

The Problem of 'New' Art Perception in the USSR: Case Study of Avant-Garde

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Abstract

The article reveals the similarities in development of Soviet art in post-Revolutionary years and in the period of "defrosting" and "stagnation". It was accepted, that this comparison is appropriate due to presence of similar aspects in the Soviet political system of the abovementioned chronological periods. The author demonstrates a great role of avant-garde art in the cultural life of the country in 1920-1930 and at the turn of 1950-1960. The specific character of Russian avant-garde, as the "Revolutionary" art, was revealed. It substantiated the idea about possible approval of the Soviet leadership in the sphere of "new" art (including rock-music) in the whole world in post-Stalin period due to competitive advantages, as compared to the USA and Great Britain. There were important factors—given the specificity of Soviet cultural policy that prevented the USSR from becoming the global leader in the sphere of new art. The negative aspects of Soviet socialist realism were denoted, even though partially, especially in advancement of the USSR's positive image in the world. The conclusion is that there needs to be certain amount of freedom under the cultural policy of the state as a required condition for participation in cultural sphere.

Keywords: art, culture, avant-garde, leadership, rock music, the left, the USSR, "defrosting"

Introduction

The Soviet art is traditionally associated with the style that got the name "socialist realism". The coinage appeared for the first time only in 1923 in the editorial of "the Literary Paper" (its author was I.M. Gronsky). I.V. Stalin approved this term in the course of meeting with writers in M.Gorky's house on October 26 of the same year (Revyakina, 2002). In other words, the socialist realism is not "the age mate" of the Soviet power; moreover, this cultural style had a competitor for some time, with many reasons to identify itself with the Revolution (in all appearances, even more than the socialist realism had).

Procedure

Our work is based on the principles of dialectics, historicism and scientific objectiveness. We deny the understanding of history as "the politics, upset to the past" and we use the problematic/chronological and comparative methods.

Results

Makarevich writes, "In the beginning of the XX century, avant-garde was the art of Revolution and the art of industrialization" (Makarevich, 2015). At that, some Russian theorists fairly noted, that Russian avant-garde was not simply developed "with the times" (Troitsky, 2012), "in Russia ... [avant-garde] was especially expected, as the opinion about the significance of definitely educating role of art and the importance of content of pieces of art always prevailed here" (Smirnova, 2009). This part of Russian art "...in political meaning was a part of general ideology, worldview, whereas European abstract art presented a pure art movement" (Borisova, 2006). It is not for nothing, that there is an opinion, that

"... the Revolution in whole was organized not only and not just politically, but aesthetically - by means of avant-garde activity. It is the avant-garde, that moved along all other European movements of that time in negation of nature and naturality in favor of creation of absolutely artificial society, where is no and cannot be the place for the old world. The negation of everything old in favor of new right structure, not infected with old diseases, excellently characterized the Soviet government. Negating and denying old ideals, it could be supported only by future achievements in its ideology" (Mikhasenko, 2014).

Thus, it is obvious, that avant-garde was actually not only the art that turned to future (Zaytseva, 2009), but also the art, the essence of which was determined by the cultural crisis of modernity (Shukurov, 2008), being in many ways the anti-religious art (Tsvetayeva, 2006). The connection of outstanding representatives of Western avant-garde with the Left political ideas is widely known.

Judging by everything, such important role of avant-garde art was not accidental. As a matter of fact, it was repeatedly noted, that the shift of political polemic and even political infighting to the cultural sphere presents an important peculiarity of Russian society. Let us point out that such situation was also typical of the pre-revolutionary Russia. In particular, "in the way of functioning in spiritual life of Russia of the XVIII century, the literature was the journalism, ideology, ethics, practical philosophy and even the religion to some extent, rather than the art of declamation, joining all humanitarian aspects of social life" (Lebedev, 2000).

