the Futurist program as being clearly present in Soviet reality well after Futurism had ceased to exist. By demonstrating the presence of avant-garde models within the Stalinist cultural paradigm, Boris Groys’ work has fundamentally challenged established interpretations of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde. Similarly, Katerina Clark’s Petersburg, The Crucible of Cultural Revolution and Moscow, The Fourth Rome demonstrate the significant role that the avant-garde had in the formation of Soviet cultural identity and the extent to which its concepts permeated cultural mores of the Stalinist era, while architectural historian Danilo Udovički-Selb has drawn attention to the influence of the avant-

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garde upon Soviet architecture throughout the 1930s. Paul Wood’s consideration of the Russian avant-garde phenomenon and problems associated with investigating its political profile represents another powerful contribution to the wave of scholarship that sought to re-examine the avant-garde’s position and role during the Soviet period.

Building upon this corpus of studies, this thesis explores the Futurist project and demonstrates the extent to which it developed in relation to the political and ideological reality of the time. Futurists understood – and indeed, were able to successfully meet – the needs of the Soviet ethos to a far greater extent than has previously been acknowledged, and the presence of their ideas in the later Soviet cultural system is a testament to this ability. That is, the Futurist program of cultural production developed in response to a direct and acute understanding of (and engagement with) its contemporary socio-political conditions, which in turn facilitated meaningful influence on the formation of Soviet culture.

When Futurism first appeared as an artistic and intellectual movement, one of its central doctrines was that art had to take an active role in society. This was not simply an armchair revolution launched by yet another cohort of young creative people aiming to “change the world”; rather, the Futurist dedication to breaking the barrier between art and life yielded an artistic program that was moulded by a keen understanding of, and desire to react to, the volatile state of affairs in Russia. In the main, Futurism has been dismissed as having been “utopian,” where utopian designates the notion that Futurists, in their creative enthusiasm, operated outside the realm of the possible and exhibited only a naïve understanding of the political and ideological intricacies of the time. Instead, an examination of the evolution of the Futurist program from its early stages through to the late 1920s serves to demonstrate that Futurism was always – and acutely –

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conscious of its contemporary reality, and indeed that the Futurist program represented a measured and calculated response to what were complex socio-political conditions.

**Reconsidering Utopia**

In his seminal essay “The Politics of the Avant-Garde,” 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. Wood argues that art historians have 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. Indeed, while assertions that Futurists before 1917 “never had anything to do with politics,” function to emphasise the aesthetic character of the movement, the engagement by Futurists with politics and ideology after the October revolution has been interpreted as a consequence of their rebellious nature. By this view, under new social conditions Futurists recognised and seized an opportunity to strike a final blow against traditionalist canons; this fact notwithstanding, however, Futurists remained divorced from the political realities of the moment, supposedly because “[t]he majority of artists at that time had only the most hazy understanding of Marxist theories.” As a result, the avant-garde movement has been characterised as ethereal and otherworldly; its lofty artistic ideals ultimately pulverised between the cogs of heavy political machinery. In the cases where the political context is not directly considered, the notion of the “impracticality” of avant-garde endeavours is foregrounded: avant-gardists feature in such studies as inspired creators, who had been dedicated to “designing for a utopian world,” and were thus inevitably “out of contact with the brutal reality of

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9Bobrinskaia, Futurizm i kubofuturizm, p. 29.
the new Russia.”¹¹ By emphasising that these projects were ambitious and romantic – but ultimately “utterly impractical” – scholarship of this nature has confined the avant-garde to a transcendental existence.¹² The label of “utopian” is thus systematically applied to the Russian avant-garde in general (and Futurism in particular), excluding this phenomenon from the domain of the real, and (by extension) securing its exceptional artistic achievements against any charge of participation in the Bolshevik project – a project that, of course, developed into one of the most brutal regimes in modern history.

Such a “severance” approach in studies of the Russian avant-garde recalls Slavoj Žižek’s concept of a “decaffeinated revolution.” In his work In Defense of Lost Causes, 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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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 the avant-garde art and its historical context, but these equally bestowed no historical agency on the avant-garde.¹⁵ It would be the works by scholars such as Groys and Igor Gomolstock, facilitated by

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¹⁴ Ibid., p. 158.
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. 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. Groys asserts 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.
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 develops 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 context that the movement must bear historical and
moral responsibility for its political aspirations.

Groys’ assertions have not, however, enjoyed universal acceptance, with
some Western scholars having characterised his proposition as a radical “unitary
narrative,” that seeks to inflict “rhetorical violence on intellectual dialogue.”
Others might reluctantly admit that there is an “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.
Whatever the reaction, however, it must be acknowledged that Groys has certainly
– and irrevocably – 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 conventional characterisation of the Russian avant-
garde as indiscriminately utopian.

16 Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism; Igor Golomstock, Totalitarian Art in the Soviet Union, the Third
17 Groys, The Total Art of Stalinism, p. 9.
19 Christina Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions, The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism, The MIT
Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2005, p. 27.
21 Sidney Monas, “Introductory Essay: Nikolay Punin and Russian Futurism”, in Monas, Greene
Krupala (eds.), The Diaries of Nikolay Punin, p. xxvi.
If we cross from 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 example of the omnipresent revolutionary fervour that infected progressive artists and theoreticians alike, and as such Futurism is again 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. In her study The Russian Revolution, Sheila 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.

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. 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 seemed wide open.

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What emerges from historians’ reading of this period is a more adequate approach to interpreting the Russian Futurist project: if there is an 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. By this assessment, the argument that Futurism was utopian because it lived in its own bubble and was incompatible with the Soviet reality becomes untenable.

There is, however, an interpretation of utopianism that does not contradict – but in fact illuminates – the true nature of the Futurist cause. In discussing 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. 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.²⁵

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 of 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 examining the continual development of the Futurist program from the early 1900s through to the late 1920s, this thesis demonstrates that Futurism – despite appearing “from outside” often fanciful – was rooted in, and consistently exhibited, a very calculated and systematic approach to addressing its contemporary reality.

²⁵ 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).
The Approach and the Framework

The nature of the problem considered in this thesis requires a deconstruction of several boundaries that have dominated scholarly investigation of Russian Futurism. First, the temporal boundary of 1917 has to be surpassed if the development of Futurism is to be considered in its entirety. Historians of the Russian Revolution have in recent times come to regard 1917 not as a boundary, but instead as a moment within a longer historical process. Peter Holquist, for example, foregrounds the notion that the Russian Revolution was embedded in a “continuum of violence,” stretching from the first revolution of 1905 through to the end of the Civil War in 1921.26 Indeed, while scholars of Russian history may opt to employ different time frames in investigating the revolutionary process, they now often “cross the revolutionary divide,” and, without diluting its significance, consider 1917 as an episode within a larger process, rather than a self-contained phenomenon.27 Embracing this logic, the year of 1917 is treated in the ensuing discussion as part of a historical continuity, and not as a point of rupture. Furthermore, the nature of the topic requires that the disciplinary division between history and art history be dissolved, as these two disciplines have treated Russian Futurism very differently, and this thesis has benefited from considering both. Finally, with Futurism originally being an Italian phenomenon, engagement with the significant body of scholarship concerned with Italian Futurism and the treatment of that movement’s political profile has aided in the process of locating a different vantage point from which to re-examine established studies of Russian Futurism.28

27 Orlando Figes, A People’s Tragedy, The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924, Penguin Books, New York, 1998. In this work, Figes considers the 1891 famine as the starting point for his investigation of the Russian Revolution; this study concludes with Lenin’s death in 1924. Sheila Fitzpatrick’s study on the Russian Revolution includes investigation of the first revolution of 1905, Revolutions of 1917, the Civil War, including the NEP period and Stalin’s First Five-Year plan as a “revolution from above.” See Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution, and also Theodore R. Weeks, Across the Revolutionary Divide, Russia and the USSR, 1861-1945, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, West Sussex, 2011.
28 One of the earliest critical accounts of the relationship between Italian Futurism and Fascism that painted this alliance in bleak colours and significantly influenced later scholarship appears in
This dissertation, then, takes a synthetic approach in considering the Russian Futurist project as it developed from the late Tsarist era, through to the Revolution and ensuing Civil War (1917-1921), and into the period of the New Economic Policy (1921-1928). Within this broad timeframe, this study aims to restore contextual reality to Russian Futurism, by demonstrating how the Futurist program developed in response to these specific historic moments, each of which was coloured by deep social and political instability. By examining Futurism through the course of this “continuum of crisis” (to borrow Holquist’s term), it becomes apparent that the Futurist program and the tactics of its proponents were reflective of its time and place. At the core of this crisis was the project of forging a modern (and later, Communist) consciousness among the Russian people. In time, Futurism would come to perceive itself not as a typical, classifiable artistic movement, but rather as a creative method that sought to address reality – a method that continually changed to meet new and emerging challenges, with the ultimate aim of realising the birth of this new modern consciousness.

The term Russian Futurism requires some elaboration. Futurism originated in Italy, and it is widely recognised as the first European avant-garde movement.\(^{29}\) The publication of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s *Futurist Manifesto* in the popular French daily *Le Figaro* on 20 February 1909 represents its official date of birth.\(^{30}\) Within a matter of weeks the Russian public learned of this new phenomenon, and Futurist ideas quickly took root in what was fertile Russian soil.\(^{31}\) The gestation of Russian Futurist ideas culminated in the publication of the first Russian Futurist manifesto in 1912.\(^{32}\) From this time until the onset of revolutionary uprising, “Futurism” was used not only for denoting Russian Futurist endeavours, but also by the general public as a synonym for any modern (or non-traditional) art, regardless of any actual connection with the Futurist program or Futurist aesthetics.\(^{33}\)

The post-revolutionary period brought further complication to the use of the “Futurist” epithet. After 1917, Futurism was one of the progressive tendencies gathered under the umbrella term Soviet avant-garde, but contemporaries (and many scholars) tended to use Futurism to signify the Russian or Soviet avant-garde in general.\(^{34}\) Similarly, the term “leftist” art was employed conterminously with

\(^{29}\) Alberto Schiavo, “Futurismo con e senza fascismo”, in Schiavo (ed.), *Futurismo e Fascismo*, p. 10; Bowler, “Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism”, p. 763.


\(^{31}\) On the transition of Italian Futurism to Russia see Cesare G. De Michelis, *Il futurismo italiano in Russia, 1909-1929*, De Donato, Bari, 1973, and also the updated version of this work, Cesare G. De Michelis *L’avanguardia trasversale, Il futurismo tra Italia e Russia*, Marsilio, Venezia, 2009.


\(^{33}\) Noted, for example, in Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, p. 55. In many ways this is not without justification: almost all progressive artists and poets during this period had, at one point or another, experimented with the Futurist idiom.

Futurism, as a designation that had both political and artistic currency: members of the Futurist cohort supported the revolutionary cause, and in artistic terms they were revolutionary radicals, having rejected all of the traditional premises of art making. During the 1920s two concepts – Constructivism and Production art (Productivism) – were born out of the Futurist logic. Artists and writers engaged in these practices were referred to as Constructivists (“Productivist” features rarely), although the term Futurists also remained in use.

Pre-revolutionary manifestations of Futurism differed markedly from the projects that artists and writers created during the 1920s under the banners of Constructivism and Production art. Though a number of scholars have noted that Constructivism arose out of Futurist ideas, scholarship has generally treated Constructivists as distinct from Futurists. Yet while there is certainly justification, necessity and great scholarly benefit for considering these phenomena individually, the term “Futurism” is used throughout the entire time.


See, for example, a contemporary piece by Sergei Tretjakov "Ot kuda i kuda? (Perspektivy futurizma)" in LEF, No. 1, 1923, pp. 192-203, where the author’s use of the term “Futurism” is not restricted to the endeavors of the pre-revolutionary period. It is important to note that scholarship recognises two Constructivisms during the 1920s, the first (1920-1921) represents predominantly innovative laboratory artistic research, while the second (from late 1921) developed production art theory and is thus also known as Productivism. For Productivists the “pure,” laboratory, or simply non-utilitarian Constructivism was, despite its revolutionary innovations, still art-making in the old sense of the word and only its merger with industry in the manufacture of useful things would facilitate a total reconstruction of arts. The majority of Constructivist artists moved after late 1921 into the Productivist idiom (See Maria Gough, The Artist as Producer, Russian Constructivism in Revolution, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005, pp. 1-19; Slobodan Mijušković, Od samodolžnosti do smrti slikarstva, Umetničke teorije (i prakse) ruske avangarde, Geopoetika, Beograd, 1998, pp. 251-281).

Slobodan Mijušković notes that Constructivism was defined first in theory and only later in practice with articles by Nikolai Punin, Osip Brik, and Boris Kushner in Iskusstvo komuny playing a central role (Mijušković, Od samodolžnosti do smrti slikarstva, pp. 251-252). Christina Lodder also argues that it was in Iskusstvo komuny that a basis for the theory of Constructivism and Production art was laid (Christina Lodder, “The Press for a New Art in Russia, 1917-1921”, in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt (ed.), Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940, University Press Florida, Gainesville, 1997, pp. 85-86; 90). Katerina Clark defines the new avant-garde movement – Constructivism – as a “postrevolutionary mutation” from Futurism (Clark, Petersburg, p. 103). Igor Golomstock notes that in Russian post-revolutionary art, Futurism, Constructivism and Productionism “were in effect one single phenomenon that appeared under different names.” Golomstock, Totalitarian Art, p. 16.

See, for example, Halina Stephan’s work on the journal LEF where she argues that Futurism ceased to exist in its “pure form” in 1917, thereby rendering its later manifestations distinctly separate phenomena (Halina Stephan, LEF and the Left Front of the Arts, Verlag Otto Sagner, München, 1981, pp. 58-59).
span under consideration in this thesis, with later movements regarded as stages of Futurism. 39 Similarly, "Futurists" is also employed to designate those individuals who carried the development of Futurist ideas from one stage into another (even if some of them are known more commonly as Constructivists). 40 Retaining the terms "Futurism" and "Futurists" serves to highlight the continuity of this phenomenon from its first manifesto of 1912 through to the late 1920s. Futurism was in essence the perpetual development of an idea, from the pre-revolutionary period, through its transformation during the Revolutions and Civil War, and indeed through until its conclusion in the late 1920s. As they had been perceived by Futurists theoreticians in the 1920s themselves, 41 Constructivism and Production art are both regarded as permutations of the original pre-revolutionary Futurist logic: although their manifestations, nomenclature and protagonists may differ, these can essentially be understood as evolutionary stages of Futurism. 42

39 Constructivism as a movement crystallised in 1921. On the formation of this movement see Christina Lodder, "The Transition to Constructivism", in The Great Utopia, pp. 266-281. Constructivism can be understood as a radical transformation of Futurism, foregrounding as it did the idea of art as a rational process for learning to handle and use materials in the construction of objects – a move away from the early Futurist principle of art that shocks. Productivism was a further radicalisation of Constructivism, which proposed that the research of materials and the knowledge associated with the production of objects should be applied in industrial production and the manufacture of socially relevant things. Although the theory of Productivism was already present in discussions that took place during the Civil War, a crystallisation of the Productivist concept took place between late 1921 and 1924 (Mijišković, Od samodovolnosti do smrti slikarstva, pp. 251-281). Thus a distinct thread of development can be traced from Futurism to Constructivism and Production art, as a gradual deconstruction of traditional formats of art making and a celebration of the utilitarian aspect, based on the original Futurist call for art to be reinvented as a part of everyday life.

40 In her studies on various aspects of Constructivism and Production art, Christina Kiaer for example considers Boris Arvatov as the quintessential Productivist critic. In the following discussion, however, Arvatov is treated as part of the Futurist continuum and is thus referred to as Futurist theoretician. See Kiaer, "Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects", pp. 105-118.

41 Best exemplified by two essays: Sergei Tretjakov "Otkuda i kuda? (Perspektivy futurizma)" in LEF, No. 1, 1923, pp. 192-203 and Nikolai Chuzhak, "Pod znakom zhiznestroenii (opyt osoznanii iskusstva dnia)" in LEF, No. 1, 1923, pp. 12-39; Chuzhak’s article was recently translated into English by Christina Lodder: N. F. Chuzhak, "Under the Banner of Life-Building (An Attempt to Understand the Art of Today)", Art in Translation, Vol. 1, No. 1, 2009, pp. 119-151. Since the journal LEF (Left Front of Arts) functioned as a mouthpiece for various avant-garde artists and writers, in many cases those associated with it were also known as LEFists (lefovtsy).

42 In his introduction to the memoirs of the poet Benedikt Livshits (a contemporary of the Futurists, and a member of their circle during one period), Tsezar Volpe notes that neither the theory and practice of Constructivism, nor the "utilitarianism of the LEF aesthetics" (meaning Production art) can be understood outside of the history of Futurism. Tsezar Volpe, "Concerning the Memoirs of Benedikt Livshits", in Benedikt Livshits, The One and a Half-Eyed Archer, (John E. Bowlt trans./ed.), Oriental Research Partners, Newtonville, Massachusetts, 1977, p. 28. See also Sarah Dadswell, "Re-
The birth year of the Futurist movement – 1909 – stands as the logical starting point of this investigation. The first chapter, however, which posits that Futurism could not have been apolitical in the pre-revolutionary period, required an investigation of the 1905 Revolution (which historically encapsulates the period between 1904 and 1907), with a focus on the political engagement of those individuals who would eventually become doyens of Futurism. Stretching the history of Russian Futurism to 1905 permits an incorporation of this important episode of Russian history into the formative years of Futurism, which in turn serves to buttress the argument that – even in its initial stages – Futurism was socially and politically conscious, as its protagonists had an already established track record of social engagement.

The end date of 1930 is justified symbolically (rather than historically): it was in April 1930 that the most prominent Futurist, poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, committed suicide. Though Futurism experienced several metamorphoses during the period between 1909 and 1930, Mayakovsky remained a constant figure, and was indeed synonymous with Russian Futurism. In an article dedicated to the memory of Mayakovsky, the then top Soviet cultural official Anatoly Lunacharsky eloquently articulated the poet’s artistic commitment by evoking an image of an “iron lyre” – a powerful symbol of art in combat, and one that remains emblematic of the entire Futurist project. There are alternative (perhaps historically more justified) dates that could have featured as the end point of this thesis: development of the Futurist program ceased in 1928 with closing of its mouthpiece Novyi LEF; 1928 was also the year of a seismic shift in Soviet history, as Stalin replaced the New Economic Policy with a more radical approach by introducing the first of his Five-Year Plans, a change that essentially announced the outset of the Stalinist era in Soviet history. Alternatively, 1932 could have been taken as an end point, marking as it did the state sanction of Socialist Realism as the official mode of Soviet artistic expression (a development that effectively


eliminated the existence of all the other contemporary artistic and literary groups, including Futurists).\textsuperscript{44}

It is Mayakovsky’s death in 1930, however, that stands as the strongest symbolic closure to this story, as it was his life and work that most profoundly embodied the core Futurist principles. Indeed, this thesis opens with an investigation of Mayakovsky’s police files concerning his involvement with clandestine revolutionary activities in the late Tsarist period; it closes by noting the recent publication of compiled secret police files investigating the circumstances of his suicide.\textsuperscript{45} It is between these two files that the story of the political and ideological profile of Futurism unfolds.

Despite Mayakovsky’s central role, however, this study breaks free from the confines of the biographical approach. Russian history boasts a plethora of stellar individuals who championed the avant-garde cause in this period, and the method of observing artistic and literary endeavours through the prism of an individual person is common.\textsuperscript{46} Notwithstanding the utility of this approach, its dominance has served to paint a somewhat distorted image of Futurist history. Different people carried the Futurist banner forward at different times, and as such the \textit{dramatis personae} change in this thesis from chapter to chapter. The first section, dealing with the period from 1905 to the Revolutions of 1917, centres around those individuals who formed the core of the Futurist movement in this period – Vladimir Mayakovsky, David Burliuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vasilii Kamenskii, and

\textsuperscript{44} In her study of Russian Futurism during the inter-revolutionary years, Sarah Dadswell notes that Futurism lasted roughly between 1908 and 1928, and thus regards the closure of Futurist publication \textit{Novyi LEF} in 1928 as the end point of the Futurist project (Dadswell, “Re-approaching Russian Futurism, The Inter-Revolutionary Years, 1908-1915”, p. 42). The more common end date of 1932 is exemplified by the studies on the avant-garde such as \textit{The Great Utopia, The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932}, Exhibition catalogue, Guggenheim Museum Publication, New York, 1992 and Andrei Krusanov, \textit{Russkii avangard, 1907-1932}, Istoricheskii obzor v trekh tomakh, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, Moscow, 2003; 2010.


Vladimir Tatlin. The following chapter, which discusses the evolution of the Futurist program through the merging of its ideas with Marxism, foregrounds primarily those leading Futurist theoreticians who facilitated this process – Nikolai Punin, Osip Brik and Boris Kushner. The chapter encapsulating the period between 1921 and 1928 relies on the material from Futurist publications *LEF* (*Left Front of the Arts*) and *Novyi LEF*, within which – aside from those by Brik and Kushner – theoretical pieces by Sergei Tretiakov, Nikolai Chuzhak and Boris Arvatov pushed Futurism into a new stage. The final chapter observes the Futurist program from a different perspective: in this chapter, Bolshevik officials Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky take central stage, as their views on the Futurist project are considered.

Composing a history of the political and ideological evolution of an artistic idea is something of a delicate balancing act, with several branches of scholarship serving to anchor the research process. Drawing on studies of Russian and Soviet political, social and cultural history has assisted in placing Futurism within a concrete historical context. Furthermore, a significant part of the thesis is concerned with ideology – particularly the chapters on Futurism during the Civil War and the NEP era, where Futurist principles were first merged with the postulates of Marxist theory. As such, engaging with the growing field of Soviet subjectivity serves to define the approach to the problem of Futurism and ideology, as ideology is considered not as an abstract concept that was superficially painted onto ambitious artistic experimentation, but as something Futurism internalised and attempted to bring to life through its practice.

Ideology functions as a mediator in the relationship between the sovereign and the subject: it is through ideology that the relationship between the ruling body and the subject is organised, that reality is understood, and that one’s place in the world can be identified. The entire Soviet project was defined by experiments with human nature – attempts to forge the ideal Soviet subject, or the Soviet “New Man” through official ideology.47 The Futurist dedication to bringing ideology to

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life is considered here as part of this wider project to forge Soviet subjectivity, and not as an isolated artistic adventure. Indeed, through the examination of Futurism in this thesis, the phenomenon reveals itself to have represented a concerted yet flexible effort to establish a creative method capable of making a lasting contribution to this ultimate Soviet project: forging a distinctly modern and Communist consciousness. The issue of Soviet subjectivity is a layered problem, and it remains a heavily disputed topic among scholars.\textsuperscript{48} Engaging with the basic premise of this scholarship, however, is a fundamental aspect of this attempt to understand and situate Futurism within its historical context.

Having approached this topic from a background in art history, my established familiarity with much of the voluminous visual material produced by the Russian and Soviet avant-garde and my prior engagement with art theory both served to coordinate this investigation. From its inception, Futurism represented an artistic strategy that easily fluctuated between all of the various branches of creative production – to wit, Russian Futurism began as a cohort of artists and poets, where individuals moved from one creative medium to another, using the brush and the pen interchangeably.\textsuperscript{49} This thesis, however, relies predominantly on the visual arts in cases where examples are required to illustrate a particular problem. The central discussion in this thesis has been oriented by recent examples of art history scholarship that have incorporated a closer examination of the influence of historical circumstance upon the artistic expression and behaviour of Russian avant-gardists. This approach is a hallmark of studies by Maria Gough concerning the relationship between Constructivism and Production art and the conditions brought on by the NEP,\textsuperscript{50} as well as the investigation by Jane A. Sharp


\textsuperscript{50} Gough, \textit{The Artist as Producer}.
into the way that censorship in the public domain affected artistic production during the late Tsarist era.\footnote{Jane A. Sharp, “The Russian Avant-Garde and Its Audience: Moscow, 1913”, \textit{Modernism/Modernity}, Vol. 6, No. 3, 1999, pp. 91-116 and \textit{Russian Modernism Between East and West, Natalia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-Garde}, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006 (in particular pp. 97-142).} Finally, in examining how Futurism sought to engage in the practice of politics and ideology, this thesis also broadly relates to the emerging trend of new Soviet political history.\footnote{Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Politics as Practice: Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History”, \textit{Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History}, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 27-54.} In line with this approach, this investigation does not regard politics and ideology as \textit{a priori} dirty words that need to be divorced from the consideration of art; nor are they considered to be unilateral practices enforced from above while the subjects (artists included) were merely “singing along.”\footnote{Naiman, “On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them”, p. 311.} Accordingly, the new Soviet political history, the revisionist wave of cultural history and the new trends in art history scholarship concerning the Russian and Soviet avant-garde, and the approach to ideology in the studies of Soviet subjectivity all inform this investigation of Russian Futurism.

\textbf{Source Base}

My research draws upon a wide range of both archival and published sources. Material concerning Futurists’ pre-revolutionary activities, including police files and documents pertaining to the censorship of Futurist publications and lectures, has been drawn from within the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) and the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA). The holdings of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) and the archive and library of the State Museum of Vladimir Mayakovsky, both of which include \textit{fonds} on Futurist artists and theoreticians, as well as rare publications regarding artistic production in the late 1910s and the 1920s, were also included in the primary research pool. In addition to archival material that stands as testament to Futurists’ engagement with their socio-political milieu, published memoirs of some of the most prominent Futurists serve as significant points of reference. Furthermore, publications produced by the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Department of Visual Arts during the Civil War period, in particular the journal
Iskusstvo kommuny (December 1918 – April 1919), as well as the NEP era Futurist mouthpiece, LEF (1923-1925) and Novyi LEF (1927-1928), are all core materials drawn upon in the course of this investigation into the development of the Futurist program during these periods. Apart from Futurist publications, material from contemporary print media aids in the process of mapping the historical context within which Futurism developed. Pamphlets, newspaper articles, records of debates and speeches and published collections of archival material pertinent to the Soviet cultural sphere, as well as studies on various topics penned by Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky – along with material on Lenin’s involvement with the cultural domain – were used extensively to construct a comprehensive image of the contemporary perception of Futurism by the Soviet officialdom. Engagement with the distinct branches of history and art history scholarship establishes a framework for discussion within each chapter.

Art as Activism

Although the main focus of this work is the political and ideological development of the Russian Futurist program, it is useful to briefly outline the premise of Italian Futurism, along with those Italian Futurist elements that would eventually serve as the basis for its Russian counterpart. When Marinetti published the Futurist Manifesto, his aim was to shake centuries-old European cultural and intellectual pillars. Though the Manifesto would introduce ideas that were generally in accord with the growing enthusiasm for modernisation, industrialisation and urbanisation, the mode by which Marinetti chose to convey his ideas was far from subtle. In calling for a celebration of what he described as a new kind of beauty – a beauty of mechanical and industrial origin – Marinetti demanded the destruction of all historical heritage, including museums, libraries and academies of any kind. His call for a new start, a tabula rasa upon 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. Although couched in aggressive and militant rhetoric, Marinetti astutely observed that the omnipresent Italian historical heritage and the
traditionalist, preservationist mentality that it transmitted hindered the possibility for a wholehearted embrace of progress and modernisation.\textsuperscript{54} Marinetti also understood that art could be a powerful tool for social change: elimination of old cultural canons would make the first dent in the traditionalist mentality, while dynamic, urban, and machine-inspired artistic production would serve to engender a modern consciousness within the public. The medium of Futurism was to be life itself; the ultimate goal of the Futurists would be to reformat the entire experience of human existence. Inspired by the belief that new times required a new human, and that art, through its various methods and techniques, had the power to spark an overhaul of human consciousness, Futurists sought to radically reinvent every single branch of artistic production in order to turn this endeavour into a tool for social change.\textsuperscript{55}

Originating in the Italian industrial triangle between Milan, Turin and Genoa – the most prosperous and technologically advanced area on the Apennine peninsula – Futurism was mesmerised by industry, machinery, and the rhythm of work in factories, by fast-developing cities with seas of people, busy traffic and the constant buzz of activity. Speed, movement, dynamism and the cacophony of contemporary life – epitomised by the automobile, the aeroplane and the factory – were a constant source of inspiration for Italian Futurist paintings, sculpture, music and writing. Had these Futurists contained their artistic innovation within the realm of subject matter, however, they would have remained merely another artistic group, having simply traded meadows for skyscrapers. Instead, their credo was to change not only the content, but also the form of their artistic production. Prompted by a desire to break barriers between art and life, Italian Futurists aimed to introduce the mundane into their art making methods. This logic had, for example, a revolutionary implication in the domain of sculpture: traditional


sculptural materials such as marble or bronze were abandoned, being as they were intrinsically static and traditionally used to capture and immortalise some eternal concept. The fast pace of modern life could not be captured in this manner, and these artists thus developed techniques that introduced (for the first time in the history of sculpture) the use of materials from daily life – cardboard, metal scraps, pieces of newspaper, straw or mud – to create constructions that sought to embody the transient nature of modern times. This pioneered a radical shift in the artistic paradigm, which ultimately reached its zenith in Russia. Freed of the established sculptural canon that dictated the use of marble or bronze in making a sculpture that would stand aloof on a city square, in a church or a gallery, Futurist artists understood that the sculptor was someone with an expertise in handling various materials and constructing objects. The next step was to leave the studio entirely, to seek to implement that expertise within industry in the construction of mass-produced objects that could have immediate value in everyday life.56

Another especially striking reinvention of traditional artistic expression occurred in the realm of theatre. Futurist theatre was the key avenue in which citizens engaged with Futurist artistic concepts within the public sphere. Indeed, throughout history theatre has often been more than just another medium of entertainment – it has been a stage for socio-political expression.57 The modus operandi of Marinetti’s Futurism – arte azione, 58 or art as an (artistic/social/political) action – found its first expression in the Futurist serate


57 In his essay on the relationship between politics and theatre in Fascist Italy, Emilio Gentile explains: “In classical Greece, the term theatron could mean either a place for dramatic performances or one for civic gathering and public orations. Similarly, in modern mass society there is a theatrical dimension to politics, understood in the dual etymological meaning of the term.” Emilio Gentile, “The Theatre of Politics in Fascist Italy”, in Günter Berghaus (ed.), Fascism and Theatre, Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance in Europe, 1925-1945, Berghahn Books, Providence, 1996, pp. 72-93.

58 On the concept of arte azione and its origins in the Futurist program see Giovanni Lista, Scott Sheridan, “The Activist Model or the Avant-Garde as Italian Invention”, South Central Review, Vol. 13, No. 2/3 (Summer – Autumn 1996), pp. 13-34.
(“evenings”). A *serata* was a theatrical event dedicated more often to stirring political speeches and outrageous challenges to social conventions than to poetry and prose. In fact, the first Futurist *serata* was strategically staged in the city of Trieste – long a focal point of contemporary political unrest. This Futurist *serata* was designed to arouse and provoke, to push people out of their comfort zone in order to force them into action and participation in the public sphere. Pandemonic brawls were a common (and, according to Futurists, most desirable) outcome of a *serata*, with conflicts often spilling into the surrounding streets. As Anna Lawton explains: “The idea behind the evening was to expand the stage, to go beyond the boundaries of the artificially limited performing space, to turn the whole city into a stage and life into a performance.” Marinetti described Futurist *serate* as the introduction of fists into the artistic battle; as the brutal entrance of life into art – for Marinetti, theatre was inextricably intertwined with political activism.

It was with great virtuosity that Marinetti merged the artistic with the social, the private with the public, the poetic with the political. Futurism’s unique standing among the modern European movements was assured by this ability to effortlessly fluctuate between the ethereal and the quotidian. Futurism was – from its inception – a totalising project, which aimed to reinvent all aspects of creative production in order to use the diverse arsenal of culture as a tool for irrevocably modernising the minds and behaviour of human beings.

The approach underpinning Futurist production was a desire to “épater la bourgeoisie,” to shock the bourgeoisie out of what, to Futurists, had become the *status quo* in Italian society. Marinetti saw the bourgeois class as guardians of conservative traditionalist values, a group bound by social and religious

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60 See Berghaus (ed.), *F. T. Marinetti, Critical Writings*, pp. 47-50.
convention – a group that valued personal comfort over any kind of social activism, and thus as a class that effectively hindered the embrace of modern progress. Through their dramatic reinvention of all aspects of creative production – from literature and visual arts, to theatre and architecture – and especially through their embrace of modern, technologically advanced media such as photography and cinema, Futurists forged an interventionist art, an art that sought to provoke, as has recently been noted, the bourgeois public to awaken from its “perceptual coma.”

When the cerebral waves emanating from Italian Futurism first lapped at the shores of Russian consciousness, Russian cultural production was similarly transformed. Russian artists sought to express (through painting, poetry, manifestos and public performances) a similar preference for abandoning tradition in favour of embracing the modern. As scholars of entanglements have noted, translocation of ideas entails their transmogrification. In particular, we can observe a profound transformation of Futurist notions taking place in the years of the Civil War. It was this change – perhaps best described in Mayakovsky’s words, which announced that, instead of a jester’s rattle, Futurists were now to carry architectural blueprints in their hands – that saw the birth of a distinctly Russian rendering of Futurism. Where pre-revolutionary Russian Futurism was, like its Italian counterpart, anarchical, provocative, and bellicose, in the years


following the October Revolution Russian Futurism sought to transform its own rebellious energy into a constructive force.\textsuperscript{67}

This change occurred as a result of a systematic merger of Futurist principles with Marxist ideology: as Futurists recognised many of the premises of their program in this state-sponsored philosophy, they began to appreciate that through their work they could contribute to the task of building the Communist system. This profound re-orientation from an anarchical into an organisational force represents a distinctly Russian interpretation of avant-gardism. As has been pointed out by Italian scholar Alberto Fiz, the relationship between Italian and Russian Futurism was never that of identical twins – though the two movements were brothers, they were brothers with very different features.\textsuperscript{68} For Italian Futurists, after destruction would come more destruction: Marinetti’s movement failed to provide a viable alternative of what the future ought to look like, and as such Italian Futurism typified the nihilistic European avant-garde model.\textsuperscript{69} Russian Futurism, in stark contrast, managed to channel avant-garde energies and, by internalising Marxist teachings, offered a vision for the new world.

A complete psychological and intellectual reprogramming of human beings (aimed at creating modern individuals who would be capable of facing the challenges of the technological era) was the central premise common to both the Russian Futurist and Communist projects. Russian Futurists, drawing upon the teachings of their Italian brethren, believed that artistic practice had a key role to play in this process. In the period between the October Revolution and the late

\textsuperscript{67} Although some historians have noted that the Futurist practice of turning away from their previous tactics began during the First World War (see Cohen, \textit{Imagining the Unimaginable}), and indeed, quoted verses by Mayakovskiy were penned in 1915, it was in fact only during the Civil War that Futurism began to implement such tactical changes in a more systematic and defined way – as will be demonstrated in the following chapters.

\textsuperscript{68} Fiz, “Il futurismo russo e l’Italia”, p. 31.

\textsuperscript{69} In his seminal study on the theory of the avant-garde, Renato Poggioli defined nihilism as one of the quintessential characteristics of an avant-garde movement, along with activism (a tendency by the avant-garde to be involved with its social surroundings), antagonism (the spirit of hostility and opposition), and agonism (the element of sacrifice willingly accepted by avant-garde members, who dared to overcome existing boundaries in order to establish a platform upon which a new future could be built). See Renato Poggioli, \textit{The Theory of the Avant-Garde}, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1968 (the work was originally published in Italian in 1962). An equally significant contribution to our understanding of the nature of the avant-garde is found in Peter Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984 (originally published in 1973).
1920s, Futurists continually developed a program that would yield a reinvention of art, art that was inspired by the possibilities of modern technological era and was based in Marxist philosophy and the principle of Communist life-building. The Futurist artistic program in this period developed as a two-pronged strategy, seeking both to eliminate the old and to forge a method of artistic practice that would answer the needs of a new social reality. With respect to the former, Futurists demonstrated the incongruence between old artistic formats and contemporary life. Old formats of art production (especially painting and sculpture), old literary genres and theatre practice, traditional methods of public celebration (which essentially combined the practice of pagan rituals and Christian processions) – these had no place within the Futurist program.

Discrimination against these forms by Russian Futurists was based predominantly upon the fact that they were intrinsically linked with the old (bourgeois) worldview, as art production inevitably asserted the values of its epoch and its society. The need for a total elimination of the bourgeois artistic paradigm was based on the belief that this art was marked by a reliance upon and an expression of imagination, inspiration, contemplation, spirituality, emotionality, subjectivism, individualism, and idealism,\textsuperscript{70} principles that were fundamentally at odds with the Communist paradigm. To Futurists, these traditional forms were inherently ideologically corrupt. Furthermore, these forms were pre-technological in nature, and thus static, totally un-modern and technically unable to enhance the dynamism of life in the technological era.

The Futurist strategy for contributing to the forging of a new Communist reality was to merge artistic practice with industry. Instead of producing muse-inspired paintings of reclining nudes in their studios, the new Russian artists were to engage in the creation of objects and surroundings for use in everyday life. The central principle of this production, inspired directly by Marxist philosophy, was that the behaviour dictated by the use of these modern objects would in turn engender a modern and Communist consciousness. A good illustration of this logic was Anton Lavinskii’s mobile book kiosk for the State Publishing House (Gosizdat). Fabricated from modern materials, this construction had large glass windows for

\textsuperscript{70} Mijušković, \textit{Od samodovoljnosti do smrti slikarstva}, p. 252.
exhibiting various books produced by the State Publishing House. It was a construction present in the streets, visible and accessible to great numbers of passers-by. Lavinskii’s kiosk was a completely new format of art production, a form that had no artistic pre-history. It was also a quintessentially modern construction with a social purpose (the exhibition and sale of low-priced books), and it was imbued with a logic drawn from central Bolshevik concepts dedicated to the eradication of illiteracy and the accessibility of education by the wider Soviet population. A construction made in modern materials and through modern technological processes, this kiosk was a form that had no historic link to bourgeois ideology, and that served a purpose in everyday life while also championing state ideology.

Figure 1: Anton Lavinskii, Book kiosk, Moscow, 1924

Futurist concepts would also incorporate a transition from art production that was individualistic in its nature, to a more objective creativity that was held in check by both the social purpose of Futurist artworks and by the rationality of industrial production. Russian Futurism thus forged an artistic practice that was at once thoroughly modern and thoroughly Communist. In turn, this new artistic practice changed the role of the artist, while also allowing art to influence the everyday environment and, by extension, the people who made use of these new spaces and objects. A reconstruction of all other artistic and literary methods in line with these principles drove the Futurist program during this period.

The development of the Futurist program did not, of course, always proceed unrestricted – especially as theoreticians and artists themselves often experienced difficulty in properly defining some of their concepts. A number of projects (unlike Lavinskií’s kiosk) went no further than the drawing board – and indeed for a long time the low yield of actualised projects served as an indisputable indication of the utopian and impractical nature of Russian Futurism. Research into the economic conditions prevalent during the early Soviet period, however, serves to highlight that the economic and administrative state of the country was detrimental to production in all domains of industry at that time. Considered against the fact, for example, that 1924 saw all of Soviet Russia produce just one hundred cars and trucks (as well as eleven tractors), Futurist production is deserving of a more nuanced judgment. That is, while there is undoubtedly strong evidence that some aspects of Futurist progressive theory encountered difficulty in the transition into reality, it must also be remembered that

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72 See in particular Gough, The Artist as Producer.
developmental experience requiring a process of trial and error was a luxury during this period. Furthermore, Soviet administrative and bureaucratic practices during the 1920s often created instability within industry, and frequent managerial and policy changes – which often served only to disrupt workflow continuity – frustrated attempts by Futurists to implement their ideas within the industrial environment. Faced with these circumstances, Futurists admitted that they might only be able to trace a path for artistic practices of the future.

The apparent inability of Futurism to comprehend its own contemporary political circumstances has also often been supported by the supposed fact that the Soviet leadership (and in particular Lenin) dismissed Futurists as operating in the realm of fantasy, rather than reality. Unfortunately, much scholarship on Futurism has suffered from interpreting Lenin’s views as the incontrovertible judgement as to the merits of the Futurist project. Certainly, Lenin’s call for the recruitment of “trustworthy anti-Futurists,” 74 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 program meant that Futurists were incapable of understanding their political reality, and constructing an ideologically sound strategy in response. It is important to keep in mind that Marxist theory was dynamic rather than rigid (and nowhere is this more evident than in Marx’s musings on art). This complexity permitted the existence of competing views, all of which could equally be regarded as Marxist. Thus, while there can be little doubt as to the influence of Lenin’s views, they do not prove the “incompatibility of Futurist rhetoric and Marxian political theory.” 75 Lenin’s stance on Futurism was neither the only possible Marxist approach, nor was it representative of some universal view of the Soviet leadership – a point that will be demonstrated in the final chapter of the thesis.

74 Lenin’s note written in 1921 to M. N. Pokrovskii, Deputy People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, V. I. Lenin, O literature i iskusstve, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moscow, 1986, pp. 330-331.
Survey of Chapters

The investigation opens with a chapter that considers Russian Futurism in the period between 1905 and 1917. Historians have shown that the revolutionary events of 1905 affected every part of the Russian Empire and every social stratum, demonstrating that political affairs permeated all aspects of everyday Russian life. An examination of the available material on the activities during this period of those artists who would become leading members of the Futurist cohort demonstrates that they, like all Russian citizens, could not have remained indifferent to the dramatic reality that surrounded them. Although the activities analysed in this section predate the formation of the Futurist network in Russia, they stand as testament to the kind of engagement and commitment to social action exhibited by these artists prior to the birth of Futurism, demonstrating that formation of Futurist network emerged from a larger constellation of political activism. The second component of this chapter demonstrates how the early formation of Futurism and its associated artistic practices came about not only as an expression of a particular artistic credo, but were directly moulded by the social and political reality of the last years of Tsarist rule. In addition to the use of primary source material, history scholarship concerning this period serves to frame this chapter and restore historical reality to Futurist endeavours.

The ensuing second chapter tracks the development of Futurist ideas during the Civil War that, following the October Revolution in 1917, saw the Red Army locked in conflict with its numerous opponents until 1921. During this period Futurism underwent a dramatic reinvention, forging a program for artistic production based upon a merging of Futurist and Marxist principles. Writings of leading Futurist theoreticians gathered from archives and contemporary publications form the core material drawn upon in this chapter, with Futurist journals in this period such as Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, Iskusstvo, Iskusstvo kommunity and IZO: Vestnik Otdela izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv N.K.P. being of primary interest. Detailed investigation of these publications permits an enhanced

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understanding of the efforts of Futurist leaders, who sought to orient modern artistic practice in a way that would support the fledging Communist society and protect the results of the October Revolution at a time when revolutionary victory was still uncertain. The central Futurist notion of eliminating the past from creation of a base for a completely modern artistic practice is analysed in the light of contemporary reality, which demanded that the old cultural scaffolding be eliminated in favour of a brand new Communist system. The Futurist program is thus shown to mirror the contemporary military field, where Bolsheviks fought against forces of the old system (among other opponents) in an effort to forge the foundation for a new society. This analysis will also challenge some of the established views on Futurism, including the idea that Futurism was indiscriminately iconoclastic when it came to dealing with the past.

An exploration of Futurist endeavours during the period marked by the New Economic Policy focuses primarily on Futurist journals *LEF*, published between 1923 and 1925 and *Novyi LEF*, published from 1927 to 1928. These publications represent a large pool of material, which has been tackled in various ways by previous scholarship, offering as it does material on the development of literature and visual arts not only in line with the Futurist current, but also of various other trends that carry the broad designation of Soviet avant-garde. Further elaboration of those Futurist ideas that emerged during the Civil War period is traced within these publications. Amid conditions that required the radical revolutionary campaign to be scaled back significantly in order to bring the country back from the brink of economic disaster, the Bolshevik leadership was forced to sanction the partial implementation of a market-based economy, and to collaborate with experts of non-Communist bent.\[^{77}\] In a situation perhaps best described as uncomfortable, negotiating between the need to draw upon the established skills of the old intelligentsia while simultaneously balancing the revolutionary commitment to Communist society, Futurists devised a cultural strategy aimed at fending off the crisis and keeping the revolutionary process on track. Offering their blueprints for celebrations of public holidays and plans for work and leisure spaces that would embody the principles of Communist society,

\[^{77}\text{See, for example, Rosenberg, "Introduction: NEP Russia as a 'Transitional' Society", pp. 1-11.}\]
Futurists sought to fortify a Communist consciousness in Russia through tailored cultural production in a critical moment when the revolutionary process faced a significant challenge. This investigation will demonstrate that, far from being idealistic in their approach, Futurism was acutely aware of the need to operate within the coordinates of possible, forging its own “minimum program” – an element of Futurist development that has previously evaded scholarly attention. It is also in this period that Futurists came to regard themselves as producers of “the art of the crisis” – a method for dealing with the volatile state of affairs within which the creation of a new kind of consciousness was of pressing urgency. It is this definition that allows us to understand Futurist endeavours as a component of the larger project of forging (Soviet) subjectivity, and to establish Futurism more firmly as a precursor to the later Stalinist cultural model.

The final chapter considers the way in which Futurism was received among Bolshevik officials during the NEP era. Relying primarily on the writings of Anatoly Lunacharsky, head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (the Soviet institution in charge of the domains of arts and education) and Leon Trotsky, this investigation adds a new dimension to our understanding of the Futurist project. Scholarship concerning the NEP era has traditionally asserted that the Bolshevik regime sought to marginalise progressive artists during this time, favouring instead traditional artistic production. In the course of the past twenty years, however, a body of work has emerged that has questioned whether such a clear-cut polarity was possible in the 1920s, as it has become better understood that the Bolshevik Party was not a monolithic force and that different segments of authority possessed differing levels of understanding as to how the Soviet cultural domain needed to be organised. This chapter, which draws upon history and cultural scholarship that challenges traditional interpretations of this period, augments these investigations by arguing that aspects of the Futurist program were in fact acknowledged by contemporary Bolshevik officials as viable elements that could be incorporated into the Soviet cultural paradigm.

78 On the cultural crisis during the NEP era, see for example, Naiman, Sex in Public.
79 See, for example, Margaret A. Rose, Marx’s Lost Aesthetic, Karl Marx and the Visual Arts, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 139-143.
The central task of this thesis is to explore evolution of the political and ideological dimension of the Futurist program. Challenging the common perception that Russian Futurism gathered artists and theorists whose youthful enthusiasm significantly outweighed their sense of reality, each of the following chapters demonstrates that, when evaluated against the political reality of a given period, Futurism in fact exhibited a keen understanding of the prevailing historical conditions. Furthermore, the Futurist artistic program was always defined within the political and ideological coordinates of the time. If the Futurist project is to be deemed as ambitious and radical (or indeed, utopian), this is because it was shaped by an era – an era that witnessed the death of the Tsar and the birth of the Communist project – best described in the same terms: ambitious and radical.
Chapter One:

Futurism Between the Revolutions, 1905-1917

On 8 March 1909 – while the publication of The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism in the Parisian Le Figaro was still resonant – the St. Petersburg journal Vecher published an article entitled “Sketches of the Current Trends (Futurists).”¹ After cautioning his readers not to confuse these self-professed futuristy (Futurists) with futbolisty (football players), the author – identified solely by the nom de plume “Panda” – offered a detailed analysis of each of the eleven distinct elements of the Futurist Manifesto. In so doing, and despite identifying a number of eccentric elements within the Futurist publication, the author noted the distinctly modern quality of the work. While praising the Italian Futurists for their keen appreciation of contemporary life, as well as their attempts to unite poetry and technology by celebrating machines, factories and modern urban dwellings, electricity, locomotives and steamships, Panda was careful to point out that the innovative nature of the Italian Futurists was already well appreciated by many Russian poets, as the concept of modernity was prominent in the verses of poets such as Aleksandr Blok and Valerii Briusov.

Not by chance did Panda choose the works of Briusov to illustrate his point: although generally considered a member of the Russian Symbolist cohort, unlike many of his colleagues, Briusov was acutely committed to the idea that art needed

¹ Panda, “Nabroski sovremennosti (futuristy)”, Vecher, 8 March 1909, p. 3. An Italian translation of this article is available in Cesare G. De Michelis, Il futurismo italiano in Russia, 1909-1929, De Donato, Bari, 1973, pp. 77-84. See also Vladimir Pavlovič Lapšin, Marinetti e la Russia, Dalla storia delle relazioni letterarie e artistiche negli anni dieci del XX secolo, Skira, Milano, 2008, p. 57. The Futurist Manifesto was published in Le Figaro on 20 February 1909, the date of the publication of Panda’s article Vecher – 8 March 1909 – is the date according to the old calendar (21 March according to the new calendar), which explains the time difference of four weeks between these two publications.
to address issues of contemporary concern. In considering the Italian Futurists’ paean to war, as well as their contempt for museums, libraries, and academies, Panda argued that Russia’s contemporary artists possessed far more real experience in this area of life than their Italian peers. Indeed, in the period between 1904 and the publication of this article, Russia had fought a devastating war with Japan, while simultaneously experiencing social and political upheaval bordering on civil war; the country had also borne witness to an intensification of political terrorism from both the left and the right, while experiencing authoritarian oppression and a string of general strikes, student demonstrations and peasant and army discontent. From within these clashes between a public that demanded major social and political reform and what was a recalcitrant regime, the progressive forces achieved one major victory: the establishment of a State Duma, a legislative body designed to curb the absolute rule of the Tsar. Significant as it was, however, the Russian constitutional parliament was a fragile entity, constantly facing the threat of dissolution or marginalisation at the whim of the Tsar. It was against this background of political volatility, in which political assassinations and terrorist actions were daily events – and within which any incident harboured the potential to kindle violence – that Panda sought to evaluate the merits of Italian Futurism.

So as to emphasise his assertion that Russia was intimately familiar with perpetual destruction (whether revolutionary or reactionary), Panda quoted a section from Briusov’s poem Zamknutyje, a poem that evoked images of destroyed parliamentary chambers, where children would ecstatically crush the remains of ornamental statues, and throw books onto bonfires. The experience of destruction – an experience so recently and deeply entrenched in everyday Russian reality – saw Russian society become Futurist avant la lettre. It is important to note that Panda regarded Briusov’s images of a destroyed parliament, replete with crushed statues and burning books, as something that would have surely appealed to Vladimir Purishkevich, a radical right-wing leader who dominated the then

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contemporary political scene and who represented the kind of destructive reactionary mentality that vigorously opposed progress. Purishkevich was one of the founders of the right-wing radical party Union of the Russian People, which was itself a significant component of the so-called Black Hundreds, an ultra-nationalistic movement devoted to the Tsar and the Orthodox Church – a movement that was at once anti-Semitic, xenophobic and passionately anti-parliamentarian.\(^4\) The ever-present threat of conflict between progressive forces and people like Purishkevich gave rise to a tense moment in which violence and destruction was always imminent: in Panda’s view, Russians were intimately familiar with a scenario that the Italian authors of the Futurist *Manifesto* had only imagined.

