

The Art of Revolution and Revolution in Art: Historiographical Aspect

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Abstract—The article focuses on the analysis of the relationship between radical political movements and “artistic riots” in Russia in the 1910s, that changed the world history and new art. The Proletkult activities and other cultural initiatives of the Soviet government are set as an example to trace the mechanics of using the latest artistic achievements to create a mythologized image of the Great Revolution. On the contrary, the history of studying the Russian formalistic movements of the 1920s, which began in the late 1950s, is considered a mirror image of this process. From the myth of the avant-garde as a single impulse, stopped on the run, the researchers refer to documentary and intent study of the certain events and trends. Demythologization goes in two ways: through clarifying the facts and reconstruction of the semantic context of art of the 1910-1920s. It is noteworthy that in recent years these tendencies merge to an increasing extent, demonstrating the creation of new methodological approaches to the study of the subject.

Keywords—*revolution; avant-garde; Proletkult; People's Commissariat for Education; First Russian art exhibition; Anatoly Lunacharsky; David Shterenberg; Sergei Eisenshtein; Vyacheslav Zavalishin; Camilla Gray; Larissa Shadova; Dmitri Sarabjanow; Evgeni Kovtun; J.E. Bowl*

I. INTRODUCTION

The interrelation of radical social and political movements, which have considerably changed the course of both Russian and world history, and the “artistic riots”, which have transformed the stylistic and formalistic structure alongside with the course of the whole art process, has been the matter of focused attention. Indeed, these two phenomena reveal quite a few common features tempting a specialist: emphasized and openly declared radicalism, outspoken futuristic principles, common style recorded with almost literal coincidence of their slogans and declarations, and finally, an incredible accomplishment — both had seemed to be utopian projects of a limited circle of enthusiastic dreamers. A rare timing of that accomplishment is remarkable: both social and art radicalism started in 1905 with the First Russian revolution and “Scarlet Rose” exhibition, which preceded the advent of symbolism, and with debuts of Vs. Meyerhold and A. Tairov (who had been twice arrested for organizing 1905 strikes of theatre actors in Kiev). They had reached their peak simultaneously by 1915-

1917, lived through five years of triumph and faded away before the late 1920s.

The events' outline also includes numerous reasons for comparison: many artists of the radical wing were “tempted by revolution” and took part in the revolutionary events devoting their art to implementing the revolutionary ideas. The inspired radical artists ready to serve the revolution were supported by the new power, which framed a brief post-revolutionary alliance of the young Soviet Republic and the formalist art representatives. The main consolidating figure was A. V. Lunacharsky (1875-1973), the first People's Commissar of education and an active revolutionary. Later he was frequently criticized for his sympathy with “leftist” art movements. Though in fact, his patronizing the left wing artists did not reflect his sympathy with their art (it is known that the People's Commissar mostly supported classical forms) or did not stem from misperceiving the avant-gardists' revolutionary ideas to be close to the ideas of class struggle. Following the leader of the Soviet state, Lunacharsky was powered with the idea of expressing and imprinting the significance of the accomplished unprecedented historic event in the minds of people's masses and their descendants. In other words, the great event demanded a myth being created, and the radical art, laconic, eye-catching and categorical in its intonation, seemed to be the most efficient instrument for that.

II. NEW POWER AND NEW ART

The scope and consistency of efforts made by the young Republic for accumulating the art forces to commemorate the Great Revolution, its devotees and ideas, are worthy of amazement. The first step was Proletkult organization (1917-1932) [Russ. *Proletarskaya kultura*, proletarian culture], which united the proletarian cultural and educational organizations that appeared after the February Revolution. In September 1917, Lunacharsky initiated their first conference, which laid the foundation of the organization's all-Russia status. By the summer of 1919 Proletkult counted more than 100 local organizations with over 80 thousand members; it had three theatres (in Moscow, Petrograd and Penza), and published 20 periodicals.