It is not for nothing that when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, the avant-garde art in Russia took leading positions for some time. In February of 1919 in Petrograd, under the aegis of People's Commissariat for Education, a conference was held there, where it was decided to create a new, novel museum of artistic culture, which, in the opinion of initiators, presented not "the time rubbish", but only modern "fine art". It was an ideological war for life or death. There is the information that K. Malevich with his like-minded fellows tried to organize a kind of demolition in the Art Academy, breaking there a part of "ideologically destructive" educational gypsum sculptures, preventing, in their opinion, from the development of new, truly revolutionary art. Academic realism began to be considered the aesthetics of "exploitative classes" among the representatives of early Soviet art.

In those conditions, there was a need in the authority of new institution, which would point out clearly what was worth of eternity, and what was not. It is fairly considered that the Museum of Fine Art became the first Museum of Modern Art in the world, preceding the famous New-York ones—the Museum of Modernist Art (MOMA) and the Guggenheim Museum— by almost 20 years. The Soviet power destroyed the market in general and the artistic one in particular and it supported the new revolutionary art as best it could. The pieces were bought by the state commission and were spread along the whole of Russia in a planned way. Creative laboratories and museum departments were opened in many provincial towns. To propagate the abstract art, the

state actually took huge efforts.

It is important to mention that native avant-garde was propagated in a global scale: thus, in 1924 K. Malevich presented suprematic pictures in Venetian Biennale, the most authoritative international forum. If the Revolution did something good, then it deprived the Russian intellectuals of the provincial complexes, peculiar of many literate Russians even today. The avant-garde public figures had a unique experience; they understood it perfectly well and hurried to dictate it to the whole world (Koldobskaya, 2003). Consequently the fact that avant-garde was frequently named in the West as "Russian art" (Dembich, 2011), rather than anything else, was not occasional.

In the opinion of many theorists (including the foreign ones), the brightest sample of Soviet avant-garde was architecture, where the union of avant-garde and communist ideas generated such significant trend, as constructivism. "Its representatives denied "the art for the art's sake", they created the projects of new cities, designing not only architectural ensembles, but also the whole life of citizens" (Mikhasenko, 2014).

However, by the end of 1920, the views of All-Union Communist Party and Soviet state about culture changed significantly, and essentially, the socialist realism was declared as the Soviet art. Moreover, at that time "the state ... consolidates the monopoly for ideology, putting the emphasis on propaganda and suppressing all aesthetic activity in administrative order" (Nakov, 1991). Thus, it is possible to agree with the Soviet literary critic P.V. Palievsky, who wrote that "Russian modernists frequently went before their Western colleagues, but they were obviously out of luck with international recognition..." (Palievsky, 1979). As a result of such fundamental changes in cultural policy of the USSR, the period from 1923 to 1933 became the time, when the Soviet avant-garde lost its global leadership, which was caused not by the world public opinion (it could accept this phenomenon!), but due to the position of the government of its country, which did not allow ideological motives to consolidate progress and "to stake" the global leadership of the Soviet avant-garde.

Let us underline, that new trends in culture survived in the 20th century not without difficulty not only in the USSR, but also in many Western countries, not exposed to such influence of classicism, typical of the USSR, Germany and Italy in the governing period of I.V. Stalin, A. Hitler and B. Mussolini respectively. Thus, for instance, an outstanding Soviet jazzman A. Kozlov in his work on rock music history wrote the following:

"post-war England, greatly damaged from the attack of German aviation, facing significant economic difficulties, treated prosperous America with some jealousy, as America did not have such financial damage during the Second World War. In the old days, true British treated the United States of America with disdain, with a split feeling of contempt and envy, as the poor nobleman to the "prosperous" new-rich without cultural roots and traditions. The new scrub of English youth, almost not remembering the war, did not want to follow the rules of "the old men", under the isolated British ideology, thus disappointing their parents. In England, there was no such race-cultural dissociation ... all types of popular American music were accepted no matter who played it - the white or the black. Thus, despite definite attempts to repress on the part of English government and society, rhythm-n-blues and rock'n'roll began to penetrate to Great Britain through different channels" (Kozlov, 1998).