For the Russian audience, the devastation and iconoclasm that informed the Futurist *Manifesto* was not simply theoretical, but was very much alive and palpable. As such, Panda’s “Sketches of the Current Trends (Futurists)” opened the history of Futurism in Russia not simply with an evaluation of its literary merits but – more crucially – with an evaluation of Futurist ideas within a heavily politicised and turbulent Russian reality. Yet the article’s prophetic bonding of Futurism with radical politics was somewhat miscalculated: while in Italy Marinetti’s Futurist platform – built as it was upon an agenda of destruction and war – would align itself with the irredentist right-wing agenda of the fascist Blackshirts, in Russia their poetics were not embraced by the Black Hundreds. Futurism in Russia, on the contrary, was destined to become red.

Unpacking the inauguration of Italian Futurism in Russia – and considering the political turbulence in which this inauguration took place – permits a new understanding of what was to become a distinctly Russian variant of Futurism. While the first contours of Russian Futurism were beginning to emerge in 1910, it was in 1912 that the first fully-fledged Russian Futurist manifesto *The Slap in the Face of Public Taste* was published.\(^5\) Scholarship concerning the Futurist


movement between the publication of this first manifesto and the Revolutions of 1917 generally focuses on its innovative expressions in the fields of literature and visual arts. In cases where scholars offer commentary on the contemporary historical context in which this movement took shape, it is usually to highlight the fact that Futurism was initially untouched by the mores of contemporary socio-political reality.\(^6\) Indeed, this characterisation of pre-1917 Futurism as a largely apolitical entity – an entity that only gained a more defined political consciousness with the coming of the revolutionary *annus mirabilis* in 1917 – dominates studies on Russian Futurism. Yet as is made clear by Panda’s article, within the charged atmosphere of the first decade of the twentieth century in Russia, issues of tradition and progress were hardly apolitical terms. As such, it must be recognised that – even in its initial phase – Russian Futurism possessed an acute political consciousness. Demonstrating this fact requires an investigation of the social and political circumstances between 1904 and 1907 – a period immediately preceding the introduction of Futurist ideas to Russia, and a period that was marked by revolutionary turmoil – so as to establish an appreciation of the historical ground into which Futurism would be transplanted. Importantly, it was during this time that one of the strongest revolutionary forces was the student body, with educational institutions often featuring as centres of revolutionary activity; it was also during this time that the future members of the Russian Futurist movement were attending secondary schools and institutes of higher learning. Exploring the pre-history of Russian Futurism permits a new reading of Futurist activity during its formative, pre-1917 phase. Stretching the timeline of the Futurist movement to include a five-year window preceding the publication of Marinetti’s *Manifesto* serves to demonstrate that Russian Futurism was never apolitical: even in its infancy, elements of revolutionary politics were present.

The first component of this chapter demonstrates the political activity during the 1905 Revolution of those individuals who would become stalwarts of

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the Futurist movement. Archival documentation pertaining to Vladimir Tatlin and Vladimir Mayakovsky, along with revealing stories from the memoirs written by Futurist luminaries such as Vasilii Kamenskii, Aleksei Kruchenykh and David Burliuk, demonstrate the level of their socio-political engagement between 1904 and 1907 and in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Although the events of 1917 certainly played a key role in the formation of the Futurist political profile, the experience of the 1904-1907 turmoil by the pioneers of Futurism demonstrates that their social and political consciousness was shaped well before 1917. In fact, many of these Futurists were already part of a wider political network in the country prior to joining the Futurist project. The second part of this chapter considers early Futurist endeavours in the context of the tense social atmosphere of the inter-revolutionary period. An exploration of Futurists’ engagement with the public domain, the formation of their strategy (which appropriated revolutionary tactics witnessed by Futurists during the period of the “First Revolution,” and drew upon their experience with the official propaganda project during the First World War) and their reaction to the general malaise that characterised post-1905 society serves to buttress the argument that, far from being a movement concerned primarily with propagating a new artistic idiom, Russian Futurism in this period continually demonstrated a keen understanding of and desire to engage in social discourse.

**The 1905 Revolution**

In 1905 the Russian Empire experienced a series of major social and political upheavals that came as a consequence of growing discontent with the authoritarian regime and the suppression of the personal, social and political rights of Russian citizens. These events would subsequently become known as “the first revolution,” or a “dress rehearsal” for the revolutions of 1917. While the question as to whether the changes that took place in 1905 qualify as a revolution remains a contested point (technically the power to rule did not change hands), that after 1905 the state of affairs in the Russian Empire was fundamentally
changed is universally recognised. The period between 1904 and 1907 – regarded by most scholars as the actual time span of the revolution – was marked by continual, dramatic and intense social and political unrest, the causes of which were rooted in a conflicted relationship between the traditional autocratic mentality of the monarch Nicholas II and the rise of modern consciousness that demanded a radically different social reality. Throughout the nineteenth century there had existed a continual desire among the progressive intelligentsia to pull Russia out of its backwardness and move toward modernisation, a project then regarded as impossible without major economic and social change. Concern for the future of Russia and its international standing within a rapidly developing world eventually forced the government to mount a major program of industrial, technological and economic development. While experience had shown that industrialisation carried inevitable social implications, the Tsarist regime believed erroneously that it would be able to accomplish significant economic progress but preserve the social status quo.

The scope of the uprisings that took place over this revolutionary period left no social group and no geographical region of the vast Russian Empire unaffected. The movement that put pressure on the ruling regime to reform the country represented a social blend of liberal intellectuals, industrial workers, peasants, and national minorities. It involved mass participation of the student body (including both tertiary and secondary school students), with universities and institutions of higher learning being in many cases the focus of revolutionary activity. The unrest spread to the army and navy, with a number of high-profile mutinies causing great anxiety among state officials. Importantly, however, much of this social unrest – particularly during the early stages of the revolution – did not exhibit an explicit political profile. Studies demonstrate that the demands voiced by protestors generally sprung from economic or, in the case of the student

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movement, academic concerns. When workers in St. Petersburg and Moscow organised strikes they sought better working and living conditions, a reduction of the working day to eight hours, polite treatment from their supervisors and freedom of association. Student strikes and lecture boycotts were often caused by a desire for students to have more of an input into the curriculum, for access to higher learning regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, social background, secondary schooling or political beliefs, and to express a demand for basic human rights. Taking action over issues of this nature in a country that held collective action to be illegal, however, could never remain apolitical. The scholarship on workers’ and students’ movements in particular demonstrates that the private, state and public spheres were not clearly demarcated in Russian society at the time, and that as such a protest of any kind was open to political interpretation.

The spark that set alight the initial spot-fires of protest came in the form of an international conflict: in early 1904, Russia entered into war with Japan. Although initially the odds appeared to have been stacked firmly in Russia’s favour, the conflict soon became a military and diplomatic disaster for Russia, an outcome that provoked great discontent among the Russian population as a result of the military and economic strain it brought to the country. By the start of 1905, the popular demand for social and economic change had become critical. The first explosion that set off the revolutionary season occurred at the beginning of the year when, on 9 January 1905, father Georgii Apollonovich Gapon (an

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Orthodox priest and leader of a workers’ movement in St. Petersburg\textsuperscript{13} led a procession of workers to the Winter Palace with the intention of delivering a petition to the Tsar. The workers called for the establishment of “a constituent assembly elected on the basis of a democratic suffrage, civil liberties for all subjects, equality of all before the law, the right to establish trade unions, and an eight-hour working day.”\textsuperscript{14} Yet though these demands represented a call for significant reform, historians have emphasised that the demonstrators never called for the abolition of the monarchy. In fact, a large portion of the demonstrators still regarded the Tsar as the father of their nation, and believed that an inefficient bureaucracy was to blame for Russia’s socio-political misfortune. The aggressive manner in which the government reacted to the demonstrators in St. Petersburg, however, very much altered this perception. As the protestors approached the Winter Palace, in what was to be a peaceful demonstration, the Tsar’s soldiers opened fire at the procession triggering an unprecedented massacre of civilians. The horror of the armed soldiers attacking civilians continues to reverberate in the term commonly adopted for this incident – Bloody Sunday.\textsuperscript{15}

Such a brutal reaction by the authorities to persons who dared to approach the Tsar with their pleas for help shocked and outraged citizens throughout Russia, and the rise of a radical revolutionary mentality was an inevitable consequence. As year-end approached, revolutionary activities culminated in the announcement of a general strike in October. This general strike started rather unassumingly, with a walkout by workers in the printing industry in Moscow. With printing workshops usually located near educational centres, however, the wave of discontent quickly spread throughout Moscow’s universities and educational institutions, and the revolutionary fervour gathered pace. The strike severely impacted upon those services that were the lifeblood of the Russian Empire, such as railways, post and telegraph services; the strike also led to the closure of shops, pharmacies, banks, schools and cultural institutions, bringing the Empire to a standstill by the middle

\textsuperscript{13} Father Gapon headed a government-sponsored labour association in St. Petersburg named the Assembly of Russian Factory and Mill Workers. By January 1905 the Assembly had around 9,000 members. See Bonnell, \textit{Roots of Rebellion}, pp. 86-93.

\textsuperscript{14} Ascher, \textit{The Revolution of 1905}, p. 27.

of the month. Although the strike began in Moscow, the heart of the movement was in St. Petersburg, where a new organisational body that was to play a major role in the future – the Soviet (council) – came into existence. The St. Petersburg Soviet, established on October 13, became the organisational centre of the general strike.

Faced with what had quickly become overwhelming pressure, the government sought to resolve the situation by issuing an official response to the unrest in the form of the Imperial Manifesto, drafted by Count Sergei Witte and published on October 17. Manifesto granted civil liberties such as personal inviolability, freedom of speech, religion, assembly and association; its implementation had led to censorship reform and abolition of preliminary censorship and most importantly, the Manifesto also affirmed plans to establish an elective constitutive State Duma. Yet while consenting to the idea of reform, the Manifesto ensured that the Tsar still possessed the significant power of being able to dissolve the Duma as well as directly influence electoral processes and ministerial appointments, which very much limited the Duma’s influence. Thus, while the general public received the October Manifesto enthusiastically, the opposition saw it as a half-measure, constructed so as to appear to give concessions while in fact reinforcing autocratic rule.

It is perhaps unsurprising then, despite the progress made in October, that the final weeks of 1905 saw a return to the violence and instability with which the year had begun. This time, however, the stage for revolutionary uprising had shifted from St. Petersburg to Moscow where the level of conflict came to resemble civil war: insurgents using guerrilla tactics to take over the city; civilians engaging in opportunistic acts of violence; police and soldiers confused by chaotic street fighting. Unable to discern revolutionaries from regular civilians, the police and

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17 Ibid., p. 71; Figes, A People’s Tragedy, p. 190.
18 Preliminary censorship meant that the text in question was subjected to censorship before publication. Later, this practice was replaced with punitive post-publication censorship. See Paul W. Goldschmidt, Pornography and Democratization, Legislating Obscenity in Post-Communist Russia, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 1999, pp. 90-97.
troops opted to approach every situation with extreme measures – which of course served only to galvanise popular discontent. The Moscow December uprising had a decisive impact on the course of the revolution: it left the opposition divided, with the liberal faction distancing itself from the radical left, while the government became more resolved to deal forcefully with those who sought to challenge it.20

The period that followed has been described as the second stage of the revolutionary process, marked by continual political tension between the establishment of the State Duma and efforts to curb its influence. This tension was also the cause of rising lawlessness and frequent acts of terrorism. Attacks on government officials, which were most common between 1905 and 1907 (but continued up until the end of the Tsarist regime),21 along with attacks on policemen, bank officials and the robbery of armed guards transporting money were all sources of great alarm for the government. The majority of these attacks were organised by Socialist Revolutionaries whose strategy for realising political reform included assassinations of state officials, attacks on jails in order to free political prisoners, and acts of “expropriation” – politically motivated robberies which were executed to secure money and weapons for aiding the revolutionary fight.22 Simultaneously, the conservative right stepped up their own preferred tactics for dealing with progressive forces with a number of assassinations against their political opponents and attacks on religious and national minorities. Students were often their prime targets, for they were deemed utterly corrupted by leftist ideas while in Russian the word “student” became practically synonymous with “revolutionary”23 – but often enough anyone who merely happened to look like an

21 Among the more high-profile attacks on state officials were the assassinations of the Russian Interior Minister Dmitrii Sipiagin in April 1902; of his successor, Vyacheslav Konstantinovich von Plehve, in July 1904; and of the Tsar’s uncle and Governor General of Moscow, Grand Duke Sergei Alekandrovich, in February 1905. See Anna Geifman, Death Orders, The Vanguard of Modern Terrorism in Revolutionary Russia, Praeger, Santa Barbara, California, 2010, pp. 28-31.
22 On the rise of terrorism and attacks on government officials, as well as the numerous robberies organised for political purposes in the period following the 1905 Revolution see Geifman, Death Orders, pp. 11-16; 27-40.
23 Figes, A People’s Tragedy, p. 165.
“intellectual” could fall victim to these attacks.\textsuperscript{24} This revolutionary upheaval came to an end in mid-1907, when the Tsar dissolved the Duma and altered the electoral law so as to ensure the formation of a politically more reliable new Duma. This move, however, violated the original constitution and, by committing an act that essentially amounted to a coup, the government betrayed the rules spelled out in the October Manifesto, and registered a blow to liberal forces.\textsuperscript{25}

**Futurists during the First Revolution**

Every social group and every corner of the Russian Empire was greatly affected by the events that took place between 1904 and 1907. Importantly, as is highlighted by Susan Morrissey’s study on the history of the student movement in Russia, in this period educational establishments became centres of political life, as it was as students that many young people first became acquainted with radical ideas and became interested in politics.\textsuperscript{26} Young Russian students played a pivotal role in politicising the country, as students who returned (or – owing to their participation in student strikes – were exiled) from university centres to their provincial homes transmitted progressive ideas and the news of the latest political developments throughout the Empire.\textsuperscript{27} By the start of the twentieth century the student movement had established a political profile, using protests and academic strikes as a significant strategy in the fight for student rights. Their alliance with workers and peasants during the revolution of 1905 was significant: with the student body already possessing a developed sense of social consciousness, universities became centres for gatherings and meetings of not only students, but also workers and intellectuals united in their opposition to the Tsar. Indeed, in many cases university premises served as headquarters for the organisation of collective social and political actions, especially after August 1905, when public pressure forced the government to restore autonomy to the universities.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Petrov, “Revolutionary Moscow, December 1905 – Rehearsal for Civil War”, p. 55.
\textsuperscript{26} Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution*, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p. 73.
\textsuperscript{28} The universities gained their autonomy for the first time since 1884. See Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion*, pp. 124-125.
Although revolutionary unrest had abated by mid-1907, Russian society remained highly politically charged throughout this inter-revolutionary period, and the oppressive police presence throughout the Russian Empire ensured that not many issues could remain apolitical while various forms of unrest and terrorism continued to mark Russian life. In these circumstances, is it possible that the future leaders of the Russian avant-garde could have remained oblivious to the wave of unrest that swept their country – especially considering the fact that the majority of these future leaders were attending secondary schools or establishments of higher learning at the time?

A vividly illustrative example of how pervasive contemporary socio-political conditions were in the lives of citizens all over Russian Empire, future avant-gardists included, is the police file recording unrest in an established educational institution in the city of Penza. The affair that shook the Penza College of Art represented a blend of events characteristic of the 1905 Revolution: student unrest, distribution of illegal revolutionary literature, secret meetings, the assassination of a state official and sensationalist reporting by the press of this affair, and, as an additional ingredient to the mélange, the provocative appearance of modern art. The *dramatis persona* in these events was a young Vladimir Tatlin, the artist who was to become a prototypical Futurist.

In February 1909 the head of the Penza regional gendarmerie wrote to his Governor:

The revolutionary fermentation that affected most educational institutions between 1905-1906 was reflected, among others, also in the Penza College of Art where it created party strife and animosity between students and even encouraged political activism by a part of the teaching staff, headed by the director A. F. Afanasev.²⁹

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²⁹ GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 32. The file connected with the events at the Penza College of Art: GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5. In the appendices of a comprehensive study on Tatlin edited by Larissa Zhadova, it is noted that Tatlin’s police files were located in GARF giving the old file classification (TsGAR, fond 102, inventory 101, unit 4945-1909; also fond 63, inventory 28, unit 2245/920). See Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova (ed.), *Tatlin*, Themes and Hudson, London, 1988, p. 445. The existence of these files is also noted in Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable, World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 2008, p. 156. To the best of my knowledge, the material in this file has been neither published nor the subject of academic study.
The head of the gendarmerie explained in full detail the events that had taken place at the Penza College of Art, stating that amid general confusion and instability, a group of students from the College, already known for their previous involvement with revolutionary organisations, profited from the tumultuous social and political atmosphere by promoting their strategy of agitating for people to join opposition party ranks. These students used school premises as a tribune for their propaganda work, organising meetings and distributing revolutionary literature. The report recalled that on 1 September 1906 an elected body of five students known as the Council of Elders (sovet starosty) was established at the school, with Tatlin one of these five. According to the police report, this Council was a body of purely revolutionary character, and it forcefully took over the majority of activities previously under the auspices of the school administration. The group participated in the school’s pedagogical council; it also took over management of the school canteen (stolovaia) and took upon itself the duty of organising student events. In addition, the Council was responsible for setting up a comprehensive library of illegal publications on school premises. The student meetings that took place at the College raised questions as to the role of terrorism, assassinations of state officials, acts of robbery and expropriation, arson of country estates and an array of similar political issues that were ever-present in daily life. This kind of activity soon spilled beyond the boundaries of the school, with students taking part in illegal demonstrations on the streets of Penza. The police report was careful to note that the establishment of the Council of Elders at school, its openly revolutionary profile and the extent of its activities would not have been possible without the support of the College director Aleksei Fedorovich Afanasev and the majority of his teaching staff.

The central event discussed in these files related to a terrorist attack that took place in Penza on 25 January 1907, when the Governor of the Penza gubernia, Sergei Vasilevich Aleksandrovskii, was assassinated. Aleksandrovskii, a highly regarded state official distinguished for his services with the Red Cross during the Russo-Japanese war, lost his life at the Winter Theatre after the end of that evening’s performance. In addition to the Governor, three other people – two
police officials and a member of the theatre staff – also fell victim to this attack.\textsuperscript{30} In its January 27 issue, the daily \textit{Penzenskie vedomosti} offered a detailed account of the event.\textsuperscript{31} Leaving his theatre box immediately after the end of the play, Aleksandrovskii walked briskly towards the emergency exit, as was the common practice during his visits to the theatre. Despite making his way as quickly as possible, the assassin seized a moment when Aleksandrovskii was slowed by the crowd to push his way through and fire a lethal shot from his Browning. Exhibiting the typical contemporary journalistic penchant for gruesome detail,\textsuperscript{32} the news report described how Aleksandrovskii had been shot from behind, with the bullet passing through his skull and coming to rest in his right eye. The police official standing nearby attempted to stop the assassin, and received a bullet though his heart as a result. Apparently unfamiliar with the layout of the theatre building, the assassin ran without clear direction. Theatre director Viktorov attempted to apprehend the assassin, who fired in Viktorov’s direction but missed; this bullet, however, killed a police officer in Viktorov’s immediate vicinity. Stage designer Rumiantsev was shot in his stomach as the assassin was making his way through the crowd with revolver in one hand and cartridges in the other. Finally, seeking a way out, the assassin ran into a female restroom. Inside, a maid (\textit{gornichnaia}) – who had heard the shots – gathered that the man standing in front of her must have been the assassin, and she quickly pointed him in the direction of a door. Believing he had chanced upon a sympathetic supporter, the assassin followed the woman’s advice, but as soon as he crossed the doorstep, he realised he had been trapped. The door led to the attic and, as the woman immediately locked the door behind him, he had no way out; understanding his predicament, the assassin shot himself in the head. Nothing was known of his background except that he was a young man, between 22 and 25 years of age; based on his “facial type” he was


\textsuperscript{31} “Podrobnosti ubistva gubernatora S. V. Aleksandrovskago”, \textit{Penzenskiiia vedomosti}, 27 January 1907, pp. 1-2.

\textsuperscript{32} In his study on turn of the century Petersburg, Mark D. Steinberg explores a number of social phenomena as reported in the contemporary press. Depictions of accidents, suicides and deaths featured prominently in this reporting, which was regularly replete with a shocking level of detail. See Mark D. Steinberg, \textit{Petersburg, Fin de Siècle}, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2011, pp. 119-156. See also Jeffrey Brooks, \textit{When Russia Learned to Read, Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861-1917}, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, 2003, pp. 109-141; Geifman, \textit{Death Orders}, p. 14.
suspected to be of “Jewish or oriental origin” (*evreiskoe ili vostochnoe proiskhozhdenie*), according to the journalist.33

Reports pertaining to the incident in Penza College made reference to the apparent general feeling of sympathy for the murdered Governor among the public, and indeed a number of students from the College decided to pay their respects to the deceased Governor by organising a subscription for the purchase of a commemorative wreath. This subscription, however, angered the Council of Elders which, according to the chief of gendarmerie, did its best to intimidate and terrorise those students who wanted to take part. The conflict between revolutionary students and those who wished to commemorate the Governor (a group consisting of seven students according to the report) escalated on the day when the disputed wreath was purchased. Outraged by the inscription on the ribbon of the wreath – an inscription that suggested that the wreath was from all the students of the College – the majority insisted that the ribbon needed to be changed to include only the names of those seven students who supported the purchase of the wreath, not the entire student body. According to a statement from a witness, Tatlin made his way to the apartment of the school director Afanasev and asked that the ribbon be removed.34 With the director’s support the ribbon was changed, and although Afanasev did not approve of the further request that the seven students in question be expelled he, according to the report, did not disapprove of a “comrades’ court” to which these seven students were subjected. At the school assembly meeting it was decided that the seven students would be marginalised, excluded from school activities and excursions, and banned from using the school canteen. The head of the gendarmerie noted in a report that the school director, along with his close assistant teacher A. I. Vakhrameev, supported the boycott by refusing to mark the work of boycotted students despite their repeated pleas. The report also accused Afanasev and Vakhrameev of supporting the Council of Elders and even enabling the fast tracking of its members’ studies against the school regulations.35

34 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 139ob.
35 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 34-34ob.
The report considered in detail Afanasev’s role in the school as a facilitator of revolutionary activities. The witnesses police interviewed on Afanasev’s character testified that, “on the day when the Manifesto of October 17 was declared in Penza, director Afanasev led a celebratory procession of students through the school corridors, followed by the sound of Marseillaise.”

The report concluded that, due to Afanasev’s revolutionary bent, the students were able to organise their political activities on the school premises. In his own testimony, Afanasev coloured his role in more neutral tones: in attempting to highlight his own efforts to soothe the conflict, he stated that he in fact had supplemented the purchase of the wreath, as the subscription had not raised sufficient funds. The report by the head of gendarmerie, however, explained that while Afanasev did help those students who wanted to purchase a wreath for Aleksandrovskii’s funeral, he also made sure that the ribbon on the wreath was replaced so that it did not suggest the wreath was from all the students of the school but only from a small group, so as to ensure that the school “would not be ‘compromised’”:

It is for this purpose that he issued the money. By giving this money he in fact helped the revolution: it was given in order to rehabilitate the school, which had been ‘compromised’ by the actions of these ‘black hundreds’ [the seven students who bought the commemorative wreath]. It is therefore in this context that we need to understand Afanasev’s claim about the administration respecting the memory of the deceased.

In the final statement attached to this report a member of the school staff, Mikhail Georgievich Tetiurev, noted that at the start of the 1906-07 academic year the school had recruited a new member to the teaching staff, Vakhrameev, who had introduced a “decadent” style in teaching art, replacing the previously dominant “realist” style. This apparently caused tension within the teaching staff and many disputes when it came to evaluating students’ work, but Vakhrameev (and his “decadent” style) always enjoyed the support of the school director Afanasev. This testimony is revealing insofar as it describes the introduction of teaching modernist aesthetics in the school, and the support for this curriculum by

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36 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 74.
37 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 76.
38 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 140.
Vakhrameev and Afanasev – the same men who supported and took part in revolutionary activities at the school.

It is essential to recognise that during his formative years Tatlin was exposed to both revolutionary politics and revolutionary art by virtue of his enrolment at the Penza College of Art, and was, as a member of the Council of Elders, at the forefront of revolutionary activities even as a student. It was, after all, as a consequence of this role and for his membership with the local student Socialist-Revolutionary organisation that Tatlin remained on the police radar for years to come.\(^{39}\) While Tatlin’s biographers mention Afanasev, albeit only in the limited context of Tatlin’s early teachers and artistic influences, this episode from his biography has never enjoyed more than a passing note, nor has it featured in explorations of the historical background against which development of the Futurist movement took place\(^{40}\) – a background marked by terrorism, highly-politicised classrooms and a media that was saturated with reports of assassinations, expropriations, uprisings and strikes.

The revolutionary background of Vladimir Mayakovsky is a detail that features regularly in scholarship on Mayakovsky’s life and work, and in the memoirs written by his contemporaries,\(^{41}\) yet details of the nature of these activities have rarely been interpreted within the context of the history of the Russian Futurist movement. As revolutionary tensions increased throughout 1905, Mayakovsky was a lycée student in the Georgian town of Kutais. News of the events taking place in the capitals spread quickly across the Russian Empire, and revolutionary turmoil did not bypass Kutais. The available records note that Mayakovsky bore witness to the revolutionary fervour that, in its established

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\(^{39}\) GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 830; GARF f. 63, op. 44, d. 2245.

\(^{40}\) In John Milner’s study on Tatlin, Afanasev is mentioned in the context of Tatlin’s early education. See John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1983, p. 8. Anatolii Strigalev also recognised Afanasev’s artistic influence on Tatlin, while on his role in the Penza College affair the author notes only that Tatlin was a member of the board of monitors at the school, which had been established in order to protect student rights. See Anatolii Anatolevich Strigalev, “From Painting to the Construction of Matter”, in Zhadova (ed.), *Tatlin*, pp. 16-22.

pattern, manifested itself most strongly within educational institutions, such as Mayakovsky’s lycée, before spreading onto the city streets. The guberniia of Kutais experienced fierce revolutionary fighting, particularly in the Guriia region – a region with a long history of social unrest. Revolutionaries in this region even managed to hold off the Tsar’s soldiers, led by general Maksud Alikhanov-Avarskaia – an outcome mentioned by Mayakovsky in his brief autobiography.42 General Alikhanov-Avarskaia, who also served as Governor of Tiflis and Kutais, was to ultimately become yet another subject of sensationalist articles in the contemporary press, as he met his end at the hands of revolutionaries who threw bombs into his carriage as he was driving late at night through the streets of Alexandropol.43

Mayakovsky remembered his running up against Cossacks during the street demonstrations in Kutais as his first experience as a revolutionary and an agitator. His initiation into the world of political activism was – as was common – facilitated by an older sibling.44 His elder sister Liudmila was at the time studying at Stroganov College in Moscow, and had friends and acquaintances involved in underground political activity; during her visits home she would bring illegal revolutionary literature – literature that Mayakovsky read avidly.45 The role of kinship in revolutionary organisations has been recognised by scholars, who have noted that the revolutionary events in Moscow had a “homespun character” and that family and friendship ties were scaffolding for revolutionary activity.46

The Revolution of 1905 played a significant role in the development of Russian political parties, and it is worth outlining here the key players as Mayakovsky’s files mention a wide spectrum of contemporary political associations. The Socialist Revolutionary Party, founded in 1902, was the largest socialist movement in the country with a platform that focused on the idea that

43 ”Ubiistvo gen’l M-B Alikhanova-Avarskaia i zheni gen’l Glebova”, Tiflisisskii listok, 4 July 1907, p. 1; Alexandropol is present day Gyumri, northern Armenia.
44 Morrissey, Heralds of Revolution, p. 73.
45 See N. Plisko, ”Mayakovsky i revolutsionnaia poezhia 1905 goda”, Oktiabr’, No. 5, 1941, pp. 177-181.
46 Engelstein, Moscow, 1905, p. 215.
socialism, as the final goal, could be achieved gradually through a set of reforms. Despite this moderate approach, however, the Socialist Revolutionary Party tolerated the use of political terror, and in 1906 a splinter group from this party known as the Maximalists was formed – a group that would later claim responsibility for a number of high-profile political assassinations in the country.\(^{47}\)

The Social Democratic Party or Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (RSDWP) was Russian's Marxist association, which split into two factions by 1903 – Bolsheviks, headed by Vladimir Lenin, and Mensheviks headed by Julius Martov. Although they disagreed over the nature of the party's profile and tactics, both factions continued to operate together on many issues during the revolutionary highpoint of 1905.\(^{48}\) The Constitutional Democratic Party (or Party of People's Freedom, informally known as the Kadets) crystallised during the period of the general strike. With a membership dominated by professionals and liberal landowners, the Kadet program was fairly progressive, although their views about the monarchy were vague. After the publication of the October Manifesto another political group – Union of October 17, or the Octobrists – came into existence. Politically to the right of the Kadets, the Octobrists fully supported the October Manifesto, believing in civil rights and the rule of law while strongly supporting the monarchy.\(^{49}\) Unsurprisingly, conservative supporters of the autocracy also organised their ranks and sought to assert themselves upon the fledgling political landscape, with the Union of the Russian People the key group on the ultra-right. Although the October manifesto provided opportunities for legal political activities, the conditions set up by the government could satisfy only the most conservative liberationists, while much of the radical opposition would continue to operate outside the institutional political framework.\(^{50}\)

Thus by the time Mayakovsky moved with his family to Moscow in 1906,\(^{51}\) the city had become a vibrant political centre. While details of Mayakovsky's


\(^{49}\) Ibid., p. 77.

\(^{50}\) Engelstein, *Moscow, 1905*, pp. 136-137.

\(^{51}\) After Mayakovsky's father died in early 1906, the entire family moved to Moscow. See Woroszylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, p. 5.
involvement with the clandestine world of underground revolutionaries and his arrests have been noted by his biographers;\textsuperscript{52} it is worth describing some details of these arrests, and in particular his arrest in the summer of 1909, an episode that involved an organised jail escape of a group of female political prisoners.

In March 1908, Mayakovsky was interrogated after being apprehended in an apartment on Chukhinskii pereulok where the Moscow Committee of the RSDWP (Bolshevik faction) housed a secret printing press. In addition to blank counterfeit passports, a number of illegal publications were found: Mayakovsky was caught in the possession of several clandestine publications, including the Social Democrat newspapers \textit{Rabochee znamia}, and \textit{Soldatskaia gazeta}, as well as the proclamation \textit{Novoe nastuplenie Kapitala}. He was released after it was concluded that he did not fully understand the significance of his actions (the fact that he was only 14 at the time was taken into consideration), and he was placed under parental supervision. Yet just months later, in January 1909, he was again apprehended, in relation to a raid on a group of anarchist expropriators – anarchist cohorts engaged in robberies (or “expropriations”), which served to secure funding for their various revolutionary activities.\textsuperscript{53} This time Mayakovsky was held in custody for several weeks before being released.\textsuperscript{54}

By mid-1909, Mayakovsky’s involvement with the revolutionary underground had taken a step further. A group of young revolutionaries had developed an elaborate scheme to facilitate the escape of a number of detainees from Novinskaia female prison in Moscow. The subsequent police report explained that a number of suspects belonging to a group of Socialist-Revolutionaries had been under surveillance for a period of time.\textsuperscript{55} Through this surveillance, the police had learned that the planned escape would be undertaken by two separate groups:

\textsuperscript{52} Woroszylskii, \textit{The Life of Mayakovsky}, pp. 8-18; Vasiliy A. Katanian, \textit{Mayakovskii, Khronika zhizni i deiatel’nosti}, Sovetskii pisatel’, Moscow, 1985, pp. 31-54.

\textsuperscript{53} Anarchists hailed the Revolution of 1905 as an instance of spontaneous mass upheaval; they were engaged in agitation, demonstrations, strikes and “expropriations” and assassinations of political and governmental officials. The anarchist movement united a variety of groups and individuals with varied political philosophies. See Paul Avrich, “Anarchism in Russia”, in Joseph L. Wieczynski (ed.), \textit{The Modern Encyclopedia of Russian and Soviet History}, Vol. 1, Academic International Press, Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1976, pp. 206-212.

\textsuperscript{54} GARF f. 63, op. 1908, d. 564 (3), ll. 56, 129, 129ob, 130; GARF f. 63, op. 6, d. 9, ll. 4-8. Excerpts from these documents are published in English in Woroszylskii, \textit{The Life of Mayakovsky}, pp. 8-18.

\textsuperscript{55} GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, ll. 57-61; 180-181ob; 185-186ob.
one group would break into the prison and aid the escape, while a second group would provide hiding places and other support to the escapees once the breakout had taken place. According to the police report, Mayakovsky was a member of the first group – a group that predominantly relied on a network of family and friends. Apart from Mayakovsky, brothers Vladimir Vasilev and Vasilii Vasilev Kalashnikov were identified within the report as members of the first group; these brothers were thought to have particularly strong motivation for engaging in such a risky undertaking by virtue of the fact that Vladimir’s wife, Anna Morozova (her real name was most likely Natalia Sergeeva Klimova)\(^{56}\) was one of the prison inmates. Similarly, Sergei Semenov Koridze – another member of the former group who, it appears, was responsible for Mayakovsky’s involvement – had strong personal motivation to take part in this operation due to his ties with Elizaveta Mate, also inmate in Novinskaia prison. In his biography on Mayakovsky, Wiktor Woroszylski included passages from Koridze’s diary (whose real name was Isidore Mordadze), describing how Koridze used to sublet a room from the Mayakovsky family, sharing housing with Mayakovsky, his mother and two sisters in Moscow.\(^{57}\) Koridze was involved in a number of expropriation plots, and according to his police record, was previously searched during the liquidation of a group of Maximalists.\(^{58}\)

On June 30, the day preceding the planned escape, police followed the Kalashnikov brothers, along with Koridze and two other men by the names of Lakovlev and Usov, all of whom met that evening in a bar with a guard from the women’s prison. Based on the compiled intelligence, police realised that the group was planning to attack the prison that night, and decided to station a number of agents and officers within the prison in preparation. That evening, however, the group successfully aided the escape of thirteen women from the prison, along with a female prison guard by the name of Tarasova, who had commenced employment at the prison only two months previously – the police assigned to the security

\(^{56}\) GARF f. 93, 1906 god, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 183-185. This police file describes the Maximalist group that attempted to assassinate Stolypin. This file reveals that Natalia Sergeeva Klimova used the alias Elena Morozova during preparations for the planned assassination.


\(^{58}\) GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, l. 60ob.
detail had arrived too late at the scene. The following morning a wide-ranging search was conducted and a number of the escapees were apprehended, as the apartments of those who had previously been under surveillance were all raided. Mayakovsky was taken into custody following a raid on Koridze’s apartment. He was searched, as was his own apartment, but these searches did not produce anything incriminating. While the police were searching Mayakovsky’s apartment they did, however, arrest Iakovlev – who had chosen a most inopportune moment to pay a visit to Mayakovsky. Most of those arrested already had earned themselves police records, and the majority of these young men were also students. A number of women involved in the operation belonged to the underground Red Cross, an illegal group that worked to assist political prisoners.59

The women who had managed to escape from prison were political activists; some of them high in profile, such as Natalia Sergeeva Klimova, a member of Maximalist branch, who had been implicated in the attempt to assassinate the Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin at his dacha on 12 August 1906 – the most high-profile assassination attempt to take place during the revolutionary season. In the aftermath of this event, the government resolved to deal brutally with the radicals, and adopted a field court-martial system for trials, which saw all of those involved with planning and organising this assassination sentenced to either exile or death. Klimova’s original death penalty as punishment for her involvement in this crime was later converted into a life sentence.60

The escape of female prisoners had been elaborately planned: a number of prison guards were involved, the group divided into two teams, and even a decoy


60 GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, ll. 233, 233ob. From Natalia Klimova’s file (GARF f. 93, 1906 god, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 183-185) we know that she used the name Elena Morozova during preparations for the planned assassination of Stolypin, and that a man named Daniel Morozov – purportedly Elena’s husband – was one of the Maximalists who lost his life during the attack on Stolypin’s dacha. The police file on the escape of inmates from the female prison describes how Vassili Kalashnikov was in touch with Klimova’s mother, asking her for money prior to the organised escape. This file also makes mention of a Nina Morozova, and later an Anna Morozova (Nina Morozova (GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, l. 61) and Anna Morozova (GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, ll. 185, 186)), each time in connection to Kalashnikov brothers – which suggests that Natalia Klimova had a number of aliases.
incident was executed, where one member pretended to be inebriated to draw police attention to himself as the operation began. The prisoners, together with the prison guards who took part in this plot, managed to escape through the prison office. The second team then took charge, providing the transportation, hideouts, supplies, money and clothes to the fugitives. This second team consisted of a number of members involved with the underground Red Cross who used their networks to aid the relocation of the fugitives and to offer financial support. As the police record of the event shows, people involved in this large-scale operation were closely connected, either by close friendships, kinship or marriage.

The cases of Tatlin and Mayakovsky both represent a nexus of political, social and intellectual tensions characteristic of the first decade of twentieth century Russia. Both records illustrate underground activities of Socialist-Revolutionaries, Maximalists and anarchists, as well as the acts of expropriation, the production of fake passports and illegal printing. Tatlin and Mayakovsky were colleagues of politically engaged students, and they both became directly involved in acts that were in direct opposition to the rule of the Tsar. Later, of course, both would also become creators of “left” art. Memoirs of Mayakovsky’s and Tatlin’s fellow Futurists Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vasilii Kamenskii and David Burliuk outline a very similar set of circumstances that led to these artists’ exposure to Russia’s political reality.

In his autobiography, Futurist poet Aleksei Kruchenykh offered a sketch of his early years as a student during the revolutionary period that closely resembled the kind of activities described in Tatlin’s and Mayakovsky’s police files. Between 1902 and 1906 Kruchenykh was enrolled in the Odessa College of Art where, when not focused on his studies, he devoted his attention to clandestine activities. He described the Odessa port and the famous Lanzheron beach as a place where one was exposed to everything “political” and “illegal,” and he revealed the dramatic effect that the demonstrations, the general strike and the mutiny on the battleship Potemkin had on him. In 1905 Kruchenykh worked with the Odessa Bolsheviks,

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61 GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, l. 185ob
62 GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, l. 185ob
63 GARF f. 63, op. 29, d. 709, l. 186
transporting illegal typography and literature, making drawings for lithographs depicting Marx, Engels, Plekhanov, Babel and other revolutionary figures, and arranging the storage of illegal publications, which eventually led to his arrest in 1906.\(^{64}\)

A similar tale is depicted in *The Enthusiast’s Journey*, the gripping autobiography of Futurist poet, playwright, artist and aviator Vasiliy Kamenskii. Kamenskii describes his exposure to the world of politics as emanating from two powerful sources: in the first instance through his work at the railway, and later as a student in St. Petersburg.\(^{65}\) Due to difficult family circumstances Kamenskii took up the position of clerk in the accounting office of Perm railways at the age of sixteen. Through this employment, and especially as a result of spending his summer holidays near Perm in the company of other railway workers, Kamenskii found himself confronted with revolutionary ideas. At the time he was also writing pieces for *Permskii krai*, a newspaper headed by an editor of Social Democratic bent; during the time of the general strike, Kamenskii held a position at the freight office on a railway in Nizhnii Tagil, where his revolutionary activity among the railway workers picked up pace. He described organising fishing and hunting excursions with his colleagues, outings that served as an excuse to meet in the open and freely discuss political issues, study party programs of different socialist groups and read their materials, a widely spread practice among workers’ circles at the time.\(^{66}\) As the general strike swept across the country, with railway workers taking a key role, Kamenskii was put in charge as a representative of regional railway workers and installed as the head of the executive strike committee. In his memoirs he describes spending a great amount of time receiving telegraph messages from all parts of the country, and organising meetings in order to communicate the latest news regarding the general strike. Kamenskii was soon arrested for his role in the general strike and imprisoned for a number of months in solitary confinement. Terrorised by the constant rumours of potential mass prisoner executions and uncertainty as to his future, Kamenskii was eventually

\(^{64}\) Aleksei Khruchenyk, *Nash vykhod*, RA, Moscow, 1996, pp. 16; 38.


released for poor health after a prolonged hunger strike in prison. In his subsequent writings he noted that it was naïve of him to believe that by organising meetings and giving speeches anything significant could have been achieved – his period of imprisonment effectively radicalised his position on the nature of revolutionary fight, as it brought to him the realisation that a strike was not powerful enough to ensure the desired change: “Marseillaise without barricades does not amount to much.”

By 1907 Kamenskii found himself in St. Petersburg where he passed his Abitur (final secondary school exam which is a prerequisite for university entry) and enrolled in agronomy courses; he also audited lectures at the natural sciences faculty, as well as convening evening political meetings that took place at the university.

Thus whether through educational establishments, places of employment, or networks of friends and family, those who would later become the stalwarts of Futurism belonged to a constellation of revolutionary activism in the inter-revolutionary period. It was against this background that the Futurist network would begin to take form, and between 1907 and 1912 friendships were struck between young men that would form the core of Futurist movement. David Burliuk and Mikhail Larionov, who would become a notorious Futurist figure during the early period of Futurist activity, exhibited together as early as 1907. In 1910 an anthology of poems and drawings entitled A Trap for Judges (Sadok sudei) was published, where brothers David and Vladimir Burliuk, Kamenskii and Viktor (later changed to Velimir) Khlebnikov collaborated. Mayakovskiy and David Burliuk met while studying together at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and struck up an intense friendship in early 1912. In December 1912 Mayakovskiy exhibited together with key Futurist figures including the Burliuk brothers, Larionov, Mikhail Matiushin, and Tatlin among others. Tatlin’s biographers have established that he and Larionov had been friends since their

68 Ibid., pp. 478-509.
69 Mikhail Larionov and his wife Natalia Goncharova were prominent Futurist figures during this early period. After the First World War they moved permanently to France. On their life and work see the collection of studies in Georgii F. Kovalenko et al. (eds.), N. Goncharova, M. Larionov, issledovania i publikatsii, Nauka, Moscow, 2003.
70 On formation of the Futurist network and the first Futurist exhibitions, lectures and publications see Nikolai Khardziev, Stat’i ob avangarde (v dvukh tomakh), Arkhiv russkovo avangarda, Tom 1, RA, Moscow, 1997, pp. 18-52.
early youth: Larionov’s completed a portrait of Tatlin in 1908, and it was through Larionov that Tatlin was introduced to other painters and poets.\(^{71}\) In 1910 at an exhibition in Odessa, Tatlin’s works were shown among those of a number of other artists, including the Burluk brothers.\(^{72}\) In June 1911 David Burluk sent a letter to Tatlin arranging his visit to Burluk’s family home, which indicates that these two artists developed a close friendship some time between the Odessa exhibition and mid-1911.\(^{73}\) Thus by 1912 a Futurist nexus had been established, and its members began their controversial public recitals and lectures, exhibitions and publication of their verses, accompanied by experimental graphic designs. All the while their group was growing, recruiting representatives of various branches of literary, visual and theatre arts.\(^{74}\)

Memoirs and autobiographies are notoriously difficult sources for historical study, and perhaps none are more problematic than those of members of the Futurist movement. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the fact that it is no accident that Kruchenykh’s, Kamenskii’s, Mayakovský’s and also David Burluk’s autobiographies appeared in the late 1920s and early 1930s.\(^{75}\) In a period just prior to the Communist Party’s resolution on literature and arts that officially

\(^{71}\) Milner, Vladimir Tatlin, pp. 3-32.
\(^{72}\) Ibid., pp. 14-16.
\(^{73}\) RGALI f. 2089, op. 2, d. 7, l. 1.

\(^{75}\) Kruchenykh wrote a short autobiography in 1927, which by 1932 would be formed into “Nash vykhod” (Rudolf Duganov, “Predislovie” in Kruchenykh, Nash vykhod, pp. 8-9). The first edition of Kamenskii’s memoirs was published in 1931 (Kamenskii, “Put’ entuziasta”, p. 532). Mayakovský’s succinct autobiography was written in 1928 (Mayakovský, “La sam”, p. 29). Burluk worked on his “Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista” in the late 1920s, but the work remained unpublished until 1994 (N. A. Zubkova, “Predislovie”, in David Burluk, Fragmenty iz vospominanii futurista. Pis’ma. Stikhotvoreniia, Pushkinskii fond, St. Petersburug, 1994, p. 8).
proclaimed the victory of Socialist Realism, Futurists felt the urge to prove their revolutionary credentials by recording the history of their movement, including its pre-history. As such, the argument that their autobiographies were specifically and artificially motivated products of persuasion in the race for official approval accounts for the doubts expressed by scholars in considering these works.\textsuperscript{76} There is, however, another side to this coin: the tendency of historians, both Russian and Western alike, to gloss over the avant-garde’s post-1917 association with the Bolshevik regime is not dissimilar to the Futurist desire to embellish their own achievements with revolutionary colour. Yet regardless of the challenges presented by these autobiographies, the material discussed above demonstrates that once Futurist ideas penetrated Russia’s capitals, future proponents of this movement were already experienced in dealing with radical ideas and political activism. Futurists thus shared a particular background before being tied together by the Futurist program. Although revolutionary violence abated in 1907, the inter-revolutionary period was nevertheless marked by a continuation of political tension, as well as profound social crisis. Thus the environment into which the earliest Futurist works were born was not one where radical artistic philosophy could remain outside political discourse.

**Futurism in Action**

The long initial revolutionary period came to something of an end in June 1907 with the dissolution of the second Duma. Although the then Prime Minister Stolypin showed a willingness to cooperate with the second Duma, the extreme political stances taken by both the right and the left within the State Duma impeded its ability to function, and it was effectively unable to discharge its duties. This situation gave the Tsar and his government the opportunity to accuse the Duma of being inefficient, and thus legitimise its dismissal. To make sure of the second Duma’s demise, authorities devised an elaborate plan that ultimately saw Social Democrat representatives charged with conspiracy against the government.

\textsuperscript{76}See Duganov’s examples of Kruchenykh’s use of Communist jargon in his memoirs, which the author judged to be banalities typical of the 1930s writing saturated with expressions of loyalty to the regime. Duganov, “Predisloviye”, p. 9.
Thus, the second Duma was dissolved by Tsar Nicholas II just three months after its convocation. In addition, the government then changed the electoral procedure so as to ensure that the Third Duma would be to the taste of the regime. This decision to manipulate the electoral law was, of course, an act that violated the constitution (since no new laws were supposed to be acceded to without the Duma’s approval), and as such it was with this move that the government significantly undermined the liberties won in the revolution and affirmed the power of autocracy.77

Yet despite the fact that after June 1907 the power to rule was firmly in the hands of the regime, Russia by this time was a profoundly transformed place. Between 1907 and 1917 the country had a multi-party system and – despite the best efforts of the government to exert control – newspapers and journals operated with more freedom than had been the case before the revolution. Similarly, peasant and worker movements, which had previously been suppressed, found opportunities to collectively address some of their concerns after 1907.78

Indeed, the path that the Russian Empire embarked upon after 1907 has seen many scholars question whether the Revolution of 1905 was truly a “dress rehearsal” for the events of 1917: for many historians, the post-1907 period indicated that Russia was on a path toward gradual modernisation, and could have avoided another episode of revolutionary bloodshed. Central to this argument is the perception that it was in fact the First World War and its devastating economic and social impact that eventually led to the October Revolution and the Bolshevik takeover. This interpretation was championed as early as 1932 by Michael Karpovich, who argued that the Revolution of 1905 was not necessarily a prefiguration of 1917; in support of this assertion, Karpovich demonstrated instead that Russian society after 1905 had changed significantly, and that the country was on a course of economic, political and cultural advancement – and not necessarily on a path towards a new revolution. For Karpovich, though there existed the potential for peaceful modernisation to occur within the Russian Empire, the devastating effects of the First World War radicalised the country and

78 Ibid., pp. 215-216.
led to the events of 1917. This assertion, however, was challenged by the ensuing generation of scholars, who were inspired by the research conducted primarily in the domain of social history and led by Leopold Haimson. Haimson’s argument, which came to dominate scholarship in this area from the 1960s onwards, was that the First World War only served as a catalyst to what were already ripe conditions for a new revolution, which was most obviously foreshadowed by the events of 1905.

More recent studies in cultural history, however, propose a new reading of this period – a reading that is strongly reminiscent of Karpovich’s original assessment of the inter-revolutionary years. Indeed, in his detailed exploration of Russian society in 1913, Wayne Dowler demonstrates that the period between 1906 and 1917 was a truly unique time in Russian history: according to Dowler, the promise within the October Manifesto of rights for Russian citizens and the introduction of the State Duma and constitution irrevocably changed both Russian society and the ruling establishment. Post-1907 Russia was diversified, with a society that was not uniformly against the government, as many Russian citizens saw an opportunity to advocate solutions to problems within the existing framework of promised freedoms, and the ruling establishment was not universally autocratic, as a number of officials saw advantages in working with the State Duma. Although Dowler argues that changes in Russian society after 1905 enabled cooperation between the state and the public on many issues, there was nevertheless a palpable tension when it came to the question of the extent to which freedoms could be exercised. Simultaneously, a threat of extremism from both the left and the right continued to loom large.

It was within this transitional society that the first Futurist projects were undertaken. Experiments with new artistic forms at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century came to fruition by 1912 with the publication of the first

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Russian Futurist manifesto. The group continued in the following years to explore the Futurist format in linguistic and visual form by producing manifestos, literary publications, pieces of graphic design and by staging exhibitions of all manner of works. The most vibrant period of Futurist activity in its pre-1917 stage came during 1913 and reached its acme in early 1914.\textsuperscript{82} The year 1914 opened with a major event: a visit by Italian Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti to Moscow and St. Petersburg. Yet despite the apparent magnitude of this event, leading Russian Futurists declared no interest in supporting the visit, demonstrating their full independence from the Italians.\textsuperscript{83} While the cultural elite of the capitals sought to accommodate their international celebrity guest, Mayakovskiy, Kamenskii, and Burliuk set off on their own tour around the Empire.

The Russian Futurist tour was organised within an atmosphere of censorship: the staging of any public lecture required police permission, and since that was not enough to satisfy the autocratic aspiration for panoptic surveillance, it was common to have a police agent present during lectures, to take notes and ensure that the evening did not stray from the pre-approved program.\textsuperscript{84} The infamous Futurist call to throw overboard the classics from the steamship of modernity; their rebellion against established values and dedication to the idea of progress – could they have been accepted in this environment as the mere pontificating of ebullient youths fighting for their artistic credo? In her study on hooliganism in the late Imperial period, Joan Neuberger demonstrates that a challenge to cultural tradition in these circumstances “took on special significance in Russia because it occurred in a politically charged period and thus fed political hostilities.”\textsuperscript{85} The Futurist experience with the establishment during this period

\textsuperscript{82} Markov, Russian Futurism, pp. 132-163.