The determinant initiative was the decree “On Republic's Monuments”¹ issued by the Council of People's Commissars and signed on April 12, 1918, a month and a half after the decree on forming the Workers and Peasants' Red Army, almost literally accompanied with cannons that would seem to make Muses keep silence. Besides the campaign historically known as “Lenin's Plan of Monumental Propaganda” aimed at removing the old monuments and erecting the new ones which could reflect “the ideas and feelings of the revolutionary working Russia”, the document declared the status of celebrating May 1, Day of International, as a public holiday, and thus established a precedent for creating the institution of nationwide celebrations (by the autumn the revolution anniversaries were added to the First of May festivities). Also, the necessity of decorating the capitals was highlighted. In accordance with the decree, the section of visual arts of Narkompros (People's Commissariat of Education) was organized later, on May 22, 1918. Its head was David Petrovich Shterenberg (1881-1948), a graduate of the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris, a member of *Comfut* [Communists-futurists] association, the future founder of OST [the Society of Easel Painters]. Until the mid-1920s, the Narkompros section of visual arts was in fact an association of formalist artists rejected by former official art. N. I. Altman, N. N. Punin, V. V. Mayakovsky was among them. Earlier than that, in January 1918, the theatre section (TEO) was organized in Narkompros, headed by Vs. E. Meyerhold (1874-1940).

Representatives of different radical art styles were actively involved in all the art initiatives of the young republic: from Proletkult to the ROSTA Windows (*ROSTA*, the Russian Telegraph Agency) (they are to thank for propaganda porcelain made by the State Porcelain Factory, which was export revenue in the 1920s).

Another significant thing played an important role in establishing contacts of the young republic and the young art: the artists representing the old academic school were “the old-fashioned intelligentsia” in terms of the time, and they were not eager to give their support to the new power or enthusiastic about the revolution. An illustrative example is “The First Russian Art Exhibition” (*Die Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*) in Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin, 1922. The Russian promoter was David Shterenberg acting on behalf of the People's Commissariat for Education [Narkompros]. The German one was the German section of Workers International Relief, an organization rendering financial support to famine-stricken Russia. The exposition including works by Kazimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Lyubov Popova, Alexander Rodchenko, Olga Rozanova, Vladimir Tatlin and others, has been an important milestone in the history of the Russian avant-garde and attracted attention of more and more researchers. But Shterenberg's preferences were not the only reason of such a complete collection which became the first to give the foreign viewers an overall and convincing impression of the new Russian art. Originally, the exhibition was going to be more varied with the works by

artists representing different styles. However, famous old school painters refused to take part without purchasing their works; besides, they had highly estimated their pictures. The Narkompros section of visual arts had to complete the exhibition with enthusiasts' works [1].

III. THE MYTH CREATION

One of the most remarkable results of cooperation between the new state and the innovative art was designing and organizing the festivities of the first post-revolutionary decade. The numerous collection of sources that has recently been enriched with a range of editions published to commemorate the centenary of the Great Russian revolution, gives us the opportunity not to dwell upon the subject. We will just note that the most outstanding artistic design was that of the first anniversary of the revolution, while the best theatrical celebrations were 1919 May Day festivities, when all the theatres showed their open-air performances on the orders of Narkompros TEO (People's Commissariat for Education theatre section). It is remarkable that half a year separating the events demonstrates a clear tendency of the leading role moving from artists to stage directors. The matter is that great and expressive decorative panels changed the images of Petrograd and Moscow in October 1918 but most people hardly perceived them; besides, unlike draft designs still worth admiring, the huge flapping panels made of cheap materials looked very shabbily sometimes. But the main reason of preference was an apparent circumstance: a spectacle, especially a mass one, is much more efficient for myth making, which was the main objective of those magnificent festivities. The logical end to the process was transition of the leading role from stage management to “the most important” of all arts. The film by S. M. Eisenstein (1898-1948), “October”, made in 1927 to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the revolution became both an outstanding art phenomenon and a brilliant finale of the ten-year myth making process, while for the following generations it was a vivid and convincing implementation of the revolutionary events.