The situation in the USA was not less simple. In the opinion of A. Kozlov,

"... after 1947, the USA started the "witch-hunting"... Mass appearance of the UFOs - "the

flying objects" above Florida, at aviation basing sites and in desolate secrete areas of thermonuclear bomb test in the period from 1945 to 1947 - caused slight panic in American society. To remove it, the press expanded the hypothesis, that they were the Russian "flying objects". That is why the statements, that rock'n'roll is the communistic disease, did not seem to be more absurd at that times, then now. The struggle with new youth culture took place at all levels, even at the everyday one... The well-known American film about the rock'n'roll history presents the remarkable shots of televised appearance of senators, teachers and public figures, revealing destructive trends. ... Popular TV presenters tried to laugh at the primitive texts of rock'n'roll songs, "to bring Elvis Presley to light" in the on-air interview. In postwar America, where the habitual racism existed, obviously, it was impossible to speak loudly about rock'-n'-roll, as about "black disease". Many devotees of white culture thought in this way... In numerous small cities, especially in South states, parents began to organize pickets before the dance floors, preventing mixing of their children with Negro's youth" (Kozlov, 1998).

In other words, the USSR had perfect opportunities to recapture the initiative in the sphere of modern culture (at that, the culture, initially remonstrative against modern bourgeois society, culture without national and race obstructions). However, they were not implemented (at that, there was even no attempt). Consequently, in the period from 1950 to 1970, the unique state's support only of the followers of traditional cultural values presented the Soviet government disparagingly among those, who were frequently named "progressive society" in the USSR. It stands to reason that the Soviet establishment could ignore the uncomplimentary opinion of foreign Western socialist-intellectuals.

Let us point out, that the USSR of the period from 1920 to 1930 was perceived by many Western intellectuals exclusively from the positive side, and many recognized world masterminds (for instance, famous French philosopher J.P. Sartre) felt admiration for the Soviet Union (Hollander, 2001). At that, the USSR of the latter period did not cause such positive attitude in Western intellectual elite, despite the evident decay in repressive policy and even some democratization of social life (first of all, in the "defrosting" period). To all appearances, the abovementioned paradox was in many ways connected with the cultural sector. The early USSR was perceived as some large-scale project by the significant part of Western intellectuals; it presupposes the creation of "new" man (Stalin's USSR continued to be as it was due to inertia!), although the later Soviet Union dimmed significantly against the background of Che Guevara, Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong and the Revolution of 1968 in Sorbonne. In other words, there was no "new" cultural style of the USSR in the "defrosting" period, saying nothing of the L. I. Brezhnev rule period, who could not suggest something new to the world, and, from all appearances, did not strive for it.

Discussion

Generally speaking, it is possible to state that the Soviet government at the turn of 1950 - 1960 faced an important dilemma: either to develop its socialist culture, oriented at the past, rather than at the modernity, or to keep up with the times and even to try to be ahead of the many global trends. In the first case, the socialists and communists, and the ones, who are named "eurocommunists" categorically became the opponents of the Soviet Union, alongside with the existing Western conservatives and liberals. By the way, they began their drift from the support of the USSR, approximately from 1956 (Zinovyev, Ortis, Kara-Murza, 2000). Judging by the subsequent practice, this process seemed to be irreversible. Essentially, the sample of relation to the avant-garde art clearly demonstrates that the Soviet ideologists stopped to consider the official ideology of the USSR to be left; it was facilitated by I.V. Stalin, who frequently manipulated with the notions

"right" and "left" in favor of political environment. Finally, he erased a clear edge between these ideologies in the consciousness of the citizens (Pivovarova, 2003). The second variant could turn the Soviet Union into a kind of Mekka for the followers of new trends in art. At that, good feelings of almost all 'Left' thinkers and, to speak wider, all people of art could have been on the side of the USSR and Soviet government, and not on side of its opponents in the Cold War.