\textsuperscript{83} The Futurist tour of the country lasted from December 1913 to March 1914 and covered 15 cities. On the Futurist tour itinerary and the simultaneous visit by Marinetti to Moscow and St Petersburg see Nikolai Khardziej, Stat’i ob avangarde (v dvukh tomakh), Arkhiv russkovo avangarda, Tom 2, RA, Moscow, 1997, pp. 6-36. The actual number of Futurist performances during the tour remains a contested point (Markov, for example, mentions that they visited 17 cities, while highlighting that Futurists themselves offered various figures, which were usually exaggerated. See Markov, Russian Futurism, p. 135). On Marinetti’s visit to Moscow and St. Petersburg in 1914 see Lapsin, Marinetti e la Russia.

\textsuperscript{84} Ascher, The Revolution of 1905, p. 2; Dowler, Russia in 1913, p. 3.

\textsuperscript{85} Joan Neuberger, “Culture Besieged: Hooliganism and Futurism”, in Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg (eds.), Cultures in Flux – Lower-Class Values, Practices and Resistance in Late Imperial Russia, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, p. 203. See also Joan Neuberger, Hooliganism -
serves to demonstrate that Futurists, like any other individual or group attempting to engage in public discourse, were subjected to control: their attack against cultural hierarchy would not proceed unchecked. They inevitably had to develop techniques for dealing with a heavily policed public domain, which affected the formation and characteristics of the movement. That is, since the regime continued to restrict the very freedom of speech guaranteed in the October Manifesto, and since every public act carried a potential political meaning, Futurists had to be aware of and learn how to deal with their political reality. As such, Futurist progressive ideas went well beyond the normal limits of the artistic sphere as the organisational intricacies following their public performances and publication projects demonstrate.

In early February 1914, as Futurists descended upon the Western provinces of the Empire, a letter was sent from the office of the Grodno Governor to Moscow regarding the “political reliability” (politicheskaiia blagonadezhnost) of Vladimir Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Vasili Kamenskii. The letter requested information from Moscow as to the political sympathies of “Moscow Futurists David Davidovich Burliuk and Vladimir Vladimirovich Mayakovsky,” based on which a decision would be made regarding the request by these Futurists to organise events on 2 and 4 March in Grodno and Belostok. The Grodno office soon received a long reply from Moscow, detailing Mayakovsky’s previous encounters with the law: the report gave an outline of all three of Mayakovsky’s arrests, relating to his possession of illegal publications, his apprehension during a police raid on a group of anarchist expropriators, and his role in the aiding the escape of inmates from Moscow’s Novinskaia prison. The report noted that there were no records in Moscow concerning Burliuk’s and Kamenskii’s political activities.86 On the whole, however, it would appear that Mayakovsky’s files made for troubling reading, as permission for the Futurist lectures was denied.87

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86 RGALI f. 336, op. 5, d. 9.
87 Khardziev mentions this incident in his article on the Futurist tour, but it is not clear on what he bases his conclusion that permission was denied. For the Futurist visit in Grodno and Belostok he indicated as his source only “Mayakovsky Museum archive.” The documents available in RGALI do not indicate whether permission was obtained or not. Khardziev, Stat’ ob avangarde, Tom 2, p. 30.
The common protocol for organising public lectures, debates, or poetry recitals required applying for permission to the City Governor’s office. The event program had to be submitted to the Governor’s office after which it was reviewed by a censorship office. In case the program was rejected, the applicants had a chance to alter the program according to the censor’s remarks and then re-apply. Police presence was a condition of these public gatherings and the agents would check the performance against the approved program and report later to Governor’s office if a deviation from the program took place.\textsuperscript{88} Thus when Futurists did manage to obtain permission from officials to hold a public lecture, police presence was a common feature, there to ensure Futurists did not deviate from their approved lecture program.\textsuperscript{89}

A report made by a police agent who was present at a Futurist lecture entitled \textit{On Art and Literature} in Kazan on 20 February 1914 serves as a revealing account of what officials made of Futurist soirées. The agent gave a detailed synopsis of this three-hour long event, beginning with Mayakovsky’s speech on the nature of beauty. By contending that beauty was not an immutable category but that throughout history different cultures had perceived beauty in different ways, Mayakovsky introduced the notion that a new culture could not rely on old canons. He continued with characteristic Futurist criticism of classics, such as Pushkin, Lermontov and Dostoevsky, who, Futurists believed, had nothing to offer to contemporary readers. The entire tone of the lecture was focused on criticism of the classics and the accepted canons, while promoting Futurists as explorers of the new world. Vasilii Kamenskii’s speech on \textit{Airplanes and Futurist Poetry}, the police agent admitted, was not possible to summarise as he did not take notes during the speech and it was later impossible to recall anything of the speech in detail as the lecture was difficult to comprehend. The agent noted, however, that the point of the Futurist lecture was that there was no eternal notion of beauty and that contemporary industrial life would give birth to a new kind of beauty. On the


\textsuperscript{89}For some of the applications for public lectures on Futurism see GARF f. 63, op. 33 (1913g.), d. 31; GARF f. 63, op. 34 (1914g.), d. 31, t. 1.
whole, the agent concluded that none of these speeches broached issues concerning political life in Russia, nor did any of them refer to any of the various political parties. The evening continued with Burliuk’s speech on *Cubism and Futurism*, in which Burliuk argued that artists should not copy nature, as photography was quite capable of performing that task; instead, artists needed to find their own understanding of the world around them. A recital of Futurist verses (interrupted often by whistling – a typical and desirable response to Futurist performances) brought the evening to its conclusion, before Burliuk invited those present (somewhere in the region of 1500 people) to join their ranks, to make the choice of whether they wanted to support the *status quo* (*ostat’sia na mertvoi tochke*) or align themselves with the progressive move forwards.\(^{90}\)

Had Burliuk’s words been uttered at a workers’ meeting, for example, the Kazan agent would likely have been somewhat more alarmed. Given his difficulties in following parts of Futurist lecture, however, the mere fact that no openly political discourse took place made for a satisfactory completion of his duties. A more discerning agent might have been troubled by the Futurists’ proclamations – and, indeed, a fellow agent in Nikolaev\(^{91}\) did take a different view of the Futurist derision of classics: as Mayakovskiy noted in his autobiography, this police official issued a warning to the Futurists that any criticism directed at authorities, or at Pushkin for that matter, would not be tolerated.\(^{92}\) In an environment where authorities reacted nervously to any idea that potentially challenged the accepted order of things, an attack on Pushkin and Russian literary tradition could easily be interpreted as an attack on the institution that embodied the idea of tradition – the Tsar.\(^{93}\)

Just like their performances, Futurist publishing endeavours were similarly subjected to restriction and control. In January 1914 a Futurist publication caught

\(^{90}\) RGALI f. 336, op. 8, d. 1.

\(^{91}\) Khardziev offers 24 January 1914 as the date of Futurists’ visit to Nikolaev. Khardziev, *Stat’i ob avangarde*, Tom 2, p. 12.

\(^{92}\) Mayakovskiy, “Ya sam”, p. 22.

the eye of the authorities: the book *Futurists. Roaring Parnassus* (Futuristy. Rykaishchii Parnas) contained four drawings that were each in violation of the criminal code. The first, a drawing by Pavel Filonov, depicted two naked male figures; the second, David Burliuk’s work, represented three interlocked naked figures while the third, also by Burliuk, showed a naked figure from the back. These three drawings, containing as they did representations of naked male and female bodies, were deemed inappropriate; a drawing by Vladimir Burliuk, depicting a “parody” of the figure of St. George, was considered to be an act of blasphemous ridicule of a holy topic. The St. Petersburg Committee on Press Affairs banned the publication on the grounds that it violated the 74th and the 1001st statues, and officials decided that a book with such drawings needed to be withdrawn.94 The 1001st statue of the Penal Code stated that all publications which intentionally aim to achieve “corruption of morals, or that openly oppose morality and decency or contain seductive depictions” were to be destroyed, and culprits subjected either to a fine or imprisonment for between seven days and three months.95 Similarly, statute 74 of the Criminal Code proclaimed that the obscene mockery of sacred objects and objects of belief would result in a charge of blasphemy, punishable by imprisonment.96 Historians have noted that definitions of blasphemy and pornography in these laws were notoriously vague, which allowed the officials to use these laws in dealing with any kind of unwanted content, most often content that was politically, rather than morally, problematic.97 In March 1914, composer Mikhail Matiushin, who was also the publisher of Futurist works,98 filed a complaint regarding the verdict on *Roaring Parnassus*, which saw this book banned prior to it even reaching the bookstores.99 Matiushin argued against the ban on the book precisely by referring to the law’s vagueness and the fact that the court did not find itself obliged to specify the reasons for the

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94 RGALI f. 336, op. 5, d. 8, ll. 1-2; also RGIA f. 776, op. 10, d. 1286, ll. 1-9a; f. 777, op. 21, d. 33, ll. 1-9. In his autobiography Kruchenykh noted that the publication was deemed seditious and was confiscated. See Kruchenykh, *Nash vykhod*, p. 90.

95 *Ulozhenie o nakazaniakh ugrozovnikh i ispravit’nykh 1885 g.* (izdano neofitsal’noe), izdano N. S. Tagantsevym, St. Petersburg, 1898, p. 514.

96 *Novoe Ugrozovnoe ulozhenie*, Vyschaishe utverzhdennoe 22 martsa 1903 g. S prilozeniem predmetnago alfavitnago ukazatel’ia, Izdanie Kamennostrovskago iuridicheskago knizhnago magazina V. P. Anisimova, St. Petersburg, 1903, p. 35.

97 Boele, *Erotic Nihilism in Late Imperial Russia*, pp. 100-104.


99 RGALI f. 336, op. 5, d. 8, l. 5.
ban. Furthermore, Matiushin argued that the court’s decision violated the Tsar’s decree (ukaz) of 26 April 1906, which referred to abolition of pre-censorship, a decree that came as a result of revolutionary pressures during 1905.\(^{100}\) The court’s reply was curt: the book remained banned, and there was no basis for considering Matiushin’s complaint, which had been subsequently returned to him.\(^{101}\)

In a brief essay on Mayakovsky and the subjection of his work to censorship, Nikolai Kharzdiev mentioned the case of Roaring Parnassus noting that Mayakovsky’s anti-bourgeois verses Take this! (Nate!)\(^{102}\) were part of this compilation of Futurist works.\(^{103}\) Given the reputation of the “statute on pornography” it is not inconceivable that censors recognised in this book more than simply provocative and blasphemous images. Thus by 1914 Futurists were fairly familiar with the authorities, which made for an acerbic comment in the Moscow newspaper Rannee utro that Futurists could be considered young only based on the date of birth recorded in their passports, for they were otherwise quite experienced, given that their audacity had already seen them dealing with “the 1001st statute.”\(^{104}\)

The St. Petersburg archives house documents of another Futurist publication that met with disapproval from censors: in early 1914 the St. Petersburg Committee on Press Affairs passed a ban on the publication entitled Igly komforta. Sverkh futurista Antona Pupa. In his exhaustive study of Russian Futurist texts, Vladimir Markov notes that during the pre-revolutionary period there was a number of publications described as “literary frauds,” that is, imitations and parodies of Futurist texts. Markov labels Igly komforta. Sverkh futurista Antona Pupa (translated as “Needles of Comfort by the Superfuturist

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\(^{100}\) Imennoi Vysochaishii ukaz dannyi Senatu – O vremennikh pravilakh dlaia nepovremennoi pechatii, 26 aprelia 1906 (the text of this decree is available at the website “Open Text”, supported by the Federal Agency for Press and Mass Communication of the Russian Federation, www.opentextnm.ru, document accessed on 23 March 2012). Matiushin specifically quoted point 3 under section IV of this decree as the basis of his complaint.

\(^{101}\) RGALI f. 336, op. 5, d. 8, l. 6.


\(^{103}\) Nikolai Khardziev, “Mayakovskiy i tsarskaia tsenzura”, in Khardziev (ed.), Stat’i ob avangarde, Tom 2, p. 100. This article was originally published in 1938. The author does not indicate sources nor does he mention the problematic drawings and the full court process.

Anton Bellybutton") as an example of these hoaxes. The work was published in St. Petersburg by the same publishing house that printed Kruchenykh’s books at that time; Markov suggests that this publication was possibly a work of the printer who set Kruchenykh’s books previously and then decided to make fun of Futurist works in this manner.\textsuperscript{105} Whether a work of a prankster or an aspiring Futurist, the St. Petersburg Committee on Press Affairs banned this work – relying again on the 1001\textsuperscript{st} statute.\textsuperscript{106} Such accusations of pornographic content were not limited to the print media, but were also used to control various gallery spaces, as a study of a 1910 court case involving an exhibition containing nudes by avant-garde artist Natalia Goncharova demonstrates.\textsuperscript{107}

The restriction imposed on every form of free speech caused the public to devise various coping and subversion techniques. When the authorities aggressively sought to prevent the publication of newspapers and journals critical of the Tsarist regime by shutting down offices and imprisoning editors, opposition forces developed guerrilla tactics. If a newspaper were shut down, it would soon reappear under a different title. Newspapers often paid people to be arrested for acting as editors-in-chief: even in the event that these people were imprisoned, the newspaper staff would continue to produce the paper unaffected.\textsuperscript{108} Similarly, when faced with the requirement that their programs receive official approval before being allowed to organise public lectures, Futurists often received their permits after forwarding the name of a respectable person as the lecture host.\textsuperscript{109} There were, of course, other ways for Futurists to persuade authorities to approve their lectures. In a revealing episode described in Kamenskii’s autobiography, the Futurists used the fact that Kamenskii was an authorised pilot to have their program approved. A man of many talents, Kamenskii was a quintessential Futurist mind, who took his adoration of modern technology a step further by promising his fellow Futurists that he would become a pilot – and soon after


\textsuperscript{106} RGIA f. 776, op. 10, d. 1280, ll. 1-10; RGIA f. 777, op. 21, d. 31, ll. 1-9.

\textsuperscript{107} Sharp, \textit{Russian Modernism Between East and West}, pp. 97-142.


passed the required test and indeed obtained a pilot’s license. This license proved to be very useful for dealing with the authorities, as the words “Pilot-Aviator of the Imperial All-Russia Aero-club” next to Kamenskii’s name on Futurist leaflets advertising their lectures was a move akin to Copernicus’ dedication of *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* to pope Paul III. The police officials in Kharkov, however, were unsure of what to make of the Futurist group, sending Kamenskii instead to see the Governor:

I showed “his excellency” the aviator’s diploma [...] Then I showed the leaflet with highlighted title “Airplanes and Poetry.”

The Governor wondered:
- Why is there Futurism? What is that? What for?
I explained that Futurism was concerned with the development of aviation.

The Governor asked:
- And Burliuk and Mayakovsky are also pilots?
I replied:
- Almost...
- Why then, asked the Governor, is there so much scandal around your names?  

To this Kamenskii replied that newspapers liked to colour everything in a sensationalist and scandalous hue in order to sell more copies, after which, although still apprehensive, the Governor approved their lecture.

In their memoirs Futurists noted the numerous police agents who sat through their lectures, and that the censors followed verbatim the pre-approved text of their plays, making sure that nothing passed through unapproved. In 1914 Burliuk and Mayakovsky were expelled from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture for their repeated defiance of the School principal’s request to curtail their “critical and agitational” work. A Moscow newspaper *Nov’* reported on this event, noting that the basis for the expulsion of Mayakovsky and Burliuk was a pure formality, since it was against the School’s rules for students to participate in public lectures. The content of the lectures, however, must also have given cause for concern, as the article noted that the “extreme artistic theories” (*krainiia teorii iskusstva*) propagated by Burliuk and Mayakovsky,

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111 Ibid., p. 573.
112 Kruchenykh, *Nash vykhod*, pp. 69-70; See also Dowler, *Russia in 1913*, p. 266.
the report highlighted, were absolutely at odds with the traditional teaching of the School, and the Futurists’ latest scandalous appearances forced the School to request expulsion, which was expected to be ratified in the following days by the Minister of the Interior, Nikolai A. Maklakov.114 Not long after, Nov’ published Burliuk’s reply. “When I went to see police chief for permission to organise a lecture”, wrote Burliuk, “[...] he showed me the ‘Futurist file’ where, among other newspaper clippings about me and other Futurists, he showed me one in particular – ‘Expulsion of Burliuk from the School’.”115 Since Burliuk was no longer a student, the police chief argued, he could not approve any lectures by Burliuk and his fellow Futurists. A school banning its students from taking part in public lectures and debates, and police officials that would not approve lectures if speakers had been expelled from schools was clearly just a convenient bureaucratic solution to dealing with troublemakers. “Why was I expelled?” wrote Burliuk in his reply, “For harmful activity outside the school walls, for freedom of thought. Because I dared to think differently to what was allowed.” Accusing the “incorruptible liberal press” for writing – on numerous occasions – articles that expressed bewilderment at the School for putting up with the impetuous behaviour of Futurists, Burliuk wondered aloud that if even the so-called liberal press celebrated intolerance, who would be left to protect freedom of speech:

Who would now stand up and say a free, loud word in defence of the abused right to think freely, at least about art, without subordination, cuff on the nape, and similar ‘pedagogy’? Who will not be afraid to show that expulsion for freedom of thinking (about art) outside school walls is unjust and that the soul of the student [...] is free. And even more so that of an artist! [...] There is no justice and no impartiality. Where is the voice of a freedom-loving press in protecting the everlasting de gustibus non disputandum.116

Burliuk concluded by saying that, in the present circumstances, there was no room for discussing taste, as there was only the approved, official, indisputable taste. Even more jarring were Burliuk’s words on freedom of thought, in which he

114 “Izslučenje D. Burljuka i V. Mayakovskago iz uchilishcha zhivopisi”, Nov’, 25 February 1914, p. 5; Khardzhev notes that Burliuk refers here to the event that took place in Penza, when he was trying to secure permission to give a lecture in Penza as one of the last performances on the Futurist tour. Burliuk eventually managed to obtain permission for this lecture, which took place on 3 March 1914. Police made sure that Futurists did not appear in their usual flamboyant outfits. Khardzhev, Stat’ ibr avangarde, Tom 2, p. 29.
116 Ibid.
highlighted that even the domain of arts, traditionally believed to be peripheral to
the state’s (political) concerns, was subjected to control and regulation.

Similarly abrasive comments appeared in Mayakovsky’s article for Nov’,
where he described the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture as a
place where one did not learn art, but rather learned to acquire the official taste, a
place where “professors shove into the still toothless mouths of their young
students their own chewed up taste.”\(^{17}\) The very fact that asking a Muscovite for
directions to the School would be met with a blank stare, that only by mentioning
that the School building was opposite a well-known post office on Miasnitskaia
street would you be furnished with directions was testament, Mayakovsky argued,
to this establishment’s lack of reputation. A call for young people to fight for the
creation of a new free academy concluded Mayakovsky’s tirade against the School.

As debate concerning the expulsion of Burliuk and Mayakovsky from the
School raged, Kazimir Malevich was completing his painting Cow and Violin – a
work that serves as a powerful example of the Futurist attack on official (or
traditional) taste. Consisting of an unusual juxtaposition of two recognisable
subjects set within an arrangement of geometric shapes, the elements of the work
were not united by a common narrative, but instead represented a free
combination of objects within what Malevich referred to as an “alogical”
composition: inspired by developments in Futurist zaum (transrational) poetry,
Malevich – who was at the time a member of the Futurist nucleus – transferred the
alogical character of this poetry onto his canvas. Zaum was envisioned as a non-
representational use of language, wherein poets would use words in a manner
unrestricted by the usual grammatical (and logical) conventions of language and
narrative. Similarly, Malevich’s Cow and Violin does not follow the expected logic of
a coherent narrative, nor does it adhere to the normal union of time and place. If
there was any doubt as to whether his work was devised as an attack on
established tastes and the dullness of bourgeois perception, the artist’s inscription
on the back of the canvas offers reassurance, with Malevich describing the work as

\(^{17}\) Vladimir Mayakovsky, “Kak by Moskve ne ostat’sia bez khudozhnikov”, Nov’, 20 December 1914, p. 8.
“An alogical confrontation of the two forms – a cow and a violin – as a moment of struggle with logic, with naturalness, with Philistine sense and prejudice.”

Figure 2: Kazimir Malevich, Cow and Violin, 1913-1914

Throughout this period Futurists continually demonstrated a strategic engagement with the public domain, conscious of the fact that the cover of an anthology of poetry, the frame of a canvas, and the walls of a classroom or lecture theatre did not allow for unchecked creativity. Armed with malleable definitions of punishable transgressions (such as “disturbing the peace” or “pornography”) the authorities dedicated considerable effort to the task of keeping artistic discourse on a tight leash. As such, negotiating the contemporary political framework represented an intrinsic component of the Futurist creative endeavour.\textsuperscript{120}

**The Experience of War and the New Revolution**

Russia’s entry into the First World War initially had a mobilising and unifying effect upon the nation, and this atmosphere also impacted upon members of the Futurist cohort. Futurists were able during the war years to continue publishing works and organising exhibitions, lectures and performances, although they were not able to do so with the same intensity as before 1914. In addition, a number of Futurists participated in collective charity exhibitions, the proceeds of which were used to support Russian military endeavours.\textsuperscript{121} While the majority of Futurists did not see action on the frontline during the war, they did devote their creative talents toward serving a common cause.\textsuperscript{122} Mayakovskiy (who originally volunteered for the army but – having been deemed politically unreliable due to his revolutionary background – was rejected for active service) and Osip Brik (who would later become a leading Futurist theoretician) both served as draftsmen in a military automotive school in Petersburg.\textsuperscript{123} Kruchenykh also worked in a military

\begin{footnotesize}

\footnote{119 Image reproduced from Nakov, *Malevich*, p. 407.}


\footnote{121 Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, pp. 121-147. See also Markov, *Russian Futurism*, pp. 276-379.}


\footnote{123 Markov, *Russian Futurism*, pp. 307-308.}

\end{footnotesize}
railway department as a draftsman between 1916 and 1918.\textsuperscript{124} The Futurist activity during the war that has attracted the most significant scholarly attention, however, was their creative contribution to the state’s war propaganda campaign.

Leading Futurist exponents became state spokesmen, creating a language of patriotism capable of conveying confident and persuasive expressions of Russian military and cultural dominance.\textsuperscript{125} While poets composed piercing slogans deriding the enemy and boisterously asserting that Russians possessed an enduring spirit capable of overcoming any hardship, painters created visual idioms that succinctly communicated patriotic content. These works usually adopted forms of \textit{lubki} (the traditional format of popular prints that combined text and image) or postcards; they extolled the supposed physical and spiritual wholesomeness of common Russian people and portrayed the Russian state as a motherly figure protecting her children, while the enemy was lampooned and portrayed as physically and morally degenerate. Futurist artists, including Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Malevich, were gathered around the publishing house The Contemporary Lubok (\textit{Segodniashnii lubok}). The most indelible propaganda pieces published by this house were executed by Mayakovsky, who generally composed both the images and the accompanying slogans; Malevich’s powerful visual solutions were also often coupled with Mayakovsky’s verses.\textsuperscript{126}

Being so intimately involved in this campaign had a profound effect on the evolution of Futurism and its tactics. The Futurist notion of creating an artistic practice that would be an integral and socially relevant component of everyday life gained a new outlet in these propaganda pieces – a significant moment in the

\textsuperscript{124} RGAI f. 1334, op. 1, d. 231.

movement’s gradual evolution from being disruptive to becoming constructive. This opportunity also gave Futurist artists an enhanced understanding of mass media, while establishing their direct and continued engagement with the public. While artists with more traditional backgrounds avoided representations of war on their canvases (in the belief that the dramatic events of war could only be properly expressed in art from a historical distance), Futurists embraced modern, technology-based mass media as a mode of artistic expression that was fast, fluent and positioned at the core of daily life. The First World War also exposed the Futurist cohort to the phenomena of mobile performances and the deployment of the first agitational trains. Their work on the propaganda campaign opened a mode of creative practice that would become central to the development of the Futurist program during the years of the Civil War.

Just as the First World War remains a problematic issue within studies that seek to interpret the evolution of revolutionary movement, the influence of the war upon the development of the Futurism remains equally open to debate. The fact that Futurists so actively and directly entered into the official discourse concerning war has – for some historians – served to buttress the argument that the Futurist experience of the First World War was the moment of the avant-garde’s political awakening, and a prefiguration of the political activism that it would exhibit after the October Revolution. The war, however, was only one component of the pre-revolutionary engagement by Futurism with its socio-political reality. In addition, it is important to highlight the fact that Futurism never offered unequivocal support to the war campaign: while designing posters that derided German troops, Mayakovsky simultaneously composed piercing verses that sought to draw attention to the fact that while ordinary men in the trenches were paying the price of the war, Russia’s elites were reading newspapers in the comfort of their heated studies. In addition, after the February Revolution when

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127 Cohen, Imagining the Unimaginable, pp. 107-114. Similarly, elite theatres avoided the topic of war, believing that proper dramatisation of the experience could not be done at that moment. See Jahn, Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I, p. 131.
128 Jahn, Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I, p. 81. On the development of performing arts during the war see pp. 85-149.
129 Cohen, Imagining the Unimaginable, pp. 149-151.
130 Artists worked for The Contemporary Lubok in the course of 1914 but, following significant Russian losses, the artists became disillusioned and the Contemporary Lubok closed down in
the Provisional Government – despite the country's total exhaustion – decided to continue the war effort, the vast majority of progressive artists openly voiced their opposition to this policy.131 Thus, the Futurist war propaganda experience must be regarded as a moment within their continual engagement with contemporary society, and not as the turning point when Futurists first became explicitly engaged in political activism. Furthermore, efforts by Futurists to engage with the state's propaganda campaign were not representative of a casting aside of the Futurist rebellious mantle. Although Mayakovsky’s verse that Futurists were now carrying architectural blueprints instead of jester’s rattles was penned in 1915, it was only during the Civil War period that this panoply of very diverse experiences was shaped into a more cohesive theory of Futurism as a constructive force.

Thus, as a wave of revolutionary energy surged again in 1917, members of the Futurist cohort possessed techniques for active engagement with the public domain that were developed both from the earlier revolutionary practice and from the agitational and propaganda projects during the war years. By the time Futurists published a proclamation entitled Manifest letuchei federatsii futuristov in 1918, they were clearly not a group of eccentric artists who were protected by revolutionary chaos and, in the absence of censorship and police constraints, had freedom to promote their ideas; rather, they were a group of experienced individuals as aware of the contemporary political intricacies as they were committed to progressive artistic ideas.132 The very title of their manifesto demonstrated the level of Futurist intent, in both goal and tactics, with respect to the revolutionary movement. Their proclamation stated that the old regime was supported by three pillars of enslavement: political, social and spiritual. While the February revolution brought an end to political slavery, the October revolution broke the pillar of social enslavement, by placing a “bomb of social revolution under Capitalism.” For Futurists, only spiritual slavery – embodied in the forms of

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132 David Burlulik, Vasili Kamenskii, Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Manifest letuchei federatsii futuristov" (March 1918), in Terekhina, Zimenkov (eds.), Russkii futurizm, pp. 103-104.
the old, still omnipresent, art – remained. As such, their manifesto was essentially a call for a third revolution, a revolution of spirit that would complete the social and political progress made by the earlier revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

The title of this text in its English translation, usually formulated as “Manifesto of the Flying Federation of Futurists,” however, is somewhat misleading: despite the Futurist fascination with idea of flight and with airplane technology (a fascination that was shared by Italian and Russian Futurists alike), the manifesto title was in fact more of a demonstration of Futurist revolutionary training. The term “letuchii” often appears in this period in reference to something “mobile,” or done in an impromptu manner. In her study on the student movement, Morrissey notes that as the authorities grew more repressive in preventing its gatherings and meetings, students developed a practice of convening so-called “flying meetings” (letuchie skhodki). Devised as blitz meetings, quick enough to be completed before police were able to intervene but nonetheless effective enough to keep the revolutionary message alive, this guerrilla method was an inventive strategy within a tightly policed environment. Similar terms were used in the report on the events that transpired at the Penza College of Art: the police report makes mention of an illegal library compiled by the Council of Elders that, in addition to books, consisted of “flying publications” – small, quickly produced publications in the form of leaflets and brochures (prestupnykh letuchikh izdaniy v vide broshiur i proklamatsii). While the previous examples use the term letuchii to refer to a blitz event or quickly produced publication, this term was also used to refer to mobile (“flying”) units of insurgents – small groups of revolutionaries, capable of quickly gathering and dispersing after an operation. Clearly, having a transient profile and the ability to work at speed was advantageous in any street fight with the police or the army. Indeed, this very tactic was later employed by

134 Morrissey, Heralds of Revolution, p. 214.
135 GARF f. 102 D4, op. 1909, d. 49 ch. 5, l. 32ob.
the Red Guards, who organised “mobile [letuchie] detachments” for combating counterrevolutionary forces.\textsuperscript{137}

In his autobiography Kruchenykh noted how, in the days after the revolutionary events, Futurists in both Moscow and St. Petersburg participated in workers’ and soldiers’ meetings, taking the rostrum after speeches by revolutionary leaders, and going from one club to another. Kruchenykh noted in particular the intensity of Futurist activity in the factories in the Vyburg and Vasilyevskii districts of St. Petersburg – the most highly populated worker areas in the city.\textsuperscript{138} It was from these tactics of Futurist “flying” performances, taken from the revolutionary practices of quick, effective and mobile agitation, that their 1918 manifesto originates.

In the same year Osip Brik and Mayakovsky devised the idea of a revolutionary “letuchii” theatre – a mobile theatre. This form of theatre performance was conceived out of a desire to complement revolutionary agitation, and was stripped of all unnecessary elements such as elaborate props and stages – and even the theatre edifice itself – as agitation for the revolutionary cause demanded minimal equipment so that it could move fast, travel to different parts of the country and deliver the revolutionary message in the most efficient manner. The origins of this concept can be traced to the war years, when artists visited hospitals in order to preform for the wounded soldiers (organising so called “flying concerts”). Impromptu performances involving the most basic of props were also recorded during the war, when so-called “bivouac spectacles” were popular with the troops.\textsuperscript{139} In the aftermath of the revolution – a time when revolutionary agitation and artistic production were united in the task of cementing the revolutionary victory among what was still a divided population – theatre needed to make its way to the people, and the best method for doing this was to take a mobile form. Revolutionary plays that supported the Bolshevik cause were not welcome in established theatres in capital cities that were still dominated by

\textsuperscript{137} Alexander Rabinowitch, \textit{The Bolsheviks in Power, The first Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd}, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2007, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{138} Kruchenykh, \textit{Nash vykhod}, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{139} Jahn, \textit{Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I}, pp. 108-109; p. 136.
cultural elites hostile to the Bolshevik takeover. It was not, however, simply that progressive theatre forms were unwelcome in the old theatres; at the same time, the newly-conceived agitational theatre had no use for these baroque buildings with their elaborate stage designs.

Thus in the immediate aftermath of the revolution, when cultural institutions were still dominated by the old mentality, it was difficult to stage a play that sought to further the achievements of the revolution. Realising that the bastions of traditional culture were still strong enough to ward off their revolutionary efforts, progressive artists united in a strategy that was appropriated from the tactics of revolutionary guerrilla fighting as well as the performance practices witnessed during the war: as a unit, the theatre group would be mobile, would travel lightly with a minimum of stage props, and would perform a play and keep moving. Brik and Mayakovsky noted in their appeal to the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky (which was published in the journal *Iskusstvo kommuny*) that “the right solution under these conditions appears to be formation of a mobile (letuchii) theatre, a voluntary organisation of stage revolutionaries, freed from any kind of burdening technical apparatus, focusing its entire energy on the play and the word that comes from the stage.”

This mobile, light, fast-moving theatre form that travelled around the country, preforming in all manner of venues including people’s houses and worker theatres, helped to further spread the revolutionary word by way of an equally revolutionised form of theatre. It was an insurgent theatre – a theatre best suited to supporting a revolution that was yet to conclude.

It was from a combination of proven revolutionary tactics and the agitational and propaganda efforts witnessed during the war that progressive artists adopted the strategies underpinning their new art practice – a practice that was born of the need to preserve the revolution. This brought to light a completely new art form – *arte azione* – art that was indistinguishable from political activism. P. M. Lebedev went as far as to suggest, in his comment following Brik’s and Mayakovsky’s appeal in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, the formation of mobile cells of artists (*organizatsiia artisticheskikh letuchikh iacheek propagandistskogo kharaktera*) that

would have a propaganda role and carry out their performances and art production not just in the capitals but also around the country towns and villages.\textsuperscript{141}

The “Mobile Federation of Futurists” and their “mobile theatre” were ideas born out of revolutionary practices, although the term itself (especially in English translation where it usually appears simply as “flying”) often lends to it a layer of flippancy. Indeed, in even more unfortunate and misleading translations such as the “Airborne Theater,”\textsuperscript{142} the origin of these ideas becomes completely obscured. Also hiding the origin of this term in Futurist usage was the fact that the original Italian Futurism based its philosophy on a love of machines, automobiles and airplanes in particular, and regarded the sensation of flying as the quintessential modern experience. It is therefore unsurprising that the idea of a “flying theatre” and a “flying federation of Futurists” did not stand out within the general vocabulary of the wider Futurist movement. The misleading terminology, however, did add an eccentric flare to the Russian Futurist movement, obscuring the level to which the movement based its ideas and its artistic tactics in their activist experiences.

**Swimming Upstream against Social Malaise**

In the opening of his study *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, Mark D. Steinberg writes that

Imperial Russia’s final decade was an era of possibility and crisis, marked by an often desperate search for the meaning of the present and a sense of the future. In retrospect, we know that this era was a threshold: the unsettled wake of the 1905 revolution and the eve of a still greater revolutionary upheaval in the midst of a devastating war.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{141} P. M. Lebedev, Comment in response to Brik’s and Mayakovsky’s article, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 3, 22 December 1918, p. 3.


\textsuperscript{143} Steinberg, *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, p. 1.
Dowler's study is representative of this exploration of "possibilities" of this period, focusing on the ways society sought to use its newly won liberties (restricted as they were) for further advancement. In many ways, Futurism was a product of this environment of possibilities. In this tense atmosphere of exercising civil liberties and being subjected to official control, Futurists were punished for promoting an artistic philosophy that went against the official academic taste, but they were able to vent their anger in newspapers; they were forbidden to perform in Grodno, but many miles away, citizens of Kharkov were able to attend Futurist soirées. The autocratic aspiration of realising panoptic surveillance and control was, after all, just that – an aspiration. The freedom of the press after 1905 was exercised vigorously, and Futurists too sought every opportunity to use this medium. Furthermore, the vastness of the Russian Empire, and the associated perpetual shortage of staff for the policing and censorship efforts (as well as the predominance of poorly educated staff who allowed problematic content to pass unaltered)\(^{144}\) – all of these factors provided Futurism with both enough space to propagate their ideas, but also imposed enough suppression to enhance their antagonism towards the regime.

While possibility and opportunity is representative of one aspect of late Tsarist society, Steinberg's work illuminates the darker side of this inter-revolutionary period – that of crisis. In the aftermath of the "failed" 1905 revolution, the Russian public had to face the profound trauma of this experience. After a sweeping wave of enthusiasm that carried the promise of radical change to social conditions, the aggressive stifling of the revolutionary drive brought on a pervasive sense of despair, disenchantment and demoralisation. This macabre mood was, as Steinberg noted, not limited to the political left or even to the educated population, but permeated public consciousness in general.\(^{145}\) It is the same anguish we detect in Panda's article from the start of this chapter, where Futurist ideas are considered against the background of omnipresent sense of devastation and chaos. Futurism thus also emerges as a product of the environment of crisis. It is through its reaction against this crisis that we can see Futurism demonstrating its sense for engaging with contemporary reality.

\(^{144}\) On the inefficiency of censorship see Goldschmidt, *Pornography and Democratization*, p. 95.
\(^{145}\) Steinberg, *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, p. 249.
There is a great body of scholarship concerned with crisis and its manifestations during the last decade of Tsarist rule. The “epidemic” of suicides after 1905, especially among the young population, represent the most extreme manifestation of the state of mind of Russian populace. In her study of the phenomenon of suicide in Imperial Russia, Morrisey offers a detailed account of the political, economic and moral causes of this surge in suicides after the revolution, as well as highlighting the perception of contemporary commentators who saw this troubling trend as symptomatic of a pathological and grave state of mind within Russian society. The rise of hooliganism on the streets of Russian cities, as demonstrated by Neuberger, was also symptomatic of this crisis. Works by Steinberg and Louise McReynolds, by contrast, discuss the contemporary lust for popular entertainment, which Steinberg in particular sees as a way of dealing with the crisis. The pervasive sense of disillusionment led people to retreat from the “big issues” and search for alternatives through which they could find solace. Embracing entertainment and amusement of all kinds became a way to treat anxiety, with numerous theatres, cafés, cabarets, sport events, circus and cinema allowing people to be dazzled and lost in light-hearted spectacles. As the search for personal pleasures gained stronger currency in the post-1905 period, tantalising issues of eroticism and sexual gratification started to dominate public discourse. Attempts to treat the collective traumatic experience of violence with sex exemplified, as Steinberg’s survey of contemporary press demonstrates, a “postrevolutionary cultural crisis in which political passions were replaced with sexual ones, and the ‘new good’ was crass egoistic pursuit of ‘life’s physical benefits’.” The rise of this phenomenon is also measurable by proliferation of a popular literature packed with heroes whose life principle is pleasure-seeking, not social commitment. Otto Boele’s study of Mikhail Artsybahsev’s novel Sanin offers a riveting example of salacious literature that grew to exemplify a state of mind of

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146 Susan K. Morrisey, Suicide and the Body Politics in Imperial Russia, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 315-324. See also Steinberg, Petersburg, Fin de Siècle, pp. 119-156.
147 Neuberger, Hooliganism - Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914, and “Culture Besieged: Hooliganism and Futurism”, pp. 185-203
149 Steinberg, Petersburg, Fin de Siècle, pp. 182-183.
an entire generation.\textsuperscript{150} Published in 1907, Artsybashev’s hero Vladimir Sanin was an embodiment of hedonistic and nihilistic attitudes. A former student and political activist, Sanin grew “bored” with the revolutionary movement, and dedicated himself instead to pursuit of his own pleasures, rather than the common cause.\textsuperscript{151} More than simply a literary (anti)hero, Sanin represented a “collective portrait of an entire generation,”\textsuperscript{152} that turned to (and actively promoted, as contemporary critics feared) a philosophy of free love and all forms of hedonism, relinquishing dangerous, and futile, social commitment. “Saninism” became a controversial and distressing social phenomenon in post-1905 Russia. Anastasia Verbitskaia’s popular potboilers, filled with adventures and passionate encounters, with tantalising titles such as \textit{The Keys to Happiness}, are often considered as part of the same phenomenon.\textsuperscript{153}

“In the winter of 1907,” wrote Kamenskii in his memoirs, “a majority of students, thanks to Verbitskaia and recently published Sanin by Artsybashev, was preoccupied with issues of gender and ‘free love’. For the first time in life, I delivered a long lecture regarding this subject in front of great number of students, castigating petty bourgeois vulgarity (poshlost’) and bawdry of the verbitskaia-artsybashev type, that distracted the youth from the great ideas of the liberation movement and from building new forms of contemporary culture.”\textsuperscript{154} In a similar vein, Kruchenykh critically wrote in his memoirs of the period between 1907 and 1909 as a time of darkness in the cultural domain, an “epoch of reaction,” when topics of mysticism and sex ruled, together with “saninshchina,”\textsuperscript{155} while Mayakovsky castigated the likes of Verbitskaia whose novels promoted

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[150] Boele, \textit{Erotic Nihilism in Late Imperial Russia}.
\item[151] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
\item[152] Ibid., p. 23.
\item[154] Kamenskii, “Put entuziasta”, p. 510. Artsybashev’s Sanin was banned by censors on the basis of the same “statute on pornography” as many Futurist publications. Boele argued that in Sanin’s case, more than seditious content, the fact that the main protagonist had a revolutionary background seemed to have been of primary concern for the censors. Boele, \textit{Erotic Nihilism in Late Imperial Russia}, pp. 97-104.
\end{enumerate}
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abandonment of the real in favour of a titillating dream-land.\textsuperscript{156} It is here again that we see Futurists not simply engaging in literary debates over the value of Artsybashev-Verbitskaia style but, more pertinently, advocating against social trends that supported this phenomenon and that might have facilitated a retreat from more significant issues.

It is noteworthy that for a large portion of its contemporary audience Futurism itself became a form of escapist entertainment. People flocked to its performances not in order to understand the Futurist program, but to have a good time, see these unusual artists, heckle and hopefully witness a scandal or two.\textsuperscript{157} Self-advertising, provocation and scandal making were, of course, intrinsic to the Futurist philosophy. For all their outlandishness and effrontery, however, and beyond their painted faces and provocative attire, there was a movement that not only demonstrated an astute comprehension of the state of affairs in the country, but also actively took part in the political discourse. Entering the Futurist project with substantial revolutionary experience, Futurists continued throughout this period to demonstrate an understanding of and engagement with contemporary socio-political conditions. Although certainly deeply involved in artistic considerations of the Futurist idiom, by the very nature of Futurism (which, of course, sought to destroy the established canons) and the context of Tsarist officialdom (which sought so determinately to preserve them), Futurism could not have remained in the ivory tower of art. Futurists’ negotiation of official boundaries in delivering their message, their public discourse on the freedom of art, and hence of speech, the appropriation of revolutionary tactics into their work, and finally their open attack on social defeatism and escape into fantasy that surged after the failure of the revolution, as well as their later active contribution to the official war discourse, all demonstrate the level to which Futurism was engaged in the socio-political reality of its time and thus inevitably accorded a political aspect to its endeavours. Though pre-1917 Futurism could not boast a clear and defined political agenda – or even an alliance with any specific political

\textsuperscript{156}Vladimir Mayakovskij, “Shtatskaia shrapnel’. Poety na fugasakh”, \textit{Utreneeii telefoon – Gazeta Nov’}, No. 3, 12 November 1914, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{157}Kharzdziev, \textit{Stat’i ob avangarde}, Tom 1, p. 51; Dadswell, “Re-approaching Russian Futurism, The Inter-Revolutionary Years, 1908-1915”, p. 45.
party – the movement was certainly not apolitical or disinterested in the state of affairs in Russia.

Against what were pervasive feelings of anxiety (and all manner of escapist methods for dealing with these feelings), Futurism called for activism and for facing modern challenges head on. Thus, against a dominant sense of pessimism and disillusionment with the outcomes of revolutionary project, as well as with general conditions brought on by modern life, Futurism represented a rare force of optimism. Similar call for optimism and courage was exemplified in the political arena by the Bolshevik platform and Lenin’s plea for “boldness against doubt” in the aftermath of 1905. Judging by the evidence in the urban press, as Steinberg argues, the Futurists’ contemporaries saw little reason for their optimism and hopefulness, interpreting it as unfounded and even contrived, which brings to mind Christine Poggi’s study of Italian Futurism – suggestively entitled The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism. In a sea of despair, it looked as if Futurists were “swimming upstream against a strong current.” But swim they did.

158 Steinberg, *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, pp. 202-211.
160 Steinberg, *Petersburg, Fin de Siècle*, p. 264.
Chapter Two:

Futurism During the Civil War, 1917-1921

Vladimir Mayakovsky on How the Soviet System Works

In 1919, on the 19th of 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 to become 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. Receiving a commission inevitably meant spending more time

1 GARF f. 4390, op. 14, d. 36, ll. 103, 103ob, 104. A short excerpt from this letter has been published, without identification of the source, in Vasili A. Katanian, Mayakovsky, Khronika zhizni i deiatel’nosti, Sovetskii pisatel’, Moscow, 1985, pp. 171-172.
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. Yet in spite of the fact that all the details of the commission had been confirmed, “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,

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 (Sheila Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1970, p. 23). The Day of Soviet Propaganda was planned for 7 September 1919, see Iskusstvo, No. 8, 5 September 1919.
he had decided to rescind the commission entirely. In the following days, Mayakovsky found himself being handballed 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 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 had not been 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 record of his 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 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” 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-Khomiaik 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.” It is with the emergent challenges associated with the new Soviet reality in mind that we must consider the endeavours of the Futurists.

The Russian Futurist movement is often, like all avant-garde movements, characterised as being little more than the utopian daydreaming of young artists – 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. This simplistic assessment, however, belies a much more complex and interesting reality. Through an examination of the writings that appeared in Futurist publications during the Civil War period, it becomes apparent that much of the Futurist program was in fact a sensible and measured response to Soviet reality. Mayakovsky’s letter is of great contextual value in this investigation, as it shines new light on discussions of

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5 Sluchai iskluchitel’nego biurokratizma (GARP f. 4390, op. 14, d. 36, l. 104).
7 There were four journals produced by the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Department of Visual Arts in this period and through their strong presence within this department Futurists were able to use these publications as a forum for their ideas: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo (Fine Art; Petrograd, 1919, one issue), Iskusstvo (Art; Moscow, January-September 1919, eight issues), Iskusstvo kommuny (Art of the Commune; Petrograd, 7 December 1918 – 13 April 1919, nineteen issues) and IZO: Vestnik Otdela izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv N.K.P. (IZO: Bulletin of the Department of Fine Arts within N.K.P. (People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment); Moscow, March 1921, one issue). See Christina Lodder, “The Press for a New Art in Russia 1917-1921”, in Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt (ed.), Art and Journals on the Political Front, 1910-1940, University Press of Florida, Gainesville, 1997, pp. 63-99. Also in Christina Lodder, “Art of the Commune, Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917-20”, Art Journal, Vol. 52, No. 1, 1993, pp. 24-33.
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 into their proper 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 they were certainly forward-looking, they were not purblind when it came to acknowledging these difficulties.

This chapter examines the Futurist creation of a theoretical basis for artistic production that would be capable of supporting the emerging Communist society. Opening with a brief consideration of Futurist activities between the February and October Revolutions (and the movement’s continuing turn away from what had been predominantly anarchical and “hooliganseque” tactics), 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 synthesis, the Futurist program became defined as 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 eliminating old cultural formats, which were representative of an obsolete mentality. Mayakovsky’s letter thus serves as a paradigm of the Futurist Civil War strategy: his pen was employed simultaneously as both a tool for constructing a new Soviet reality and a sword for attacking the obstinate old mentality.

Among the various journals that appeared during the Civil War period and served as a platform for elaboration of the Futurist program, the most important was the Petrograd fortnightly *Iskusstvo kommunity*, which was published between December 1918 and April 1919. A sounding board for revolutionary rhetoric and the developing Futurist vocabulary, the pages of *Iskusstvo kommunity* became a crucial forum where – with great virtuosity – Futurist theoreticians fused the premise of their program with elements of Marxist teaching, creating a two-pronged strategy for Communist cultural ideology. The first aspect of their program focused upon the formulation of art as an expression of materialism, where art production was involved in the creation of material surroundings – objects and spaces of everyday use. It was by defining art as a material force that
Futurism was able to address a number of key issues, including their central belief that a change in the material environment would engender a new consciousness among citizens. Thus art became part of a wider project of instilling a new ideology into society, and creating a New Soviet Man. The notion of art as a material product also allowed Futurists to reconsider the role of the artist, the art objects he or she made and the relationship between art and reality.

The second aspect of the Futurist platform – the campaign against traditional artistic practice – also needs to be considered within the framework of contemporary revolutionary efforts. The October revolution represented only the beginning of the fight and throughout the Civil War revolutionary victory was far from assured: the threat of the past was still very real and Futurists perceived the cultural domain – which remained a stronghold of old traditionalist mentality – to be a particularly important battlefield. Futurists believed that forms of cultural production embodied and reflected the values of a particular time, and that as such these forms inevitably transmitted the ideological code of the society that had originally created them. It was on the basis of ensuring ideological protection for the revolutionary cause that Futurists believed exclusion of old cultural practices (and by extension the ideology these practices embodied) to be a vital component in the process of securing the revolutionary victory. For Futurists the conflict between old and new artistic methods was nothing short of ideological combat – combat that would ultimately determine the success of the proletarian revolution.

This Futurist campaign against the presence of old cultural practices in the revolutionary project is powerfully argued in two articles penned by Nikolai Punin: his criticism of the celebration of the first anniversary of the October revolution, and his analysis of Vladimir Tatlin’s creation of the *Monument to the Third International*. Both stand as testament to the fact that, far from being a merely modernist dismissal of and distaste for tradition, there was a strong strategic logic inherent to the Futurist call for an elimination of old cultural behaviour.

It was upon the pages of *Iskusstvo kommunity* that the idea of Futurism as a creative method for engendering a modern Communist consciousness would start to take on a stronger form. Though 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 mind-set that would embrace and actualise this change 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 routine of everyday life. The challenge was to preserve (and protect) this revolutionary momentum through what has been described as the revolutionary “morning after.”8 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.

**February, October and the Onset of Civil War**

The year 1917 stands as the revolutionary *annus mirabilis* in Russian history: a year that produced a crash course in revolutionary procedure, as a liberal-democratic takeover in February morphed into a proletarian Red October. The Tsar’s abdication in February meant that the task of governing the country was left in the hands of two central bodies: the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. While the establishment of the Provisional Government represented a victory for the political elite, the birth of the Petrograd Soviet was a victory for the people,9 and from the outset it was envisaged that these two entities would share a complementary relationship, and govern as a “dual power.” The Provisional Government originally consisted mainly of liberals, while the Petrograd Soviet (resurrected from the 1905 Petersburg Soviet model) was dominated by socialist intellectuals from Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary (SR) ranks. Over the ensuing months, as the Provisional Government was transformed into a coalition of liberals and socialists with Menshevik and SR backgrounds (groups that already wielded strong influence within the Petrograd

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Soviet), the two entities forged a stronger bond, and the “dual power” model seemed operable.