Nevertheless, visual arts made a significant contribution to generating of the revolutionary myth: we mean the images that entered both the Russian and world visual culture as well-established revolutionary emblems. It is enough to mention such examples as of the famous poster by El Lissitzky, “Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge”, inspired by the monument designed by N. Ya. Kolli, “The Red Wedge” erected in Revolution Square, Moscow, to commemorate the first anniversary of Red October. In the same year N. I. Altman, who decorated Uritsky Square in Petersburg and “wrapped” the Alexandrian Column in bright red calico flames, managed to visualize revolution as the world fire, like Aleksandr Blok in his poem, “The Twelve”, written in January 1918, illustrated by Yuri Annenkov and published by “Alkonost” publishers. Along with this, huge boards depicting workers, peasants and Red Army soldiers, used for decorating the State Duma building and Zimin theatre in Moscow and a number of squares in Petrograd on November 7, 1918, were an obvious source for the picture by

¹ Published in “Izvestia TsIK” [News of the Central Executive Committee] of April 14, 1918 and in “Sobranie Uzakonenii RSFSR” [Collection of RSFSR Laws] No.31 of April 15, 1918.

Boris Kustodiev, "Bolshevik" (1920, State Tretyakov Gallery), significant for the revolutionary iconography.

However, such active participation of avant-garde artists in the myth-making process had another predictable consequence. Thanks to the participation, the mythogenesis inherent to the avant-garde movement itself grew significantly, and the Russian avant-garde became a kind of myth, even as a definition. The term "Russian avant-garde" had appeared in English-language literature. Many Russian researchers picked it up, while others did not accept it at all, for example, G. G. Pospelov (1930-2014), the author of classical studies of "Knave of Diamonds" (*Bubnovii Valet*) art group, works by Mikhail Larionov and many other representatives of radical formalistic movements [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7]. Being very sensitive to the most refined determining of their painting and graphics, to uncovering and evaluating new art objectives and solutions, to the works' quality, he could not agree with sweeping unification of so various and bright talents. He touched upon the theme in his public speeches and avoided using the term in his texts. However, the term came to stay, sometimes making a false impression of some collective inspiration and the artists' unity, while they often belonged to opposing art groups.

Determination of the authorities to part with former allies played an important role in making a myth of Russian formalistic art in the late 1900-1920s; the regime exposed them to destructive persecution, which ruined their lives in the saddest or even most tragic way. The art of recent favorites was condemned to oblivion but not exterminated. Even though Russian radical art had been buried in the leading museums' repositories, scattered around local collections, and glimmered in the works of several artists or small informal groups, it survived to be in demand by the late 1950s.

IV. FROM REHABILITATION TO RESEARCH

The process began both in Russia and in the USA and was primarily provoked with the art process itself: art had entered a new stage of formalistic experiments that manifested itself in the design boom of the 1960s and shaping neo-abstract art as one of the leading art movements. "Rehabilitation" of avant-garde in Russia began in the sphere of art. Besides organizing a network of art centres transforming the produce of Russian manufacture, we have to remember art project groups, such as "Staropetergofskaya" one, of Vladimir Vasilievich Sterligov (1904/05-1973), a disciple of Malevich. The group appeared in the early 1960s, worked until the artist's death and began one of the outstanding Russian non-conformism phenomena, which is sometimes named the second Russian avant-garde.

In contrast, the interest in Russian radical art of the 1910-1920s was born in the research sphere of the USA, among the Slavists and literature scholars. It seems to be curious, because in the early 1960s the new continent could not boast being familiar with Russian avant-garde, unlike Germany, where there were regular exhibitions of the new Russian art (including the only lifetime Malevich exhibition in Berlin, 1927), and thanks to broad variety of works the first gallery

specializing in Russian avant-garde was opened in Cologne in the early 1960s (Galerie Gmurzynska). Though there had been some attempts. In December 1934, the exhibition "Art of Soviet Russia" opened in Philadelphia. Its American organizers were the Pennsylvania Museum of Art and the private Philadelphia American Russian Institute; they hoped to get a complete collection of the latest fifteen-year Soviet art works, including those by Kazimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin. But the Russian organizers, All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS, *Vsesoiuznoe Obshchestvo Kulturnoi Sviazi s zagranitsei*), did not invite the artists to take part, as well as other formalists. The "leftest" participants of the exposition were former OST members (Society of Easel Painters, *Obshchestvo Khudozhnikov-Stankovistov*) (Aleksandr Deineka, Yuri Pimenov and Peter Williams), and the exhibition was neither integral nor of high quality, many participants were represented with random works found in their studios. So, introduction to the Russian avant-garde did not succeed until WWII. That is why it is not surprising that Russian-born researchers were the first to study the avant-garde heritage.