It is important to note, that making a bid for socialist realism, the government of the Soviet Union, essentially, rejected avant-garde once and for all as the extremely foreign art. In the post-Stalin USSR, the Soviet government in not making the attempts to seize the initiative in support of the new art, essentially acted like the establishment of the USA and Great Britain, not wishing to support new ideas and then continued this wrong line. Finally, the USSR lost the leadership in avant-garde development; it irrevocably passed to the USA (Borisova, 2006). It is regular that, as distinct from 1920, the avant-garde of the period from 1960 to 1970 was a marginal part of native painting like the other art trends. The situation was a little better in theatrical art (evil-wishers accused the well-known producers Yu. Lyubimov and M. Zakharov as well as such critics as A. Ya. Zis, V.N. Turbin, G.D. Gachev of addiction to the avant-garde (Volkov, 2008; Lyubomudrov, 1991). From our point of view, the most pitiable situation was in architecture. Indeed, beginning from the middle of 1930, the Soviet architects were deprived of the opportunity to contact closely with their foreign colleagues. That is why to serve the Stalinist Empire style, totally waster architecture replaced the full native avant-garde of 1920-1930s, presented by brothers L.A., V.A., and A.A. Vesnins and other recognized maestros. The specialists in this sphere wrote the following: "...architectural-city-planning practice lost the traits of art" (Sveshnikova, 2007), and the architecture itself became "faceless" (Orelyskaya, 2009). In 1970, as a result, the development tendencies of the Soviet architecture fell behind the Western ones by the decade. For comparison: the ideas of outstanding representative of Russian avant-garde V.E. Tatlin in the period from 1910 to 1920 were in demand in the USA in 1962 (the aluminum rotating house in California) and even in Dubai (the project Dynamic Tower by the architect D. Fisher in 2008) (Lapshina, 2010).

Alongside that, the notorious "iron curtain" during 1950-1960 and beyond became more penetrable than, for instance, in the 50s, to say nothing of the earlier period. As a result, it is possible to speak about clandestine and half-clandestine penetration of mass culture to the USSR. Let us agree with the Russian fine art expert A.V. Shalashova, who fairly mentioned in her thesis research, that "for 1960, the contraband of Western civilization had a great impact on the culture of our country" (Shalashova, 2009). On our own behalf let us note, that this statement is also fair in full measure for the next two decades. There is no need to prove that such half-clandestine cultural import could not but result in the weakening of positions of official culture (if to consider the problem wider, under penetration of Western technologies and values, in the weakening of the Soviet regime in whole!). The interest to the avant-garde art also began in many ways to have half-clandestine character (first of all it deals with the art exhibitions). Let us note, that the denoted cultural import (including the one of avant-garde character) sapped the bases of the Soviet regime actively and quite effectively. In particular it was underlined that "... the culture and aesthetics of avant-garde, in their order, quality and main aesthetic direction, undoubtedly, were sharply opposite to the classical culture. The method itself and structure were opposite to this classical heritage". It is not for nothing, that the main opponents of both avant-garde and Western mass-culture were not only the adepts of Soviet-Communist ideology, but also Russian national patriots, who saw not only the threat to classical heritage, but to Russian national traditions in notorious cultural import (Fomencov, 2012).