By mid-year, however, the “dual power” was faced with a serious challenge. In class terms, the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet represented a partnership between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In July 1917, this partnership would be tested as workers, soldiers and sailors pressed members of the Soviet to take hold of all of the reins of power in the name of the working class, voicing their discontent with the “bourgeois” Provisional Government, and especially its commitment to continuing the war effort. This discontent had wide-ranging consequences: while socialist forces took on a more radical leftist stance, liberal representatives, concerned about the threat of a popular uprising, adopted a more conservative position – which made the balancing act of cooperation between liberals and socialists an increasingly difficult proposition. The Bolshevik slogan “all power to the soviets,” along with their refusal to cooperate with the Provisional Government (they were the only socialist group who refused to participate in the Government’s war efforts) preserved their credibility with workers and resulted in Bolsheviks achieving a majority in both the Petrograd and Moscow soviets, marginalising the previous Menshevik-SR dominance in these bodies. By late October, Bolshevik forces organised a successful revolutionary uprising, securing an end to the liberal-democratic aspirations of the Provisional Government and inaugurating a Bolshevik takeover of the soviets – which ultimately paved the way for the establishment of a single-party dictatorship within the country.10

These political tensions had a direct and profound effect upon the cultural domain.11 Following the February revolution, the process of dismantling the Tsarist institutional network saw the abolition of the Ministry of the Imperial

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Court – the state body responsible for, among other things, all of Russia’s major cultural institutions. This loss of an institutional framework left the artistic sphere in Russia bereft of organisational support and guidance. Concerned over the possibility that revolutionary tension would manifest itself in the form of a destruction of Russia’s cultural heritage, a group of fifty established artists, writers, actors and musicians gathered in Maksim Gorky’s apartment in March 1917 with the intention of establishing a commission that would serve to protect the cultural heritage and regulate arts during this turbulent period. In his exhaustive study of cultural affairs during the revolutionary season, Andrei Krusanov demonstrates the chaotic atmosphere in the cultural domain where numerous groups sought to assert their position in the power vacuum left after the overthrow of Tsarist regime. Gorky’s Commission, as it would come to be known, was an especially powerful entity, comprised of cultural conservatives who pushed for the establishment of a Ministry of Fine Arts (which would be an independent affiliate of the existing Ministry of Education) – an idea that found support with the Provisional Government.12

In an attempt to block the aspiration of Gorky’s Commission to win the official support of the Government, a number of artistic groups, united in their cultural opposition to Gorky’s Commission, joined to form the Union of Art Workers (Soiuz delatelei iskusstv – SDI). Futurists became a part of the left bloc within this Union, which was split into right, centre and left factions.13 In addition, Futurists held a strong position in the SDI, with four out of the Union’s twelve member organisational committee – Vladimir Mayakovsky, Nikolai Punin, Natan Altman and Vsevolod Meyerhold – coming from their ranks.14 Taking a stand against Gorky’s Commission and its plans for a Ministry of Fine Arts (and state control of artistic life), the SDI believed that artists themselves should have full jurisdiction over the management of artistic affairs. The Union in effect called for the abolition of state tutelage, and argued for the “democratisation of art”: instead

12 Krusanov, Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia, 1917-1921, pp. 7-38.
13 Krusanov explains that this division is defined according to the dominant currents in contemporary art stretching from traditional to modern, the left is represented by their commitment to modern and avant-garde artistic research. Krusanov, Futuristicheskaia revoliutsiia, 1917-1921, pp. 19-20.
of a circle of established elders (such as Gorky’s Commission) assuming a dominant position within Government and then organising the cultural field in a particular way, the SDI wanted all of the various artistic groups to have equal input into organisational matters, believing that only a system of this nature would truly reflect the democratic and liberal aspirations of the new political reality.\textsuperscript{15}

Futurist alignment with the SDI’s call for democratisation of art has often been regarded as representative of an aspiration to liberate creativity from any form of institutional regulation. This interpretation has then served to buttress the argument that, once Bolsheviks assumed power, Futurists were caught off-guard, and were apprehensive as to the intentions of the Bolsheviks: supposedly committed to an anti-institutional stance, Futurists did not want to see a government (even a revolutionary government) impose a set of demands upon artists.\textsuperscript{16} This argument essentially seeks to distance Futurists from Bolshevik politics – a line of thinking that is only possible if the Futurist call for freedom of art is taken completely out of its historical context. In calling for artistic independence Futurists argued against the establishment of a new Ministry of Fine Arts not because they sought freedom of art from institutional influence, but because they were opposed to the birth of a new Ministry that would have been scarcely different from that which had existed under the Tsarist regime. As Krusanov eloquently demonstrates, the Futurist call for freedom of the arts was not made simply to keep art free from politics but – on the contrary – as a politically charged act of rebellion against the establishment of a cultural institution that would still have been dominated by the same people and mind-set as in the Tsarist era. Their slogan “separation of art and state” was actually a political statement and open opposition to the Provisional Government’s intentions in the cultural domain.\textsuperscript{17}

Developments in the cultural field that occurred between late April and the onset of the October revolution were testament to Futurist political and

\textsuperscript{15} Krusanov, \textit{Futuristicheskaiia revoliutsiia}, 1917-1921, pp. 7-38.
\textsuperscript{17} Krusanov, \textit{Futuristicheskaiia revoliutsiia}, 1917-1921, pp. 23-25.
organisational proficiency. Under pressure from the SDI, Gorky's Commission was dismantled in April – and immediately Gorky suggested the formation of a new commission, which would this time include members of the SDI. This move divided the SDI: while some members considered joining the Provisional Government's new Commission, members of the left bloc (predominantly Futurists) refused to cooperate with the Provisional Government. In the immediate aftermath of the October revolution, the left bloc of the SDI broke away and approached the Bolshevik government – taking the serious risk of tying their destiny to that of the Bolshevik revolution. Indeed, the successful takeover by Bolsheviks in October was, as has been often noted, essentially only the beginning of the revolutionary fight: the Civil War broke out by mid-1918 and Bolshevik forces, organised as the Red Army headed by Leon Trotsky, were locked in conflict with the anti-Bolshevik camp, known as the White Armies, until 1921. While not all left bloc artists subscribed completely to Bolshevik political beliefs, they were able to recognise within the Bolshevik agenda the commitment to a radical overhaul of social conditions, and accordingly devoted their support to the nascent Bolshevik institutional framework. That Futurists had been the first to offer their support to the newly empowered Bolsheviks (many other groups had refused to cooperate with the new leaders – hoping that the Bolshevik takeover would be only a temporary detour) was recognised by the Bolshevik leaders, even if the Futurist creative method did not always satisfy Bolshevik tastes. Indeed, Futurists would ultimately become the key force within the Department for Visual Art (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv – IZO), which was formed in early 1918 under the newly established Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – Narkompros) – the Bolshevik entity in charge of the domains of art and education, headed by Anatoly Lunacharsky.

20 See for example Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, "Iskusstvo v Moskve", Iskusstvo i revoliutsiia, Novaia Moskva, Moscow, 1924, p. 98.
21 Although Futurist stalwarts including the theoretician Nikolai Punin and composer Artur Lourié had established connection with Lunacharsky already in November 1917, it was with the inauguration of IZO Narkompros in early 1918 that Futurists begin to gravitate towards this institution. Over the course of a year all leading figures of progressive art would join the Petrograd or later established Moscow IZO Narkompros. SDI dispersed in the autumn of 1918. See Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, pp. 110-161; Susan Compton, Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917-
The years of the Civil War was the most significant period of Futurist activity within the Bolshevik institutional framework. Futurists were present in significant numbers in both the Petrograd and Moscow branches of IZO, which allowed them to exert significant influence upon a number of major cultural projects. They were able to organise numerous exhibitions that, contrary to the well-established traditional practice, were held without any selection board restricting entry. Futurists were also able to purchase a number of works from artists (mainly of modernist persuasion) through the IZO Museum Office, and they established over thirty museums in provincial towns across Russia. All of these projects were testament to the Futurist dedication to dismantling the old hierarchical and centralised cultural administration. A section of IZO dedicated to the execution of government commissions was also established, gathering together various artistic organisations capable of undertaking these tasks and, as a result, numerous official propaganda and agitational projects occupied artists in this period. Before the end of the Civil War, two major institutions – which would both become central to further development of the Futurist program – were established: the Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul’tury – INKhUK), formed under the auspices of IZO, and the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhнические мастерские – VKhUTEMAS). VKhUTEMAS came about through merger of Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov School of Applied Arts (also situated in Moscow). Both INKhUK and VKhUTEMAS opened in Moscow in 1920, the former as a centre for the advancement of new artistic theories and methods, the latter as an educational establishment, founded upon the principle of uniting artistic and industrial practices, and dedicated to training future artist-engineers (or artist-constructors).

Thus in the immediate aftermath of the October Revolution, Futurism was a dominant force in the formation of new artistic theory, as well as artistic education and administration through the IZO – INKhUK – VKhUTEMAS network. Scholars have also noted that during this period Futurists – their strong position within the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Department of Visual Arts notwithstanding – experienced difficulties in carrying out some of their projects, owing to opposition from various groups who remained critical of their philosophy and approach to cultural matters. Though this is true, there can be no doubt that the Civil War period was as a moment of most intense theoretical reconfiguration of the Futurist project. Furthermore, a significant proportion of this evolution was made possible through Futurist work in various IZO publications – publications that quickly transformed into drawing boards for the development of Futurist ideas.

Making Futurism Communist

Through examining a selection of Futurist publications we can trace what perhaps ought to be regarded as the maturation of Russian Futurism. The movement had, of course, already demonstrated an ability to shelve its hooliganesque and anarchic characteristics by contributing to various propaganda projects in the early months of the First World War. During the Civil War, however, this maturation became far more profound: having recognised its kinship with the Bolsheviks, and in a quintessentially Futurist act of disdain for the past, the movement rejected its own prior methods in order to answer a call for the “proletarianisation” of the Russian cultural domain. In turn, this serves to demonstrate that Futurist enthusiasm for the revolutionary events was not simply an opportune expression by a youthful group with a penchant for disobedience and challenging authority, but a well-reasoned approach that was rooted in Marxist theory, and aimed at securing both the revolutionary victory and a place for Futurism within the social fabric of the new proletarian state. The energy and

lofty ambitions of Futurism should not obfuscate the fact that its proponents were not building castles in the sky, but foundations for the world to come.

The dominant intellects that shaped Futurist-Communist cultural ideology through their engagement in publications by IZO (including Iskusstvo kommuни) were Nikolai Punin, Osip Brik and Boris Kushner.²⁶ Punin was an established art historian and critic, deemed to have been “the most respected voice of Russian Futurism.”²⁷ Although a jurist by training, Brik felt far more at home in his role as a writer and literary critic, and was one of the central theoreticians of Russian Futurist group; his close relations with the avant-garde artists, most famously with the Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, along with his mysterious and controversial coquetry with the Soviet regime, continue to stimulate the imagination of the scholars to this day.²⁸ Boris Kushner was a poet and writer, and served as the editor of numerous Futurist publications.

The ultimate aim of the October revolution was a total elimination of the old political and social system: with the arrival of the revolution, Futurists understood that their original rebellious methods – aimed at disrupting the traditional establishment – were no longer adequate. That is, with the October Revolution having dealt a tremendous blow to the social hierarchy that Futurists had originally challenged, the use of provocative tactics by Futurists had become obsolete. As Futurists recognised their kinship with the Bolshevik cause – and with the Marxist philosophy that underpinned it – they implemented a change in tactics so as to strengthen their ability to contribute to the Bolshevik project. Thus in the first post-revolutionary months, recognising that the new conditions demanded a different artistic tactic, Futurists set out to define a new approach – and indeed, by

just the second issue of *Iskusstvo kommunity*, Punin dedicated his contribution entitled “Bomb-throwing and Organisation” to the Futurist change in strategy.  

Under the conditions of the Tsarist regime, Punin argued, young innovative artists were forced underground, as their creative contributions represented a challenge to the established norms. This marginalisation of creativity naturally led to its radicalisation, and the adoption of a “terror approach” in dealing with the recalcitrant cultural and social mentality: Futurist calls for a destruction of the past represented an attack against traditionalist and preservationist values that were upheld by the “civilised bourgeoisie.” Punin argued that calling for a destruction of the old remained a valid tactic as long as the past held any sort of grip upon the present; with the October revolution, however, the traditional social system had been eliminated, and as such it was no longer sensible to “hurl bombs.” Instead, Punin asserted, it was time for Futurism to enter a new stage of organised creative construction (*stroitel’stvo*).

In Punin’s eyes, those who cared about the debris of the past would be left behind – a sentiment eloquently expressed in the opening slogan of an issue of *Iskusstvo kommunity*: “The approaching tomorrow is our sole goal. We leave the option to the vanquished to stay until the evening.” With the coming of the revolution, aggressive Futurist tactics were no longer useful methods for the avant-garde’s purposes, as history had offered the opportunity to organise and contribute toward a reconstruction of society. Any continuation of “artistic terror,” as Punin noted, would only demonstrate a lack of ability to swiftly react to the demands of the moment, and indeed would indicate inertia and creative impotence. New times required new strategies, and in this context it must be recognised that the Futurist call for destruction of the past was not an *a priori* iconoclastic or anarchist urge: indeed, within the confines of the museum space, the past would be left alone. This separation between the aspiration of the past to preserve its influence over the new society (which Futurists vehemently opposed) and the museum space (within the confines of which the art of the past would continue to exist) was perhaps best exemplified by the fact that, while writing his

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articles for *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Punin simultaneously served as the Commissar of the Hermitage.\(^{31}\) Instead, the Futurist attack on the past was aimed at preventing the influence of old social mores upon the formation of completely new reality: if the mentality of the past continued to fight for supremacy in the present, Futurists were ready to protect the revolutionary victory from the danger of facing backwards. Similarly, this Futurist attitude toward the past has also been recognised in the analysis of Mayakovsky’s poems published as editorials for *Iskusstvo kommuny* and *Iskusstvo*, many of which demonstrated that, as opposed to simply wanting to eliminate the past, Futurists in fact sought to limit the influence of this past on the formation of contemporary cultural formats.\(^{32}\)

It is useful to illuminate the background against which the push towards constructive social action and a consolidation of Futurist ranks took place on the pages of *Iskusstvo kommuny*. Futurist members of the SDI’s left bloc operated in Petrograd and, after the Bolshevik revolution, they joined the IZO Narkompros (which was also initially located in Petrograd), breaking away from the SDI completely. The members of the Futurist cohort in Moscow at the time regarded themselves as “anarcho-futurists”: gathered around anarchist publications such as *Anarkhiia* issued by the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups,\(^{33}\) these Muscovite Futurists regarded their Petrograd colleagues, including Mayakovsky, David Burliuk and Vasili Kamenskii as moderates, and referred to them as the “state” or “Bolshevik” Futurists, and even “Futurists dictators.”\(^{34}\) Yet while there is a record of a statement from the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups proclaiming to have never had any collaborative ties with Futurists Mayakovsky, Burliuk and Kamenskii,\(^{35}\) scholars have noted that there was in effect no fundamental


\(^{34}\) Krusanov, *Futuristicheksaia revoliutsiiia, 1917-1921*, pp. 54-55. Interestingly, the term “Bolsheviks of Futurism” was used to designate Cubo-Futurists as early as 1914 (referring specifically to the Burliuk brothers, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov and Mayakovsky) because among the various Futurists groups of that time, Cubo-Futurists were regarded as the most extreme. See Genrikh Taseven, *Futurism, Na puti k novomu simvolizmu*, Tovarishchestvo tipografii A. I. Mamontova, Moscow, 1914, p. 32.

\(^{35}\) RGALI f. 2577, op. 1, d. 1347. Document dated 22 March 1918.
disagreement between Petrograd and Moscow Futurist groups. Indeed, in early April 1918 Futurists from Petrograd came to Moscow to establish cooperation with their Moscow colleagues: the Petrograd delegation was headed by Futurist theoretician Nikolai Punin, artist Natan Altman and composer Artur Lourié, all already part of IZO Narkompros in Petrograd and future contributors to *Iskusstvo kommuny*. Artists from the “anarcho-futurists” cohort approached the Petrograd group and initiated a collaboration within the institutional framework of IZO Narkompros. First among them was Vladimir Tatlin, frequent contributor to the journal *Anarkhiia* (but also member of the Moscow Soviet of Soldiers’ and Workers’ Deputies in 1917), who was now heading Moscow IZO Narkompros division.

A letter sent to Feliks Dzerzhinsky at the Soviet security agency Cheka by Anatoly Lunacharsky in April 1918 illustrates the fact that Bolshevik leaders took Futurists’ liaisons with anarchist circles seriously. In his letter Lunacharsky wrote:

Dear comrade,

This document is to confirm that comrade V. V. Mayakovskyy enjoys the full trust of the Commissariat of Enlightenment and knows well artists, poets and other cultural workers who are, in one way or another, connected to the anarchist groups. In order to avoid any misunderstandings, I ask you to consider his testimony with regards to participation of these persons in anarchist ventures and groups.

This document is being issued to comrade V. V. Mayakovskyy with the purpose of rapid rehabilitation and cession of persecution (if this took

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36 IZO Narkompros was established in early 1918, with David Shterenberg as its head. Natan Altman and Nikolai Punin became members of IZO Narkompros Collegia in March 1918 with its establishment. Osip Brik became a member of Collegia in November 1918, Krušanov, *Futuristesksaia revoliutsia, 1917-1921*, pp. 41-51. Interestingly, Compton also lists Punin and Lourié as contributors of the journal *Anarkhiia*. Compton, *Russian Avant-Garde Books 1917-34*, p. 152 (footnote 29).


39 See Krušanov, *Futuristesksaia revoliutsia, 1917-1921*, pp. 53-60; artists Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Kazimir Malevich published in *Anarkhiia*. Krušanov notes that Tatlin became member of Moscow IZO in April and head in May 1918; other “anarcho-futursits” such as Malevich and Olga Rozanova joined in June 1918 and Rodchenko in January 1919.
place) of those cultural workers who harboured relationship with anarchist groups exclusively in the domain of art.\textsuperscript{40}

The letter was sent the day after the Cheka had dealt violently with anarchist circles in Moscow; it was also during this campaign that the newspaper \textit{Anarkhiia} was closed down.\textsuperscript{41} It is thus clear that Petrograd Futurists were driving this crucial transformation in Futurist tactics from anarchic to organised both theoretically (on the pages of \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity}) and also directly, by drawing Moscow Futurists into an institutional framework and vouching for their reliability in the face of the organised elimination of anarchist groups by the Bolsheviks. This drive toward an organised approach to artistic production was highlighted in a contribution to \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity}, which stated that in the aftermath of the October Revolution there would be no room for the remains of bourgeois aesthetics, and no yielding to any push to superimpose old ideas onto the new social reality; there was also no room for anarchism and rebelliousness, not “even in abstract and imaginary forms.”\textsuperscript{42}

It was clear that “bomb-throwing” was no longer a viable artistic tactic, and as such the vision of what artistic production under the new conditions ought to be was formed through a merging of original Futurist ideas with Marxist theory. Thus the slogans adorning the opening pages of \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity} (leitmotifs that indicated the main topic of the issue) illustrate how editorial policy juxtaposed the Futurist demand for rapid and radical modernisation with contemporary revolutionary slogans and Communist postulates. “The only true Communist is the one who has burned all the bridges behind him,”\textsuperscript{43} proclaimed the fourth issue, fusing revolutionary zeal with the Futurist rejection of the past. The omnipresent violence and destruction of the Civil War years, regarded as a necessary step in the process of creating a new socialist society, inspired copy such as “There is no

\textsuperscript{40} Document from The State Vladimir Mayakovsky Museum (Moscow) exhibition material; the collection staff was unable to trace the location of this document prior to its arrival to the Museum collection.

\textsuperscript{41} On the night of 12 April 1918 Check raided a number of anarchist centres in Moscow. See Gassner, “The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization”, pp. 302-304.

\textsuperscript{42} “Dokladnaja zapiska, K proektu polozeniia o Nauchno-Teoreticheskoi Sektsii Teatral'nogo Otdele, predlozhennomu Biuro Sektis Borisom Kushnerom”, \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity}, No. 17, 30 March 1919, p. 2.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity}, No. 4, 29 December 1918, p. 1; these opening slogans were first introduced in the fourth issue.
beauty without combat, and no masterpiece without violence,” 44 – taken directly from Marinetti’s Manifesto – followed by “To destroy means to create, for through destruction we overcome our past.” 45

The radical approach taken by Futurists to the task of building a new social reality was expressed consistently. “Futurism is an uncompromising and thoroughly revolutionary movement,” stated Kushner on the front page of the eighth issue of Iskusstvo kommuny, “It knows of no compromises, no half-measures, no conciliation. Its proletarian background is unquestionable.” 46 Futurists also campaigned aggressively against those who propagated free or independent art as a way to avoid expressing political opinions: attempts to stay neutral during the turbulent revolutionary times were criticised by Futurists, who appropriated the Bolshevik motto “those who are not with us are against us,” in declaring that the current situation did not allow for a non-class art. 47 In his articles, Brik called for open dictatorship of the proletariat in every aspect of culture building. 48 The demands for “free” art (that was independent from socio-political life) seemed in the current circumstances to be an escapist and pusillanimous option. An article from Iskusstvo argued that, at a time when the proletarian revolution was threatened from all sides by the “White guard generals,” art could not be “free”; it defined “free” art as an attempt to sit on the fence, to play safe during extremely volatile times: “To support Communists, that is dangerous [...] To welcome counter-revolution is also.” 49 This is why some would opt for independent “free” art, in a safe diplomatic move that would protect artists from both the Bolsheviks and the Whites. Contemporary reality did not allow art to be apolitical: any effort

47 Iskusstvo kommuny in its fourth issue published reportage from the meeting organised in Petrograd to discuss art issues. Mayakovsky participated at this meeting and in his speech he formulates this idea that there could not be any more independent art and that during revolutionary times everything becomes part of the revolutionary frame. In his words “vneklassovogo iskusstva net!” See “Miting ob iskusstve”, Iskusstvo kommuny, No. 4, 29 December 1918, pp. 2-3.
49 Iakov Lers, “Za shirnui (Koe-chto o “svobodnom iskusstve”), Iskusstvo, No. 8, 5 September 1919, p. 2.
to keep art in an ivory tower was in itself a rejection of the revolutionary effort. The author proclaimed that everyone needed to decide whether they wanted to stand on the barricades with the revolutionary proletariat, or in the temple of bourgeois art – *tertium non datur*.

**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 develop 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 would work 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; exploring new forms of mass communication – these were the primary tasks of the Soviet artist.\(^{50}\) Indeed, with time the role of the artist would expand even further: ultimately it was envisaged that the artist would design the production process itself.\(^{51}\)

This drive toward directly involving artists in the creation of reality was translated into Marxist terminology by Osip Brik.\(^{52}\) 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

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\(^{50}\) "Miting ob iskusstve", pp. 2-3.


\(^{52}\) 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.
solid melts into air.”

“The bourgeoisie transformed flesh into spirit,” wrote Brik in the first issue of *Iskusstvo kommunity* 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.”

According to Brik, a proletarian artist created 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 those forces responsible for shaping social being. In a number of articles published in the final issues of *Iskusstvo kommunity* in 1919, Punin argued that art had the capacity to be a socially formative force of the same order as other major social determinants:

Above all, we are materialists [...] We do not accept art outside life, and equally, we do not accept art as a function of life. We do not believe that at the beginning earth was created, and art, like the spirit of God, spread over earth, separating light and darkness, making earthly things, and arranged the world. Art is a form (*bytie*), the same as socialist theory and communist revolution are forms; besides art is the most synthetic form, and for that reason perhaps the most powerful.

Punin viewed material creation as a way for art to become an integral component of life, rather than serving as simply an *a posteriori* embellishment upon life: he believed that art should be freed from studios and galleries as, rather than serving as an expression of individual genius, art was a formative humanistic force. For Futurists, art was material because artists worked to conceptualise (and realise) objects with quotidian use.

In explaining this view, Punin evoked Marx’s famous words: “It is not consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social

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being that determines their consciousness.” 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. Marx's words are thus translated to read that "it is not consciousness that determines bytie, but bytie that determines consciousness." 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. In her study of Russian cultural models, Svetlana Boym explains this tension between bytie and byt as the central element of Russian culture: "The opposition between byt, everyday existence (everyday routine and stagnation), and bytie (spiritual being) is one of the central common places of the Russian intellectual tradition. It is often understood as the opposition between everyday life and ‘real life’." Artistic production, as an act of perpetual creation, is bytie. Punin's use of bytie incorporates the quintessential Futurist concept of dynamism and progress, as bytie is a dynamic, edifying, creative force – as opposed to byt, which Boym describes as inert. Furthermore, artistic production 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. In other words, bytie, or form, created by art, is the element that would create the new (modern) consciousness. By mounting his argument in this manner, Punin would recast artistic production as a pivotal component in creation of the Communist structure.

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57 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 soderzhani".  
58 For Punin's definition of bytie see N. P., "O forme i soderzhani".  
59 Ne bytie opredeljasia soznaniem a soznanie – bytiem.  
60 For explanation of byt and bytie see Svetlana Boym, Common Places, Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1994, p. 29. For comment on byt and bytie with regard to Futurism see also Sergei Tretiakov, "Otkuda i kuda? (perspektivy futurizma)", LÉF, No. 1, 1923, pp. 200-201.
Marxist theory posits that economic conditions, which are the base of a particular social reality, influence the development of various elements of the superstructure such as politics, law, philosophy, aesthetics – in such a way that all of these elements make for a particular ideology or a form of social consciousness. In a famous letter to Joseph Bloch in 1890, Engels clarified that the relationship between the base and the superstructure as he and Marx envisioned it was not unilateral, but was in fact reciprocal; that the superstructure and the base were simultaneous influences upon one another.\(^6^1\) In his study on Marxist literary criticism, Terry Eagleton echoes this notion by recalling the materialist theory of history, which asserts that while art cannot by itself change the course of history, it can be an active element in such change.\(^6^2\) Punin's moulding of Futurism within the Marxist rubric was a paradigm shift: instead of essentially passive art (which is what Futurists saw bourgeois art to be), art was recast as an active element of social change. This transformation of the role of art was all the more radical as Punin understood art as an essentially component of the basic conditions for shaping daily life: the artist, according to Punin, would work to create material reality – objects and surroundings that serve as the instruments of everyday life – and, in turn, these instruments would affect the way people behaved and understood their immediate existence. It was at this point that Italian \textit{arte azione} gained a new, Marxist character.

Punin suggested that Futurists were foreseen in Marx's philosophy, and that their collaboration in the proletarian project came as a logical development. Quoting from Marx's \textit{Theses on Feuerbach} the famous notion that philosophers explained the world, but that now it needed to be changed, Punin saw Futurist endeavours as exemplifying the Marxist revolutionary project.\(^6^3\) These lines were regarded as precise formulation of the Futurist project: instead of explaining (or in artistic terms \textit{representing}) the world, Futurists set out to change it – to take part in the creation of a new modern Communist reality through their artistic production.

\(^{6^3}\) Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, in Tucker (ed.), \textit{The Marx-Engels Reader}, p. 145; This sentence is also the leitmotiv for the first (and only) issue of \textit{IZO (IZO: Vestnik Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv N.K.P.}, March 1921).
The kinship between Futurism and Communism, as Futurist theoreticians saw it, was evident in a shared perspective on the materialisation of life and all that was derived from it: mechanisation, collectivism, determinism, systematic organisation of culture and, most importantly, creative work. Creative work was seen as the common denominator shared by Futurism and Communism because their project was based on a complete reshaping of society: “There are currently no other movements, except for the socialist and Futurist, that take the future into consideration, and there are no other methods, apart from Communism and Futurism, capable of going, with absolute creative exertion, towards this future.”

Most critically, it was at this point that Futurism more clearly recognised and defined its task as the process of forging a new consciousness – a task that was also at the core of Bolshevik project of creating the New Soviet Man.

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, or the architectural blueprints drafted by Konstantin Melnikov and the Vesnin brothers for workers’ clubs (spaces created with the intention of promoting development of the proletarian mentality), were borne of this very same principle. As such, it is no surprise that the term Futurism has long been understood as coterminous with the Russian avant-garde in general.

What Futurist theoreticians essentially asserted was the idea that art had the capacity to forge a different social reality. Their project, however, could not be actualised through paintings hung on the walls of cosy apartments or sterile gallery walls; instead, it was envisaged that a new social reality would emerge as a consequence of the creation of various objects and environments of daily use and existence. The ramifications of this view were significant: insofar as it aimed to

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64 Punin, “Kommunizm i futurizm”, pp. 2-3.
restructure daily life, Futurism was to be a totalising project, and as such the artist was to be involved in various tasks, and was not to specialise in one kind of activity: during the 1920s, for example, Mayakovsky and Rodchenko were involved in making slogans and creating designs for candy wrappers for a state owned candy factory; Rodchenko also designed a model for a workers’ club, down to the furniture in which workers would spend their free time informing and edifying themselves. From chairs to candy wrappers, artists were to be involved with every aspect of creating social reality. This totalising, or as Punin described it, synthetic approach to art-making represented an attack on Capitalist life-forms: it surpassed specialisation (there would be no specialist portraiture artist, and certainly no artists of the kind employed by the Rubens workshop, such as those with specific expertise in painting flowers or animals only), and it simultaneously erased the traditional division between “high” and “low” art, as intellectual (high art) and manual (low or applied art) labour were to be one and the same.

Casting aside any hierarchical evaluation of artistic production was important, it was argued in a contribution to *Iskusstvo*, because any artist who felt that it was less significant to paint a plain signboard (or indeed, design a candy wrapper) was not a socialist artist, and accordingly was not fit to contribute to the new socialist society – a society where every aspect of material reality would be a component of the new Communist life. Futurists were, however, careful to emphasise the continued importance of talent and training: at no point would Futurists yield to the concept of amateurism in art, and while every person who possessed the requisite talent was to be afforded the opportunity to pursue education and participate in the creation of socially functional things, Futurists were against the notion that everyone (regardless of professional background) could be a practicing artist. That is, rather than vulgarising the artistic profession, Futurism wanted to see professional artists making a contribution to socialist society like any other skilled workers. The relationship, as Futurists saw it, was not to dilute the force of artistic creation by opening this field to untrained amateurs, but to elevate the process of labour to a new standard: the desired outcome was a translation of the artistic process (being a personal and complete relationship

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between artist and object from conception to realisation) into the factory setting – the cathartic and inspirational relationship between an artist and her or his work was to be incorporated into modern production, in the belief that “Labour and art, interlocked, [would] create a new life.”

Futurist theoreticians dismantled the bourgeois hierarchy of pure or high art and craftwork, in the belief that there should be no explicit separation between intellectual and physical work. In addition, and guided by their desire to implement artistic processes within the factory setting, these theoreticians also sought to surpass the capitalist alienation of labour. The product of this theory was to be the Communist Renaissance creator – a worker who, by approaching his or her object of creation in an artistic manner, epitomised the ideal of a modern industrial factory worker, who would realise the Communist Gesamtkunstwerk.

This idea was further elaborated upon in the pages of Iskusstvo kommuny: in an article appearing in the second volume of the publication, Brik sought to distinguish between the artist-bourgeois and the artist-proletarian. The artist-bourgeois, Brik argued, created to express his or her own sense of self; the artist-proletariat, on the other hand, worked to create a socially relevant work. That is, while the former was devoted totally to individuality, and sought distance from the masses by safeguarding art and creativity as ethereal categories, the artist-proletarian remained an integral part of society. The artist-bourgeois sought to achieve fame by catering to elite tastes, and as such was prepared to tirelessly repeat the same forms once a lucrative formula was established; the artist-proletarian, by contrast, worked toward the continual betterment of society, and was thus driven by an incessant desire to conquer new horizons.

The Futurist conception of materialism in artistic production resulted in a radical redefinition of the role and the profile of the artist, the artistic method, and the notion and function of an art object (or environment). This redefinition sought to answer – at least on a theoretical level – the question of how art ought to work in a system inaugurated by the Bolshevik revolution. In an article published in

69 "Khudozhnsevnoe vospitanie i kultura", Iskusstvo, No. 8, 5 September 1919, p. 5.
Iskusstvo, an anonymous author argued that historical periods of innovative art production corresponded with those civilisations that had perceived artistic production not as something separate and individual, but as a component of communal participation toward achieving a common goal.\textsuperscript{71} The author referred to ancient Greece and Rome and the period of the Middle Ages as prototypes of societies where art was fused with its social surrounding. Art did not possess meaning outside its social milieu: building a temple, erecting and decorating a triumphal arch on the city crossroad, painting manuscript illuminations – these were all expressions of an artistic shaping of the social reality executed by groups of people who shared ideas about their socio-political reality and sought to construct it together. This argument, of course, was drawn directly from Marx’s discussion of ancient Greece and the creative achievements of that society. Indeed, throughout his body of work Marx often evoked this concept of artistic creation as an organic element of social life, and extolled ancient Greek art in particular as a stellar example of such a praxis: from the time of his doctoral thesis on Epicurus\textsuperscript{72} through to his later works, this example of the relationship between ancient Greek art and its society continues to reappear as an example of balanced societal relations.\textsuperscript{73} The problem of ancient Greek art would later be taken up by Futurists, and discussed at length in the pages of LEF. As James von Geldern defines it in his comment on Bolshevik appropriation of ancient Hellenes as a model for the future, it was this idea of “a society free of modern life’s great schisms: work and play, theatre and church, government and governed, religion and philosophy,”\textsuperscript{74} that attracted builders of the Communist system – and this same concept is present in the Futurist redefinition of artistic practice. Marx’s theory was a catalyst for the Futurist concept of how art should design reality, and consequently forge a Communist consciousness among citizens; this theory was also seminal in explaining why this transition was critically important if the revolutionary project was to succeed.

\textsuperscript{71} “Gosudarstvennye trudovye khudozhestven. kommuny”, Iskusstvo, No. 2, 15 January 1919, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{72} Karl Marx’s doctoral thesis “The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature” was completed in 1841.
\textsuperscript{73} For discussion of Marx’s interest in ancient Greek art see for example, Mikhail Lifshitz, The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx, Pluto Press Limited, London, 1973, pp. 9-39; 85-94.
\textsuperscript{74} James von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1993, p. 36.
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 programs of revolution, Futurists were aware of the need to take on omnipresent and persistent cultural traditions while simultaneously tackling definitions of proletarian culture that were not in accord with their own revolutionary mentality. On the first battlefront, 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 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.\footnote{Victoria E. Bonnell, “The Iconography of the Worker in Soviet Political Art”, in Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), Making Workers Soviet, Power, Class and Identity, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1994, p. 356; Von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920, pp. 79-80; Amy Nelson, Music for the Revolution, Musicians and Power in Early Soviet Russia, Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 2004, p. 26.} 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 also campaigned 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.\footnote{On development of proletarian art see Lynn Mally, Culture of the Future, The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1990.} The Futurists opposed amateurism, believing that only work of a high standard was befitting of the future Communist society – a view that put them into conflict
with leaders of Proletkult (Proletarian Cultural-educational Organisations). Osip Brik castigated the Proletkult mentality, noting that “[a]rt, like any form of production, does not tolerate amateurism,” before remarking, “this is what Proletkult forgot.” In another article, Brik argued that Proletkult’s approach did not shift the arts even in the slightest from the age-old stance: “Nebulous concepts of ‘workers’ and ‘proletarian’ culture led Proletkultists only to the trite forms of bourgeois romance with its cheap heroism and vulgar folklore.” The Proletkult idea of engaging workers and peasants directly in the process of art-making, on the basis that anyone could express their creative being and publish stories in proletarian journals or exhibit their artwork in proletarian exhibitions, was dismissed by Futurists as an essentially archaic concept of art creation. Futurists were also wary of the tendency of amateur artists to use old, easily recognisable forms from the past. Amateur artistic production was accordingly regarded as conceptually passé and utterly incompatible with the mentality of the Bolshevik revolution, a revolution that strove toward the birth of a new world.

In voicing their concerns, however, Futurists did far more than simply express a desire for achieving a redefinition of the artistic profession and its tasks. A central tenet of Futurist logic was the concern that a recasting of old artistic forms which had served the bourgeois world inevitably led to an adaptation of the mind-set, logic and ideology of the world these forms had been previously used to depict – and therefore opened a path for these old systems of thinking to infect 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 anew, but more pertinently by the fear that these old forms represented an ideological

77 The conflict between Futurists and Proletkult has been widely examined by scholars. The Futurist movement and Proletkult are generally perceived as competing entities. Occasionally, however, there was enough common ground for a number of Futurists to cooperate with Proletkult, and ultimately some Proletkult branches adopted Futurist ideas (such as the notion of Production art) while some of the key Futurist theoreticians, such as Boris Arvatov, came from a Proletkult background. See Mally, Culture of the Future; Fitzpatrick, The Commissariat of Enlightenment, pp. 89-109; Jangfeldt, Majakovskij and Futurism, 1917-1921, pp. 72-91; Kolchevska, LEF and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s, pp. 46-56.
80 The key article that considered problems with the concepts of “art for the proletariat” and “proletarians’ art” was penned by Osip Brik; Brik, “Khudozhnik proletari”, p. 1.
Trojan horse: with old forms, old content had an avenue by which to sneak in. In his article “Futurism and Proletarian Art,” Altman described political traps that were inherent in the practice of using old forms of expression in the new proletarian society. He reprimanded the ubiquitous naïve understanding that a drawing done by a worker or a poster representing a worker in a heroic pose with a red banner in his hands constituted proletarian art, and warned that by using old visual codes just because they were easily read by artistically illiterate persons did not make for proletarian art. Altman, again writing in Iskusstvo kommuny, explained “This art that represents the proletariat is as much of a proletarian art, as a member of Black Hundreds with a Communist party membership card is a Communist.”\(^{81}\) 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, Soviet 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.\(^{82}\)

Two Futurist commentaries exemplify their argument that the elimination of old formats was a necessary step in the process of securing an ideological foundation for the new society: a piece by Punin regarding public celebrations that had been organised to mark the first anniversary of the October Revolution; and another concerning Vladimir Tatlin’s famed Monument to the Third International. Considered in relation to their contemporary context (in which the outcome of the proletarian revolution remained uncertain), in both cases what is conventionally considered to be representative of the Futurist penchant for destruction and utopian fantasy instead stands as a hallmark of a far more reasoned approach to contemporary socio-political conditions.

Futurists campaigned against the manner in which various public celebrations were being assembled in 1918, amid preparations for the anniversary of the October revolution. Warning that the decorum of any public celebration


would directly reflect upon how Bolshevik rule was to be perceived by the people, Futurists argued that each and every element of any public celebration required particular attention and consideration. The very first issue of Iskusstvo kommuny carried Punin’s aforementioned article, in which he summed up the outcome of these anniversary celebrations by calling upon organisers to increase their awareness of the historic consequences of their actions:

In our times there is nothing unimportant. The smallest movement and the most insignificant word have a historic meaning. To do something today that is half-hearted (priblizitel’no), with whatever fits (kak podoidet)\(^{83}\), is unacceptable.\(^{84}\)

Punin expressed concern that organisers had seemed preoccupied with how successfully they would execute their plans – and relatively unconcerned with the nature of the plans themselves. As a result, the October celebrations had resembled the kind of events organised by the bourgeoisie all around the world: celebrations that were supposed to mark the first year of the new era – an era that had opened with what Futurists regarded as the glorious destruction of the old world of hermetic hierarchies, and ushered in endless possibilities for a dynamic redefinition of human existence – very much resembled the old Tsarist parades. Those charged with organising this event, in Punin’s estimation, had recklessly adopted the concept of “decoration”: they did not attempt to think about the idea and the meaning of these celebrations, and they did not conceive a concept that would adequately communicate the essence of this new reality created by the victories of the Red Army; rather, they did what was easiest, and simply used old forms to decorate a new reality. Punin decried this approach as a cardinal mistake and a potential minefield of trouble, for in this embryonic period of Russia’s new reality “there is nothing unimportant,” and every move, including decoration for the anniversary of October Revolution, was part of a blueprint for the new Communist society. Making a mistake with the plan would take its toll in the future, and it is not difficult to see how the words of one of the organisers – to the effect that an entire district should be decorated so that at least on the day of the

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\(^{83}\) The expression “kak podoidet” would be best translated as “suitable, acceptable”; in his book Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920, von Geldern translated a segment from this article, and “kak podoidet” was translated as “whatever fits.” See von Geldern, Bolshevik Festivals 1917-1920, p. 75.

\(^{84}\) N. P., “K itogam Oktiabr’skikh torzhestv”, Iskusstvo kommuny, No. 1, 7 December 1918, p. 2.
holiday the “unsightliness of our living conditions” would be masked – demonstrates what was regarded by Futurists as a perilous approach to such a significant project.85

Putting things together as best as the given moment allowed, using what was at hand from the remains of the old world – this approach was regarded by members of the Futurist cohort as irresponsible, lazy and unbefitting of the mentality that Bolsheviks wanted to create. Embellishing the new worldview with bourgeois garlands represented a dangerous precedent that might have facilitated the possible re-acceptance of old forms into other social spheres. In his article Punin acknowledged that the proletariat, as a new social force and bearer of historic change, could not have already created a fully delineated concept for the cultural domain; nonetheless, he was adamant that while the concept of Communist creative practice was being constructed the proletariat could not be tempted to express itself using old forms of representation: indeed, and in characteristic Futurist fashion, Punin argued that it would have been better to employ a proletarian method of destruction than a bourgeois manner of decoration. Rather than decorating, proletarian art would be better off destroying to mark the October celebrations: it would be better “to blow up, destroy, and wipe off from the face of the earth old art forms.”86 Punin conceded, however, that bacchanalian destruction with Futurist intent was not the most realistic of expectations; nonetheless, he emphasised that the argument against decoration was of utmost ideological importance. He highlighted not only the ideological problems associated with the staging of these celebrations, but also gave a specific example of a grievance, being the inappropriate use of fabric for the creation of decoration at a time when many people were going around wearing little more than rags. Decisions of this nature meant that these celebrations were also politically irresponsible at a very sensitive point in time: a time when Bolsheviks were still fiercely engaged in the fight against numerous enemies; a time when revolutionary victory was still far from certain and when people paid careful attention to the every move of the Bolsheviks. Punin argued that history would not forgive such a heedless approach to the creation of a public recognition of the

Bolshevik revolution, and that its commemoration would need to be crafted with utmost care.

The true significance of what Punin was saying, however, has not always been properly appreciated. In an examination of a series of periodicals published in the early revolutionary period, Christina Lodder's interpretation and translation of Punin's words paints Futurists in the usual anarchical tones. Lodder notes:

He [Punin] was also outraged by the amount of cloth being wasted to make flags and panels for the celebrations when "we are all without trousers and skirts." His most damning indictment, however, was that it was all unnecessary: "History will not forgive this. In our time there is nothing that is not necessary."\(^{87}\)

It might be concluded from this appraisal that Punin's primary concern pertained to the waste of material for skirts and trousers, and that the celebrations were on the whole excessive if not unnecessary. This interpretation, however, is plainly incorrect: Punin's clear belief, as exemplified by his statement, was that the celebrations were very important and that, insofar as these celebrations would serve to create the image of Bolshevik rule, nothing was unimportant – every single aspect of the celebration needed to be considered carefully, and the organisers could not resort to simply making red flags and decorating windows with garlands. That is, contrary to the apparently dismissive tone painted by Lodder's interpretation, Punin argued that in order for the Bolshevik revolution to secure its victory, how it presented itself within the public domain was of utmost importance.

Von Geldern explains the importance festivals had in Soviet culture, even during the most difficult times:

Politicians sacrificed valuable time to organize and participate in the festivals; the press gave them central coverage, even when the Civil War hung in the balance. The festivals were deemed so important that essential funds and manpower were diverted to them during a time of economic disaster. In the midst of famine, valuable foodstuffs were distributed almost

\(^{87}\) Lodder, "The Press for a New Art in Russia 1917-1921", p. 83.
freely; and during housing and heating crisis, lumber and fuel were appropriated for decorations and parade floats.\(^{88}\)

Festivals were the most public form of mass media, and a particularly efficient way to express and inculcate societal values. As such, festivals were catalysts for defining and propagating the Bolshevik cause, as it was precisely in the most turbulent times that the Bolshevik government needed festivals in order to both deal with history and contribute to their own myth-building.\(^{89}\) Yet though the political and intellectual elite understood the power of public celebrations, it is simultaneously apparent that the consequences of mishandling this power were not always fully appreciated. It is in this context that we can comprehend Punin’s concern at the prospect of assembling festivals “kak podoidet,” and his sense of urgency in working to create an adequate vocabulary for expressing the Bolshevik cause.

Punin’s consideration of that most iconic project of the revolution, Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (often referred to simply as Tatlin’s Tower), offers further insight into the logic informing the Futurist call for the elimination of old forms from contemporary projects. In her study of Russian Constructivism, Lodder couches discussion of Tatlin’s *Monument* within the contemporary context of Lenin’s *Plan for Monumental Propaganda*. The Plan was devised as a propaganda campaign, with the intention of placing a number of monuments dedicated to revolutionary figures in Petrograd and Moscow in an effort to inspire and fortify new values within the Russian population.\(^{90}\) As Lodder highlights, Tatlin’s proposal represented an alternative vision for these monuments, dramatically different to the traditionally formatted commemorative statues and busts that were being produced as part of this plan. As an alternative to this established format, Tatlin envisaged a form that would commemorate the revolution: a monument that would simultaneously function as a powerful weapon of societal agitation – the essence of Lenin’s Plan. Punin’s article “On Monuments”


\(^{89}\) Ibid, p. 5. For celebration of the first October anniversary see also Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power*, pp. 356-388.

offered insight into why this Plan necessitated a dramatically different approach to the usual bust/statue tactic.\textsuperscript{91}

Opening his discussion of the task of monumental propaganda, Punin expressed his apprehension regarding its parameters. He noted that the problem with the original definition of this project was twofold: neither the envisaged form nor its content could deliver the revolutionary message correctly and efficiently. In terms of content, the idea of celebrating the great heroes of the revolution was in itself non-Communist as, Punin noted, “the time when we understood history in terms of its heroes is gone.” Further, Punin argued even if it were accepted that there might be agitational value in venerating the names of great revolutionary leaders, the form by which this idea could be delivered – a sculpture or bust of an individual – remained problematic. For Punin, sculptures and busts of revolutionary forefathers and leaders were ineffective for the simple reason that they were unremarkable and thus hardly noticed: only on the day of their unveiling – at the moment when the “red rag” was ceremonially lifted – was it apparent that these sculptures had something to do with the revolution. Absent this “red rag,” however, these figures fast became indistinguishable among other bearded figures of tsars and dignitaries, lost within the urban hustle and bustle, and therefore impotent as agitational weapons. The call for something radically different – such as Tatlin’s Tower – represented more than a belief in the aesthetic primacy of some particular method of artistic expression: whatever their aesthetic merit, Futurists believed that established forms simply were not up to the task of reinforcing the revolutionary achievements.

Punin concluded his evaluation by stating that while he was uncertain as to whether Tatlin’s “colossus” could be realised (although he believed that it could), the value of the project was that it demonstrated “direction for the thought processes of artists, tired of heroes and busts.”\textsuperscript{92} Tatlin’s Tower was a radically new, different and dynamic form that could engage the viewer and thus serve to transmit a particular message. For Punin, artists needed to forge ahead on the path toward new forms: while innovative forms would most likely not always

\textsuperscript{92} Punin, “O pamyatnikakh”, p. 3.
unfailingly produce the desired results, reverting to old forms was not a solution to any problem. The Futurist exclusion of old artistic methods was thus based on the notion that, as Altman eloquently explained, traditional creative expression left open an avenue through which old and out-dated habits might continue. In addition, these old methods were utterly ineffective and unable to communicate the revolutionary message.

Figure 3: Vladimir Tatlin, *The Monument to the Third International*, 1919
Sketch of the inclined axis and of the vertical view

Tatlin’s *Monument for the Third International* was commissioned by the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment in 1919, and the artist unveiled a scale model of his creation in late 1920 in Petrograd and Moscow during the Eighth All-Russia Soviet Congress. Structured around a double-spiral framework, the monument was intended to symbolise the dynamism of the Communist spirit (and directly challenge the “static” nature of the West, as epitomised by the Eiffel Tower): its levels consisted of a cube, a pyramid and a cylinder in ascending order, and the spiral structure was capped with a hemisphere. In testament to Tatlin’s

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ambition, the cube – which was to be used as a venue for international meetings
and conferences – was intended to revolve slowly, so as to make a complete
revolution annually, while the pyramid was to rotate once a month and serve as an
administrative centre. Meanwhile, the cylindrical section – which would house a
propaganda centre – would turn on its axis daily. The propaganda section was
envisioned as a hive of media activity, complete with an information bureau,
facilities for publishing newspapers, proclamations, brochures and manifestoes, a
radio and telegraph broadcasting station and a projector that would continually
paint a slogan on the sky. Finally, the top hemispherical section would rotate on an
hourly basis and further serve propaganda activities.94

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Tatlin’s ambitious and innovative Monument has
been the focus of numerous works of scholarship – works that have often matched
the artist’s own creativity in interpreting the sources and ideas that informed his
work.95 Yet while there can be no doubt that Tatlin’s plans for his Monument were
audacious, in an atmosphere in which the political elite was committed to
identifying the most effective tools for spreading the revolutionary message and
genrendering support for the Bolshevik cause, these plans are perhaps less radical
than has often been suggested. In this regard, it is useful to consider the project of
agitational trains (“agit-trains”) and steamboats, which were devised by state
officials during this period as literal vehicles for promoting and disseminating the
Bolshevik message throughout the country. Contemporary commentary on this
project paints a vivid scene:

To crisscross Soviet Russia with flamboyant, artistically designed trains and
steamships, equipped with mobile libraries, bookstores, cinematographs,
mobile rostrums, educational and information apparatus – this is almost a
fantastical undertaking.

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94 Gail Harrison Roman, "Tatlin’s Tower, Revolutionary Symbol and Aesthetic", in Gail Harrison
Roman and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt (eds.), The Avant-Garde Frontier, Russia Meets the West,

95 Apart from the works by Christina Lodder, Gail Harrison Roman and John Milner see also Alexei
Alexeyevich Kurbanovsky, "Freud, Tatlin and the Tower: How Soviet Psychoanalysis Might Have
892-906; Norbert Lynton, Tatlin’s Tower, Monument to Revolution, Yale University Press, New
Yet, this is no fantasy... – such a train already exists, and it is already on its way from the heart of Russia toward the southern border. This is the first-born of the creative Revolution – the first agit-train\textsuperscript{96} by the name of Lenin.\textsuperscript{97}

Futurists – including Tatlin\textsuperscript{98} – were actively involved in numerous early propaganda projects for the Soviet state, and indeed a number of them worked on the first agit-train. The idea of sending agit-trains across the country to promote and propagate the Soviet cause was first discussed in August 1918, with the first train – Lenin – commencing its journey in December that year, towing a payload of Futurist-decorated carriages.\textsuperscript{99} In 1920 an official report concerning the agit-trains and steamships project was published, and it is clear from this report that the ideas that led to the creation of these vehicles were very much in the spirit of the ideas informing the design of Tatlin’s Monument.\textsuperscript{100}

This report described the incorporation of technology, science, and art into the agit-trains and steamboats, and recommended continued and enhanced support for the project. Agit-trains in particular were described glowingly: in addition to distinguishing and recognisable exterior decoration, these trains carried cinematographs, radio stations and printing presses around the country, facilitating the swift and wide dissemination of supportive films, broadcasts and publications. Exhibition carriages transported visual and other material that supported on-board lectures, and the trains also gave mobility to the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). Book and magazine storage compartments were central components of the agit-trains, enabling the delivery of published material to local bookshops, as well as allowing the trains to function as mobile libraries. Mobile theatre groups travelled on the trains, alongside doctors, veterinarians and bureaucrats equipped to receive and process public feedback. In addition, agit-

\textsuperscript{96} Literaturno-instruktorskii poezd imeni Lenina
\textsuperscript{97} GARF f. 1235, op. 139, d. 1, l. 183.
\textsuperscript{100} Karpinskii (ed.), Agitparpoeda V. Ts. I. K.
trains effectively served as itinerant command centres for various Commissariat representatives, who rode alongside lecturers, artists, actors, and poets. As agit-trains moved around the country, each of these “working passengers” would contribute their skills to reinforcing Bolshevik rule, both while the trains made various stops and while they were en route.101

As the Red Army advanced and secured Bolshevik rule across the country, the agit-trains followed. To enhance their efficiency, the report suggested equipping the trains with even more dazzling technical effects: equipment for projecting illuminated slogans (svetiaschitiesa meniaushchiesia agitnadpis) into the sky and the use of loudspeakers for music were both strongly recommended. These proposals notwithstanding, it was clear that the agit-trains, replete with their decorations and associated paraphernalia, were certainly effective in attracting and commanding the attention of the masses. As such, it was also suggested that the trains might include exhibitions relevant to a particular region, and that rather than being exhaustive and scientific (naucho-ischerpyvaiushchaia), these exhibitions ought to take the form of a blitz (udarnia) – a brief (15 to 20 minute), striking and impressive spectacle that would inform, inspire and enhance the future work of the visitors.102

The parallels between the agit-train project and Tatlin’s Monument are clear. Agit-trains provided working environments for political representatives alongside agitators and lecturers, whose teaching was aided by various artists, mobile press and communication facilities, as well as various multimedia technologies. At the same time, they were themselves works of art: their carriages were adorned with images, slogans and posters, while their rooftops served as stages for performances and speeches. All of these elements can be seen incorporated into Tatlin’s plans for the Monument – like the trains, this Tower offered a dynamic fusion of the political, artistic, agitational and technological in support of the revolutionary campaign. The push towards the new forms to express and propagate revolutionary efforts, as exemplified by Bolshevik

celebrations and Tatlin’s *Monument*, was inspired by a need to find effective ways 
to communicate the revolutionary message, a message that Futurists believed old 
formats were simply unable to convey.

Futurist theoreticians also harboured 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.”\(^{103}\) 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.\(^{104}\)

Brik further tied his argument to Marx’s views in *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 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

\(^{103}\) Proclamation by the Commissariat of Enlightenment’s Department of Visual Arts, “Otdel 
Iksusstva Komissariata Prosvesheniia, K rabochim i khudozhnikam”, RGALI f. 665, op. 1, d. 3 
[1918-1919], l.8.

\(^{104}\) O. M. Brik, “Utselevshii bog”, *Iksusstvo 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.
cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.\textsuperscript{105}

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.”\textsuperscript{106}

More than any other revolutionary group, Russian Futurists were acutely aware of the dangers posed by the powerful bourgeois culture – understandably, as they were themselves the progeny 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 beliefs and as a consequence had stagnated – the hope was that destruction would serve to rejuvenate. Kushner explains: “From the very heart of bourgeois culture came its revolutionary negation. It first flared up passionately, irately and indomitably in art. This negation is called Futurism.”\textsuperscript{107} 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, who described the nature of the bourgeois class as innovative, audacious and in possession of visionary entrepreneurship, and as historically central to any revolutionary cause,\textsuperscript{108} reverberated strongly with Russian Futurists – for these words affirmed their fears that bourgeois culture, like bourgeois politics and economics, was a powerful enemy. That is, Russian Futurists

\textsuperscript{106} Marx, \textit{The Eighteenth Brumaire}, pp. 15-16.
\textsuperscript{107} Kushner, “Pryzhok k sotsializmu”, p. 1.
understood that threat posed by bourgeois culture owed not only to its proclivity to hold onto traditional formats and values, but also to the demonstrated ability of the bourgeoisie to forge revolutionary change so as to invigorate itself and retain its position of power. It was for these dual reasons that Russian Futurists regarded the cultural model that had been dominant under the previous system as a foe that could not be underestimated.

In his contribution to the first issue of *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Punin argued that as long as the political revolution was fighting persistent reactionary tendencies, the same struggle would be mirrored in the domain of art. The bourgeoisie, as he noted, was accustomed to holding the reins of power and would not give up its ruling position easily: it would keep fighting with every available weapon – art included – in order to influence the emerging proletarian consciousness. Punin argued that old bourgeois forces continued to infiltrate Soviet cultural circles with an obvious goal in mind, and that the Soviet press still readily published pieces by those bourgeois aesthetes whose tastes and beliefs had remained steadfast. In Punin’s estimation, although this kind of infiltration was not capable of directly challenging Soviet rule, it nevertheless posed a reactionary threat that could exist within and pass unnoticed for a very long time, and was thus potentially more dangerous than open military or political opposition. Punin noted that it was important to understand the form of this threat: as bourgeois “political adventures” failed, they opted for a new strategy: “We will influence their consciousness any way we know how and with any tool with can. We will make them accustomed to our art, to our methods, and soon enough, to our political theories.” By depicting bourgeois attempts at restoration in this manner and warning of the existence “of a living hydra of reaction,” Punin drew attention to the need to protect the fledgling Soviet reality by securing the cultural domain.

In his article “The Third International,” Punin also cautioned against tendencies within the domains of science and the arts that might compromise the socialist revolution, arguing that the moment was imminent when issues of artistic and scientific creativity would pose great challenges, and that the ruling powers therefore needed to urgently define their approach in line with Communist

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109 N. Punin, “Popytki restavratsii”, *Iskusstvo kommuny*, No. 1, 7 December 1918, p. 3.
logic.\textsuperscript{110} As a discussion at one of the meetings of Narkompros’ Theatre department (transcribed in Iskusstvo kommuny) demonstrated, this was a shared concern. This discussion centred on clarification of the postulates of Communist ideology within the sphere of the arts:

Great founders of scientific socialism, Marx and Engels, formed the general historical and economic law that determined revolutionary and class self-consciousness and the socialist ideology of the proletariat. In the midst of the battle for socialism, this general law of the theory and ideology of the worker’s class was subsequently applied to various domains of society and human culture [...] However, conditions for the development of the proletariat and the atmosphere of its revolutionary fighting during a capitalist regime were such that its approach to arts, an element of cultural superstructure very much removed from the determinant economic basis, was impossible until the October revolution.\textsuperscript{111}

Because the proletariat assumed power before being able to create its own cultural model, the post-revolutionary atmosphere was marked by an ideological vacuum in the cultural domain – a situation that permitted bourgeois forms to linger. That is, although the proletariat had achieved political hegemony, bourgeois aesthetics (and the inherent antiquarian mentality) were still an ever-present influence upon the proletarian consciousness.\textsuperscript{112}

Brik also acknowledged that the proletariat had not yet conceptualised its own aesthetic sensibilities, and that the issue of artistic production had not yet undergone revolutionary criticism. He emphasised his belief that, when it came to establishing a proletarian dictatorship within the field of culture, there was no pre-constructed ideological template to implement. Indeed, Marx and Engels left little in the way of aesthetic theory: their scattered writings on the issues of artistic production served merely as signposts.\textsuperscript{113} This lack of ideological preparation for the future Communist culture, according to Brik, left the proletariat “defenceless in

\textsuperscript{111} “Dokładna zapiska, K proektu polozhenia o Nauchno-Teoreticheskoi Sektsii Teatral’nogo Otdela, predlozhennomu Biuro Sektsii Borisom Kushnerom”, pp. 2-3.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p. 2.
\textsuperscript{113} Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, pp. 1-3.
the cultural arena in front of the pressure created by the bourgeois-democratic system.”

Attempts by Futurists to register a Communist-Futurist collective (Kom-fut) with the Vyburg region R.K.P. (b) in 1919 should also be read in relation to their campaign to ideologically secure the cultural domain at a time when Bolshevik victory was still not assured and when the bourgeois mentality still had many avenues by which to reach the Russian population. The program reads as a mélange of original Futurist and Communist postulates:

The Communist system requires a Communist consciousness. All elements of everyday life (byt), morality, philosophy and art need to be recreated on a Communist base. Without this there can be no further development of the Communist revolution.

The program warned that the current institutions of the Soviet state did not seem to understand the seriousness of the task of creating a Communist cultural structure, and that the Social Democratic approach that had been haphazardly assembled represented “no match for the kind of century long experiences that bourgeois ideologues possess.” By allowing these ideologues of that past to participate in the creation of cultural-enlightenment institutions, the state opened a way for them to promote their ideas and values to the masses as infallible truths. In response, Kom-fut called for the immediate creation of a Communist ideology in the cultural field in order to protect the future of the Communist system, and cultural leaders to rid themselves of “all democratic illusions,” as the realisation of cultural projects could not be any less revolutionary than the realisation of the political Communist reality.

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 coherent strategic effort to conceptualise a form of artistic production that would satisfy the social and ideological demands of contemporary

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116 “Kommunisty-Futuristy”, Iskusstvo kommuly, No. 8, 26 January 1919, p. 3.
117 Ibid.
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 numerous opponents – was clearly more shrewd than eccentric.

A brief examination of the overall Futurist cultural strategy serves to add emphasis to this point. In this period – and far more methodically than had been the case during the First World War – Futurists were engaged in the production of propaganda and agitational works. This undertaking represented a very direct way of exerting influence upon daily Russian life: whether through presenting ideas for radically modern monuments that would embody and celebrate the revolutionary drive, or through their work on public celebrations, agit-trains, and propaganda posters, Futurists committed their creative talents to supporting major projects that were aimed at emancipating and modernising the lives of the Russian people. Mayakovsky, for example, produced numerous posters during the Civil War period for the Russian Telegraph Agency – works that united his verses and drawings so as to deliver powerful messages calling for perseverance and determination in the revolutionary fight. These posters served as powerful pieces of propaganda, and were present both in public spaces as well as on board the agitational trains that meandered their way across the country. Mayakovsky’s ROSTA posters calling for perseverance in the revolutionary combat and Tatlin’s Monument embodying the spirit of the revolutionary campaign exemplify the logic of the Futurist activity during this period.
Yet while posters, public celebrations and monuments represented a powerful way to augment the Communist consciousness within the population, Futurist theoreticians believed strongly that the achievement of this outcome would be significantly enhanced through the continued development of their concept of materialist art. The “art” of creating the tools, objects and spaces of everyday life was an endeavour imbued with an unparalleled capacity to perpetually engender this new consciousness, as this was an art that would be an ever-present component of daily life at home and at work, during periods of activity and of leisure, and in both public and private spaces. In essence, Futurists

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believed that continually asserting the revolutionary values via the “art of
everyday life” was a more efficient vehicle of influence than sole reliance on the
agit-train, the drum or the poster, howsoever well-realised these projects may
have been. Accordingly, what Futurist theoreticians envisaged for this art was a
union of the agitational and the everyday with industrial mass production.

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 1920s was a time when the revolutionary project was introduced into the
“third” – the cultural – front. This new battlefront, David-Fox argues, “was widely
proclaimed the next locus of revolutionary activity in the wake of Bolshevik
victories on the first two ‘fronts,’ the Party’s military and political struggles in the
civil war.”\(^{119}\) Comprised of the domains of culture, science, education and ideology,
this new front was focused upon remodelling the entirety of human life, and upon
forging a “New Man.”\(^{120}\) 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 \textit{proletarian
consciousness}.\(^{121}\) Discussing the plans for rebuilding Moscow in the 1930s,
Katerina Clark writes that “Architects attempted to create an incredible space of
grandeur that would inspire citizens, impressing on them the greatness of their
state and inspiring them to become ‘grander’ human beings.”\(^{122}\) Artistic branches
such as architecture, and literature in particular, were used in the 1930s by Soviet
officialdom to forge a particular kind of Soviet citizen: as Clark describes it, they
sought to “put new software into the machine” via cultural production.\(^{123}\) Clearly,
the cultural sphere was to be \textit{fons et origo} of the new Communist consciousness,

\(^{119}\) Michael David-Fox, \textit{Revolution of the Mind, Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929},
\(^{120}\) David-Fox, \textit{Revolution of the Mind}, p. 83.
\(^{121}\) Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander
Rabinowitch, Richard Stites (eds.), \textit{Russia in the Era of NEP, Explorations in Soviet Society and
\(^{122}\) Katerina Clark, \textit{Moscow, The Fourth Rome, Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of the
\(^{123}\) Ibid., p. 104.
and as such the Futurist belief that cultural production could be a powerful tool of revolutionary change represented a sound strategy well before the very same logic became a crucial component of official Soviet policy. That is, Futurists did not disregard present conditions with their actions, but were in fact ahead of the curve and very much in tune with the demands of their historical moment – a moment marked by the challenge of establishing the coordinates of a new society.

By creating posters that the Commissariat’s section of Peoples’ Houses would use to celebrate the Day of Soviet Propaganda, Vladimir 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 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 its socio-political milieu; 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. Aligned with this logic, this chapter 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 skilfully 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.

124 Gough, Artist as Producer.
Chapter Three:

*Futurism and the New Economic Policy, 1921-1928*

In his opening address to the First Moscow Conference of the Workers of Left Art in January 1925, Nikolai Chuzhak began with a rhetorical question:

> How does an artist differ in this environment from any other person? The difference is in the fact that he sees further, he sees that which ought to be tomorrow. And is it not that a politician also ought to see what will happen next, what tomorrow will be. This is perfectly true. This is why I claim that a politician is also an artist. If he is building life, he is an artist.¹

Characterisations of totalitarian political leaders as inspired Demiurges – Adolf Hitler as the “Architect of the Third Reich”; Joseph Stalin as the “The Architect of Communism” (or, writer of the Soviet project, “the author of authors”) – would later become a regular feature of contemporary iconography employed in creation of the myth of these rulers.² The analogy offered by Chuzhak, on the other hand, represented a recognition that arts and politics in early Soviet Russia were oriented toward the same, very pressing, goal: that of building a new kind of life. It is this logic that frames the following examination of Futurist endeavours under the New Economic Policy (NEP). This investigation demonstrates that, during the 1920s, Futurists would reiterate and further advance the concept – conceived previously on the pages of *Iskusstvo kommuny* – that their artistic efforts were an instrument for creating the requisite new consciousness; a tool for chiselling the new Soviet subject. Thus, Futurists defined consciousness as the clear target of their endeavours, just as Bolshevik officialdom had in their efforts to secure and entrench the fragile Soviet system.

¹ Nikolai Chuzhak at the First Moscow Conference of Workers of Left Art on 16 and 17 January 1925, RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 7.
In his discussion of the Russian Revolution, Peter Holquist describes the opening decades of Russia’s twentieth century, stretching from the Revolution of 1905 to the end of the Civil War, as a “continuum of crisis”; for Sheila Fitzpatrick, the subsequent period – which was characterised by the implementation of the New Economic Policy – must also be considered a fundamental component of this distinct period of great change and social turbulence. In their theoretical writings of the 1920s, Futurists would define theirs as the art of crisis – an artistic practice that would function, from the period of the 1905 Revolution through until the demise of the NEP, as a method for dealing with what was a volatile and unstable reality.

This chapter considers two key aspects of Futurism in the 1920s: the acknowledgement of continuity within the Futurist project – perceived by its theoreticians as a dialectical creative method born of post-1905 conditions – through the NEP era, and the Futurist view that the NEP era was a sustained moment of crisis, a new stage of the revolution whose final outcome depended on the successful creation of the new Communist consciousness (a perception shared by Futurists and Bolshevik leaders alike). Through the course of this period Futurism – through both theory and production – aimed to create conditions that would ultimately lead to the realisation of this consciousness. Building on the core argument of this thesis that, far from being utopian, each stage of Futurist development demonstrated a keen sense of reality and desire to actively address it, this chapter also approaches the thesis of Boris Groys, regarding the presence of avant-garde logic within Socialist Realism, from a new angle. Throughout his body of work, Groys has famously argued against the interpretation that the Russian avant-garde project failed, or the notion that it was entirely eliminated, asserting that its fundamental principles were in fact integrated into the Soviet Socialist Realist paradigm. The following discussion will demonstrate that during the 1920s the Futurist project – in a far more direct manner than has generally been recognised, and through its continued embrace of Marxist theory – paved the way for Socialist Realism. By considering Futurism not as an artistic movement but as a

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method (which was indeed how Futurist theoreticians themselves regarded their program) for creating the new Soviet consciousness, judgements of its failure, or indeed its demise with the arrival of Stalin’s Great Break, are deserving of reassessment.

The closing of the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny* in 1919 left Russian Futurists without a forum for discussing artistic production that might have been capable of supporting the developing Communist system (*stroi*): previously, this journal had come to represent a public domain in which they had been able to articulate, debate and propagate their design for future society. It would take four years of struggle for Futurists to secure a new mouthpiece: in 1922 Vladimir Mayakovskiy announced the formation of a new organisation – The Left Front of the Arts (*Levyi front iskusstva* – LEF), which was to serve as a gravitational force gathering progressive writers and artists. The publication of the first issue of the organisation’s eponymous journal occurred in March 1923, marking a new phase in the development of the Futurist project. Seven issues of *LEF* were produced between 1923 and 1925; then, following a two-year hiatus, the journal re-emerged as *Novyi LEF* (New LEF), and monthly issues were published from 1927 until 1928. It was within the pages of *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* that the development of the Futurist program in the 1920s would take place.

Examining the articles that featured in these two journals allows us to follow the further development of Futurism in relation to Marxist theory, and to observe this phenomenon as both a continuous process from its first rebellious episodes through to the late 1920s and also as a strategy for addressing the crisis brought on by new conditions. In 1921 the Soviet government introduced the New Economic Policy, a series of measures that partially restored a free market economy and caused significant shifts in the economic, political and cultural life of the country. In addition to representatives of the old traditionalist cultural mentality who sought to assert their power, Futurists gained a new opponent as the market economy generated a surge in demand for popular commercial culture.

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4 For the list of groups that were associated with LEF see Halina Stephan, *LEF and the Left Front of the Arts*, Verlag Otto Sagner, München, 1981, pp. 38-39.

5 Digital versions of all the issues of *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* are available on line at www.ruthenia.ru/sovlit/jour.html
Recognising that the revolution had entered a critical stage, Futurists devoted themselves to the task of developing a program of cultural production that would keep the revolutionary program on track amid what were extraordinarily challenging circumstances.

The Futurist approach to the NEP crisis (as they would come to regard it) in many ways mirrored their bifocal tactics during the Civil War period: while engaged in discrediting the old cultural behaviour as well as the emerging, ideologically-bankrupt commercial culture produced by the conditions of market economy, Futurists simultaneously developed a cultural strategy that would aid in creating Communist reality. It was during the NEP era that Futurism crystallised first the Constructivist and then the Productivist paradigms of artistic practice, prefigured in *Iskusstvo kommuny*, which foregrounded the production of objects, the organisation of spaces and the engagement of creative and innovative thinking within industrial processes. These movements would bolster efforts to promote both a materialisation of Communist reality, and subsequently a Communist consciousness. The ultimate goal of Futurist artistic practice was the creation of a new consciousness, which would be immune to the surreptitious influence of competing ideology, and strengthened through adequate artistic practices.

The investigation in this chapter opens with an overview of the state of affairs brought on by the New Economic Policy and the formation of the Left Front of the Arts and its publishing endeavours. Focus then shifts to an essay by Nikolai Chuzhak entitled “Under the Banner of Life-Building (An Attempt to Understand the Art of Today),” and two contributions by Sergei Tretiakov – “Where From and Where To (Prospects of Futurism),” and “LEF and the NEP,” both of which defined contemporary conditions as a critical stage in the continuation of the revolutionary campaign. It is in these works that Futurism was defined as a mutable but continuous revolutionary method, the present task of which was to fend off the crisis in the revolutionary process that had been brought on by the NEP through

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strategic artistic production. It was also in these essays that the interpretation of Futurism through Marxist theory would be developed to a point where it actually arrived at the gates of the Socialist Realist paradigm.

From these studies the inquiry turns to two essays by Boris Arvatov, the first concerning Marx’s notion of artistic restoration, the second on the issues of easel painting and its ideological implications. Through the lens of Marxist theory, Arvatov argued that old cultural models represented a real threat to the current stage of revolutionary process. Following on from Arvatov’s campaign against the old, the question for Futurists was stark: how might their artistic production save the Communist project from the temptation of Capitalist cohabitation in Soviet Russia? While there exists a significant corpus of study concerning the creative endeavours of Futurist (or Constructivist/Productionist) artists during this period, there also exists the general perception that these works were more often than not idealistic projects that could not have been realised there and then, and thus could not have played any tangible (or at least any significant) part in the creation of Soviet reality or the consciousness of its citizens. An examination of a number of pieces from LEF and Novyi LEF, and of Tretiakov’s proposal for celebrating the tenth anniversary of October revolution in particular, however, will demonstrate that Futurism was not simply about a dream of “gleaming communal cafeterias and public laundries,” but that while keeping an eye on the projects of the future, it was pragmatic about the scale on which the radical change could take place within the actual coordinates of its day. Through an examination of the Futurist texts and projects of this period, this chapter adds emphasis to Groys’ thesis on the influence of the avant-garde in the formation of Stalinist cultural behaviour. Furthermore, an exploration of the interpretation, proposed by Igor Golomstock, that Socialist Realism transcended the traditional concept of an artistic style and function to become a method guided by a particular worldview, serves to further demonstrate the extent to which Futurism influenced the logic that underpinned later Soviet culture – as this concept was most certainly already present in 1920s Futurist

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theory. The recognition that major elements of Futurism would later form a significant component of the Soviet Socialist Realist paradigm stands as testament to the ability of Futurists to successfully read the conditions of their day – and provide adequate answers to challenging situations.

A Test of Nerves

The development of Futurist theory within the pages of *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* coincided with the implementation of the New Economic Policy, which encompassed the period between 1921 and 1928. Following the Civil War, those who were attempting to build the Communist future found themselves facing a new series of challenges: administrative and economic chaos, a demobilisation of Red Army soldiers, food shortages, industrial breakdown and inadequate infrastructure presented the Bolshevik leadership with a very difficult “revolutionary morning after.” The introduction of the NEP was an attempt to restore confidence to the citizens of a country that, after years of raging global and domestic conflict, had been driven into an economic abyss. The policy sought to revive relations between the agricultural and industrial sectors, and it permitted the private sector to spark this economic activity, as the weakened state was unable to do so.\(^\text{11}\)

In the early part of 1921 the state abolished the practice – enforced during War Communism – of requisitioning peasant produce: no longer would the state confiscate grain, or place rigid controls on the pricing and distribution of goods.\(^\text{12}\) Instead of taking everything peasants were able to produce, government officials introduced a fixed tax (first in kind and later in money) and allowed peasants to trade the goods that remained after this tax had been paid; with this surplus, peasants were able to obtain industry-produced goods. Soviet industry, however, was in a very poor condition and the government was in no position to lend assistance – a situation that meant that there was never enough industrial

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\(^{12}\) On War Communism’s policy toward peasants see Alan M. Ball, *Russia’s Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921-1929*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987, pp. 4-5.
production to satisfy this emerging peasant demand. It was a catch-22 situation: by trading their surplus production, peasants found themselves in the position to buy industrial goods – only there were not enough industrial goods to buy. For industry to start working again, the state required grain to feed industry workers, and to buy the necessary foreign industrial equipment – but the new laws meant that the state was no longer able to simply confiscate the necessary quantity of grain. The NEP was devised in an attempt to forge a solution – albeit an ideologically problematic solution – to this dilemma.

Opening the economy to private entrepreneurship and trade was a move aimed at reviving light industry and thus giving peasants the opportunity to buy goods with the money earned from the sale of their grain; it was hoped that the entire economy would then be adequately stimulated by the multiplier effect. As Nikolai Bukharin – a prominent supporter of this economic policy – explained, the greater the buying power of the peasantry, the faster industry would grow.13 This policy paved the way for private manufacture and trade, which subsequently gave birth to a new social phenomenon – the figure of the NEPman, a merchant-trading middleman who was seen as a crucial player in the NEP landscape. NEPmen were defined as predominantly urban traders and financiers, but also manufacturers, and therefore all those who owned production capacity and who profited from market trade.14 As such, and although policies introduced under the NEP were regarded as the only way to stimulate the domestic economy, the resurrection of private capital ownership and trade was regarded by many party members and leaders as a high price to pay.

The implementation of the NEP represented a departure from several Communist axioms: the state would no longer be the sole regulator of the economy, there would be a dedication to the development of light industry and there would be broad concessions afforded to the peasantry, to the extent that they enjoyed significant power in the important agricultural sector. While all three issues were accepted as economic necessities, the latter also carried a strong political undercurrent. Since Russia’s populace consisted predominantly of

peasants (and not workers), the state – notwithstanding its dedication to building a proletarian society – needed peasants on its side, and bringing the peasant constituency under its wing was especially important in light of the fact that Russian leaders had largely given up hope of support in the form of a larger European proletarian revolution. If the Bolshevik project was to be a success, they would need the country’s peasant constituency on their side.\(^{15}\)

Despite Lenin’s backing of the plan, many party members and leading Bolshevik figures were fearful that this policy was the first step towards a relapse into Capitalism. In response, Lenin argued that the NEP was a strategic retreat, and would permit the Bolsheviks an opportunity to regroup before renewing their revolutionary assault.\(^{16}\) He believed that this was a necessary step in building a socialist society; a temporary and unavoidable detour on the path toward the creation of a future Communist system. Indeed, the NEP had an immediate healing effect on the ailing economy, bringing the economic boost that was so desperately needed. It was Lenin’s authority that enabled such a plan to be put in motion – despite its obvious deviation from Communist ideology – and to be tolerated by the party membership. Throughout the NEP era, however, the Communist Party’s Left Opposition – led by Leon Trotsky – advocated an end to the concessions given to peasants, and argued in favour of a more forceful push toward the creation of a powerful heavy industry sector. Lenin’s death in January 1924 would bring further instability to both the political and economic battlefields: emerging victorious from the power vacuum that had been left, Stalin (along with his then close ally Bukharin) continued to back the strategy of giving concessions to peasants, of making only moderate investment in industry and of allowing market forces to naturally stabilise the flow and prices of goods and services. This system, however, would not last – and by the end of 1927 a volte-face in Party strategy would occur, as Stalin turned against Bukharin and supporters of the NEP and reiterated the Party’s dedication to the development of heavy industry while introducing compulsory seizures of grain in support of a policy of rapid industrialisation. Thus, economic policy turned toward collectivisation of agriculture, a state-run economy

\(^{15}\) Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, pp. 94-95.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., p. 117.
and the abolition of all private trade, as outlined in Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan, which was introduced in 1928.\textsuperscript{17}

The relative economic liberalism of the NEP gave rise to the phenomenon of profit-driven NEPmen. In turn, this had repercussions in the domain of arts and culture, where the NEPman’s newfound wealth was spent on light entertainment, cafés, restaurants, and other commodified pleasures generated by the free market. For committed revolutionaries, it seemed that this new money had effectively restored the pre-Revolution atmosphere to cities like Moscow, as one could observe in city streets “bearded priests summoning the faithful, prostitutes, beggars and pickpockets working the streets and railway stations, gypsy songs in the nightclubs, uniformed doormen doffing their caps to the gentry, theatregoers in furs and silk stockings.”\textsuperscript{18} For supporters of the Bolshevik cause, the NEP represented more than a simple economic measure that would help the country to emerge from difficult circumstances – to these people, the NEP represented a real ideological challenge. Once the effects of this policy spilled into the streets and those profiting as a result of the NEP openly flaunted their wealth by indulging in luxury and the salacious entertainment offered in nightclubs and cabarets, the question being asked among Communists was whether the revolutionary campaign had resulted in a Pyrrhic victory. As Michael David-Fox explains, “NEP lost its primary meaning of New Economic Policy, and became semantically synonymous with ‘new bourgeois strata’, speculation, and Nepanism.”\textsuperscript{19} that is, the NEP started to denote not simply an economic measure but a socio-cultural decadence, a resurrection of the Capitalist mind-set that threatened to collapse a still very fragile Communist social scaffolding. This cohabitation of Capitalism – with all its various manifestations – and a Communist dedication to the total overhaul of the human condition created what can be best described as an uneasy


\textsuperscript{18} Fitzpatrick, The Russian Revolution, p. 96.

atmosphere where a sense of deep crisis saturated daily life. Scholarship concerning the Soviet 1920s often describes this situation with the same terminology frequently encountered in studies of Russian society after the 1905 revolution: crisis, neurosis, high suicide rates, pervasive sense of loss, sexual disorders, rise of hooliganism among the youth or alternatively (or concomitantly), total hedonistic-nihilistic surrender to light-hearted entertainment and the pleasures of life.\textsuperscript{20}

It is against a background marked by this omnipresent social anxiety, the tension between making concessions to Capitalism and the desire to build a socialist country, and the challenge of forging a Communist consciousness despite the presence of NEPmen (who indulged in imported foods and smelled of French perfume), that Futurists fought hard to regroup and, through their publications, offer a strategy for Communist life-building. Their commitment to creating and enforcing a new consciousness so as to secure the ultimate victory of the revolution gained an even stronger sense of urgency against the NEP background. As Sergei Tretiakov stated in one of his many contributions to \textit{LEF}, the NEP represented a test of stamina, and in this cohabitation of Capitalism and Communism the outcome would be resolved in favour of the side that had “the strongest nerves.”\textsuperscript{21} The only antidote to the alluring vices brought on by the NEP had to be the creation of an impervious and resolute Communist mind-set – and Futurist publications of the 1920s stand as exemplars of that logic.

A specific set of conditions permitted the formation of \textit{LEF}'s core editorial group, the publication of its journals, and its establishment as a clear continuation of the efforts commenced in \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity}.\textsuperscript{22} It was with the advent of the


\textsuperscript{21} Tretiakov, “\textit{LEF} i NEP”, p. 71.

\textsuperscript{22} In the early 1980s two works investigating \textit{LEF} and \textit{Novyi LEF} appeared, and while both of these studies primarily explore the new literary methods and theories developed within these journals, they also illuminate the tumultuous history of the journals, from their formation and initial publishing challenges, to the major organisational and leadership issues that beset both: Natasha Kolchevska, \textit{LeF and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s}, PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1980; Halina Stephan, \textit{LEF and the Left Front of the Arts}, Verlag Otto Sagner, München, 1981.
NEP that the Soviet government made it possible for private and cooperative enterprises to move into the world of publishing. With the governmental publishing apparatus focussed on political and scientific literature, the printing of belles-lettres, art books, children’s literature and other forms of the written word were left to private publishers. As a result there was a surge in the publication of various kinds of popular literature, especially those forms that explored salacious topics, or those that challenged the dominant political and social structures. The opportunity to release the journal LEF – which was initially published by the State Publishing House (Gosizdat) – came as a consequence of a broader campaign mounted by the Soviet cultural administration. The administration, weary of the kind of popular culture and entertainment that was coming to dominate the public domain, sought to counteract the success that private publishers had enjoyed with popular literature by supporting groups that exhibited a dedication to the Communist cause in their work – groups like Mayakovsky’s Left Front of the Arts. Having decided to subsidise the publications of these groups, the government soon established a decree by which those which declared themselves to be Communist could no longer use the facilities of the private publishers.23 Indeed, when Futurists submitted their request for publication to the Agit-Department of Ts.K. R.K.P. in 1923, the document stated clearly that, given that the journal’s ideology was determinately Communist, the possibility for the LEF group to seek private publishers was inconceivable.24 Using this favourable wind to set the sails, Futurism opened up a new avenue for its further development.

It was Mayakovsky’s name that appeared under the title of Editor-in-Chief (otvetstvennyi redaktor) in both LEF and Novyi LEF, although the general consensus among scholars is that it seems more likely to have in fact been Osip Brik who ran the day-to-day operations of both journals – Mayakovsky’s name, by virtue of his reputation and influence, was most likely a strategy employed to give the journals a fighting chance within the chaotic publishing landscape of the NEP era.25 In addition to Mayakovsky and Brik, the fact that Boris Kushner – previously

23 Stephan, LEF and the Left Front of the Arts, pp. 19-24; also pp. 35-37.
24 RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 355, l. 1.
a frequent contributor to *Iskusstvo kommunity* – made significant contributions to
both *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* lends strong support to the claim of aspirational continuity
between the theoretical grounds established in *Iskusstvo kommunity* and the
ideological development that occurred in *LEF* and *Novyi LEF*. 26 Indeed,
Mayakovsky’s official application for the publishing of *Novyi LEF* explicitly traces
the provenance of the LEF journals: “*Novyi LEF* will continue the work we
commenced in the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommunity* (1918-1919) and the journal *Lef*
(1923-1924).”27

In addition to these authors, the LEF camp was rounded out by a group of
avant-gardists from the Soviet Far East: in 1920, the poet Nikolai Aseev and writer
Sergei Tretiakov, together with the artist David Burliuk and journalist Nikolai
Chuzhak, formed a Futurist group by the name of Tvorchestvo (Creation) in
Vladivostok, and together they offered unequivocal support to the contemporary
efforts of their fellow Moscow and Petrograd-based Futurists.28 From this group
Aseev, Tretiakov and Chuzhak, along with art historian and critic Boris Arvatov,
would take an active role in the creation of *LEF*,29 and were together considered to
constitute *LEF*’s “A-team.” As such, *LEF* was established on a solid foundation of

26 Katerina Clark notes that the Futurist team during the NEP changed and that people who were on
the forefront during the War Communism period, such as the key Futurist theoretician from that
period Nikolai Punin, as well as people like David Shterebenberg, were not as involved during the NEP
period and rather tended to withdraw into oasis of avant-garde dominated institutions such as the
Institute for Artistic Culture and Dom Miatlevykh in Leningrad. See Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in
27 RGALI. f. 2852, op. 1, d. 355, ll. 13, 13ob, 14.
28 Stephan, *LEF and the Left Front of the Arts*, pp. 18-19; See also Kolchevska, *Lef and Developments
in Russian Futurism in the 1920s*, pp. 64-68. At the beginning of 1920, a left coalition established
its rule in Vladivostok, but already by April of the same year Japanese forces would take over the city.
The Japanese administration, however, did not heavily police the city's cultural life and the press,
and a Communist newspaper *Krasnoe znamya*, under whose auspices the journal *Tvorchestvo* was
issued, continued to be published. See Leonid Anatolevich Seleznev, “Neobychnyi Burliuk – Dal’nevostochnaya literatura kritika i memuaristika Davida Burliuka 1919-1922”, in Leonid
6. Forced to leave Vladivostok, however, the group would be re-formed in Siberia’s Chita where the
last issue of the journal was published in May 1921. See Clark, *Moscow, The Fourth Rome*, p. 37; The
journal *Tvorchestvo* (subtitled “organ kommunisticheskoi kul’tury”) published six issues in
Vladivostok between June and November 1920 and the last issue No. 7 came out in Chita in late
May 1921 (see *Tvorchestvo*, No. 7 (April-June 1921), p. 161).
29 For the allocation of particular fields of duty of these artists see Stephan, *LEF and the Left Front of
the Arts*, p. 30 and Kolchevska, *Lef and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s*, p. 75. On
Arvatov’s art theory and formulation of utilitarian art production see Christina Kiae, “Boris
Arvatov's Socialist Objects”, *October*, Vol. 81 (Summer 1997), pp. 105-118 and Maria Zalambani,
3 (Jul-Sep. 1999), pp. 415-446.
avant-garde theory: Mayakovsky, Briк and Kushner had previously worked to define the goals of Futurism within a Marxist framework in the pages of *Iskusstvo kommuny*, while Aseev and Tretiakov, along with Chuzhak (who was a Party activist and who gradually developed a version of Marxist art theory “in which the Futurists figured as the forerunners of new socialist art”\(^30\)), provided remote support for these published ideas. Though Arvatov’s background was connected more with Proletkult, in his work he sought to forge a “theoretical bridge” between Futurism and proletarian art.\(^31\) Additionally, artists who were at the forefront of practical efforts to merge Futurist-Marxist theory with industry, such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov Popova and Anton Lavinskii, were all frequent contributors to *LEF*.\(^32\)

Scholarly exploration of LEF’s achievements can essentially be divided into two methodological approaches. The group was in effect a collective entity that gathered various progressive artistic tendencies under a single umbrella, wherein Futurist-Marxist theoretical developments and the projects that were demonstrative of this logic represented but one thread in LEF’s rich fabric. The journals *LEF* and *Novyi LEF* explored different forms of avant-garde theory and literature, published film scripts and plays, discussed photography and film technology, engaged in industrial design, and envisaged forms of public celebrations and appropriate *byt* for the new Soviet man. In dealing with LEF’s publications, scholars have often opted to consider the way in which LEF’s theoretical guidelines inspired developments within a particular discipline, such as literature or visual arts.\(^33\) An alternative approach to dealing with LEF’s multifaceted nature has been to focus on the work of a particular LEF member, and

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\(^{30}\) Stephan, *LEF and the Left Front of the Arts*, p. 32.

\(^{31}\) Ibid., pp. 32-33. For information on the members of the LEF editorial board see also Kolchevska, *Lef and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s*, pp. 6-9. On Arvatov see also Kiae, *Imagine No Possessions*, pp. 28-30.

\(^{32}\) Stephan, *LEF and the Left Front of the Arts*, p. 33.

\(^{33}\) Studies by Stephan and Kolchevska, for example, focus on literature, with both examining developments in the field of poetry and prose published in *LEF* and *Novyi LEF*. Christina Kiae’s work on Russian Constructivism examines revolutionary changes in the domain of visual arts generated by the LEF cohort. See Christina Kiae, *The Russian Constructivist 'Object' and the Revolutionizing of Everyday Life, 1921-1929*, PhD thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 1995; Kiae, *Imagine No Possessions*. 

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to investigate LEF’s philosophy as practiced by that individual.\textsuperscript{34} It is thus with a degree of methodological experimentation that this chapter considers a number of selected articles from LEF and Novyi LEF and, through a direct comparison with Futurist concepts developed in the publications of the Civil War period, focuses on the continuum of Futurist ideas.

With the three manifestos published in the inaugural issue of LEF, the Futurist project was defined as a continual effort, notwithstanding the fact that it had by that point already undergone several transformations.\textsuperscript{35} In their respective discussions of Futurist history from the 1905 Revolution through to the NEP era, each of the manifestos emphasised the fact that Futurism had always discarded its own methods once those methods were rendered obsolete by a change in historical circumstance. These manifestos also noted the mutable nature of the Futurist cohort, which had experienced several “purges,”\textsuperscript{36} as only those who were unwaveringly committed to societal progression and the Communist project were able to truly embrace and advance the always-changing nature of Futurism.

What threat did Futurists perceive in NEP culture? Insofar as it promoted art as a method of escapism, Futurists regarded NEP culture as a serious counter-revolutionary force. Eclectic and light-hearted, this was a cultural format that catered to an emerging class that wanted to spend its newly accumulated riches in the ebullient atmospheres of nightclubs and cabarets. More pertinently, however, this desire for unburdening entertainment affected a wider audience who, having endured a long period of political and social turmoil, sought an escape into a different world and thus readily immersed themselves in films such as The Thief of Bagdad, rather then concerning themselves with anything depicting Soviet reality.\textsuperscript{37} Yet although Bolshevik officials understood that NEP culture represented

\textsuperscript{34} See, for example, an investigation of Osip Brik’s involvement with LEF and his writing on Soviet byt, literature, film, photography and design in LEF and Novyi LEF in Natasha Kurchanova, Against Utopia: Osip Brik and the Genesis of Productivism, PhD thesis, The City University of New York, 2005.

\textsuperscript{35} The three manifestoes include: “Za chto boretsia LEF”, “V kogo vgyraetsia LEF?”, “Kogo predosteregaet LEF?”, LEF, No. 1, 1923, pp. 3-7; 8-9; 10-11. For discussion of the first three LEF manifestoes see Stephan, LEF and the Left Front of the Arts, pp. 64-67 and Kolchevska, Lef and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s, pp. 84-89.

\textsuperscript{36} Vladimir Mayakovsky, Osip Brik, Boris Kushner, Nikolai Aseev, Boris Arvatov, Sergei Tretiakov and Nikolai Chuzhak, “Za chto boretsia LEF”, LEF, No. 1, 1923, p. 4.

a serious threat to the revolutionary project as it distracted the populace from the task of Communist life-building, their idea of counter-attack was, as Futurists would argue with unwavering passion, inadequate. The proposed Bolshevik concept of proletarian culture – a proposal that essentially relied on traditional formats to express revolutionary sentiments – was regarded by Futurists as ideologically corrupt and indeed powerless against the pernicious effects of commercial culture and entertainment. For Futurists, a determined and thoroughly modern artistic approach, fortified by Marxist theory, would be the only true antidote to the influence of the NEP, and the only way to keep the revolutionary project on track amid this new critical stage.

**Continuum of the Futurist Idea**

Prominent within the inaugural edition of *LEF* was an article by Nikolai Chuzhak entitled "Under the Banner of Life-building (An Attempt to Understand the Art of Today)." Chuzhak used this piece to argue that Communist life-building was in a state of crisis. He would engage Marxist theory in an attempt to further illustrate how the Futurist concept of art as a life-building force – artistic production that is directly engaged in forging a new material reality – had to be adopted if the Communist project was to be successfully realised and the crisis that the NEP presented surpassed.

Chuzhak’s exploration of the contemporary cultural landscape and assessment of Futurism as being the only viable cultural strategy begins by quoting Marx’s notion of dialectic progress of history as conceptualised in *Capital*:

In its mystified form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up;

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39 The author mentions in his article that Communist approach to art production developed simultaneously not just in Petersburg’s *Iskusstvo kommuny* but also in *Tvorchoesto* in the Far East and *Vesch* in Berlin (p. 14).
because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.\textsuperscript{40}

This consideration of the process of change through the conflict of opposing forces in Chuzhak’s article opened the possibility of interpreting Futurism as a dialectic process. If in the core of every activity – including artistic endeavour – there can be located some material element, then that element (according to the notion of dialectic materialism) is already something transient, something that as soon as established is automatically already on the way to being negated. Therefore, the task of a materialist art (and Futurism had already established itself as materialist art in Nikolai Punin’s articles for \textit{Iskusstvo kommuny}) could not be the fixation of \textit{byt} (painting it on a canvas, for example) but rather the realisation of that antithesis that is being born in the present as a reaction to dominant material conditions; this antithesis is a condition upon which tomorrow would develop.

Futurist theoreticians discerned that the development of Futurism had begun with a form of artistic experimentation that was representative of a break away from all previous practices in devising new expressions in literature and visual arts. Far from being just another artistic movement, Futurism sought to free itself from the confines of studios and fashionable salons and take a social stand: the idea of shock and provocation as methods for pushing the public out of its comfort zone and inciting social action went hand in hand with innovative creative research. With the revolution having brought forth new political and social conditions, Futurist creative expression changed from aiming to shock to becoming a coherent agitational endeavour, and the application of Futurist concepts in the propaganda effort would be referred to as the \textit{rostrum-poster phase}. Sergei Tretiakov’s article – again within the first issue of \textit{LEF} – highlighted how, through agitational ditties and plays, newspaper contributions and marching songs chanted during the revolution, Futurism entered reality in a most direct way, reaching a new stage in its task of merging art and life.\textsuperscript{41} The first \textit{LEF} manifesto cited works

\textsuperscript{40} Karl Marx, \textit{Capital}, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p. 12. This section was quoted in Chuzhak’s article (p. 14).

\textsuperscript{41} Tretiakov, “Otkuda i kuda?”, p. 197.
such as Vladimir Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, Mayakovsky’s revolutionary play *Mystery-Bouffe*, Vasilii Kamenskii’s play *Stanka Razin*, posters for the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA), as well as the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommunity*, as examples of the employment of progressive art as effective agitation in support of the revolutionary cause.42

Yet already at this stage, while the revolutionary struggle was still at its peak, Futurism had recognised that agitation alone would not secure victory for the Bolshevik campaign. What artists needed to pursue was a formation of the new Communist mentality on a larger scale than individual posters and plays – artists needed to create practical things and new living and working spaces that would provide a setting for the development of a new, Communist mentality. Furthermore, in order to be able to produce these things, art needed to become a part of industry: though entrenched in its agitational stage, Futurism had recognised the demands of the future and begun the process of orienting itself toward achieving a new goal: attempting to enter the social base – the economy – by devising a notion of unity between the arts and industry. The push towards production art, or artistic creativity that was to merge with industrial production, gathered momentum through the Futurist agitational phase. In the prerevolutionary period progressive artists had moved away from the traditional concept of representational (mimetic) art, focussing instead on researching different materials and investigating concepts of construction and spatial relations. While some of this innovative research was applied to agitational projects during the Civil War (*Tatlin’s Monument* or non-objective painting influenced designing posters), artists continued to produce (non-utilitarian) art works. By late 1921 the vast majority of progressive artists, however, had abandoned “laboratory” (or non-utilitarian) Constructivism which, although extremely innovative and progressive, was still in effect traditional studio art-making; instead, these artists had committed themselves to the goal of realising “Production art” – creative innovative work with materials aimed at achieving a utilitarian goal and applicable

within an industrial environment. It was thus in this agitational stage that
Futurism recognised its future path and made a final transition from “aesthetic” to
“real” – orienting entire creative effort away from producing art objects, toward
producing items of quotidian value. In his article Chuzhak asserted that the
notion of art that acted as a vehicle for the creation of socially relevant things was
indeed the crucial point in defining the next phase of Futurist activity. What came
out of this development was a firm Futurist position that art was a production
process and a process of overcoming – not canonising, as had been the case with
every previous artistic movement. Chuzhak posited that the realisation of
Production art represented a defining stage: “its realisation,” Chuzhak argued, “will
help us advance further.”

Chuzhak represented the entire Futurist movement – from its
“hooliganesque” performances in the 1910s to its later commitment to the
concepts of art as life-building and industrial production – as a dialectic
development. Thus the position that scholars have sometimes adopted by equating
the end of certain Futurist practices with the end of the entire movement appears
untenable, as Chuzhak defined Futurism as an open process whose tactics (or
aesthetics) changed in accordance with the demands of the time. In her work on
LEF, Halina Stephan asserts that “when Futurist art, originally dedicated to the
destruction of all traditions, was faced with the actual revolution, it had to develop
a new, constructive, positive system. From this point on, the reorientation of
Futurism toward the positive goals that had been originally alien to Futurism, the
movement no longer existed in its pure form.” This comment echoes the criticism
Futurists were faced with in the 1920s – a time when the “death” of Futurism was
proclaimed more than once. It was, however, precisely this ability to reject its own
past and discern more suitable methods for the next stage as a way of keeping up
with rapidly changing times (and avoid being out-dated, surpassed by the

43 Maria Gough, Artist as Producer, Russian Constructivism in Revolution, University of California
44 Gough, Artist as Producer, pp. 8-9; Christina Lodder, Russian Constructivism, Yale University Press,
45 Chuzhak, “Pod znakom zhiznestroenia”, p. 22.
46 Stephan, LEF and the Left Front of the Arts, pp. 58-59.
demands of the present and displayed as a passive memento on the museum wall) that was inherently and undeniably Futurist.

The crescendo of Chuzhak’s study comes as his investigation of Futurism as a dialectic process approaches what we can recognise as the logic of Socialist Realism – a phenomenon traditionally understood as being diametrically opposite to the avant-garde Geist. Chuzhak reached this point as he explored the nature of the proletarian class and the culture it would create: proletarian culture, he argued, would develop as an intrinsic component of proletarian society. This proletarian society, however, was unlike any other that had come before it, and was to have a unique historic mission: on the one hand, the proletariat was a social group that represented a class fighting for its own interests; on the other hand, the proletariat was to be the final social class, as its goal was ultimately to see an end to class structure. As a class that was born to bring an end to the class system – and thus the end of its own class – the proletariat existed within a constant tension between present and future. Considering this phenomenon, Chuzhak envisaged a cultural system that would correspond to the self-abolishing nature of such a class, and he would refer back to his own earlier essay Toward an Aesthetic of Marxism (K estetike marksizma) from 1912, in which he had considered an artistic practice that would be capable of such a profound understanding of the present that it would possess the ability to see its own antithesis within itself: liberation of this antithesis represented what the future would be. In this art, which could recognise a kernel of future in the dialectic conflicts of the present, the present would be the future in the making. 47 This was creative work, as he wrote in 1912 study, that could be defined as an extrapolation of “the truth of the future” (pravda budushchago) from within the present. 48

In reconsidering what he had written in 1912, Chuzhak noted that as he was shaping his first views in the early 1910s of the proletarian society and its culture, Futurism was simultaneously making itself visible within the Russian cultural scene. As a movement that recognised tensions in the present time,

47 The earlier writings Chuzhak refers to is his work K estetike marksizma (Irkutsk, 1912); I was able to obtain only the 1916 edition of this work: N. Chuzhak, K estatike marksizma, Kommercheskaia Elektro-Tipografiia, Irkutsk, 1916.
48 Chuzhak, K estatike marksizma, p. 5.
Futurism had always sought to build the future from within the present. The following stage of Futurist development (a stage that occurred during the revolutionary season) served as a further example of the dynamic regard Futurists had for the future. Futurism was capable of seeing, in amidst the revolutionary turmoil, a future task for the arts: the task of redefining artistic production and employing it in the creation of a new Communist world.

It is uncanny that Chuzhak – writing in 1912, and before he knew of Futurism – would use the term ultra-realism in attempting to explain this visionary artistic practice. In his article “Under the Banner of Life-building” Chuzhak explained how, back in 1912, he came to the idea of naming this concept “ultra-realism.” Highlighting that the term had nothing to do with a trite notion of realism as a faithful depiction of the actual surroundings hic et nunc, for Chuzhak ultra-realism was to communicate the fact that the artist, through “ultra” precise scrutiny of reality and use of the “dialectic prism” could recognise a dialectic battle between opposites, discern the future outcome, and commence work on its realisation. Ultra-realism was realism that saw the future and created it within the present: “to build the future reality [...] that is the path of art.” Ultra-realism essentially meant to Chuzhak the same mapping of contemporary contradictions in the light of the future that Futurism sought to practice. While Chuzhak was determined to state that this ultra-realism, as a concept of seeing through the present into the future, has nothing to do with the traditional realism that refers to recording of the real world “as is,” there is a realism that arguably mirrors Chuzhak’s definition – Socialist Realism.

Socialist Realism was conceptualised not as a faithful depiction of actual present time but as an image of the future that, through its physical presence, ought to invoke and consequently materialise this future reality in the here and now. This approach sought to “conflate the present and the future,” or as Eric Naiman points out, to “more speedily bring the inevitable future into being by

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50 Chuzhak, “Pod znakom zhiznestroenia”, p. 17.
portraying it as if it currently existed, as a form of incantation.”

It would appear, therefore, that the original Futurist theories, as they were developing increasingly within coordinates of Marxist theory, gave life to a method of thinking that would underlie Soviet Socialist Realism. As Chuzhak noted, the spiritus movens of artistic creation is the ability to unlock a new (future) reality that already exists within the heart of the present and start working toward its actualisation. It was from this Marxist theoretical concept of history as a dynamic process that Futurists based the legitimacy of their practice, which adamantly excluded the possibility of the formation of cultural absolutes or canons, and saw continual change and redefinition of artistic method as logical behaviour for those who were committed to the realisation of Communist society. As such, while the end product of Futurist practice continued to change, their commitment to constantly contribute to Communist reality remained steadfast.