Moreover, the "devotees" of cultural traditions during 1950-1960 and in the following years

frequently criticized the avant-garde as the anti-Russian and even "Jewish" art (read as alien to the country and people). Thus, the critics of avant-garde, as if from Russian national positions, actively exaggerated the ideas, the essence of which lied in disproportionately significant (or even dominating, as some radical adepts thought) role of ethnic Jewish in destruction of Russian constructions in the period from 1920 - 1930, including cult ones¹. Let us note that the polemic itself on the questions of preservation of monuments in Moscow in the Soviet period was not unique and in many ways resembled the dialogues of Le Corbusier with the chief architect of Paris in 1920 (Le Corbusier, 1970); it is not worth mentioning the fact that the term "brusselization", meaning mass demolition of historic development (it directly took place in Brussels, Stockholm and some other Western European cities), appeared not in the Soviet Union. Besides, the presentations of Russian-patriotic society about reconstruction of Moscow in post-revolutionary period were not consistent with reality. Among the real specialists there dominates the opinion, that the revolutionary in all meanings project of Le Corbusier, the same as the avant-garde in its essence "Ladovsky parabola", did not any significant impact on the plan of Moscow reconstruction (Starostenko, 2009), as distinct from pre-revolutionary projects of this megapolis development.

The "Jewish" problem was exaggerated in painting. The matter was not only in the above-mentioned K. Malevich, but also in the circumstances, that there were a lot of ethnic Jewish among Soviet abstract artists of the period from 1960 to 1970; for instance, O. and A. Rabins, Yu. Zolotnikov, A. Melamid, B. Shteinberg, B. Borukh, N. Elskaya. Let us refer here with reason the outstanding Soviet collector A. Glezer - one of initiators of famous "bulldozer" exhibition on September 15, 1974. Certainly, there were representatives of other nationalities among the Soviet abstract artists, first of all, Russian (V.I. Vorobyev, Yu.A. Zharkikh, L.A. Masterkova, V.N. Nemukhin, V.Ya. Sitnikov, L.A. Bazhanov, S.M. Boldyrev, M.N. Odnoralov, A.P. Zhdanov, A.A. Tyapushkin, I.S. Kholin and many others); it naturally disrupted the postulate about anti-Russian character of avant-garde. However "the devotees" of cultural traditions were not embarrassed by this fact, just as the lack of any direct connection between the canons of Judaism and avant-garde art, not speaking about the abovementioned anti-religious character of avant-garde.

In Soviet classical music, there were also the attempts to take the avant-garde for the Jewish art, because D.D. Shostakovich and A.G. Shnitke (by the way, both outstanding composers were not pure-blood Jewish!) followed the traditions of Novovenskaya school, namely such representatives, as A. Shenberg and R. Leybovich. Essentially, the Soviet cinematography did not have avant-garde manifestation (respectively, "Jewish" theme was not in operation). The one, who was accused of it, was the famous producer A.N. Sokurov. He did not consider himself to be the avant-gardist. He strived, confessedly, for "finding the connection with tradition in each film" (Bondarenko, 2009).

Conclusions

In whole, the Soviet experience proves the postulate, whereunder an important difference between totalitarianism and avant-garde lies in the fact, that the first is focused on power, and the second one is focused on exclusiveness and freedom (Lyubin, 2006). The focus on comprehensive control over socium, but not on initially declared freedom naturally resulted in the situation, when the initially pro-Soviet art contributed to the decay of the Soviet regime, and the USSR, instead of being the flagman of the avant-garde art, hopeless yield the palm to its rivals. It is also important to

¹ It was especially related to Moscow, which was "deformed" by M.Ya. Ginzburg, V.G. Gelfreich, B.M. Iofan, V.A. Minkus and L.Z. Cherikover in 1930 - 1940, and then by M.V. Posokhin and V.G. Makarevich; these ideas were actively propagated by V.N. Emelyanov, who founded the company, named "Memory" in the reconstruction period, to be more exact, one of its multiple branches.

note, that the lack of its cultural style, the new one, and not the archaic, promoted not only degradation of the USSR image, but also crash of all Soviet project. The avant-garde art in itself is the procreation of the Eurocentric world, the part of which was the pre-revolutionary Russia and even early USSR. Under this world, the idea of freedom became one of the most significant values, contributing to the origination of the avant-garde art.

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