Yet if artistic practice was, in the same vein as social progress, to become a continual process of overcoming present conditions and as such a dynamic realisation of the future, was there a final goal to be reached? When Chuzhak noted that a realisation of the Productivist idiom would pave the way for the next stage of development, what did he envision? For a group of theoreticians, Chuzhak included, the proletarian class was to be the last class before the end of entire class structure; similarly, Futurism was to be the last definable artistic force that would disintegrate once art and life were fully merged – and art as an independent concept would disappear from reality. In Chuzhak’s words: “We imagine the moment when real life saturated to overflowing with art will reject art as unnecessary; this moment will be a blessing to the futurist artist [...] Until then, the artist is a soldier guarding the social and socialist revolution.”

At the moment of this article’s publication, of course, the revolution was far from over, and indeed a number of LEF contributions aimed to expose the NEP era as a critical stage, a time to neither relax nor despair, as securing revolutionary

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victory depended upon preserving the revolutionary fervour through what were trying circumstances. Tretiakov’s article in the first issue of LEF echoed some of Chuzhak’s assessments of Futurism, as it sought to reaffirm the notion that Futurism was not a school with its own set of categories, but was better considered as a “socio-aesthetic tendency,” or as a tool for the fight against “yesterday and today” – a tool against byt.54 Originally, in fighting what they regarded as “bourgeois-phileistine” byt, Futurists had employed hooligan tactics as an affront to “bourgeois respectability.”55 They had donned outrageous clothing and painted faces, stating that what really disturbed byt – even more than the rejection of literary canons or incendiary remarks within Futurist manifestos or novel artistic experimentations – were outfits in garish colours, asymmetrical suits, painted faces and, instead of flowers, wooden spoon boutonnières. These were acts designed to upset and shock: recent scholarship has recognised that Futurists drew upon the power of clothing and cosmetics in order to overthrow bourgeois conventions of gender and good taste,56 demonstrating how these “sartorial travesties” functioned to heighten public alertness.57 Tretiakov thus saw the evolving Futurist project as a clear continuation of efforts dating back not just to the months of Iskusstvo kommuni, but to the pre-revolutionary era, and in his reading of contemporary social conditions he (like Punin) highlighted byt – a “system of feelings and actions that through repetition become automatic behaviour,” a system that is formed upon a specific socio-economic base and becomes firmly entrenched within society – as the main obstacle standing in the way of the birth of a dynamic Communist consciousness.58 By this argument, byt becomes an act of seeking “comfort for comfort’s sake,” within an ossified, unchallenged way of living. While Futurist venom was previously aimed mainly at the byt of the past, the formation of a new, distinctly Soviet byt – something that had already been flagged on the pages of Iskusstvo kommuni – appeared at this

time as a real threat. The reasons for challenging byt went further than demanding continual progress and change: byt, as Tretjakov defined it, was the establishment of order and the character of things that people surround themselves with, and onto which they project their sympathies and memories, in the end becoming slaves to these objects. For this reason byt was essentially a deeply reactionary force: it was a chain of tradition and respect for things that had lost their purpose, “it starts with a neck tie and ends with religious fetish.” Tretjakov’s campaign against byt represented a Futurist rally against giving in to present conditions, as the revolution was far from over: amid the reality of the NEP, taking respite or settling into a routine was a most dangerous endeavour.

In his article “LEF and the NEP,” Tretjakov continued to emphasise that the NEP phase was a decisive test for the proletarian class. The economic and cultural conditions formed under the NEP had given birth to a unique hybrid Soviet businessman, who, as Tretjakov vividly depicted him, was a mélange of bourgeois mentalities: a lover of jewellery, fur and silk; a patron of cafés and casinos; a collector of houseplants, porcelain elephants and other paraphernalia of the newly established Soviet byt – banal objects and kitsch revolutionary souvenirs such as Soviet porcelain plates bearing slogans such as “those who do not work, do not eat.” This mentality was not the product of any particular ideology: for those who had found fortune during the time of war and revolution, the desire to make more money was the sole raison d’être, and the conditions under the NEP ensured their further success. As such, in order to emerge from this period victorious, the proletariat would have to organise and focus its revolutionary energy, with the fight for the future stroi transferred from the barricades into offices and factories. On the pages of Iskusstvo kommuny Futurists argued strongly that keeping the revolutionary zeal alive amid the stark post-revolutionary reality was a task of utmost urgency. As Tretjakov noted, dealing with the NEP was a game of mental strength and discipline that would either make or break the proletarian future: “the victory,” according to Tretjakov, “will go to those who have the strongest

59 For understanding of Capitalist notion of object as passive versus the notion of “socialist object”, as an object that takes active role in daily life see Kjaer, Imagine No Possessions, pp. 1-38.
61 Tretjakov, “LEF i NEP”, pp. 70-78.
nerves.” In a play published in *LEF*, Tretiakov drew inspiration from a real event where employees who, having no proper equipment or gas masks, took three-minute turns working in the poisonous environment of their place of employment, just to keep their institution in operation. The play was referred to as metaphor for the mentality and approach required if the Soviet project were to overcome the challenges that Soviet society was facing. Futurists recognised that the fight to establish a new society had become a function of mental strength, and that the psychological makeup of the nation was to become a decisive factor. The NEP was another challenge in the revolutionary process: a quiet endurance test, a phase marked by combat for “the soul of the proletarian class,” and art, with “a Titan-like force,” would have to surpass the current unfavourable conditions and contribute to fortifying and strengthening the proletarian mind-set if this challenge were to be successfully met.

Efforts to preserve revolutionary fervour under the circumstances Russia found itself in during the 1920s were also championed by Osip Brik in his article “For Politics!” in which Brik described how contemporary cultural life in Soviet Russia was showing a tendency to distance itself from “agitational tedium.” Exhausted after a sequence of war, revolutionary upheaval and internal conflict, people perceived the era of the NEP as a welcome break and the cultural milieu that blossomed was one that offered an escape into a better world – a world in which agitating in the name of the future held scant appeal. Futurists recognised the danger inherent in these circumstances for, as they had and would continue to argue, the contemporary era was an endurance test between bourgeois power (which was waiting for the revolution to wane) and a proletariat that, with mammoth-like strength, needed to continue its project, in spite of the extremely challenging new circumstances. Many perceived the period marked by the NEP as a manifestation of a slowdown in the revolutionary spirit. Brik remarked upon this phenomenon, which had resulted in discussion of the issues of the day hushed in editorial offices, cinemas and theatres in favour of talk of fantastic worlds, stories about love, nature, happiness and sorrows – stories capable of providing a break

63 Sergei Tretiakov, “Protivogazy”, *LEF*, No. 4, 1923, pp. 89-108.
from reality. For Futurists, this cultural escapism was dangerous, as it threatened
to compromise the revolutionary accomplishments. Frustrated by the lack of
understanding among state officials that a firm line was needed in the cultural
domain, and that the revolution was still far from won, Brik wrote:

We still interpret revolution and revolutionary as that which is represented
by props usually cast in the bad stories from so called revolutionary life –
barricades, red flags, shootings and chaos (pogromy); and without all that,
there is no revolution, meaning that we can do what we please, go home
and concern ourselves with our own private affairs (prishli domoi s ulitsy i
zanialis’ domashnimi delami). But we have repeatedly said and pointed out
that revolution is not only carried out in the street, it is also conducted at
home, and that every day and in every step, and even in private life, a
person’s action can be measured by the level of their revolutionism.

Every retreat from revolutionism in byt inevitably leads to reaction, and it is
time to understand that the apolitical does not and cannot exist.⁶⁵

LEF’s position, as Brik outlined, was to fight every attempt “to annul the
revolutionary tone of today.” Acknowledging that the revolutionary fight of the
early 1920s would require different tactics to that of 1917-1918, Brik further
asserted that “revolutionism” in everyday life was of central importance. Futurists
criticised the rising optimism regarding the outcome of the revolution, equating it
with self-deceit – a false belief that the fight had been won and that the future had
already arrived. For Brik, LEF was not pessimistic but realistic: the group believed
that problems and danger still lay ahead, and were concerned that Russian society
in general was choosing to ignore these dangers. When faced with the
contemporary retreat into past forms of art production, or else into popular
phantasmagorical forms of entertainment, Futurists saw defeat and an expression
of utopian naiveté. They believed that it was clear that only through their concept
of industrial art, and through a scientific approach, would Soviet society create the
material and psychological conditions for a realisation of Communist stroi.

Studies on Soviet youth and culture during the 1920s have demonstrated
that the existence of the NEP generated mixed messages and represented a source
of confusion for the populace, and that this confusion manifested itself strongly
among the youth. Communist educators told young people that they ought to

spend their time in Komsomol clubs, reading about Lenin and watching films about the Civil War and educate themselves in the spirit of those values expounded by the Revolution. In reality, however, the NEP facilitated a surge in the availability and popularity of “bourgeois” commercial culture, with Hollywood films and romance novels being especially prevalent – to the point that even numerous government agencies came to rely upon the sale of more commercial and popular forms of entertainment so as to generate enough income to support their own projects. It is clear that, in such an atmosphere, rejecting the allure of Hollywood spectacle and committing instead to the principles of Communism would have required “an extraordinary degree of internal motivation and discipline.” In the domain of art, the implementation of the NEP facilitated a resurrection of the concept of learning from the great works of the past, and the notion that art ought to be an experience that offered rest and delight to mind and soul – similar to the famous observation of French artist Henri Matisse, who in 1908 stated:

What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity, devoid of troubling or depressing subject-matter, an art which could be for every mental worker, for the businessman as well as the man of letters, for example, a soothing, calming influence on the mind, something like a good armchair which provides relaxation from physical fatigue.

By contrast, the entire Futurist project was a crusade against art as “a good armchair.” Art that would support “comfort for comfort’s sake” (uiut, kak samotsel?) in the era of the NEP was problematic for Futurists: they were adamant that the proletariat could simply not afford to take even a short rest at such a critical moment, and oriented their efforts toward building a resilient Communist consciousness that would be capable of rejecting the allure of the comfortable armchair.

While acknowledging that Bolshevik leaders were equally critical of the commercial culture that was an inherent feature of the NEP, Futurists regarded the Bolshevik approach to creating a counter-culture, in which the proletariat would

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supposedly learn and emulate the work of the great masters en route toward creating its own proletarian culture, as being doomed to failure. For Futurists, the concept of these supposedly “proletarian works” was more harmful than helpful: the use of old forms, along with the increasingly popular use of revolutionary events as subject matter, functioned only to devalue the revolutionary cause. If the revolution were to become mere subject matter, this great moment in history would inevitably deteriorate into a pacified, domesticated and aestheticised story; a romanticised moment of the “good old days,” and this would undermine its (still important) role as an agent of social change.⁶⁹ If the task of creating a revolutionary mentality was undermined by commemorative story telling of the revolution, art would no longer function as an active tool. Furthermore, if old artistic practices were to continue, the bourgeois class would retain its weapons of art and culture, and would ultimately use these weapons to transform the proletarian cause. Just as it was during the revolution (when icon painters refurbished their angels with the faces of Red Army soldiers), the use of old forms was a deeply problematic notion for Futurists – old forms, as Natan Altman had earlier warned in *Iskusstvo kommunity*, represented a potential Trojan horse.

**Easel Painting as a Sign of Thermidor**

In an article published in the third issue of *LEF* in 1923 entitled “Marx on the Restoration of Art,” Boris Arvatov drew upon the work of Karl Marx to highlight why Futurists believed that there was an urgent need for a radical break with the past.⁷⁰ Arvatov argued that the inability of theoreticians and practitioners to reach a consensus on what proletarian art ought to be – or, more precisely, what the proletarian relationship with Russia’s artistic heritage should be – had hindered contemporary artistic progress; he claimed that this situation essentially represented a continuation of the conflict between passéists and those who were committed to an uncompromising development of the new. At the time, members of the Bolshevik elite believed strongly that the proletariat, bereft of its own

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⁷⁰ Arvatov, “Marks o khudozhestvennoi restavratsii”, pp. 76-96.
cultural forms and in the midst of a transitional phase, should adopt and use the artistic heritage of those historical eras that exhibited the highest artistic and cultural achievements.71 Along with his LEF colleagues, however, Arvatov campaigned against this view: LEF stalwarts continued to advance the view that the only true path for the future proletarian culture was for it to break with the past and develop its own cultural domain organically in relation to the current socio-political reality.72 To support this notion, Arvatov drew upon Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte (a text already strongly linked with Futurist ideas within the pages of Iskusstvo kommunity), as well as the German philosopher’s Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy.

Marx’s writings on ancient Greek art represented one of the most significant weapons in LEF’s arsenal. In this work, Marx had noted that ancient Greek art emerged as a logical and organic response to its social, political and economic context, and that Greek mythology was created as a system for reflecting and comprehending the Greek understanding of the natural and social world of the time of its conception. Within this context, art that was developed in the ancient Greek world was a natural part of the historical reality of Greece; Greek art could be considered beautiful because it was a natural component of the social and intellectual state of ancient Greece. As such, Marx asserted that any effort to transposing this art onto a different social and historical context would be completely nonsensical. Once humankind had superseded the state of knowledge that was accessible to the ancient Greeks and possessed a greater understanding of the natural world and social relations, there was no need to continue using Greek mythology as a tool for explaining reality. By this logic, Marx asked how it could make sense to continue to draw upon ancient Greek artistic canons?

In Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy Marx wrote:

71 Vladimir Lenin and the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, promoted the use of cultural heritage in the creation of proletarian artistic expression. This issue is the focus of the following chapter.
72 This position is explored here with a focus on the domain of visual art. For the development of this concept in literature see for example Vahan D. Barooshian, "Russian Futurism in the Late 1920’s: Literature of Facts", The Slavic and East European Journal, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Spring 1971), pp. 38-46; Devin Fore, "The Operative Word in Soviet Factography", October, Vol. 118 Soviet Factography (Fall 2006), pp. 95-131.
Let us take, for example, the relations of Greek art, and that of Shakespeare, to the present time. We know that Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art, but also its basis. Is the conception of nature and of social relations which underlies Greek imagination and therefore Greek [art] possible when there are self-acting mules, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs? What is a Vulcan compared to Roberts and Co., Jupiter compared with the lightning conductor, and Hermes compared with Crédit mobilier? All mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established. [...] Regarded from another aspect: is Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented? And is the Iliad possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press bar the singing and the telling and the muse cease, that is the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?73

Arvatov drew great inspiration from Marx’s words – even commenting that, if it were not known that they were written in 1857, these words could easily have been mistaken for the work of revolutionary artists from the 1910s!74 Essentially, what Marx had observed directly supported the core Futurist credo that artistic and cultural accomplishments are inextricably linked with their specific historic and geographic context, and that taking artistic accomplishments as an absolute and universal value was not a viable option for a truly progressive society. In the eyes of Futurists, cultural forms were justifiable only if they related perfectly to their social environment; subsequent epochs and societies could not rely on the forms of bygone eras, because these forms would not correspond to the changed contemporary reality. As Marx had written, the extent to which artistic production might flourish was in no way related to the state of social development – what was considered to be a great achievement, such as classical Greek art, was connected to societal and technical conditions that, by modern standards, were rudimentary. Thus, while contemporary audiences could doubtless still find charm and beauty in the artistic production of ancient Greece, admiring and appreciating something was entirely different from emulating it: “An adult,” wrote Marx, “cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish.”75 For Russia’s Futurists, humanity had

74 Arvatov, “Marks o khudozhestvennoi restavratsii”, p. 84.
75 Marx, Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy, p. 35.
outlived its ancient Greek stage of thinking and creating, and twentieth century man had no business looking back at the past.

Of course, the Russian Futurist stance regarding the past had earlier been defined in Iskusstvo kommuny: Futurists had long been concerned at the prospect that old mores might seek to assert their influence within the present, and consequently the future. Added to this concern was the new belief that indulging nostalgia would retard contemporary growth. Yet Futurists were not anti-history, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that the Futurist call for the destruction of the past has been overemphasised: in reality, Futurism insisted that the way forward depended upon finding answers from within, not that the past in toto needed to be expunged. Indeed, in “LEF and the NEP,” Tretiakov argued that to consider the works of the past once was to usefully learn about them. Similarly, in his address at the LEF conference in January 1925, Brik expressed his deep distress not at the fact that Pushkin’s verses were read at a Komsomol gathering, but rather that they were read in a didactic sense: for Brik, using Pushkin as “archival material” was far less problematic than continually returning to his work as if it might play an active role in the present. This stance was most clearly stated by Tretiakov, who asserted that once a visit to a museum turned into a permanent residence, the entire notion of progress was lost: while Marx admired ancient Greek art and the famed Athenian political system, he also asserted that mimicry of these past models would not form a healthy basis for future societies. Arvatov went even further, asserting to his readers that adoration of the past was nothing more than blind fetishism (comparable, in Arvatov’s view, to religion or consumerism).

As a conclusion to this piece, Arvatov drew attention to the fact that Marx had emphasised the value and beauty of those things that were organically related to their surroundings, and thus that artistic and cultural production could only give positive results if they were linked to their contemporary socio-political reality.

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77 Tretiakov, “NEP i LEF”, p. 74.
78 Osip Brik at the First Moscow Conference of Workers of Left Art on 16 and 17 January 1925, RGALI f. 2852, op. 1, d. 115, l. 10.
79 Tretiakov, “NEP i LEF”, p. 76.
For Marx, Arvatov asserted, beauty was a factor of socio-historical fact, not of individual taste or psychology: artistic production could be deemed beautiful if, in its setting, it had purpose and meaning. Arvatov would also consider Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, again in support of the Futurist argument for following the path of modernity as the only assured way of securing the success of the revolution. While Arvatov’s consideration of this text opened with the famous lines of the spirits of the dead hovering above the living, the author looked further inside the work in order to demonstrate how a relapse into the old forms unambiguously implied a crisis within the revolutionary project.

Marx asserted that the revolutionary process, in trying to create a completely new set of social parameters, tended to fall into a phase of self-doubt – at which point, in order to legitimise their project, revolutionaries would return to some past model and then re-present themselves as a continuation of that past idea. For Marx, just as mythology was the product of a lack of understanding of the natural world (a lack supplanted by imagination), restoration of historical and artistic cannons in the midst of revolutionary upheaval reflected an inability of revolution to deliver meaningful change. Arvatov drew upon this assertion to explain that illusion was needed where society was not the master of its own destiny: illusion filled in for either an inability to understand the world (illusion in the form of mythology), or for an inability to progress (illusion in the form of historic and cultural restoration). Marx’s discussion of the bourgeois revolution interpreted the events from 1798 to 1830 as an initial revolution with great social reform that was followed by a chain of upheavals, which in essence did not advance the original revolutionary cause but instead retreated into an aspiration by one class to take over the position of another. Marx argued that the bourgeois revolution could not realise its “liberty, equality, fraternity,” and that the revolution led into nothing more than another exploitation of the majority by a minority. This was the reason why many revolutions used old visual forms, old names and jargon, old titles and costumes – in essence, they did not offer anything revolutionary at all.80

80 Arvatov, “Marks o khudozhestvennoi restavratsii”, p. 94.
The proletarian revolution, however, possessed as it was of a new vision for the future, did not need past models; it did not need to be draped in a *Roman toga*:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition in regard to the past. Earlier revolutions required recollections of past world history in order to drug themselves concerning their own content. In order to arrive at its own content, the revolution of the nineteenth century must let the dead bury their dead. There the phrase went beyond the content; here the content goes beyond the phrase.\(^{81}\)

Arvatov concluded by arguing that Marx believed that the art of the revolutionary proletariat needed to focus on the future, and future only, and that forging a new political, economic and moral code for a future society inevitably meant having a future-oriented stance regarding the arts. In his discussion of Marx’s notion that the proletarian revolution could not properly begin until it had finished stripping away all superstition about the past, Arvatov found firm theoretical support for the Futurist notion that building a proletarian culture could not begin with a rehash of some past artistic form.

The fact that such Futurist writings appeared at the height of the NEP era was reflective of a general feeling among Communists that Soviet Russia during the 1920s had begun to “smell of Thermidor”\(^{82}\) – the period of the French Revolution in which the original revolutionary goals had begun to degenerate. While the majority of Bolshevik leaders understood and accepted the rationale in making concessions to capitalist measures and employing non-Communist “experts,” these policies were much harder for “rank and file” Communists to swallow, especially as they witnessed the return of officials from the old regime to new positions within the soviet, or school teachers who remained religious and continued to teach catechism.\(^{83}\) In a very similar vein, witnessing the emergence of bourgeois cultural and artistic formats was for Futurists representative of a cultural “Thermidor.” As such, the Futurist response to what the NEP had brought should not be dismissed as the mere theoretical harangue of zealous avant-gardists – it was in fact a

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\(^{83}\) Ibid., p. 104.
reaction against the prospect that revolutionary achievements might yet be undone.

A similar motivation can be seen in another of Arvatov’s articles, in which he sought to demonstrate that the use of artistic mediums that were ideologically incompatible with Communist rule was indicative of a serious crisis in revolutionary values. “The Contemporary Art Market and Easel Painting,” which was published in Novyi LEF in 1928, took aim at the official commissioning by the Soviet government of a number of paintings depicting “revolutionary topics” so as to mark and celebrate the ten-year anniversary of the Revolution. Arvatov argued that the old artistic forms were ideologically compromised, a position that he supported with an investigation of the history of painting and its social use and position, seeking to prove that traditional forms of artistic production (such as easel painting) were an intrinsic component of a Capitalist bourgeois logic, and were therefore unsuitable for the formation of a proletarian cultural model.94

Painting, in Arvatov’s estimation, developed out of fresco and icon painting, and also out of stained glass, book illumination and object-decorating practices. Through the specialisation of artistic labour, painting, with its practice of representing people, things and the natural environment, became an independent profession: it was understood that an object, depicting a representation of something else, could be sold and transferred from one owner to another, independent of time and place. Arvatov argued that the very embodiment of the idea of “independent representationalism” was easel painting, which was (in economic terms) a commoditised form of spatial art. With the development of an exchange economy, competition between artists grew, as did specialisation within the field of painting and its gradual orientation toward private byt. This meant that artistic production quickly became ruled by the demand of personal aesthetic consumption, and that painting became a decorative, a-utilitarian object par excellence, satisfying personal tastes in private domestic settings.

Arvatov also argued that the motivation behind any artistic creation was the organisation of byt: medieval craftsman and book illustrators, in Arvatov’s

example, participated in creating a cathedral (and all the related paraphernalia), because it was around the church that all medieval byt was organised. Thus, representational art still had a defined function, serving as it did in the formation of a particular byt, ideology or religion, and was still an organic part of the social fabric. With easel painting, the creator would endeavour to develop an understanding of individual byt and taste, offering to his “contemplative consumer” an original experience of the world. Easel painting, accordingly, was bound by private domestic mores and divorced from any active role.

It is useful to consider John Berger’s influential study Ways of Seeing, which offers an analysis of the tradition of European painting, and in particular the medium of oil painting, as a form of artistic production intrinsically linked to the rise of the Capitalist system and the free market economy.85 Berger argues that the emergence and pre-eminence of the oil painting, which corresponds to period between the sixteenth and the early twentieth century, is directly connected to the rise of the Capitalist ethos of property, exchange and possession. As such, a large proportion of these works depict things that can be bought and owned; furthermore, the very medium of oil is itself crucial, owing to its supreme capacity for life-like representation of the materiality of objects such as furs, tapestries and exotic fruits, the ownership of which emphasised the power and wealth of the owner of the painting. “Oil painting celebrated a new kind of wealth,” Berger argues, “which was dynamic and which found its only sanction in the supreme buying power of money.”86 Capable of depicting so effectively the tangibility, texture and lustre of objects, oil paintings were themselves the supreme commodity: unlike music or poetry, oil paintings were exclusive in their consumption, a fact that further asserted the power of their possessors. Owing to these inherent properties, Berger argues that the period of the rise of Capitalist logic could only have been expressed by the medium of oil painting. While the discourse pertaining to Marxist interpretations of the history of literature and art is complex,87 it suffices here to note that numerous contributions to LEF

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86 Berger, Ways of Seeing, p. 90.
passionately sought to demonstrate – through an engagement with Marxism – that the artistic forms of past epochs could not legitimately be used in constructing Communist reality. For Futurists, form carried just as much ideological weight as content: a painting that represented workers instead of kings was still, after all a painting.

Futurists were especially opposed to state patronage of easel painting. Since individual consumers and personal tastes served as guidelines in the creation of painting, private patronage was inextricably linked to the formation of independent easel painting. Any attempt to commission paintings for the state that would support some common value was an attempt to divorce a form (easel painting) from its natural social setting (the private domicile) and function (delighting personal tastes and fantasies). Whether paintings were created for a monarch and his court, or bought in a Parisian gallery by a wealthy businessmen, they fulfilled individual needs, functioned in a private setting (and Futurists regarded museums as deposits, “temples” that society created for itself) and were essentially dead objects that did not participate in life: by their very nature they were unambiguously non-utilitarian. Furthermore, easel painting, in line with the traditional understanding of what an objet d’art ought to express, strove to capture some “universal” category and it was made “forever.” This profiling of easel painting showed that its nature was utterly incongruent with the kind of task the state apparatus tried to force upon it – apart from not being suited to conveying the collective, proletarian cause, a progressive society did not need things that were made “forever.” Proletarian tasks were transient; they were to be surpassed as society moved continually forward. No “everlasting” recording of these efforts was needed, for they would only be piled up in a museum – and painting could not participate in everyday life, being as it was the ultimate monument to staleness and inflexibility, a dead object that was untranslatable into active arena of life-building.

For Arvatov, cultural and technological development went hand-in-hand: as technology developed, fresco painting had no place in concrete buildings, and photography had rendered book illumination obsolete. Similarly, easel painting was unable to keep up with the speed of poster making, photography, cinema,
newspaper printing or telegraphic communication. Arvatov pointed out that if this epoch desired to represent the “monumental,” there was no need for big canvases, for life itself had become monumental – fast-paced and technologically innovative, contemporary life was in and of itself a monument to progressive modern society. It was through these novel technological possibilities that artistic production could become “tightly connected to the material byt of urban industrial workers,” and could participate in the most direct way to building the mentality and environment of Communist life. This spirit could not be translated into a studio where artists, with their paint and brushes, depicted the heroic deeds of the proletariat.

It is therefore hardly surprising that Arvatov went further than to simply argue against easel painting on the grounds that it was incompatible with the demands of a proletarian society – he also argued that its existence within the private sphere was not realistic in the context of a socialist society. Arvatov here developed his economic theory of easel painting further, stating that making a painting, which was of course done by hand, was the least economic form of production – especially compared to the possibilities of industry. Creating a painting took a long time, and required the qualified labour of an artist; as such, it was a costly endeavour. Furthermore, in order for any particular painting to find a private buyer, the entire society had to be structured in an economically hierarchical way – that is, the market for easel painting required the existence of a bourgeois society. Brik similarly argued in his article “From Painting to Printed Calico” that painting had to disappear: owing to its intrinsic link with Capitalism, painting had no application within Soviet reality.

Grandiose canvases were fundamentally representative of the bourgeois-capitalist system, and were thus unable to support the goal of Communist life-building: painted depictions of pioneers and peasants were an utterly inadequate strategy against the alluring charm of bourgeois culture. The Futurist plan for an artistic counter-offensive was to focus upon the production of objects for actual use in domestic, professional and public settings – objects that would encourage a change in behaviour en route toward forging a true Communist mentality. With

89 O. M. Brik, “Ot kartiny k sittsu”, LEF, No. 2, 1924, p. 27.
this ambitious goal in mind, it is unsurprising that the works that emerged from the Constructivist/Productionist smithy have long drawn significant scholarly attention and interest.

It was during the NEP period that artistic production that aimed to shape the social environment, as developed by Futurist theoreticians on the pages of Iskusstvo kommuny, would begin to emerge. The Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) and the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (VKhUTEMAS) functioned as the headquarters for research into this area: these institutions employed progressive artists who pursued the theoretical and practical advancement of this idea and trained the first generation of the new hybrid creator: the artist-engineer. A number of artists during the 1920s were able to establish links within industry and test the application of mass production in the realisation of their ideas: the challenge of designing new, more practical clothing and other objects of everyday life (including, for example, cooking utensils) was pursued by Tatlin, while Stepanova and Popova established one of the most successful artist/industry relationships through working as fabric designers for the First State Cotton-Printing Factory.

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91 See Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions, pp. 41-141.
Rodchenko’s famous solution for workers’ clubs – modern spaces in which workers could spend free time pursuing their own self-betterment – was realised in 1925 as an official commission representing the Soviet section at the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels in Paris, while a number of buildings with similar intent were commissioned by trade unions (profsoiuzy) and created and built by the architect Konstantin Melnikov in the late 1920s. It was also during this period that Anton Lavinskii’s book kiosk was designed and produced. In 1923 Mayakovsky and Rodchenko formed an association under the name Advertising-Constructor (Reklam-Konstruktor), where they worked as advertising copywriters and designers, producing slogans and designing solutions for posters, newspaper advertisements and product labels for state enterprises such as the State Department Store (Gosudarstvennyi universal’nyi magazin – GUM), the Moscow Rural Cooperative Administration (Moskovskoe upravlenie

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sel’skoi promyslovoi kooperatsii – Mossel’prom) and the Soviet Rubber-Industry Trust (Gosudarstvennyi trest rezinovoi promyshlennosti – Rezinotrest). These advertisements served to significantly boost both the popular appeal and the market power of these entities relative to their privately owned competitors. Indeed, a number of Futurist artist worked in the advertising field for state entities in the 1920s, and it was a very active period in terms of translating Futurist theoretical concepts into reality.

Figure 6: Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Advertising poster for Red October cookies, 1923

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96 Image reproduced from Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions, plate 16.
Notwithstanding this fact, however, it was also true that the creative energy and enthusiasm artists had for producing objects informed by the demands of the new society was significantly higher than could actually be produced during this period, and thus a number of these ideas remained on paper. It is perhaps for this reason that while the innovative and visionary qualities of these works have been widely recognised, this recognition often only goes as far as to label these works as curious examples of revolutionary thinking. While visionary thinking was certainly a dominant component within the Futurist approach, however, there was simultaneously an aspect of their work that was fully cognisant of the possibilities of the here and now.

**In Lieu of Painting or How to Make a Living Ideology**

Constructivism and Constructivist production has been the subject of extensive study. Seminal works in this area of scholarship have recalled the painstaking debates that took place among artists and theoreticians of the Constructivist group in the course of defining ideas regarding progressive artistic practice, as well as the challenges faced in the process of translating these ideas into reality. Christina Kiear's work offers a useful term for the objects that came out of Futurist theory: “socialist objects,” or “object-as-comrade,” both used to designate things that, by their very production, contributed to the process of building the Communist system by requiring users to behave in a certain manner and develop certain values (unlike the Capitalist object, which was and is produced simply to be consumed). Yet despite a major conceptual leap made both in Futurist theory and in the works that they were able to create, Futurists were rarely credited with achieving any level of success – perhaps because significant attention was paid to the low number of objects that they actually produced. Seemingly, the level of production has been regarded as a prerequisite to the success of this movement.

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There is no doubt that Futurists themselves were intimately aware that theirs was an environment beset by volatile economic conditions and bureaucratic inefficiency; moreover, they were clearly realistic in judging that not every project – and certainly not every idea – would prove feasible. Instead, it was a mode of thinking – a method of approaching reality – that was at stake for proponents of the Futurist movement. In his first article for *LEF*, Chuzhak argued that the development of the new artistic method would not be a linear process, but that it was a process of experimentation, searching and dead-ends; he demonstrated that even contemporary ideas of what artistic practice should consist of were not always completely clear. While confident that achieving a merger between art and quotidian reality (via modern industry) was the ultimate goal, Futurists did not possess a ready-made blueprint for how this would be achieved, and opportunities for testing their ideas were few and far between.

According to Chuzhak, after searching for and devising new terminology and ideas (agitational works during the phase of *Iskusstvo kommuny*, as well as experimental, non-utilitarian Constructivist works), the Futurist concept of artistic production crystallised in the form of Constructivism in industry (or Production art), and finally some concrete results were achieved. While Constructivist accomplishments were neither perfect nor abundant, they did break the barrier between the art studio and the outside world. As Punin noted regarding Tatlin’s *Monument*, Futurists were always sure to highlight that the value of this research was that it opened new possibilities for artistic production, offered options that would correspond to contemporary demands, and moved away from the old and tired canons of creation.

Both economic and bureaucratic concerns featured regularly in Futurist reasoning as to how to deal with their contemporary conditions: indeed, the very first issue of *LEF* offered an insight into the situation artists were facing in their day-to-day operations, and in their attempts to put their theories into practice. Brik’s article “Into Production” asserted that, with the country in the difficult position of mass deficit, the issue was *quantity*, not *quality*, and that it would take
some time before a qualitative change could occur. Brik’s attention was focused on the fact that, economic conditions aside, there were also issues of poor administrative organisation and a generally closed traditionalist mentality (which bore mistrust toward people who attempted to reinvent artistic and industrial production) for Futurist artists to deal with – especially within the factory setting. Even when the opportunity to test ideas in the industrial halls arose, workers were not able to see these innovators as anything more than traditional artists – ethereal souls who would invent and imagine in their ateliers. Factory workers and management looked at them with suspicion, not able to understand why artists wanted to meddle in technical processes. Those dedicated to the idea of production art knew, however, that the way an object was shaped could only be determined through understanding its final purpose and the process of its production; that this understanding was a prerequisite for their creation of practical objects. Without practice on the factory floor, the Futurist project for Communist society would remain confined to the drawing board.

Rodchenko also noted that it was incredibly hard for progressive artists to establish continuity in their work, which was necessary for these artists to test their ideas and establish themselves as regular members of the factory and institutional workforce. Every time, Rodchenko would lament, that he managed to secure work within a factory, the person in charge would change, someone new would arrive, and he would have to start persuading the new management to support his projects – as Rodchenko put it, there was “no way to cement the work.” This was also the case with Karl Loganson, an artist who achieved success in his efforts to integrate his creative projects within the industrial environment, whose close ties with and support from factory management was a crucial aspect of the application of his ideas, as the entire work of a factory or an institute depended essentially on the support of a particular manager (zaevduiushchii) and not upon any institutional framework. Rodchenko noted that in one year he worked in ten different institutions, following a manager who sympathised with

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99 Brik, “Ot kartiny k sititsu”, pp. 27-34.
the Futurist project. Every time the manager changed position, Rodchenko would follow him, leaving his work in the previous institution unfinished. Mass recalcitrance, large economic disparities, bureaucratic inefficiencies – these were the pervasive conditions of the Soviet 1920s, felt as much by Futurists as by any Soviet citizen. Instead of giving up, however, Futurists remained staunch in their belief that the present should not be a time of longing for idealised visions of the future, nor a time to fall back on the old formats of cultural production. Instead, it was the right time to start taking the steps necessary to ensure that the desired future would eventually arrive. As Arvatov stated, work on the Future needed to start now:

‘LEFists’ believe that, despite the distance of the full realisations of their prognosis, approaching partial realisation of the tasks posed by productionist art needs to happen now. ‘LEFists’ believe that, similar to the socialist system, the art of that system would develop gradually, in the course of decades, accumulating experience from continual class combat against bourgeois forms of art. ‘LEFists’ believe that brushing off current revolutionary work in arts and referring to its ‘remoteness’ [the fact that it could only be fully realised in the future] is to secretly support bourgeois art, i.e. the aesthetic conciliation, aesthetic Menshevism, revisionism, opportunism [...] The question is do we cultivate bourgeois, reactionary art that is pulling us back or build our own revolutionary [art] to the best of what is possible (po mere sili), art that transforms byt together with socialist building; do we sit with our arms crossed, sighing about the future while waiting for it to come, and wallow in the mud of aesthetic Philistinism, or do we fight the Philistines and build new forms required by the building proletariat.¹⁰²

Futurist artists and critics made a careful distinction between what was termed the “maximum program,” or the ideal program (possible only in the future once conditions permit a full realisation of the Communist project), and the “minimum program,” or projects that could be done at the present time, under the present conditions – a concept that was also taken from Marxist political strategy. This approach stipulated that the ideal outcome could not always be immediately achieved, but that through establishing and accomplishing the minimum program, progress would be kept on track until conditions were reached where the ideal

program (maximum program) could be initiated.\textsuperscript{103} This principle underpinned Futurist strategy during the NEP era:

One needs to know where one is going, LEFists say, one needs to have an iron course in arts, like one needs in politics or economics, otherwise one strays off course. But it is through an intermediate phase that one reaches the final destination. The final destination is the work of the future. But future is something we start today.\textsuperscript{104}

It was through the educational system, and through experimental work in the institutes and art schools that standard forms of material \textit{byt} could be devised and later implemented in industry and everyday life. This was for the LEF collective the only sound path toward the future society.

\textbf{Futurist Minimum Program}

Sergei Tretiakov’s article concerning the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution offers insight into what, for Futurists, the minimum program entailed. Public celebrations were long considered by Futurists to be great vehicles of cultural revolution, as these events had unrivalled potential to influence and alter public consciousness. When in December of 1918 Punin wrote that “[i]n our times there is nothing unimportant,” and that the success of the Revolution, and of the entire Communist project, depended on how things were positioned in the very first moments of the Revolution, one of the major concerns for him was how Bolshevik celebrations were organised.\textsuperscript{105} Punin warned political leaders of the dangerous fact that their celebrations looked very much like those of the Tsars or the Church, and he suggested instead that revolutionaries should be destroying the remains of the past state or, at the very least, exhibiting an appetite for destruction. This Futurist logic, a logic that decried the use of old forms, remained steadfast through the period of \textit{LEF} and \textit{Novyi LEF}. Indeed, in the second issue of \textit{LEF}, the upcoming celebration of May Day was

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{103} One the concept of program maximum and program minimum see for example Frederick Engels, “A Critique of the Draft, Social-Democratic Programme of 1891”, in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, \textit{Selected Works}, Vol. 3, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1969, pp. 429-439.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Arvatov, "Utopia ili nauka", p. 19.
\item \textsuperscript{105} N. P., “K itogam Oktiabr’skikh torzhestv”, \textit{Iskusstvo kommuny}, No. 1, 7 December 1918, p. 2.
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roundly attacked by Futurists, who bemoaned the fact that five years after the revolutionary victory, and despite major daily achievements in the process of building the new society, Russian society had still not embraced the revolutionary mentality completely, and as such the same “monotonous celebrations” and “languishing art” continued to dominate.106

In 1918 Nikolai Punin had been unable to offer a clear description of what celebration in the new proletarian society ought to look like. By 1927, however, Tretiakov – in his article “How to Celebrate the Decennial” – provided an elaborate outline for celebrations that would be in line with the ideology of the new society.107 The entire celebratory project, Tretiakov argued, ought to be guided by the concepts of production and utilitarianism, as opposed to traditional celebrations which combined popular recollection of the commemorated event with a concert, resembling a vigil, along with a parade stretching from the outer regions to the central square and back, mimicking in effect the procession of Jesus carrying the cross. Newspapers, cinema and radio were suggested by Tretiakov to be at the core of organising an appropriate celebration: newspapers should guide Soviet citizens through the past ten years of proletarian struggle, but also be a form of balance sheet and a guide to the events that were planned for the day of the celebration; an advertising poster for the holiday and “a music sheet in the hands of singing masses.”108 Radio, able as it was to reach every corner of the country, should enable all Soviet citizens to participate, whether they were on the streets or in hospital beds. Cinematic portrayal of the events of the October revolution should be projected onto building walls, rather than indulging in mass recreation of the events themselves, as such recreations could only be chaotic.

For Tretiakov, only modern technology could be used to realise an appropriate form for celebrating the first decade of Soviet rule, in recognition of the great accomplishments that had been made in rapidly modernising the country. Tretiakov devoted the second part of his article to promoting the notion that every Soviet citizen who stepped onto the streets on the day of the

106 “Tovarishchi formovshchiki zhizni!”, LEF, No. 2, 1923, p. 3.
107 Tretiakov, “Kak desiatiletie!”, pp. 35-37.
108 Ibid., p. 36.
celebrations ought to make (and feel) their own contribution toward the goal of Soviet life-building. Every participant should be able to both look at what had been accomplished and simultaneously envisage what was required for the future:

On the days of celebrations every person stepping out into the street and gathering at the places of public celebrations should feel himself as the master of Soviet construction, a master who looks at all this that he has achieved, filled with creative enthusiasm and confident in his future.¹⁰⁹

Tretiakov argued that if festivities were organised in such a way as to make every citizen feel intrinsically involved in the atmosphere of celebration, this would instil a feeling of participation in the wider Communist project, and serve to enhance and fortify the individual and common proletarian consciousness. The importance of modern industry was to be exemplified by the use of modern technology to facilitate the celebrations; exhibitions of industry needed to be organised so that everyone was able to see what various industries produced, and how these industries operated differently in the post-revolutionary period. Tretiakov recommended the staging of various competitions between different branches of industry, and that a focus of the celebrations should be the commendation of the most capable workers. Finally, instead of decorating buildings with banners and red flags, graphs showing the development in Russia over the past decade needed to be exhibited on the facades of factories and commissariats.

Encompassing not only the incorporation of new technology into contemporary celebrations and a replacement of decoration with scientific displays of Soviet advancement, Tretiakov’s article also tackled some of the core issues of Soviet byt. The Futurist aspiration was to turn the ephemeral slogans of a celebration day into a mentality that would remain a constant presence in everyday life. Celebrations, according to Tretiakov’s vision, were not about props that would find themselves put away into storage after the party was over, and as such the celebration of the Revolution needed to be about the core changes that lived on after that day: the anniversary holiday needed to be about “cleaning up, tiding up, fixing up,” as this would be representative of a change far more valuable that any slogan hanging upon a façade. Instead of a haphazard, one-off choir

¹⁰⁹ Tretiakov, “Kak desiatiletit”, p. 36.
performance, the aim was to find a way to establish choirs – the *loci* of positive and healthy social interaction – as an on-going practice. A fundamental aspect of Tretiakov’s piece was his promotion of the idea that even the most modest efforts to ameliorate Soviet life, their minimum program, would help contribute to the fortification of modern Soviet consciousness. From every angle, the aim of public celebrations needed to be about transforming traditional *byt* into a truly new and *better* version of itself.

Using celebrations as a platform to initiate long-lasting societal improvement was a notion reasserted in the opening feature of *Novyi LEF*’s sixth issue in 1927, in which Rodchenko described his experience of being asked to provide decorations for an institution for the celebration of May Day. 110 Commenting on the fact that the budget would be expended on food, decorations and slogans while the walls were dirty, furniture damaged and the clock broken, Rodchenko wondered why, instead of spending money on banners, these funds were not simply used to buy new chairs and clean the walls? 111 That LEF’s slogan was to offer amelioration instead of decoration (“*daesh’ uluchshenie*” not “*daesh’ ukrashenie*”) is representative of this logic of minimum program and the ways of making the future happen by starting immediately and within the coordinates of possible, not by hiding the difficulty of the present behind decorations. Futurists deplored useless decoration, taking aim at such practices as putting up enormous red banners across central telegraph buildings (especially if these banners rendered fixtures such as public clocks invisible) and the pointless exercise of fashioning the jubilee emblem out of bread in the windows of pastry shops. Instead, the preferred Futurist task – far more revolutionary in its nature – was to fix the lanterns, clean the courtyards and renovate nurseries. 112

The approach devised by the LEF group represented a significant conceptual leap from traditional forms of celebrating to a completely novel expression of the Soviet project, one that would incorporate every person as an actor within the event; an expression that would educate, elevate and inspire, and

111 Ibid., p. 6.
also an event that was about core changes, as opposed to superficial embellishment. It also took into consideration the contemporary conditions where, instead of falsifying reality through decoration, it was better to commit to a minimum program and start to clean up, for while cleaning up would eventually lead to revolutionary change, masking reality would achieve nothing.

The same kind of measured approach is evident in LEF’s discussion of workers’ clubs. Rodchenko’s famous workers’ club project, which was exhibited within the Soviet section at the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels, exemplified the Futurist theory that space could shape and create the new Soviet man. Anatoly Lunacharsky characterised the workers’ club as “a piece of socialism” (kusochek sotsializma), a place for education, repose and dissemination of the basic principles of the new socialist understanding of life-building.113 Perhaps unsurprisingly, these clubs were celebrated within the pages of LEF, with the publication lauding the workers’ club as an unparalleled space in which a true Communist mind-set might be forged.114

![Figure 7: Aleksandr Rodchenko, Workers’ club interior, Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels, Paris, 1925](image)

113 Anatoly Lunacharsky, Desiatiletie revoliutsii i kul’tura, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, p. 4.
115 Image reproduced from Kiaer, Imagine No Possessions, p. 198.
Trotsky, however, famously noted that, although these clubs did indeed represent an ideal foundry for the new proletarian consciousness, people would first have to visit them in order for that concept to work\textsuperscript{116} – a problem also lamented within \textit{LEF}. Workers’ clubs were envisaged as crucibles of proletarian culture, a place where community could be formed, and a platform for education and relaxation – yet the reality, as noted by the \textit{LEF} collective, was almost the complete opposite.

Existing clubs were generally tiny rooms in which workers attended tiresome meetings after already having completed a full day of work; they were either bad hybrids of hotels and theatres, or alternatively monasteries where tirades were directed against the consumption of alcohol and decadent life. Instead of showers, massage rooms, well-equipped reading rooms, a radio room, a photo laboratory and crèche, these places at best housed cheap cinemas and dancing halls. Though clubs were envisaged as centres where current issues could be absorbed and discussed, the reality was a source of significant irritation to Futurists and, adding to this frustration, the budget that was allocated to these clubs was usually spent on useless decoration. The dedication of club budgets to the procurement of portraits of leaders, the creation of slogans and a tree for the celebration of the New Year was, in the eyes of Futurists, evidence of an inability to sever ties with the mentality of a defunct era. LEF’s notion of having a maximum program but working within the realms of the possible and implementing a minimum program was the mentality missing within the cultural administration. The example of workers’ clubs is again evocative of Punin’s early articles in \textit{Iskusstvo kommunity} where he warned that the new reality could not be mounted with the “kak podoidet” mentality.\textsuperscript{117}

Futurists asserted strongly that the Soviet officialdom needed to adopt a different strategy for these clubs, and \textit{LEF} offered a solution: enticing workers into these clubs could not be seen as a concept of peripheral importance, and officials needed to embrace the workers’ club as a vital tool for facilitating the birth of new life-style. If workers harboured an aversion to entering the clubs, then this

\textsuperscript{116} Lev Trotsky, \textit{Voprosy kul’turnoi raboty}, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow, 1924, pp. 154-163; also in \textit{Sochinenia, Problemy kul’tury, Kultura perekhodnogo perioda}, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, pp. 133-140.

\textsuperscript{117} N. P., “K itogam Oktiabr’skikh torzhestv”, p. 2.
demanded a total reconsideration of the entire concept: clubs needed to be brought to the people, to the places of their spontaneous gathering – be it a buffet, or a corridor, or a place where people would simply gather to chat. Any space where people naturally came together could potentially be turned into a space that would be capable of instilling new mind-set – to the foyer of a cinema, for example, might be added a bookshop, a reading room, a telephone, resources that could better make use, in a utilitarian manner, of the time that would otherwise be simply spent waiting. In LEF the Mostorg store was cited as an inspiration, as this was a space where one could not only buy things, but also make a telephone call, have breakfast, read the paper, write a letter, simply do everyday things and feel comfortable without any desire to leave. For Futurists, the fact that persons were able to satisfy their everyday needs within a pleasant environment ensured that venturing into a space like the Mostorg store quickly became a powerful habit, and as such this same logic needed to be harnessed in re-inventing the concept of workers’ clubs. Instead of awaiting the ideal conditions that might allow Rodchenko’s plan to be accepted, Futurists understood that achieving results demanded adaptation to the current conditions.

**Futurism and Soviet Subjectivity**

The notion that ideology functioned as a mediator between the ruling body and the citizenry is an established tenet of history scholarship concerning the Soviet era. While the extent to which ideological narratives are adopted and practiced in any society remains a contested point, it is nevertheless clear that embodiment of some particular ideological principle remains an underlying

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objective of any ruling entity. The 1920s was a critical time in Soviet history: it was during this period that the push towards making a Soviet subject – the New Soviet Man – was crucial, as the destiny of the revolution depended on whether Bolsheviks would be able to transform the Soviet populace into citizens with a distinctly modern, forward-looking and Communist mentality, citizens who would be ready to embrace (and carry out) the revolutionary transformation. As such, Futurist endeavours in this period must be understood as an intrinsic component of the wider project of creating the New Soviet Man, as both Futurist theory and practice was guided by the belief that art needed to take an active part in shaping and entrenching a new consciousness among the people. Chuzhak stated this unequivocally: “Futurism is not a school, but a tendency to reconstruct human striving toward ‘a future consciousness.”’

By arguing that Futurism was not a “school,” the focus was shifted away from the actual produced artefacts (whether paintings or poems that embody a particular set of principles, characteristic of a given artistic school), toward a process or a method – in other words, what Futurism sought to build in this period, through the objects and spaces of the Communist stroi (system), was in fact a Communist stroitel’ (creator). Tretiakov expressed this most eloquently by noting that “it was not the making of new paintings, verses or tales, but the creation of a new man through art, which is one of the tools of that creation, that served as compass for Futurism since its earliest days.”

Futurists had long harboured a keen interest in the creation of the objects and spaces of Communism, and during the 1920s their interest would develop even further as they focused their creative energies upon designing and refining the industrial process itself, with the ultimate goal of creating a new consciousness. As Tretiakov noted, art was one of the tools for shaping this consciousness, and the entire Futurist opus was about finding ways to best apply their creative instincts toward achieving this result. Futurism thus never resembled any other artistic movement, as it did not own a particular style or set

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121 Chuzhak, “Pod znakom zhiznestroenia”, pp. 21-22.
123 As exemplified by Karl Loganson in Gough’s study Artist as Producer and also Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography”, pp. 95-131.
of immutable creative categories by which it could be catalogued: again, it was never a “school.” To again turn to Tretiakov: “A Futurist ceases to be a Futurist if he starts to rehash (perepevat’), even if it is his own work, if he starts to live on the percentage of his creative capital.” 124 While the outward appearance of Futurism is a variable category by the nature of Futurist philosophy, the continual search for the method that would best evoke the new mentality was a constant. It was during the 1920s that Futurism came to define itself as a method of bringing new ideology to life; a method that was dynamic, constantly calibrated by reality, and ready to reject its own strategies as soon they were deemed obsolete or unsuitable. Ultimately, the focus of Futurist thought as it developed within Marxist coordinates was not so much the end product itself – a particular garish costume or Lavinskii’s book kiosk – but rather the continual honing of a creative method that would most effectively engender the new consciousness.

The development that occurred upon the pages of LEF and Novyi LEF could be viewed as a stage of further radicalisation in the Futurist approach to merging creative expression with life. As in every previous stage, not all members of the Futurist circle were ready to assume the new path; nonetheless, progress of the Futurist idea followed a coherent conceptual line. 125 What is demonstrated by the texts discussed in this chapter is that the merger of Futurism and Marxist theory did permit the establishment of a definition of Futurism that would allow for (and in fact, directly announced) the future Soviet cultural paradigm of Socialist Realism – if we consider Futurism as a method, Socialist Realism, which carried in its code so much of the Futurist logic, could be perceived as its continuation. In his essay on the birth of Socialist Realism from within the avant-garde spirit, Boris Groys rightly demonstrates that Socialist Realism could be understood as “the

125 Chuzhak resigned from the group’s editorial board in 1924 over differences with Mayakovsky, Brik and Aseev (Fore, “The Operative Word in Soviet Factography”, pp. 95-96); then the disagreements over the theoretical direction as well as the organisational profile of the group culminated when Mayakovsky, Brik, Aseev and Rodchenko distancing themselves from the journal in 1928, and leaving Tretiakov and Chuzhak as editors of the last five of issues of Novyi LEF. See Stephan, LEF and the Left Front of the Arts, pp. 55-56; for details on the conflict within editorial board of LEF and later New LEF see Kolchevska, Lef and Developments in Russian Futurism in the 1920s, pp. 146-164.
continuation of the avant-garde’s strategy by different means.”¹²⁶ Indeed, Chuzhak and Tretiakov’s articles testify to a definition of Futurism as a dialectic method, underpinned by the concept that tomorrow is recognised (and indeed, commences to be realised) in the present and that the presence of the future in the here and now was the only way to assure that this future would occur. Both Futurism and Socialist Realism were practices aimed at advancing a particular ideological system.

In his study on totalitarian art, Igor Golomstock, who – like Groys – through investigation of Socialist Realist art recognised in it a realisation of the avant-garde dream (albeit in a distorted form), asserts strongly that Socialist Realism was not designed as a style, but rather as a creative method.¹²⁷ In support of this reading, Golomstock argues that far more important than adherence to a particular set of stylistic categories was the embodiment of a particular worldview that guided Soviet artistic production. Indeed, this concept is clearly present in the logic of Futurist theoreticians, who adopted the ultimate goal of making a New Soviet Man as the beacon guiding their creative practice.

While Soviet culture of the 1930s certainly does not ostensibly resemble something that Futurists might have hoped for, it does undeniably share the same conceptual platform as the Futurist movement. Despite the utter rejection of painting by Futurism and even though externally they appear to be polar opposites, a continual line of development of Futurist-Marxist philosophy did pave the way for the birth of Socialist Realism. It was precisely because the proponents of Futurism possessed such a keen understanding of their immediate conditions that Futurism was able to develop an adequate strategic response to the demands of Russia’s “continuum of crisis”: the adoption of Futurist logic within later cultural models is a testament to the fact that Futurists understood what was required by the Soviet project. It is also crucial to recognise that an aspect of Futurist activity rarely noted is their dedication to the minimum program logic – Futurists exhibited an acute understanding of the issues of their contemporary reality, and

¹²⁷ Golomstock, Totalitarian Art, pp. 290-301.
they sought to engage with them in a way that took into consideration the economic and administrative difficulties of the time. It is again as a result of the scholarly rejection or dismissal of this aspect of the movement that the Futurist project is painted with a more utopian hue that was really the case.
Chapter Four:

*Soviet Culture Wars in the 1920s*

The meaning of proletarian culture, and of proletarian art more specifically – along with their role in the revolutionary process – had been a topic of vigorous internal debate since the inception of the Bolshevik movement, and it would continue to cause significant political tension within the Party throughout the 1920s.¹ The domain of culture, along with political and economic identity, was an important element of the self-constitution of any class – an indispensable aspect for articulating the ideology and creating within the populace a new mind-set. Marxist theory posits that every class establishes its own culture and artistic expression as it develops,² and that once a particular class comes to dominate and rule within a society, its culture and art similarly become dominant.³ In Russia the proletarian

¹ The issue of proletarian culture gained prominence within the Bolshevik camp after the 1905 revolution. In the aftermath of this revolution, the Bolshevik leadership questioned the manner in which the working class might achieve proletarian consciousness, which was seen as necessary in the fight for the revolutionary cause. Aleksandr Bogdanov believed that the creation of proletarian culture would play a central role in engendering a higher level of consciousness among the workers, and that before the establishment could be overthrown, there first had to be fully rounded socialist men and women ready to run the new society. Zenovia Sochor notes that Bogdanov focused not on the immediate objective, the seizure of power, but on the long-term objective, the transition to socialism. A number of Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, opposed this view. Lenin believed that revolutionary experience alone was sufficiently powerful to make the requisite impact on and change to the consciousness of its participants; thus in his view it was primarily through practice (engagement in the political and revolutionary fight) and not in culture that the new man would emerge. See John Eric Marot, “Alexander Bogdanov, Vpered, and the Role of the Intellectual in the Workers’ Movement”, *Russian Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (July 1990), pp. 241-264. Also on the approach to culture see Zenovia A. Sochor, *Revolution and Culture, The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1988 (especially pp. 29-41); Georgii D. Gloveli, John Biggart, “‘Socialism of Science’ versus ‘Socialism of Feelings’: Bogdanov and Lunacharsky”, *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (July 1991), pp. 29-55; David G. Rowley, “Bogdanov and Lenin: Epistemology and Revolution”, *Studies in East European Thought*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (March 1996), pp. 1-19.


class, as Bolshevik leaders argued, came to power before it had fully developed its own cultural and artistic forms: as a class that had long been oppressed, and had in general been denied access to education and edifying experiences, the Russian proletariat had never been permitted the opportunity to cultivate a self-affirming form of creative expression.4 As such, in the aftermath of the Revolution there was no proletarian creative counterforce ready to replace bourgeois production within the new social conditions.

In line with Marxist theory, as a ruling class the proletariat had to forge its own cultural format so as to counter bourgeois influence; in addition, art was regarded as a crucial tool in the process of engendering and fortifying the new mentality of the Soviet subject. The role of art for Soviet society was thus to both guard against the influence of the past, and to aid in the process of forging a new mentality – a notion that had already been recognised by the Futurists during the Iskusstvo kommuny period, as demonstrated by their creation of a two-pronged artistic strategy. Accordingly, the need to create a cultural and artistic model that would embody the ethos of Soviet society was a prominent item on the Bolshevik agenda throughout the 1920s. This chapter considers the Futurist project in the context of contemporary efforts by Soviet officials to define and forge a formula for proletarian art.

The conventional interpretation of the official treatment of Futurism in the 1920s is that the movement was marginalised and eventually eliminated by an increasingly oppressive regime that ultimately preferred a very different cultural paradigm to that which Futurists offered. In considering the dynamic of cultural discourse in the 1920s, historians have generally perceived and portrayed Futurists as belligerent radicals who demanded total cultural dominance and the elimination of all alternative cultural currents: they often appear in studies on early Soviet cultural policy as aggressive and antagonistic; the famous Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, is forced to constantly keep them in check while they continually criticise his attempts to create an all-inclusive cultural climate. Historians have branded Futurists as “militant Young Turks,” who aspired

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4 See, for example, Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution, Russell & Russell, New York, 1957, pp. 184-214.
to “seize control of the Bolshevik agenda on culture from party moderates such as Lunacharsky,”5 while noting that Lunacharsky despised the Futurist “intolerance of other groups and their demands for a monopoly in culture.”6

Art history, on the other hand, has painted Futurists and avant-gardists in general as martyrs whose creative enthusiasm and humanist desire to make Soviet life modern were pulverised by a culturally unenlightened and backward totalitarian regime.7 Whether cast as aggressors or martyrs, however, the conclusion is largely similar: Futurists were ultimately a band of outsiders whose artistic approach was impractical and unrealistic in the face of Soviet reality. By the end of the 1920s, Futurists certainly experienced difficulty in making themselves heard; in addition, they were increasingly disillusioned by the direction that Soviet cultural life had taken. Yet while there is no doubt that Futurism was exposed to severe contemporary criticism from multiple sides – and indeed that many Bolshevik officials, and Vladimir Lenin most famously, had little tolerance for the Futurist project – its position during the NEP years is more complex than the traditional accounts propose.

The following discussion represents a departure from the conventional approach of cataloguing the various contemporary criticisms that Futurists confronted. Attacks against Futurism had various motivations and were commonly expressed in a formulaic manner: the apparent decadence and bourgeois background of the movement were common targets, as was the supposedly impenetrable nature of Futurist work. Lenin’s own views feature strongly in scholarship centred around these criticisms, which generally cites his famous calls for some anti-futurists to be found to fend off the Futurist influence, his characterisation of Futurist sculptures as scarecrows, or else his recommendation that Mayakovsky’s work should be printed in only very small editions to satisfy the

eccentrics. Rather than focusing on occasional commentary by Lenin, as dispersed in his speeches or the memoirs of his contemporaries, however, it is the works of Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky that form the basis for this chapter, as they both dedicated significant attention in their writings to Futurism and developed more rounded philosophical frameworks against which an understanding of the extent to which Futurism was perceived as a possible avenue for creating Soviet culture can be drawn.

The aim of this chapter is to offer a more balanced account on the position Futurism had during the NEP era, and in the debates over the definitions of proletarian culture and art that occurred at this time. Beginning with an outline of the scholarly efforts in the fields of political and cultural history of the NEP will serve to reposition Futurism and establish it not as an isolated group, but as a part of a larger front within Soviet society. Discussion then moves to focus upon the writings of Anatoly Lunacharsky, and in particular his vision of proletarian art and his criticism of the Futurist project. Lunacharsky's work in the Soviet cultural arena is traditionally considered by scholars as a measured approach to meeting the challenge of forging a proletarian cultural model, based as it was upon the notion that the old cultural elites needed to be assimilated and included in this project. Yet the analysis of his concepts will demonstrate that Lunacharsky's approach faced significant challenges and that – far from offering a solid alternative to what were supposedly outrageous Futurist proposals – his approach in fact left enough room for Futurists to assert the superiority of their own project. Furthermore, and as will be demonstrated, Lunacharsky's formula for proletarian art did reserve a place for Futurism.

Trotsky's writings on Futurism, on the other hand, offer a different perspective of this movement. Trotsky, a prominent Bolshevik figure who was at the time the leader of the Left Opposition, offered an analysis of Futurism that in many ways mirrored the kind of development and transformation that Futurism had experienced, and indeed considered the path outlined by Futurists in more favourable light than what has been commonly acknowledged. Futurism cannot be

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understood in the context of the 1920s as an isolated phenomenon, whose project for building the Communist society was too extravagant and unrealistic to be considered as a viable method for creating a proletarian artistic identity, and whose proponents simply did not comprehend the complexity of contemporary reality. Rather, Futurism stood within a particular wider cultural and social front and, while its program for a cultural model did encounter difficulty in defining or actualising some of its premises, alternative solutions faced similar challenges (though scholarship does not paint these alternatives as misguided or fantastic). Finally, in both Lunacharsky’s and Trotsky’s accounts, Futurism is actually seen (albeit to a different extent) as having the potential to participate in creating a method of proletarian expression. Taking heed of Trotsky’s comment that cooperation would be preferable to confrontation in dealing with Futurists, this chapter begins from a new vantage point by focusing not on the exclusion of Futurism but – on the contrary – on the ways in which Futurism was acknowledged as a contributor of the Soviet cultural discourse at the time.

The Dividing Issue of Specialists

The introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 was more than simply an effort to draw upon the bourgeois capitalist economy with the aim of restoring the country to a position of economic stability. The Bolshevik leadership asserted that building the new Soviet state would necessitate an initial reliance upon the help of professionals (that is, people who had been educated prior to the revolution, and were not of proletarian background), not only in the domain of economics but indeed everywhere – from administration, military affairs, technology and science to education and the cultural sphere. As the proletariat had not previously enjoyed wide access to education, it could not draw from its ranks the expertise required to ensure the normal running of the country, and this necessitated the proletariat’s dependence on help from the “outside.” Lenin in particular expressed strong support for the notion that the Soviet state had no other viable option but to use experts, regardless of their class background, in order to put the country back on its feet after years of devastating revolution and
war, and that the proletariat would have to learn from these experts in order to be able to run the country independently in the future. The expectation was that, as a result of collaborating with the old intelligentsia (or “bourgeois experts,” as they were known), the proletariat would endure a process of acculturation and education, while the members of the old intelligentsia would experience ideological transformation, and would emerge from this process as committed Communists. This concept, termed the “soft” line approach, became, as Sheila Fitzpatrick argues, a cornerstone of the official state policy in this period. Studies of Soviet cultural policy similarly note that the NEP in culture demanded an accommodation with the old intelligentsia in order to promote its assimilation into Soviet society, and to use the expertise of this group to assist in the cultural and educational development of the proletariat. Lunacharsky in effect attempted to achieve this outcome in the process of building of a new Soviet reality.

Despite official endorsement of the soft line approach as a necessary tactic in the process of consolidating the Soviet state, criticism of this strategy soon emerged. A significant portion of the Bolshevik powerbase believed that any kind of inclusion of old enemy classes and implementation of capitalist and bourgeois practices in the process of Soviet life-building represented a deviation from the true revolutionary path. A call for a steadfast commitment to the original principles of the October Revolution, along with the implementation of more radical economic measures, also grew stronger within the Party and by 1923 a faction, led by Trotsky and known as the Left Opposition, was formed. The cultural domain, similarly, had its own opposition, or cultural “hardliners.” Proletarian writers (centred most significantly around what would become the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers – RAPP) voiced the strongest opposition to the

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12 For Lenin’s comments on cultural issues see Lenin, O literature i iskusstve and V. I. Lenin i A. V. Lunacharskii, Prepiiska, doklady, dokumeny, (Literaturnoe nasledstvo Vol. 80), Nauka, Moscow, 1971.
13 The Organization was founded as the All-Union Association (VAPP) in 1920. With adaptation of NEP, VAPP split into two factions. The one calling itself October (Okkiabr’) was formed in 1922 and represented the “hardline” among proletarian writers. The October group established the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP) in 1923. Soon the October group would come to
inclusion of the old bourgeois literati in the formation of the Soviet cultural domain, and demanded that the proletarian state take care of its own by sanctioning the dominance of proletarian writers who were committed to the revolutionary cause. They were vehemently opposed to the state practice of soliciting assistance from the bourgeois intelligentsia and calls for the proletariat to “treat them with respect and make them feel like partners in the task of socialist construction.” Proletarian writers perceived this bourgeois group as a class enemy, and an enemy that should take no part in the creation of the proletarian cultural domain. Fitzpatrick argues that these hardliners were effectively waging a “class war” within the cultural domain by calling for “the establishment of Communist and proletarian ‘hegemony’ in the various branches of scholarship and the arts.” Their enmity was particularly aimed at the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) headed by Lunacharsky, which was committed to actualising the soft line policy in cultural matters.

Lunacharsky was a staunch supporter of the idea that the proletariat had much to learn, and was only beginning to make its first steps in the process of creating its own culture. For Lunacharsky, insofar as it possessed a significantly enhanced level of cultural education relative to the proletariat, the old cultural intelligentsia had an important role to play in the process of elevating the proletariat and, in turn, assisting the realisation of a proletarian culture. Michael David-Fox’s work further enhances our understanding of the complex nature of the cultural domain by demonstrating that, while Lunacharsky’s soft line policy was characteristic of Narkompros, other institutions that influenced cultural development did not necessarily share this policy and, in fact, promulgated the

dominate the entire VAPP. The October group was gathered around a journal of literary criticism and theory named Na postu (On Guard) published between 1923 and 1925. Writers gathered around this journal, called Napostovtsy, were the most militant and influential advocates of the “Octobrist” line on the role of proletarian literature. The Party resolution in 1925 caused some modification within the proletarian writers’ front. The organisation was renamed the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) in 1928, with Napostovtsy being its “left” wing. After the Party resolution on literature in 1932 RAPP was liquidated along with all the other groups and the formation of a single Union for all writers was established. See entries “Na postu”, “Oktyabr” and “RAPP” in Victor Terras (ed.), Handbook of Russian Literature, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1985, pp. 292; 315; 362-363.

14 O’Connor, The Politics of Soviet Culture, p. 84.
hard line approach in their workings. This investigation demonstrated that pivotal governmental bodies such as Glavlit\textsuperscript{17} and the Central Committee’s Agitprop, both of which enjoyed strong influence within the cultural domain, were staunch proponents of more radical policies. As such, the question arises as to whether the soft line approach, the important position of Narkompros notwithstanding, can truly be said to have been the official policy in culture at all.\textsuperscript{18}

This scholarly debate demonstrates that the issue of incorporating old classes and their socio-economic mores caused division within the Bolshevik camp, not only in the domains of politics and economics but also in the cultural sphere where, to make matters even more complex, the divisions ran not only through the artistic community, but also through individual governmental bodies charged with responsibility for cultural matters. Thus, the Futurist program, in voicing concern with deviations from the original revolutionary project, was not alone in its conflict with the official state soft line policy (if we choose to accept this policy as official). Again, instead of being dismissed as blinded zealots with little sense of the real, it must be remembered that Futurism was a part of larger oppositional wave that formed within Soviet society at the time.

In examining the phenomenon of hardliners within the cultural field, it has been noted that proletarian writers, especially those involved with the journal Na postu (whose members were known as Napostovtsy), were staunch supporters of the hard line position – this group was “young, brash, aggressive, self-consciously Communist, and ‘proletarian’ in the sense that it was hostile to the old literary intelligentsia.”\textsuperscript{19} Writers gathered around Na postu were in accord with avant-garde artists in their belief that revolutionary art and revolutionary politics had a natural affinity, and that the past could not serve as a starting point toward the future art of a proletarian society. Thus Communist cultural radicals (proletarian writers), and the avant-garde artists and critics (which essentially represented a

\textsuperscript{17} Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs under the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment.


\textsuperscript{19} Fitzpatrick, “The ‘Soft’ Line on Culture and Its Enemies”, p. 104.
part of the left wing of the intelligentsia)\textsuperscript{20} found themselves on common ground. Indeed, in 1923 Futurists declared their alliance with \textit{Napostovtsy} in their publication \textit{LEF}, calling for a united stand against the “masters of sweet-talk,” and their “return to” mentality, Futurists positioned themselves clearly within the hard line sphere of the Soviet cultural scene.\textsuperscript{21}

The relationship between political and cultural opposition to the NEP also requires clarification, because political opposition to the NEP and calls for adherence to a strict revolutionary line within the Party did not always imply cultural radicalism. The case of Trotsky is illustrative of this point. In June 1922, Trotsky launched an initiative aimed at achieving governmental support for young writers and artists: in a letter addressed to the Politburo, Trotsky warned that his colleagues were “undoubtedly risking the loss of young poets and artists who are close to us.”\textsuperscript{22} Noting that the official policy was essentially indifferent to them, Trotsky explained that the most talented and revolutionary creators were being forced to solicit the help of publishers that were either bourgeois or openly hostile to the Bolsheviks, and that as such these talented youths had to hide their support for Bolshevik power in order to secure publishing opportunities.\textsuperscript{23} Trotsky’s memorandum was answered in the Politburo by Joseph Stalin, who expressed support for the proposed initiative, and instructed the deputy head of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of TsK RKP(b), Ia. A. Iakovlev, to produce a report outlining the Russian cultural landscape.\textsuperscript{24} According to Iakovlev’s final

\textsuperscript{21} “LEF i MAPP”, “Soglashenie Mosk. assotsiatsii prolet. pisatelei MAPP i gruppy LEF”, \textit{LEF}, No. 4, 1923, pp. 3; 4-5; LEF signed agreement with Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP), which was precursor to Association of Proletarian Writers (VAPP) and later Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). O’Connor mentions \textit{LEF} and \textit{Na postu} as a combined force of “cultural radicals”: O’Connor, \textit{The Politics of Soviet Culture}, p. 78.
\textsuperscript{22} “Zapiska L. D. Trotskyego v Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) o molodykh pisatelyakh i khudozhnikakh” (30 June 1922) in Andrei Artizov, Oleg Naumov (eds.), \textit{Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaja intelligentsija, Dokumenty TsK RKP(b) – VKP(b), VCHK-OGPU-NKVD o kul’turnoi politike 1917-1953gg, Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratija”, Moscow, 2002, pp. 36-37.
\textsuperscript{23} Trotsky’s note was concerned with young artists and writers, and protection of “representatives of young Soviet art” in general, but the subsequent discussion within the Party was mostly concerned with the writers. The Party policies on literature, as Clark noted, were subsequently applied to all other branches of art production. (Katerina Clark, \textit{Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution}, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusets, 1995, p. 243).
\textsuperscript{24} “Zapiska I. V. Stalina v Politbiuro TsK RKP(b) po povodu predlozhenii L. D. Trotskogo o molodykh pisatelyakh i khudozhnikakh” (3 July 1922), in Artizov, Naumov (eds.), \textit{Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaja intelligentsija}, p. 38.
report, Futurists were listed among groups that stood clearly within the Bolshevik camp.25

At the same time Trotsky’s writings demonstrate that, while he was against the economic and bureaucratic implications of the NEP, he – like Lunacharsky – supported the idea of evolutionary cultural development, with proletarians learning from an inherited corpus of knowledge. Thus, while calling for the support of young poets and artists with a distinctly revolutionary bent, Trotsky also offered support for cultural “fellow-travellers” – people sympathetic to the revolutionary cause but not officially members of the Party. When Futurists and Napostovtsy launched their campaign against the fellow-travellers, they aimed their attack at Aleksandr Voronskii, editor of the journal Krasnaia nov’ (Red Virgin Soil) for his support of these writers and his publication of their work. Within this attack was a specific focus upon Voronskii’s relationship with Trotsky: by implying a relationship with Trotsky’s Left Opposition, Futurists and Napostovtsy sought to discredit fellow-travellers, and position themselves as the group with more in common with Party officialdom, and thus deserving of more official support.26 This attack came at a time when Trotsky’s position within the Party had become increasingly tenuous (he was ousted from the Politburo in 1926),27 and identifying fellow-travellers with him seemed like a good strategy. It is as a result of these political machinations that it is difficult to discern Trotsky’s actual stance on fellow-travellers and cultural radicals.

In order to demonstrate the level to which politics has served to complicate readings of the cultural domain, it suffices to consider the work of Russian historian Aleksandr Galushkin, whose examination of the issue of LEF and fellow-travellers leads to a larger point that Futurism, no more or less than any other group, was affected by the ebbs and flows of contemporary politics.28 Indeed, in the context of Stalin’s Great Break, it must be recognised that proletarian cultural

radicals who benefitted from the onset of Stalin’s 1928 campaign against fellow-travellers were – just a few short years later – themselves subjected to intense persecution by the same regime. Thus – and again – the characterisation of Futurism as a naïve artistic cohort that misunderstood their contemporary political reality falls away, because in effect nobody “understood” Soviet politics, and the movement’s oppositional and cultural radicalism cannot be interpreted as merely an isolated and misguided effort. Furthermore, when considering the difficult relationship between politics and culture at this time, one must bear in mind that much of the cultural production that some Soviet politicians regarded as undesirable domestically was simultaneously championed to represent the achievements of Soviet modernity and cultural tolerance abroad. Thus, for example, while often critical of the work of the avant-gardes, Lunacharsky recognised that the First Russian Exhibition (which took place in Berlin in 1922 and was characterised by strong presence of the avant-garde front) was highly regarded by the Western audience and deemed to have been of significant propaganda value for the new Soviet government. This double standard in cultural policy remained present well into the 1930s.

An enhanced appreciation of the dynamic and multifaceted relationship between Soviet politics and culture in the 1920s has in more recent times incited a reassessment of the role and contribution of the avant-gardists during this period. In his article “What Is Cultural Revolution?” David-Fox recalls a current in scholarship that argued that true cultural revolutionaries were not Communists (proletarian cultural radicals), but were in fact Petersburg intellectuals “whose antimarket, antiphilistine, organicist ethos allows them to help construct Soviet culture” – a notion also championed in Katerina Clark’s Petersburg. Indeed, in her study of the evolution of Soviet culture, Clark demonstrates that the Bolsheviks

31 Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Russkaia vystavka v Berline”, Iskusstvo i revoliutsiia, Novaia Moskva, Moscow, 1924, pp. 176-183.
Party and the intelligentsia were not monolithic entities, and neither were they completely separate from one another, which in turn meant that there was no single agency in the process of the evolution of Soviet culture. Clark asserts that fragmentation within both the Party and the cultural intelligentsia served to ensure that most factions within the intelligentsia could find sympathisers somewhere within the Party hierarchy, and that left artists often enjoyed the patronage of persons who were ready to resolve matters in their favour. Clark’s study thus aids the efforts of constructing a more balanced assessment of Futurism by demonstrating the fragmentation within both the cultural and political fields at the time.

Regardless of the political currents influencing relations between proletarian cultural radicals and Trotsky, it is important to highlight that proletarian radicals were, by the very nature of things, “potential supporters of any ‘revolutionary’ opposition,” and furthermore, that the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), as the main stronghold of proletarian writers, adopted a stand on social and cultural questions that was high-on indistinguishable from the Opposition’s 1926-1927 platform. Fitzpatrick’s work calls attention to the fact that, whatever might have been hidden behind various political machinations, on a conceptual level political opposition and cultural opposition must share basic similarities – nomen est omen, after all. In line with this logic, Paul Wood argues that there was a definite connection between the Futurists and Trotsky’s Left Opposition. “On at least four grounds,” Wood asserts, “the left front of the arts can be read as the cultural correlative of the predominantly Trotskiiist 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.” While careful to point out that his argument does not imply that the political supporters of the Left Opposition would necessarily be sympathetic to

34 Clark, Petersburg, 195.
35 Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War”, p. 137.
37 Ibid., p. 17.
leftist art, Wood does demonstrate that there was no outright rejection of the progressive arts by the Left Opposition – and in fact that there was an open possibility for dialogue between the two groups. Wood’s study is thus also a significant foundation for further discussion, as it represents a reorientation of the usual reading of Futurism: the author asks us to consider the Futurist camp as part of a larger front – a front that was connected to the story of the Left Opposition in the 1920s.

Russia during the 1920s was a place of great political and cultural volatility, and recognition of this fact demands a reconsideration of the position assumed within this landscape by the Futurist movement. Analysis of Lunacharsky’s writings on the formation of proletarian culture serves to demonstrate that proponents of soft line policy encountered significant difficulties in their efforts to resolve this issue. Considered relative to Lunacharsky’s work, the Futurist program was certainly more consistent; at the same time, however, juxtaposing these two programs also serves to highlight the fact that all those who endeavoured to partake in shaping Soviet cultural identity faced serious – and often insurmountable – challenges. Furthermore, despite Lunacharsky’s criticism of the aggressive Futurist approach, it must also be recognised that he did reserve a particular field of cultural production for their ideas.

**Lunacharsky’s Proletarian Art**

Among his collection of essays concerning Bolshevik revolutionaries, Trotsky offered a sketch of Lunacharsky as Commissar of Enlightenment in which he noted that the Commissar was irreplaceable in his ability to represent Bolshevism as a culturally enlightened force.38 Indeed, it has long been recognised that Lunacharsky played an important role in negotiations between the old intelligentsia and the Bolshevik powerbase, which saw him work feverishly to

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draw the former into the Bolshevik fold.\textsuperscript{39} As a man of great knowledge in matters of literature, visual arts, theatre and music, and indeed as a writer himself, Lunacharsky was an ideal spokesperson for the Bolshevik cause within intellectual circles. It was a time when the positive image of the October revolution at home and abroad was critically important, especially as the anti-Bolshevik propaganda machine sought to paint Communists as barbaric aggressors who gave not a second thought to employing radical methods in the aim of achieving the total elimination of their political opponents – along with any cultural or educational establishments from the past.\textsuperscript{40} It is thus clear that the official stance of ensuring the absolute protection of Russian cultural heritage and cooperation with the old intelligentsia was a crucial component of Bolshevik image-making, if they were to gain wider social support within the country and abroad.

The need to preserve Russian cultural and educational institutions (and the knowledge they housed) was not, however, simply a component of the Bolshevik political stratagem – it was also an intrinsic element of their vision for building a socialist society. Lunacharsky repeatedly argued that, when it came to matters of culture, Bolsheviks believed in an evolutionary, not a revolutionary process, stating that “socialism grows organically out of the past in terms of culture and technology, even through the transition towards it happens in politically turbulent and catastrophic forms.”\textsuperscript{41} One of the central ideas driving the revolutionary program was the Bolshevik push toward radical emancipation: the elimination of illiteracy in the country, the cultural enlightenment of the people and the promotion of educational opportunities for the wider population, not just the elite. In line with this logic, the preservation of cultural heritage was seen as vital, for it was to serve as a source of knowledge and education: through learning, understanding and ultimately surpassing the achievements of the past, the art of the proletarian state would add its own page to history: “To make an artistic


\textsuperscript{40} Platon Mikhailevich Kerzhentsev, \textit{Kul’tura i sovetskaia vlast’}, Izdatel’stvo Vserossiiskogo tsentral’nogo ispolnitel’nogo komiteta sovetov r., s., k. i k. deputatov, Moscow, 1919, p. 3; Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Sovetskaia vlast’ i pamiatniki stariny”, \textit{Stat’l ob iskusstve}, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Iskusstvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1941, p. 483.

\textsuperscript{41} Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Predisloviye”, \textit{Iskusstvo i revoliutsia}, p. 8.
autobiography of the human kind accessible in the widest array of expression to every working man, so that these working men can add to this autobiography their own page – this is the goal of Narkompros in the domain of artistic enlightenment." As the head of Narkompros, Lunacharsky worked to defuse this potential cultural crisis, and to prevent any radical breaks within this field, confident that to “the wonderful Petersburg of the Tsars,” the proletariat would add an even more beautiful “Petersburg of the workers.” As such, the preservation and transmission of culture became two of the pillars of the official cultural policy.

The uncomfortable truth associated with employing artefacts from the past in the creation of a new proletarian reality was the fact that these artefacts were intrinsically linked to the privileged classes. Whether directly (through commissions) or indirectly, art and culture of the past were reflective of a social system that was toppled in 1917. Italian Futurists had argued that the omnipresence of venerable public monuments and classical ruins supported an antiquarian mentality and behaviour. Their Russian counterparts took this argument further: couched within a framework of Marxist theory, Russian Futurists argued that it was not merely the message (or the content) of old cultural artefacts that was problematic, but that the very forms themselves were inevitably reflective of a particular worldview – just as Boris Arvatov argued in LEF and as John Berger so vividly demonstrated in his analysis of oil painting. Terry Eagleton’s study on Marxist literary criticism reminds us of Georg Lukács’ words that the truly social element in literature is form, meaning that form itself is intrinsically linked to an ideological narrative and that an artist by mere choice of format (be it an oil painting or a novel), has chosen a particular mind-set, irrespective of content itself. The Futurist argument for exclusion of the past in the creation of contemporary expression, along with their continual assertions that art of the past

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43 Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, Rech’, proiznesennaia na otkrytii Petrogradskikh Gosudarstvennykh Svobodnykh Khudozhestvenno-Uchebnykh Masterskikh 10-go oktiabria 1918g., Izdanie Otdela Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv Komissariata Narodnogo Prosveshcheniia, Petrograd, p. 28.
would be not a base, but in fact a burden to the development of a new proletarian culture, posed a serious challenge to the creators of Soviet cultural policy.

Lunacharsky's mission to preserve this cultural heritage, however, followed a different logic. In order for the proletariat to create a new social order and realise its goal of creating a socialist society, it first needed to learn from the past, and to learn everything: the realisation of a socialist system, which would include socialist culture, could not occur unless the proletariat properly understood the culture of the past. During its exhausting political battles, the proletariat had been unable to concentrate on matters of art, culture and education; once it had become politically established, however, the proletariat would begin to focus on its own cultural development. Bolshevik leaders believed that the revolution had secured access for the proletariat to all of the existing cultural riches, and that the proletariat ought to learn, adopt, and then gradually overcome this culture in an evolutionary process that would ultimately result in the creation of a truly proletarian culture. As Lunacharsky liked to point out "one cannot be a professor before being a student first."46

The contentious issue within this argument was the fact that the proletariat was now to take lessons from its class enemy – a problem that the Soviet leadership wrestled with in economic management, governance, science and education as much as in the cultural domain. In the context of the NEP era, the issue of adopting the culture of the class that the proletariat was still effectively combating was a serious ideological conundrum. Yet despite this risk, Lunacharsky argued that it would be utterly reckless to reject all previous national and international culture, especially in a country such as Russia that was culturally lagging behind its European neighbours. Lunacharsky's perpetual argument was that Russia had significantly less cultural and educational capital than other European countries and that it could not afford to discard anything, irrespective of any stigma that may have been attached to the culture of yesteryear. Using Marx as an ideological compass, Lunacharsky recalled that Marx himself had to learn from

46 Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, Idealizm i materializm; Kul'tura burzhuznaia, perekhodnaia i sotsialistitcheskaya, Krasnaia nov', Moscow/Leningrad, 1924, p. 82.
bourgeois science, economics, philosophy and history in order to forge his own theories.\textsuperscript{47}

Responding to Futurist criticism, Lunacharsky would argue that the relationship with the past was not passive veneration, but in fact active and critical. While the new proletarian dictatorship had to rely on the accomplishments of the past and learn from them, Lunacharsky was aware that a measured approach needed to be adopted: while he agreed that there was a real danger inherent in the fact that the proletariat needed to learn from its enemy and that the state could not adopt a \textit{laissez-faire} attitude in this process, he was adamantly against those who showed complete disregard for “bourgeois professors” and believed they could create their own culture without outside help. Lunacharsky concluded that the best process for developing proletarian culture would be to approach the old art as a source of knowledge and to learn from it – not simply to absorb it, but rather to take a critical approach to this learning process. He explained that the Soviet government regarded the preservation of the great achievements from the past as vital, but that “it is imperative to clean the past legacy of all the elements of bourgeois decadence and debauchery (\textit{raspad i razvrat}): boulevard pornography, petty-bourgeois vulgarity, intelligentsia’s tedium, Black Hundreds and religious prejudice.”\textsuperscript{48} The proletariat would reject the bourgeois delight in pretty landscapes or representations of the opposite sex; it would avoid the path of petty-bourgeois celebrations of domestic life and “unhealthy sentimental romance.”\textsuperscript{49} \textit{In nuce}, all vulgar bourgeois commercial culture – proliferated as side effect of the NEP – along with those aspects of past culture deemed inadequate were to be discarded.

Lunacharsky believed that in cases where suspicious elements were inextricably intertwined with great artistic achievement, it would be necessary for the proletariat to critically adjudge the relative merits of this “spiritual food.”

\textsuperscript{47}Lunacharsky, \textit{Idealism i materializm}, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{48}“Tezisy khudozhestvennogo sektora NKP i TsK RABIS ob osnovakh politiki v oblasti iskusstva”, signed by the head of the Narkompros, A. V. Lunacharsky and head of TsK Vserabis, Iu. Slavinskii, in Ivan Matsa (ed.), \textit{Sovetskoe iskusstvo za 15 let, Materialy i dokumentatsia}, Ogiz-IZogiz, Moscow/Leningrad, 1933, pp. 57-58. The theses were first published in journal \textit{Iskusstvo} No. 1, p. 20, 1921 in Vitebsk.
\textsuperscript{49}Lunacharsky, \textit{Idealism i materializm}, p. 122.
question of how the proletariat would simultaneously critically consider the art of the past, purging it of unwanted elements (which would require a sophisticated understanding of both art and ideology) while still only in the process of learning the ropes of cultural production, was a typically Soviet catch-22 situation (and a situation common to many domains of state management). To appreciate the clumsy nature of these tactics, it suffices to mention a proposal by Lunacharsky in an essay on the role of the Central political-educational committee (Glavpolitprosvet)\textsuperscript{50} and its publications. While noting that it was important to popularise classical literature, Lunacharsky voiced concern that the consumption of this literature, given that the majority of it stemmed from privileged classes and was infused with a particular worldview, had to be approached with care. His solution to this problem was to require publishers to include a Marxist foreword and Marxist commentary at the end of the each published classic – sections that would serve as tools to aid the “proper” reading of these works, and to help readers avoid making ideological misconstructions.\textsuperscript{51}

Methods by which the proletariat could avoid ideological “traps” encoded in cultural remnants of the past formed a major component of many of Lunacharsky’s essays on state cultural policy, but the question remained \textit{circulus vitiosus} for him. He was cautious about extreme approaches: for Lunacharsky, both under-purging \textit{(nedochistka)} and over-purging \textit{(perechistka)} were equally detrimental in the process of educating the proletariat – allowing ideologically problematic material to pass through out of respect for the creator would compromise the proletarian revolution, while simply eliminating works would be detrimental to the development of proletarian culture.\textsuperscript{52} Lunacharsky was adamant in his belief that art was a powerful weapon, and that the state could not be indifferent to the cultural production that was available to the people: allowing complete freedom in the domain of arts would be akin to “giving weapons to the enemy so they can shoot at us,”\textsuperscript{53} and was especially problematic at a time when proletarian victory

\textsuperscript{50} Glavpolitprosvet (Glavnyi politiko-prosvetitel’nyi komitet) was a section within the Commissariat of Enlightenment in charge of political education, agitation and propaganda work.

\textsuperscript{51} A. Lunacharsky, \textit{Iskusstvo i zhizn}; \textit{Nashi zadachi v oblasti khudozhestvennoi zhizni} (\textit{Stat’ia pervaia, Glavpolitprosvet i iskusstvo}), RGALI f. 279, op. 1, d. 67, (documents from 1919 to 1933), l. 14.

\textsuperscript{52} Lunacharsky, “O proletarskoi kulturre”, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{53} Lunacharsky, \textit{Osnovy teatral’noi politiki sovetskoi vlasti}, p. 12.
was not yet secured. The position held by the former cultural intelligentsia was that art demanded complete freedom: it was an independent domain, completely separate from politics, and the state could not force its own agenda onto this field. This position, however, was unacceptable to the Bolsheviks – as Lunacharsky noted, under the banner of pure art, all manner of propaganda could be disseminated. In a similar vein, however, an extreme position of prejudicial censorship would compromise the use of cultural remnants as a source of knowledge for the proletariat. For Lunacharsky, censorship was a necessary and useful weapon, but one that required careful handling: no-one should “fire a revolver at every passer-by just because he is not a Communist.”

Lunacharsky also understood that there was a sense of urgency in the task of creating an adequate proletarian approach to the arts, a point that recurs in the arguments of Futurist leaders. “Everything that is more or less sound in old art is to be safeguarded,” he wrote, “art [...] is to be influenced, but not cruelly, to complete its evolution as quickly as possible to meet the new requirements.” This search for an accelerated evolutionary process in response to the imminent need for a proletarian cultural model again demonstrates Lunacharsky's difficulties in finding a compromise between his commitment to gradual transition and the actual demands of his time.

Ultimately Lunacharsky believed that the proletariat had no choice but to learn from the past, despite the danger of ideological infection. In his study on Soviet cultural policy and Lunacharsky’s work, Timothy O’Connor’s argues that Lunacharsky was aware of the risk inherent to his policy, but was equally sure that he had “found a solution” to the problem by insisting that the proletariat, in the process of creating its own intelligentsia, would rework the existing cultural heritage into the foundation of a new proletarian culture. While there is no doubt that Lunacharsky's approach appeared measured and calculated, it failed one major test – practicality. Indeed, the difficult task of forging a viable compromise

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54 Lunacharsky, “Predislovice”, pp. 6-8.
57 O’Connor, The Politics of Soviet Culture, p. 47.
between learning from cultural heritage and learning too much is a consistent theme in Lunacharsky’s writings. After noting that some critics found Lunacharsky’s policy unworkable, O’Connor in effect retreats from the assessment that Lunacharsky had identified a solution by concluding: “perhaps it is better to judge Lunacharkii not by his accomplishments but by his aspirations, goals and vision.”

Futurism has been often criticised for its apparent utopian irrationality. Yet even a cursory consideration of Lunacharsky’s painful attempts to negotiate a solution to the Soviet cultural dilemma serves to highlight the fact that the task of forging a proletarian art that would simultaneously function as a counterculture to the alluring effects of bourgeois cultural model (be it the vulgar commercial culture or masterpieces from the past) and as a tool for forging proletarian consciousness was a difficult problem. That is, the Futurist program – considered within this complex historical context, and next to the problems evident within Lunacharsky’s soft line approach, should not be a priori labelled as fanciful, impractical, and irrational. Futurists did not, of course, forge a simple solution to this complex problem – indeed, they were first to acknowledge the difficulty in defining some of their theoretical positions, and in translating these concepts into practice. At the same time, however, it must be recognised that Lunacharsky’s own approach did leave ample room for Futurists to argue their own case.

The Marxist History of Art According to Lunacharsky

As the proletariat was in the process of learning and purging the cultural heritage of the ages, what did Lunacharsky envision its artistic output would eventually look like? To consider Lunacharsky’s model of proletarian art one must start with his musings on the development of art in a society and its stages of flourishing and decadence. In explaining his belief, Lunacharsky drew upon a Marxist reading of the history of art, linking certain forms of artistic expression with particular phases of social development, focusing primarily on the bourgeois

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class and its culture. He argued that during periods in which a particular class was possessed of strong ideals and drawn towards progress, realist art was dominant insofar as it was the most clear and communicative way of expressing grand ideas and agendas. Once a class entered a phase of intellectual decline and its innovative energy began to abate, its art became introverted: for Lunacharsky, when a class as a whole had little to say, its artists had no major concepts to depict, and as such they would move away from the “realist” idiom and focus more acutely upon formal explorations of their medium. Such art is formalist (that is, the elements of the creative method feature more prominently than the content or the message of the work) and has essentially nothing to communicate.

A speech on new art forms delivered by Lunacharsky at the Moscow State University in December 1923 aids our understanding of this theory. In assessing the modern movements of the early twentieth century, Lunacharsky noted that these movements were increasingly seeking to explore the formal capacity of art (and that this was especially the case in visual arts), while the content or message communicated by a particular work of art had become less important. He expressed the view that once the content or message of an artwork became less important than the elaboration of pure technical and formal aspects within the work, this was indicative of a wider social decadence: “Only classes that have become effete [...] transform art in pure form and beauty for its own sake, pleasure becomes the sole purpose of art, for they have nothing to say.” Symbolism, according to Lunacharsky, was a good example of this trend. The European fin-de-siècle was characterised by a general sense of pessimism and a need for escapism that saw people retreat from the real world. Though there was widespread discontent with the general state of affairs, there was also a lack of energy to actively bring about change. Instead, people found solace in worlds outside reality – mysticism, fantasy, medievalism and occultism of all kinds. Lunacharsky even employed the image of a typical French bourgeois young man at the end of

60 Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Agitatsiia i iskusstvo”, Iskusstvo i revoliutsiia, p. 75.
nineteenth century dressed almost as a woman, expressing his spiritual and physical fragility – to argue that this “effete” behaviour was indicative of a society that had found itself in a cul-de-sac. In the arts this trend manifested itself in Symbolism, art that was the exclusive domain of the privileged, who used it as a method of escapism. Symbolism, according to Lunacharsky, amounted to “grinding of the content,” – content in artworks became very obscure, formal elements took on a greater importance, communication between the art and the public gradually disappeared and art was served cold, as “an ultra-refined dessert after a bourgeois menu.” Bourgeois art became solely about pleasure and the satisfaction of individual needs (of the artist and his patrons, who were of privileged background), and had no social role whatsoever – certainly no desire to engage with the wider populace. In Lunacharsky’s estimation, there was no (realist) art to express grand ideas, because the bourgeoisie was no longer able to offer any such ideas.⁶²

Lunacharsky’s analysis of Cubist painting dismissed this movement as the continuation of a similar trend. The Cubist method was to pare back the subject matter to the most basic level – a still life, a portrait – as the central Cubist interest was to explore painterly technique and the formal possibilities of painting as a medium. The result was often at the edge of abstraction: content was so obscured by technical experimentation in form that it was almost indecipherable. For Lunacharsky, an exercise of this type had meaning only within artistic and narrow intellectual circles: it was an individualistic and self-indulgent endeavour that was largely irrelevant to the outside world. In the absence of a strong social impetus, Lunacharsky concluded, art began to look inward in order to find a reason for its own existence, and as such this “formalist art” was judged to be a practice predominantly interested in its own medium, and symptomatic of a society that had become stagnant: contemporary modern art by and large was formalistic because the bourgeoisie has “lived out its content,”⁶³ and the arts had no ideology to communicate.

⁶¹ Lunacharsky, Rech’, p. 25.
⁶² Lunacharsky, “Iskusstvo i ego noveishei formy”, pp. 203-211.
⁶³ Ibid., p. 200.
In his Marxist reading of the various modern movements, Lunacharsky also considered the phenomena of Italian and Russian Futurism. Italian Futurism, Lunacharsky argued, represented a reaction to this decadent withdrawal of art into itself – indeed, this quality was recognised by both Lunacharsky and Trotsky as a great advantage of the Futurist movement. Marinetti’s Futurism represented a rebellion against an affected, escapist and stagnant mind-set. In an attempt to reboot bourgeois society, Italian Futurism had called for a purge of the moody, the pale, and the pious, and had promoted instead masculinity and virility, seeking to build a new healthy body, complete with resilient nerves and infused with a desire for life, to get art out of stuffy salons and into open urban spaces. Or, as Lunacharsky described it, “Italian Futurism is a reaction of a doomed class that lost its content and became [...] passive. Futurism emerged out of a need for doping.”

The bourgeoisie, according to Lunacharsky, needed to regain its physical and mental strength if it was to cope with the new era of rapid modernisation, and indeed keep the reins of power firmly in its hands, because “it requires a lot of strength to hold the world in your hands.” Lunacharsky recognised that Futurism was able to promote this positive, life-affirming attitude, and he believed that this quality was something that proletarian art would do well to adopt. Italian Futurism, however, notwithstanding its stated desire to elevate bourgeois society, shared the same problem as other modern movements: in essence, it was lacking in content since it was ultimately still a component of a bourgeois intellectual framework.

Russian Futurism also exhibited an interest in formal research, having developed out of the same framework as its Italian cousin. In Russia, however,

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64 Lunacharsky, “Iskusstvo i ego noveishe formy”, p. 213.
65 Ibid., p. 211.
66 It is important to note that within the LEF camp there was a particular current of Russian Formalism. This circle, composed of philologists and literary historians, was concerned primarily with literature. They were heavily criticised at the time for their supposed total preoccupation with the form in creation and analysis of literary works. Although they had close ties with the Futurists, they are not considered here as part of Futurist development within Marxist theory which is the avant-garde current examined in this thesis. Since Futurists, however, especially in the context of visual arts discussed here, were often preoccupied with the issues of form, and saw form as equally important element in creation of new proletarian art, they themselves were accused by hostile contemporary critics (Lunacharsky included) of being formalists, a label that had increasingly negative connotations in the 1920s. For a basic outline of Russian Formalism see Victor Erlich, “Russian Formalism”, Journal of the History of Ideas, Vol. 34, No. 4 (October-December 1973), pp.
Futurists declared themselves Communists, and were prepared to use their art to communicate Communist content. Lunacharsky noted that Futurism (he referred to members of LEF directly) was unable to express revolutionary content, owing to its formalist nature and origin, and that Russian Futurists would thus have to abandon completely this past and seek simple and powerful methods if they wanted to express new Communist content. From Lunacharsky’s perspective, formalist research in painting served to obscure cultural content, rendering works almost if not completely abstract (progressive artists in Russia reached the idiom of abstraction in painting in the years of the First World War)\footnote{Experimentation by progressive artists opened the way for abstract (non-objective, \textit{bespredmetnoe iskusstvo}) painting, manifesting itself most significantly in the works of Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. The showcase of this development in arts was the exhibition \textit{The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting 0.10} which took place in St. Petersburg between December 1915 and January 1916. On the development of abstract painting by the Russian avant-garde see Slobodan Mijušković, \textit{Od samodovolnosti do smrti slikarstva, Umjetničke teorije (i prakse) ruske avangarde}, Geopoetika, Beograd, 1998, pp. 125-204.}  – and abstraction could not express the great concepts of Communist life-building. Lunacharsky saw this progressive art as being essentially mute: grand revolutionary ideas could only be obscured by complex formal language; these ideas could only find adequate expression within a realistic, simple and comprehensible visual canon. In addition, realist art had a “healthy” background, as it always formed during what was culturally and intellectually the most prolific phase in the development of a particular class. For these reasons, Lunacharsky regarded the predominantly realist art of the French Revolution as an appropriate and safe model, especially as it had arisen out of the most ideologically potent episode in bourgeois history.\footnote{Smirnov, ”A Little Known Speech by A. V. Lunacharsky”, p. 13.} What prevented realist art entering Soviet society immediately subsequent to the October revolution was its political background in Russia: most representatives of realism were members of the Academy or the established cultural elite, exhibited liberal (if not completely conservative) political views, and were as such un receptive to the Bolshevik agenda.\footnote{Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Revoliutsiia i iskusstvo”, \textit{Iskusstvo i revoliutsiiia}, p. 37 (Written on 7 October 1920); see also Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, “Ob otdеле izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv”, \textit{Ob iskusstve, Tom 2: Russkoe i sovetskoe iskusstvo}, Iskusstvo, Moscow, 1982, pp. 79-83. The essay was first published in \textit{Novii mir} 1966, No. 9, pp. 236-239. It was written most likely in 1920.} In Russia, the practitioners of the realist style in painting were known as the Wanderers (\textit{Peredvizhniki}) – a group that

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emerged in 1871 in St. Petersburg as a reaction against the Imperial Academy of Arts and its dogmatic adherence to neo-classical canons. The Wanderers were driven by a desire to contribute to the social debate of their time by devoting their creative ability to depictions of the real life of common people (and the peasantry in particular), as opposed to the ephemeral worlds of Greco-Roman mythology. The Wanderers would initially be associated with the nationalist ethos and the Populist movement in Russia, but by the 1890s they became members of the Academy, and began to enjoy the patronage of the Court itself. By the time young Futurists were beginning to make themselves heard on the Russian cultural stage, representatives of the realist school of painting had made the Academy their stronghold, becoming the resolute guardians of yet another artistic canon. At the point when the Bolsheviks took power, Russian realists were among the most intransigent cultural groups (associated at time even with the extreme right parties including the Black Hundreds). Thus, although formally compatible, realist art was in the immediate aftermath of October revolution politically at odds with the new leadership.

In the post-revolutionary period Lunacharsky argued that art should – above all else – convey an ideology. He noted that, just like the art of previous revolutions (he would repeatedly refer to the French Revolution as a model), cultural production needed to express revolutionary content, excite the soul and, through artistic expression, organise the emotions of the masses to help them face the current turbulent and confusing times. In a series of essays, Lunacharsky argued that art could be a great ally in spreading the revolutionary way of thinking.

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70 The Society of Travelling Art Exhibits had its inaugural show in November 1871. The term the Wanderers (Perevzhzniki – “those who travel about”) would come to be more frequently used as it denoted the Society's desire to take art to the people and break away from the centralised system ruled by the Imperial institutions of St. Petersburg and Moscow. See David Jackson, *The Wanderers and Critical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Russian Painting*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2006, pp. 6-7.


72 Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art*, p. 162.

73 In an article on his expulsion from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, David Burliuk remarked that the Wanderers, who were themselves expelled from the Academy for rejecting the tasks of their professors, were – fifty years later – behaving in a same manner, turning from prisoners into jailers, and moreover jailers of a “more decisive and cruel kind.” See “D. Burliuk o svoem iskluchenii iz uchilishcha zhivopisi”, *Nov*, 1 March 1914, p. 10.

feeling and acting throughout the country: “The state must ask itself if art can be of help here, and the answer is clear: if revolution can give art a soul, then art can give revolution a voice.” As such, and notwithstanding their political support, Lunacharsky wrote that the kind of great artistic expression created by Phidias and Sophocles for Athenian “semi-democracy” (poludemokratia), by Boccaccio and Giotto for Florentine democracy, or by Rousseau and David for the bourgeois revolution would not be achieved in the Soviet epoch by the Futurist method, as its formalist background prevented Futurist art from expressing great content. Never short of instructive parables, Lunacharsky equated Futurist works to showing a hungry person how to reap, grind, prepare and bake bread without giving him a piece of it: he believed that while Futurism exhibited significant technique, it failed to deliver on content and left the Russian audience hungry. While agreeing that Futurist art did offer some innovative and useful elements, Lunacharsky ultimately concluded that the new art would not be a decisive factor in the creation of proletarian art. The academic (predominantly realist) art, on the other hand, had the right form, but its content had been surpassed or was inadequate (and in any event its Russian exponents had no desire to lend their support to the Bolsheviks). Lunacharsky identified this paradox across the full breadth of the artistic domain, from visual arts to music and theatre; his response was to attempt to “proletarise” the old academic art, while “academising” the radical new art. Russia’s conservative realist artists needed to embrace proletarian ideology and express the great ideas of proletarian life-building through their realist repertoire; radical avant-garde artists, on the other hand, needed to be tamed to the point of remaining innovative enough to further develop the established realist method, but without spinning off into abstraction:

I personally believe that the path towards proletarian, socialist art comes from the past, and not through futurism, and if it incorporates some technical elements of futurism, it will be in small doses (I exclude from this

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75 Lunacharsky, “Revolutsiia i iskusstvo”, p. 34.
76 A. Lunacharsky, Iskusstvo i zhizni; Nashi zadachi v oblasti khudozhestvennoi zhizni (Stat’ia pervaia, Glavpolitprosvet i iskusstvo), RGALI f. 279, op. 1, d. 67, (documents from 1919 to 1933), l. 159b.
77 Ibid.
79 Lunacharsky, Osnovy teatral’noi politiki sovetskoi vlasti, p. 19.
industry-based artistic practice). This is my opinion that many other Communists probably share.\textsuperscript{80}

Lunacharsky’s writings demonstrate that his all-inclusive approach would not permit various artistic groups the freedom to express their individual positions, but would instead aim to channel each of these groups toward the goal of forging proletarian art. Historians have often noted that it would be wrong to regard Lunacharsky’s soft line cultural policy as an expression of liberalism\textsuperscript{81} as, after all, the concept of liberal Bolshevism would be a political oxymoron.\textsuperscript{82} Certainly Lunacharsky’s apparently permissive and tolerant stance was never going to go as far as excluding official influence from the process of cultural development.

Lunacharsky’s “personal belief,” though dismissing any notion of Futurist artistic accomplishment, did open a way for the incorporation of Futurist ideas within a different segment of proletarian expression. The Futurist concept of fusing artistic production with industry resonated strongly with Lunacharsky: the creation of objects that would ameliorate everyday life, along with projects that sought to organise the human environment (living spaces, working environments, urban surroundings), fitted in well with the Communist notion of life-building:

If we take a look at artistic tasks in the field of industry, we can see endless opportunities: creation of new cities, infrastructure, parks, gardens, people’s palaces, clubs, living spaces, reform and elevation of fineness of human utensils (\textit{cheholovecheskaia utvar’}), human clothes etc. Ultimately, it is a reconstruction of the surrounding natural environment. (\textit{V konechnom schete eto kak byestroika okruzhaiushchel nas estestvennoi sredy.})

[...]

We are currently in a very difficult situation and we cannot still talk about serious work in the domain of actual reconstruction of \textit{byt} of Russian workers and peasants – this will not be possible for a while but this does not mean that we should be indifferent to industrial possibilities of art.\textsuperscript{83}

In an essay on the union of industry and art, Lunacharsky considered the effect that this merger might have within Communist society. He argued that in the

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\textsuperscript{80} A. Lunacharsky, \textit{Iskusstvo i zhizn’, Nashi zadachi v oblasti khudozhestvennoi zhizni (Stat’ia pervaya, Glavpoliprostev i iskusstvo)}, RGALI f. 279, op. 1, d. 67, (documents from 1919 to 1933), l. 13.
\textsuperscript{81} Fitzpatrick, “The ‘Soft’ Line on Culture and Its Enemies”, p. 268.
\textsuperscript{82} Galushkin, “Nad strokoi partiinogo resheniia”, p. 110.
\textsuperscript{83} Lunacharsky, “Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i iskusstvo”, p. 42.
\end{flushright}
process of building of new social system, uniting industry with artistic production would serve to elevate the taste of the masses by producing things that were useful, and he also believed that this process would educate the Russian people and ensure that the “masses were not just a crowd.”\textsuperscript{84} Furthermore, he believed that a union of industry and art would be a defining project of Communist development: while under a Capitalist system production was driven by the need to maximise profits (which often had an adverse effect upon product quality), production that was oriented towards life betterment was distinctly Communist and could only be achieved under Communist (and not bourgeois) society.\textsuperscript{85} Accordingly, he acknowledged the significance of Futurist advocacy of a merging of industry and art, and reserved room for the Futurist movement in this new category.

A cause of tension between Lunacharsky’s view and the Futurist program was that Lunacharsky recognised the Futurist effort as a viable practice exclusively in the domain of industry. While supporting the idea that industry-based production of new objects and the organisation of environments would be a valuable component in the actualisation of socialist reality, Lunacharsky argued that these efforts were only one – “material” – aspect of artistic production where art was understood as means of changing everyday life and surroundings. For Lunacharsky, however, art had to also fulfil a second, ideological role: it had to express the ideology of the current system. Thus while agreeing that the newly emerging art was very good for “material” reconstruction of Communist life, Lunacharsky did not see eye to eye with the Futurist proposition that this material reconstruction was completely expressive of Communist ideology: for Lunacharsky, ideological content could be expressed in arts only through traditional means; neither the built environment nor everyday objects could adequately communicate ideological messages.\textsuperscript{86} Lunacharsky’s idea of how to best communicate ideological content followed the tradition of using images as instructional tools: just as with the Christian tradition of Paupers’ Bibles (\textit{Biblia

\textsuperscript{84} Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky, “Promyshlennost’ i iskusstvo”, \textit{Iskusstvo i revoliutsia}, p. 85.
\textsuperscript{85} Lunacharsky, “Promyshlennost’ i iskusstvo”, pp. 77-87.
\textsuperscript{86} Anatoly Vasilyevich Lunacharsky, “O znacheni i ‘prykladnogo’ iskusstva”, \textit{Iskusstvo i revoliutsia}, pp. 88-93.
pauperum) where images were used instead of text to communicate Biblical content to the illiterate, proletarian art needed to essentially follow this line of informative art (poznавatel’noe znachenie iskusstva) and produce clear images for the masses to learn about Communism. As such, Lunacharsky continued to search for the Communist Phidias and David, whose artistic genius would celebrate Communist ideology on a grand artistic scale and in well-recognised artistic forms.

The challenging visual art of Futurism was, by this logic, “unable to produce any ideological art, any magnificent sculptural or painterly depiction (иллюстратив) of the great historical event they witnessed.” All of which was perhaps unsurprising, insofar as Futurists had long ago abandoned the practise of creating artistic depiction and passionately rejected the bourgeois format of painting – after all, story-telling image-making was for Futurists a thing of the past, both because it expressed the worldview of a bourgeois class and because this format was regarded as obsolete in what was an era of expanded industrial possibility. For Futurists, the merging of art with industry so as to recreate – and thus directly influence – the everyday life, psychology and behaviour of those who would make use of the produced objects and live in these spaces represented living ideology. Lunacharsky, however, believed strongly that art could be separated into two broad categories: intellectual or contemplative “high art,” and applied art (art that was the product of manual labour), which was for him what a merger of art and industry essentially represented. These two broad categories of art were clearly separated – while the role of artistic practice within industry as envisioned by Futurists was to “reconstruct in a joyous manner all human surrounding,” fine art served to “organise our senses in a manner that helps us understand our tasks” –

88 Support of such reading of artistic production can be illustrated by Lunacharsky’s speech at “LEF and Marxism” conference held on 3 July 1923 in Moscow, published in English in I. Kuznetsova, “A. V. Lunacharsky and LEF”, Russian Studies in Literature, Vol. 12, No. 4 (Fall 1976), p. 66.
and for Lunacharsky, only fine art had the capacity to communicate ideological content.  

Thus while Futurism, owing to its “decadent” past, found itself excluded from the task of creating proletarian art, its concept of art in industry was viewed by Lunacharsky as offering great potential. There was, however, a significant problem inherent to Lunacharsky’s logic: his criticism of Futurism was – even upon its publication – obsolete. Lunacharsky’s tirade against abstract painting (as a symbol of the “degenerate” bourgeoisie) was simply misguided – abstract painting was a critically important phase for many progressive artists, as it was through abstraction that these artists were released from the task of manipulating the medium of painting or sculpture into an illusory space in which a certain narrative took place. By eliminating subject matter, artists were able to focus on painting and sculpture as objects in their own right, constructed of materials that carried certain inherent properties. This was a crucial point in the process of moving away entirely from creation of objet d’art to making of a utilitarian object – things constructed based on the knowledge of different materials and intended for use in daily life.

The Futurist abstract artistic practice (which was non-utilitarian) originated in the First World War period, and subsequently evolved into a particularly intense creative phase of “laboratory” Constructivism. By the end of 1921, however, Constructivism had moved completely away from artistic experimentation that was not goal oriented: it had by this point become committed entirely to Productionist theory, which regarded art as being exclusively guided by a utilitarian goal. In this process, painting and sculpture – abstract or otherwise – were completely eliminated from the Futurist vocabulary. In this sense, Lunacharsky found himself critical of a mode of Futurism that was long gone. Lunacharsky’s proposition that Futurism could be involved in the process of forging proletarian art only within the industrial sector was understandably unacceptable to Futurists: according to their program, there could only be a single proletarian art, one that did away with the bourgeois separation between “high”

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90 Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, O byte, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, pp. 80-81.
and "low" artistic practice. As such, to accept Lunacharsky's dismissive view that the Futurist position was anarchist, militant or childish would be to disregard the extent to which Futurists understood their contemporary conditions and the level to which they sought to implement Marxist guidelines within their own program. The issue of culture in the aftermath of October revolution was incredibly important to Futurists: they saw it as a decisive field of battle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie – a battle in which half-solutions and compromise, their measured allure notwithstanding, were simply unable to resolve.

**Trotsky’s Socialist Art**

Trotsky’s two-part article on Futurism, originally published in *Pravda* and subsequently transformed into a chapter on Futurism in his study *Literature and Revolution* – a publication described as being “as close as one is likely to get to an authoritative Left Opposition theory of art” – offers a comprehensive overview of Trotsky’s understanding of the movement. For his investigation of Futurism, Trotsky sought the opinions and material input of Vladimir Mayakovsky and Antonio Gramsci on aspects of Russian and Italian Futurism respectively. The significant interest shown in Futurism by a very busy political figure such as Trotsky was a telling indication of the profile of the movement: that the movement came under such intense scrutiny is testament to the challenge that it posed to Soviet leaders. A significant level of research and preparation is evident in Trotsky’s reading of Futurism, which produced an analysis that was more nuanced and even-handed than the interpretation offered by Lunacharsky.

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91 Trotsky’s article appeared under the title “Futurism” (subtitle: “Its Origin – The Break with the Past – Components of Russian Futurism – Theoretical Research and Wanderings – Creative Work – Mayakovsky – The Place of Futurism”) in *Pravda* on 25 September 1923 (pp. 2-4) and 26 September 1923 (pp. 2-3).

92 Lev Trotsky, *Literatura i revoliutsiia*, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow, 1924.


Trotsky recognised that Futurism, as an artistic and intellectual movement, opened itself to access by the wider public and sought to forge a direct connection with its contemporary socio-political reality. Trotsky acknowledged that Futurism had raised its voice against such things as the “automatism of yesterday,” trite social convention, mysticism, deification of nature and laziness, and called for an urgent rejuvenation based instead upon technology, scientific organisation, willpower, courage, speed, precision and the creation of a new modern man. Trotsky also recognised the fact that Futurism provoked discourse between the domains of art and life, and that it was in essence an aesthetic revolt against the moral and social stagnation of the day. Despite its rejection of the past Futurism was, in Trotsky's view, a continuation of a particular cultural tradition. The argument of both Trotsky and Lunacharsky was that Futurism, as a rebellion against bourgeois culture, was itself a product of this culture and more importantly was a rebellion aimed at a very narrow intellectual stratum – in other words, it was a storm in a teacup.

For Trotsky, the rebellious tactics employed by Futurists represented a shrewd act within bourgeois society, aimed as they were against the old intellectual elites, who were generally closed off from and disinterested in wider society. Russian Futurists attacked contemporary bourgeois culture – which for them predominantly meant the decadent practice of Symbolism, and the conservative realism of the Academy. He characterised the Futurist rebellion as a “revolt of the semi-pauperised left wing of the intelligentsia against the closed-in and caste-like aesthetics of the bourgeois intelligentsia.” Futurism aimed its “progressive revolt” against the staleness and impotence of the contemporary mind-set:

A revolt against a vocabulary that was cramped and selected artificially with the view of being undisturbed by anything extraneous; a revolt against impressionism, which was sipping life through a straw; a revolt against symbolism, which had become false in its heavenly vacuity, against Zinaida

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96 Ibid., p. 3.
Hippius and her kind, and against all the other squeezed lemons and picked chicken bones of the little world of the liberal-mystic intelligentsia.97

The problem encountered by Russian Futurists was that their tactics – essentially those of anarchic bourgeois bohemia as Trotsky defined it – were largely irrelevant in the process of proletariat life-building. While a call to destroy the past so as to rejuvenate intellectual life held appeal within the stuffy studies and studios of academia, such a call hardly registered with the proletariat. The working class could not break with tradition, Trotsky asserted, as it had never been able to lay claim to this tradition in the first place. Futurist revolution and proletarian revolution had very different origins: while Futurism fought against the bourgeois traditions of the intelligentsia, the proletariat sought to wrestle these same traditions from the hands of bourgeoisie and to master them, so as to themselves reach a new, higher cultural level. Trotsky argued that having set out at a very low level, proletarian development would be similar to that of all other classes in the course of history – first adopting, then mastering and eventually surpassing the cultural knowledge of the past. The call for a break with the past was senseless in a proletarian society, and while Trotsky saw the attack of Russian Futurists against the old intelligentsia as a commendable act, it was an act appropriate for the pre-revolutionary setting and he warned that this could no longer be a viable strategy in a country where the proletariat had emerged victorious.

Trotsky also expressed doubt as to the true social consequence of avant-garde antagonism, arguing that these rebellions were in fact never fundamentally revolutionary in nature, but instead simply acted as safety valves and ensured that no change took place at all. He pointed to a historic pattern where intellectual movements that challenged tradition functioned as a method of release for simmering social outrage, through which social dissatisfaction was tamed and eventually dissipated. Trotsky argued that the avant-gardes of one era inevitably became a component of the academic establishment in the next, and that bourgeois society always eventually absorbed these movements by giving them recognition – an act that essentially preserved the established order of things. By allowing intellectual and artistic avant-gardes to rebel against the system and then

97Trotsky, “Futurizm”, Pravda, 25 September 1923, p. 3.
gradually defusing these campaigns through official recognition, such as a chapter in a history textbook or a professorship within an academy, the bourgeoisie effectively created a controlled opposition, allowing the system to remain unaltered in perpetuity. Avant-gardists, Trotsky argued, would generally end up sitting next to the old Mandarins in the academy club: for Trotsky, the experience of Romanticism and its destiny was a telling example of this phenomenon. Futurist revolution was little more than a reaction against the tradition of the intelligentsia, to which it would eventually return: “Just as the wind always returns to its own circles, so these literary revolutionists and destroyers of traditions found their way to the Academy,”98 and as such the kind of rebellion Futurists were propagating was in fact only a simulacrum of revolution. This reading of the Futurist project was most likely influenced by the reply Trotsky had received from Gramsci, where Gramsci opened his discussion on Futurism with the words: “Since the war, in Italy, the futurist movement has utterly lost all its defining features. Marinetti now pays scant attention to the movement. He got married, and prefers to devote his energies to his wife.”99 Such commentary on the destiny of Europe’s first fully-fledged avant-garde movement certainly served to amplify Trotsky’s own view.

Proletarian revolution, on the other hand, was a true method for dismantling bourgeois society – because it dismantled prior society as a whole, beginning not with the superstructure but with the base. Furthermore, Trotsky highlighted that the proletarian project had its own revolutionary tradition – from the French Revolution and the Paris Commune, to the Revolution of 1905 – and the October revolution came as a continuation of that tradition. Futurists were never part of that revolutionary tradition; their discourse was always located solely within intellectual, bourgeois tradition. Trotsky argued:

The October Revolution appeared to the intelligentsia, including its literary left wing, as a complete destruction of its known world, of that very world from which it broke away from time to time, for the purpose of creating new schools, and to which it invariably returned. To us, on the contrary, the Revolution appeared as the embodiment of a familiar tradition, internally digested. From a world which we rejected theoretically, and which we undermined practically, we entered into a world which was already familiar

to us, as a tradition and a vision. Here lies the incompatibility of psychological type between the Communist, who is a political revolutionist, and the Futurist, who is a revolutionary innovator of form. This is the source of the misunderstandings between them. The trouble is not that Futurism “denies” the holy traditions of the intelligentsia. On the contrary, it lies in the fact that it does not feel itself to be part of the revolutionary tradition. We stepped into the Revolution while Futurism fell into it.\footnote{Trotsky, “Futurizm”, Pravda, 25 September 1923, p. 2.}

Tradition for Futurism and Communism incited two very different reactions: while the former wanted to eliminate it from the process of creating the future (acting essentially as a rebellious offspring who wanted to take the reigns), the latter sought to conquer it and transform it into a basis for the future. The achievements of the previous social systems (usually referred to as simply bourgeois culture) in the domains of arts, science and education were seen as something that was previously an exclusive right of the privileged: something that the proletarian class never had real access to (and thus could not rebel against). As such, one of the driving forces of the proletarian revolution was desire to access this domain, to elevate itself culturally and feed its progress on these achievements – not to reject it. Furthermore, the proletariat had its own revolutionary tradition and, unlike Futurists who rebelled against their intellectual ancestors, the proletariat was not in conflict with its own past.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of Trotsky’s comparison of Futurist and proletarian revolution, however, was his sense that the incompatibility between Futurism and Communism was more “the result of their [Russian Futurists’] spiritual past than of their social origin.” When Russian artists adopted Italian Futurism, they also took on certain “spiritual” baggage; Russians, however, had endured a different social past to Marinetti, and this was perhaps why Trotsky believed that there was the clear possibility that Russian Futurists could participate in the Soviet life-building project. Indeed, considering that Russian Futurism emerged from an already established network of social activism and that, under conditions that indelibly marked inter-revolutionary society in Russia, rebellion against even the intellectual establishment would very quickly translate into the political realm, it is not easy to delineate where Futurist revolution differed from social revolution – which is perhaps why Trotsky’s comment left
open the possibility of cooperation between the two.

Although Trotsky believed that the rebellious Futurist tactics were incompatible with the present-day proletarian agenda, he did not regard their turbulent past as an impediment that would prohibit Futurists from taking part in building Soviet society. In fact, he argued that Russian Futurism had been blessed with a historic opportunity to escape from the usual avant-garde destiny, because the revolution destroyed the possibility of the movement eventually becoming simply a component of the old intellectual establishment. Revolution, that is, rescued Russian Futurism from the usual avant-garde evolutionary path, which would ordinarily have seen it become tamed and academised. The Revolution had occurred when Futurists were at their rebellious high point:

The workers’ Revolution in Russia broke loose before Futurism had time to free itself from its childish habits, from its yellow blouses, and from its excessive exultation, and before it could be officially recognised, that is, made into a politically harmless artistic school whose style is acceptable. The seizure of power by the proletariat caught Futurism still in the stage of being a persecuted group. And this fact alone pushed Futurism towards the new masters of life, especially since the contact and rapprochement with the Revolution was made easier for Futurism by its philosophy, that is, by its lack of respect for old values and by its dynamics.101

Lunacharsky regarded the anarchic past of Futurism with unease: their rebellion against the past that had been carried into the era of proletarian life-building, and their insistence on taking radical measures in forging a new cultural domain represented a continuation of their recalcitrant logic and saw Futurists labelled as radicals under the new political conditions. Trotsky, on the other hand, read Futurist combative tactics as valid in the old system but incompatible with what he defined as proletarian tradition: in the post-revolutionary period, Trotsky believed that the Futurist project had reached the end of the line. Although having different origins, Futurism was caught by the proletarian revolution at the peak of its own revolution, and this for Trotsky was enough common ground to completely alter the angle of the discussion on Futurism:

We have no reason to doubt that the “Lef” group is striving seriously to

work in the interest of Socialism, that it is profoundly interested in the problems of art, and that it wants to be guided by a Marxian criterion. Why, then, begin with a rupture, and not with an effort to influence and to assimilate? [...] What is the situation regarding the artistic practice of Futurism and its research and accomplishments? Here there is even less ground for haste and intolerance.102

Of course, Trotsky’s reading of Futurism and his criticism of Futurist methodology as obsolete came at a time when the movement had already undergone its inner redefinition. Indeed, it was already during their work in *Iskusstvo kommuny* (1918-1919) that Futurism recognised the need for true Futurist-like rejection of their own past methods, and for the need to move from destruction towards construction. Trotsky insisted that once the movement shed its intelligentsia identity it would go through a significant qualitative change and cease being Futurism – which was in many ways the transformation that had happened during the Civil War, as was acknowledged by Futurist theoreticians in *LEF*. In his contribution to the first issue of *LEF* in 1923 Sergei Tretiakov had stated in no uncertain terms that if it “had not been for the Revolution, Futurism would have easily degenerated into child’s play (*igrushnichestvo*), catering to the blasé salon audience. Without the Revolution, the Futurist creation of human character (*chelovecheskaia lichnost’*) would never have gone beyond individualist anarchist attacks and wanton terror in word and paint. It would have become innocuous.”103

Unlike Lunacharsky, who believed that the ability of the Futurist movement to aid in the process of Communist life-building would be limited to the domain of industry, Trotsky recognised vast potential within Futurism: he wrote that the Futurist vision for future art was generally on the right track. Their innovations in language, literature, architecture and theatre, along with their reconstruction of visual arts on an industrial basis were all significant, according to Trotsky, with each offering innovative methods for building a socialist culture. Having identified the demonstrated commitment by Futurists to building socialist art through the following of Marxist criteria, Trotsky even went so far as to suggest that the state ought to have made approaches on the basis of assimilation and cooperation, rather than confrontation. He further asserted that it was not just on a theoretical

102 Trotsky, “Futurizm”, *Pravda*, 25 September 1923, p. 3.
level that Futurism was influential, but in practice as well, and that it was having an unquestionable impact upon the formation of new culture. Futurist poetry – and Mayakovsky’s work in particular – had pushed that field forward, as did Constructivism in visual arts. This led Trotsky to conclude that, irrespective of whether Futurism would stand he test of time, “today, at any rate, the strength of Futurism is greater than all those tendencies at whose expense Futurism is spreading.”\textsuperscript{104}

Trotsky was, however, critical of one of the central planks of Futurism: he did not subscribe at all to the notion that the future could be made in the present. Futurists believed that the role of their movement was, following the logic of material dialectics, to recognise the kernel of the future within the present, and to focus on developing that kernel. Trotsky regarded this notion as nonsensical, as it demonstrated a desire to “tear out of the future that which can only develop as an inseparable part of it, and to hurriedly materialise this partial anticipation in the present day dearth.”\textsuperscript{105} Using the domain of architecture to illustrate his point, Trotsky noted that the architecture of the future would rely upon new techniques to solve both old and new problems. Thus new endeavours, such as building people’s homes, community houses, vacations hostels, and large schools would be created by new methods and materials that would be determined in the future – it would be impossible to solve tomorrow’s construction problems today. By this logic, Futurist experimentation in architecture represented a futile search within a void. Trotsky argued that “beyond a practical problem and the steady work of solving this problem, one cannot create a new architectural style,” and that this theoretical and hypothetical research would merely lead to “more or less clever individual arbitrariness.”\textsuperscript{106} He disputed the Futurist concept that the future started now, instead asserting that the future problems would be solved later, in more favourable economic conditions: he believed that the accumulation of material culture, growing prosperity and developments in technique were prerequisites for experiments in art. In his article on the culture of the future, he highlighted that large-scale construction projects often had to be put on hold, and

\textsuperscript{104} Trotsky, “Futurizm”, \textit{Pravda}, 25 September 1923, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
that the “authors of gigantic, Tatlin-type projects got, unwillingly, additional time to think their projects through, and to correct or radically reconsider them.”\textsuperscript{107}

Another error that Trotsky saw in the Futurist approach was the determination to fuse art and life here and now. While he agreed that the separation between art and life had come as a result of class structure in society and that self-sufficient art (which had become a commodity object) was an indication that art was the property of the privileged classes only, Trotsky believed that art and life would fuse naturally in the future socialist reality through production, through the organisation of public holidays and through the organisation of collective life. While he supported Futurist efforts to point out pathways toward the possible realisation of these ideas, he objected to their stated desire to start work on this immediately. He argued that the Futurist call to abandon all past forms of art production, wherein “the poets, the painters, the sculptors, the actors must cease to reflect, to depict, to write poems, to paint pictures, to carve sculptures, to speak before the footlights, but they must carry their art directly into life,” without knowing exactly how to achieve this, and without the economic means, was unreasonable.\textsuperscript{108} For Trotsky it was not simply an issue of present economic poverty, but of cultural poverty as well; he echoed the perpetual problem identified in Lunacharsky’s writings of the need for the proletariat to endure the process of acculturation. Futurism aggressively asserted that art was not a mirror but a hammer; that art was not for depicting reality, but for constructing it. Trotsky picked up on this line, arguing that the present cultural poverty of the proletariat meant that the proletariat only had the “mirror” and that it did not know at all how to use the “hammer” – it needed to learn first, and the past art was a way of “picturing and imagining knowledge,” without which there would be no moving forward.

Trotsky made exclusive use of the term “socialist culture” rather than “proletarian culture,” as he totally rejected the possibility of proletarian culture. Trotsky’s view – in line with Marxist theory – was that the proletariat as a class

\textsuperscript{107} Lev Trotsky, “O kul’ture budushchego”, Sochineniea, Problemy kul’tury, Tom XXI: Kul’tura perekhodnogo perioda, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, pp. 446-449.

\textsuperscript{108} Trotsky, “Futurizm”, Pravda, 25 September 1923, p. 3.
was a transitory phenomenon: on the way to destroying the class structure and moving toward a classless socialist system, the proletariat would triumph over the bourgeoisie, and this triumph would simultaneously result in the elimination of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as all classes would disappear. If the proletariat as a class was only a transitory stage and an episode on the road to socialist reality, Trotsky argued that all social domains during the proletarian struggle were also transitory in nature. Furthermore, he believed that there would simply not be time to create a fully-fledged proletarian culture, because proletarian victory would immediately usher in the creation of socialist culture. Though recognising that the proletarian period would not be brief, Trotsky believed that, unlike previous epochs where periods of class dominance lasted for centuries, the proletarian transition would occur over a number of decades, which would not allow enough time for the creation of a rounded model of proletarian culture.\(^{109}\) Lunacharsky, on the other hand, argued that despite the period of proletarian dictatorship being relatively short in comparison to previous historical developments, there would nonetheless still be time for forge a mature and complete proletarian culture.

For Trotsky the notion that a proletarian culture could become powerful enough to stand against bourgeois culture was absurd: he believed that there would never be proletarian culture, but only a preparatory phase that would usher in the dawn of socialist life and – with it – socialist art. Theorising that the proletarian phase would be militaristic, and in this phase there simply would not be the requisite economic and social stability to permit a coherent and complete development of a proletarian cultural system, he asserted that the revolutionary era would not be an epoch of new culture, but rather a path toward its realisation: “If a line were extended from present art to the socialist art of the future, one would say that we have hardly now passed through the stage of even preparing for its preparation.”\(^{110}\) Central to Trotsky’s argument was his strong belief that cultural and economic development were closely linked and that, owing to the development of the New Economic Policy in the period that followed War Communism, all manner of different economic models coexisted: “remains of patriarchism, elements of the petty-merchant economy, elements of private


\(^{110}\) Ibid., p. 12.
capitalism, state-capitalism and finally elements of socialist economy.”\textsuperscript{111} Similarly, this transitional period in the domain of culture was marked by the existence of a mélange of elements of courtly art, bourgeois culture, petty bourgeois and peasant elements. All of these elements and their complex interaction made for a culture of the transitional period, and in this melting pot “Futurism contributes to a greater degree and more directly and actively than all other tendencies, in forming the new art.”\textsuperscript{112}

Trotsky’s vision for contemporary cultural development was an open, in-progress, transitory activity, as opposed to the fixed and completed cultural system envisioned by Lunacharsky. As such, Trotsky’s view was in direct accord with the proponents of Futurism. Through the works of Nikolai Chuzhak, Tretiakov and Arvatov in \textit{LEF}, Futurists asserted that their movement would be a decisive stage in the development of a socialist culture: just as the proletarian class would be the last class, Futurism would be the last art, as through their experiments in merging life and art in the era of Communism these boundaries would be broken, and there would no longer be any separation between life and art. Through the transitional period Futurism saw itself as fulfilling the same role as the proletarian class: fighting to renovate the human mind-set and, instead of having a set cultural model, in a state of constant flux, as the creation of socialist reality demanded continual transformation and adaptation.

\textbf{Answering the Brief}

The creation of a form of artistic expression that would serve as one of the tools for forging the New Soviet Man was a task of both great urgency and utmost intricacy. The development of the Futurist method needs to be considered in the context of this painstaking search for an approach to creative production that would achieve this goal. Although the Futurist movement has previously been cast

\textsuperscript{111} L. Trotsky, “Kul’turnaia rabota i ‘proleterskaia’ kul’tura”, \textit{Voprsy kul’turnoi raboty}, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow, 1924, p. 158.

\textsuperscript{112} Trotsky, \textit{Literature and Revolution}, pp. 13-14.
as radical, brash and irrational, it must also be recognised that Futurism, to a significant degree, answered the brief with which it was presented.

Futurists called for the elimination of old artistic methods from the process of creating the new proletarian culture because old formats, as they repeatedly argued, were intrinsically linked with an out-dated mentality, and were at the same time unable to capture the dynamism of modern life, based as they were upon traditional (non-industrial) artistic processes. Accordingly, Futurists took a very assertive approach in combating bourgeois culture, believing that this was a decisive battle within the wider revolutionary campaign. Lunacharsky claimed that the contemporary bourgeoisie had no grand (or even particular) ideals, which he asserted was proven by the fact that modern art was formalist (that is, it was not a form conducive to expressing actual content) because the bourgeoisie no longer had any grand message to communicate. In contrast to this view, Futurists embraced Marx’s assessment of the bourgeois class and continually argued that the bourgeoisie had in fact historically been a very dynamic and revolutionary class, capable of and willing to undergo significant transformation in order to preserve its own position – and was thus an enemy not to be underestimated. In the cultural domain in particular the fight against bourgeois influence was crucial, as this was in essence – as Tretiakov had asserted – the fight for the “soul of the proletariat.” As such, and as Nikolai Punin had argued in his articles for *Iskusstvo kommuny*, the power of bourgeois culture represented a serious challenge, and an adequate counterattack had to be devised not only with urgency, but also with utmost care.

Futurist criticism of old artistic formats (such as painting or sculpture) was founded on the notion that these were products of, and thus intrinsically lined to, the old bourgeois world-view, and they transmitted bourgeois ideology regardless of any change in content. In addition, old formats of art-making were unable to adequately express the principles of Communist teachings, because they were static, built to endure and, most importantly, they were dead objects on a wall or in a corner – theirs was a format prohibitive of a true fusion with life. These formats, as Futurists argued consistently, simply did not work anymore – a notion that was

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at the core of Punin’s argument against bearded monuments, as well as Tretiakov’s consideration of public holidays. Futurists believed that in a new form, the new content would have greater communicative power.

The Futurist approach also eliminated the hierarchical division of artistic categories, directly confronting the Capitalist notion of the division of labour. Through their attempts to forge a union of art with industry, Futurists outlined a plan for realising the Communist vision of a new approach to labour and production. Art-making based upon industrial processes was a solution that surpassed ideological issues associated with the use of old art forms, and it also offered new formats that were more in line with the notion of employing art in the creation of new life and of taking advantage of new technological possibilities, rather than limiting art to the role of decorating the dwellings of the privileged. This was an aspect of the Futurist program that Lunacharsky was unable to grasp, as his understanding of creative work remained anchored to the traditional system of artistic categorisation. For centuries, European academies supported a very hierarchical understanding of art – fine arts were more contemplative and thus on a higher level than applied arts, which were understood as involving more manual (and less contemplative) engagement. As he repeated continually throughout his writings, Lunacharsky supported the Futurist notion of a union of art with industry in the process of creating useful objects, but he did not see these material objects as being able to communicate ideological content, as this was the exclusive prerogative of fine art such as painting and sculpture. Futurists, in stark contrast, demonstrated that within the coordinates of the new Communist system there simply could not be fine nor applied arts, as these were products of – and supportive of – the Capitalist way of life. It is also instructive to recall that applied art at this time was understood as being the production of objects, onto which a particular decoration was subsequently added. In their work Futurists made a clear distinction between this practice and the production of their objects, wherein artists would design and create objects of everyday use that were supremely functional, shaped by the demands of industrial production and specific knowledge of materials, and empowered to provoke behaviour that would engender
Communist consciousness. Each of these aspects far surpassed the traditional concept of an object of applied art.

In addition to the creation of objects that had quotidian value, Futurists – again in line with the logic of realising art that would be capable of creating a new reality – applied their talent to the creation of environments, as well as to the creation, innovation and implementation of industrial processes themselves. A similar logic regarding the direct influence of art in life as a result of technological development is visible in many other aspects of art, such as the use of newspapers as a form of mass media, and the way that photographs accompanying text created new ways of thinking about literature. To again return to the image of Anton Lavinskii’s kiosk, the Futurist program sought to unite creativity with technology in the belief that through the use of these objects, and as a result of inhabiting carefully designed environments, people would adopt a particular behaviour, which would in turn forge a particular consciousness. Futurism was essentially focused on bringing ideology to life through production. Lavinskii’s kiosk, which represented a total union of the artistic, the industrial, the ideological, the quotidian and the civic, was thus closer to a solution – and conceptually far ahead of Lunacharsky’s editions of Tolstoy’s works sandwiched between Marxist introductions and conclusions – for realising the New Soviet Man.
Conclusion

On April 12, 1930 Vladimir Mayakovsky died instantaneously, having shot himself in the chest with a Mauser revolver. The death by suicide of a poet who had come to be known as the voice of the Revolution, and who was a household figure nationwide, sent shockwaves through Soviet society. In 1908, the Tsarist secret police had opened a surveillance file on Mayakovsky, owing to his established links with the revolutionary underground. To the Tsarist agents he would be known from then on as “The Tall One” (Vysokii). Daily reports opening with “Vysokii left home at such and such hour, in the direction of...” traced Mayakovsky’s movements around Moscow, recording everything from his purchase of bread rolls at a local bakery to his encounters with other persons of interest.1 Just over two decades later, Mayakovsky would become the subject of another secret police investigation: this time it would be agents from the Soviet Commissariat for Internal Affairs (the future KGB) who would compile the notorious “file No. 50” concerning the circumstances of Mayakovsky’s death.2

Rapidly spreading rumours that the poet, whose verses celebrated the revolutionary victory and the fledging Soviet stroi, had taken his own life in response to feelings of profound frustration with the way that Soviet reality had unfolded were a source of significant concern for the authorities. Soviet agents kept their ears close to the ground, making particular note of conversations within artistic circles where the belief that the cause of Mayakovsky’s suicide was

1 GARF f. 63, op. 44, d. 84. Elements from Mayakovsky’s files have been published in works such as Wiktor Woroszylski, The Life of Mayakovsky, Victor Gollancz, London, 1972; Vasili A. Katanian, Mayakovsky, Khronika zhizni i deiatel’nosti, Sovetskii pisatel’, Moscow, 1985.

2 From 1935 file No. 50 was located in the personal files of Nikolai Yezhev, head of the NKVD (later the KGB), and housed in the Kremlin in the archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (which was in 1991 renamed the Archive of the President of Russian Federation). The file was presented to the State Museum of V. V. Mayakovsky in 1995. S.E. Strizhneva (ed.), “V tom, chto umiraiu, ne winite nikogo”, Sledstvennoe delo V. V. Mayakovskogo: dokumenty, vospominaniia sovremennikov, Ellis Lak 2000, Moscow, 2005, pp. 5-6.
“disillusionment with the Soviet system” was widespread.3 Rumours of a collective suicide pact within a group of poets – perhaps as a symbol of protest, or as a message to the West about the state of affairs in Soviet Russia – made the authorities nervous, as did insinuation that the state was directly implicated in Mayakovsky’s death,4 all of which produced “a very unfavourable impression not only on Soviet citizens but also on ex-officio residents in the USSR.”5 The death of a poet had quickly become a matter of national security.

Mayakovsky’s suicide was a mystery for his contemporaries, and has largely remained a mystery for historians. Whatever might have ultimately prompted Mayakovsky’s decision to end his own life, however, it is certainly the case that in the period preceding his death he had expressed growing discontent with the way that Soviet life was beginning to head. Historians often cite a speech that he delivered on 25 March 1930 – just days prior to his death – at a gathering dedicated to the celebration of twenty years of his creative work to illustrate this point.6 Reflecting upon his twenty-year effort to inaugurate a new kind of mind-set and to create a modern Soviet reality, Mayakovsky noted that the combat over these years had effectively amounted to eliminating “all those Venuses of Milo” from the process of creating a new life. These manifestations of a time long gone were simply unable, in Mayakovsky’s view, to satisfy the needs of the millions who were working to create a new modern reality in the bustling city atmosphere. Just prior to this lecture, Mayakovsky had been given a piece of candy from a colleague – a candy from the state run department store Mossel’prom, the wrapper of which had been decorated with an image of the Venus of Milo.7 Mayakovsky’s comment demonstrates that this candy wrapper was a sharp blow to those who had fought

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4 In late 1980s and early 1990s Russian author Valentin Skoriatin published a series of articles where, based on archival materials, he argued that the state was directly involved in Mayakovsky’s death. These articles are collected in Valentin Skoriatin, Taina gibeli Vladimira Mayakovskogo, Novaja versija tragedoksikh sobytii, osnovannaja na poslednikh nakhodkakh v sekretnykh arkhivakh, Zvonitsa, Moscow, 2009.
5 In early 1980s Russian author Valentin Skoriatin published a series of articles where, based on archival materials, he argued that the state was directly involved in Mayakovsky’s death. These articles are collected in Valentin Skoriatin, Taina gibeli Vladimira Mayakovskogo, Novaja versija tragedoksikh sobytii, osnovannaja na poslednikh nakhodkakh v sekretnykh arkhivakh, Zvonitsa, Moscow, 2009.
6 See, for example, Boris Thomson, Lot’s Wife and the Venus of Milo, Conflicting Attitudes to the Cultural Heritage in Modern Russia, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1978, p. 73.
relentlessly to build the new Soviet state, not upon the ruins of ancient Greece, but on a modern, technological and industrial basis. Whether this episode was the final straw for Mayakovskii will remain unknown – but certainly this anecdote is illustrative of the late 1920s sentiment among Futurists that their efforts had been in vain. Yet this should not distract us from assessing the influence of the Futurist project and the consistency within their reasoning: Futurists had clearly recognised the cultural requirements of their time, and had largely been able to address them. In addition, through their work Futurists had drawn attention to a number of key issues, and had compelled responses and recognition from Bolshevik luminaries – even those who had been critical of the Futurist project. Finally, the ability of this cohort of avant-garde artists and writers to read and react to their contemporary situation is confirmed by the fact that so many Futurist principles can be identified in the subsequent Soviet cultural model.

Soviet leaders incessantly repeated that one of the key tasks of the October revolution was the necessity to change byt – to change the habits of everyday life – in order to change the old passive mind-set so as to create a new, dynamic and progress-oriented Soviet citizen. Lunacharsky often asserted that the ultimate goal of the revolution was to achieve a reconstruction of byt, and it was in this field that one encountered the greatest difficulties: while the state system could be changed by decrees and the economic system by organising labour, he wrote, byt had deep roots in history and instinct that were extremely difficult to alter. For Lunacharsky the task of making a meaningful and conscious impact on the process of byt was essentially the final frontier of the revolution. Through creating modern, useful objects and environments, Futurists directly confronted the problem of changing byt, targeting the root of the problem, rather than attempting to make cosmetic changes such as paintings of peasants and revolutionary heroes.

In his famous essay “Artist as Producer,” Walter Benjamin recognised that the revolutionary artist was someone who did not accept the established system of

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8 Anatoly Vasilievich Lunacharsky, O byt, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, Moscow/Leningrad, 1927, pp. 9-10; RGASPI f. 142, op. 1, d. 277 (1921-1930), ll. 7-8; Trotsky held similar views on the urgency of changing traditional byt, see Lev Trotsky, Voprosy byta, Gos. izd-vo, Mosocz, 1924.
artistic production, but who instead developed and revolutionised that force. In this process, as Terry Eagleton’s discussion of Benjamin’s essay highlights, a new relationship between the artist and the audience was formed. Eagleton notes that it was not “just a question of pushing a revolutionary ‘message’ through existing media; it is a question of revolutionizing the media themselves,” before concluding that “The truly revolutionary artist, then, is never concerned with the art-object alone, but with the means of production.” Old formats, in other words, command a certain kind of relationship between the artist, the object and the audience – a relationship that would not change if pioneers were depicted instead of nymphs and Madonnas. Their efforts to change the structure of this relationship are demonstrative of the Futurists’ interest in offering a solution to the root problem.

One of the central questions in the debate concerning proletarian culture was certainly the profile of the proletarian artist. Futurists were always committed to the notion that art production, just like any other domain, was a professional field: the notion that proletarian art was something that was made by a proletarian was, as their discussions in *Iskusstvo kommuny* demonstrated, completely rejected by Futurists. Central to their concern was the fact that a person who did not have proper training in art tended to imitate the well-established patterns of art making – this was the origin of their confrontation with Proletkult, as well as later with the association of proletarian writers. For Futurists, the issue at stake was that an artist was a professional, not a semi-professional who worked at a lathe by day and composed poetry by night. The problem was not merely that amateurs in general tend to repeat established patterns of artistic practices, but that professional training was a prerequisite to any kind of creative break-through.

The issue of evolution versus revolution in the creative process also needs to be considered in the context of artistic professionalism. Futurism was perceived both by many of its contemporaries and later by numerous scholars as a quintessentially anarchistic phenomenon, owing to its fervent call to eliminate everything old and start anew. At every given opportunity Lunacharsky would

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castigate Futurists for this anarchist penchant, reminding them that “The proletariat is a class that grew organically from the capitalist epoch, and it cannot be seen as an anarchic rolling stone torn from the soil.”

This was in line with his (and Lenin’s) evolutionary concept of culture, where one class inherits everything from the old, from which a new creative form of expression then grows. Futurism, of course, was no different: its program did not emerge from nowhere, but was the product of a thorough and professional understanding of the past; it was from this knowledge that, as Chuzhak explained in his article “Under the Banner of Life-Building”, a revolutionary (dialectic) reconsideration of art could be made to meet the needs of the new society. This could not be achieved without the knowledge that only a professional artist possessed. Thus the Futurist stance essentially mimics the Bolshevik notion of the revolutionary vanguard: cultural revolution could only be achieved by a group of professionals who could push culture forward; it was not a job for amateur artists who might never posses the level of knowledge and skill necessary to achieve revolutionary change. For Futurists, creative innovation required professionalism.

Eagleton notes that the creation of form is a complex unity of three elements: “it is partly shaped by a ‘relatively autonomous’ literary history of forms; it crystallizes out of certain dominant ideological structures [and] it embodies a specific set of relations between author and audience.”

Similarly, in his study of the Russian avant-garde, Slobodan Mijušković argues that the kind of revolutionary reconsideration of art that occurred within avant-garde circles was a product both of the inner development of art (starting with the rejection of mimetic concepts in art), and the outside demands of contemporary society for a different, more socially active form of artistic practice. The Futurist concept was not the result of an immaculate conception; it came about as a product of both an internally propelled impetus and external (social) demands. It was this inner artistic revolution that could not have happened without professionalism, nor without a deep understanding of the artistic field and its history, which in turn

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12 Eagleton, Marxism and Literary Criticism, pp. 24-25.
13 Slobodan Mijušković, Od samodovolnosti do smrti slikarstva, Umetničke teorije (i prakse) ruske avantgarde, Geopoetika, Beograd, 1998, pp. 206-211.
allowed Futurists to push the boundaries of that field. It must therefore be remembered that Futurism did not stand for destruction of the past – its focus was always exclusively upon attacking the influence of and reliance upon old cultural models, believing them unsuitable for expressing contemporary reality.

Finally, the role of art (and culture more generally), and the question of whether art was a prerequisite for revolutionary change, or instead an “epiphenomenon”\(^\text{14}\) – something that came after the revolution, as a secondary social development – remained a point of contention among the Bolshevik elite. Eagleton illuminates the complex position culture has in Marxist theory:

> Culture for Marxism is at once absolutely vital and distinctly secondary: the place where power is crystallized and submission bred, but also somehow ‘superstructural,’ something which in its more narrow sense of specialized artistic institutions can only be fashioned out of a certain economic surplus and division of labour, and which even it its more generous anthropological sense of a ‘form of life’ risks papering over certain important conflicts and distinctions.\(^\text{15}\)

Lunacharsky understood that cultural development was not something to be done after the political and economic conditions had stabilised, but as something vital to the success of the revolutionary process itself.\(^\text{16}\) Trotsky’s consideration of Futurism, by contrast, demonstrates that he believed – as in his example of architectural development – that the concrete problems would be solved once material conditions allowed for the proper testing of various issues. Creating a future architecture and solving future problems with theory was, in Trotsky’s estimation, something that could easily slip into arbitrariness. The Futurist program, of course, was from its outset committed to the notion that in order to secure the kind of future aspired to by the revolution, work on this future had to begin in the present. For Futurists, art – employed as it was in directly creating consciousness – was a fundamental component in any quest to realise a future society. While it was certainly true that a number of Futurist projects could only

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\(^{16}\) Anatoly Vasilevich Lunacharsky, *Idealizm i materializm; Kul’tura burzhuznaia, perekhodnaia i sotsialisticheskaia*, Krasnaia nov’, Moscow/Leningrad, 1924, p. 83.
have been realised on their envisioned scale in the future (once permitted by economic conditions), it is important to remember that Futurism also embraced the concept of minimum program, where, while remaining focussed on the future, they were committed to doing as much as possible in the present. That is, although Futurists acknowledged the economic conditions lamented by Trotsky, they nonetheless believed that the future was a function of the present, and they were ready to devise ways of building the future within the coordinates of the here and now.

Trotsky’s consideration of Futurism, notwithstanding his criticism, represented an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of the Futurist program. Futurism forged an open method, a continual quest for the best approach to creating a new consciousness – it did not resemble the traditional creation of an artistic school that would settle upon and perpetually promote a particular style. Although Futurists in their texts often use the term “proletarian art,” their program in fact outlines this “open” method, where there is no such complete and finished product as “bourgeois art” or “proletarian art” the way Lunacharsky saw it. This Futurist assertion echoed Trotsky’s view that the contemporary conditions were an introductory, transitional phase along the path to a socialist reality that would ultimately have its own cultural model. It is therefore unsurprising that the general outlook offered by Futurism met with Trotsky’s approval.

Revolution presented the Futurist cohort with the task of creating a completely modern and Communist mode of art-making that would befit a society based upon a completely new set of principles. By almost any measure Futurism answered this brief: as a movement, it reacted to the task of the day and gave answers to many of the problems posed by the revolution, by the looming influence of bourgeois cultural models and by the need to forge a new common mentality. That it encountered difficulties in defining and delivering this program can hardly be considered exceptional, especially as Lunacharsky’s approach is demonstrative of the fact that alternatives to the Futurist program were also confronted with equally serious difficulties.
In his work on the relationship between the avant-garde and Socialist Realism, Boris Groys demonstrates that there were several key avant-garde notions that were integrated into Socialist Realism. Like Futurism, the art of Socialist Realism was optimistic, and it harboured a keen belief that a work of art should abandon transcendental aims and become instead a force of social development. Following on from the Futurist model, Socialist Realism set out not to simply portray but to shape life; Socialist Realist art was not to be mimetic but prophetic. The commitment to a total transformation of life classifies both phenomena as totalising projects. Furthermore, Socialist Realism liberated artists from catering to the needs and whims of the consumer market. Groys also recognised that the Stalinist cultural model promoted a system where art was the prerogative of an elite group of creators – just as Futurists had believed strongly that the production of art should be the role of professional artists and not of the masses.\(^\text{17}\) The definition of Futurism as a method of creating a new consciousness, wherein actual production is ultimately a mutable, non-canonical means towards this end, permits Socialist Realism to be understood as a continuation of the Futurist project. The evolution of the Futurist program, from its original Italian corpus of ideas through to the development of those ideas in line with Marxist theory, ultimately opened to door for Socialist Realism. This reading adds both to the history of Soviet cultural development and to scholarly efforts dedicated to understanding how Italian Futurism functioned in Russia and why it developed the way that it did. If Russian Futurism developed as a tool for actualising an ideology or a method for creating a new consciousness, then the Futurist project is deserving of fresh judgement, as it is clear that many of its components later emerged within the Soviet cultural mentality. Any dismissal of Futurism as utopian – in line with the claim that Futurists did not understand the complexity of their own historic moment – must be regarded as a historical distortion, as this was not a characteristic inherent to Futurism itself.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

Gosudarstvenny arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), Moscow

Fond 63: Otdelenie po okhranenii obshchestvennoi bezopasnosti i poriadka v Moskve (Okhrannoe otdelenie) pri Moskovskom gradonachelnike 1880-1917

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