One of the first to promote the Russian avant-garde art in the USA was Vyacheslav Klavdievich Zavalishin (1915-1995), a poet, novelist, translator and journalist. As a teenager, he was one of few visitors of the cancelled Pavel Filonov exhibition in the Russian Museum, 1929, he also saw Malevich (his book, "Kazimir Malevich", was published only in 1991 [8]). Zavalishin was the most important source of information about new Russian art, especially that of emigration. The Russian emigrant newspaper, *Novoye Russkoye Slovo* (New Russian Word) published his articles about Nikolai Remizov, Anisfeld, Filonov, Malevich and Suetin. His critical articles about the first exhibitions presenting such artists as Goncharova, Larionov, Malevich, Popova and Rodchenko, also used to appear in the newspaper. The exhibitions mentioned are "Russian Avant-Garde Art", in Leonard Hutton Galleries in 1971; "Russian Avant-Garde" in Dorothea Carus Gallery, in 1975; and "Russian Revolution in Art" with Rose Eastman and Rachel Adler, in 1979. But the exhibitions were preceded with extensive arrangements made by likeminded emigrants, including emigrant artists who used to belong to new movements of Russian art.

A young researcher, Camilla Gray (1936-1971), got into the orbit of the community. The daughter of a keeper of Oriental art at the British Museum, she did not have any special education and originally wanted to become a ballet dancer (in 1955 she first visited Moscow to enter the Bolshoi ballet school), she took a serious interest in Russian art. In 1958-1959 her first articles about Malevich and El Lissitzky appeared, and in 1962 her book "The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863-1922" was published; it broke new ground in explaining Russian art to the world [9, 10]. The author was only 26 when the book was published. The book was a summary of a four-year research conducted in France, USA and USSR and supported by the first director of New York Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr (1902-1981). She based her work on consultations with the artists then living

(Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova, David Burlyuk and Yuri Annenkov, Naum Gabo and Anton Pevzner, Pavel Mansurov and Sonia Delaunay), as well as with Russian scholars and collectors Nikolai Khardzhiev, Mikhail Alpatov, Dmitry Sarabianov, and with Georgi Kostaki who then lived in Russia.

The list does not exhaust the circle of serious researchers interested in avant-garde art of Russia. But it took a long time for their research works to be legalized. An exception was the architecture of Russian constructivism, which had preserved its official positions five years longer than left movements of easel arts. It is clear that the interest in constructivist experiments was caused with the 1960s architects' search of new spatial style. The first sign of the interest was a collection of materials prepared by Vigdaria Efraimovna Khazanova (1924-2004) in 1963 [11]. But the first book by a Soviet researcher devoted to post-war avant-garde art, "Search and Experiment: Russian and Soviet Art in the 1910-1930s", was published in German in Dresden, 1978 [12]. The author of the book was Larisa Alekseevna Zhadova (1927-1981), a talented art historian and the wife of Konstantin Simonov. Using the authority of her husband who was the chairman of the USSR Union of Writers' board, in 1977, after a long period of silence, she organized the first exhibition of Vladimir Tatlin's works in the Central House of Writers. She also prepared the first monograph about the artist, which was not allowed to be published in our country, and like the first book, was issued abroad: in 1983 - in Hungarian, in 1984 - in English and German, and in 1990 - in French. Before that, in 1982, her book was published in Great Britain: "Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930" [13].

By that time new editions about Russian avant-garde had been demanded by international research community. There was a group of researchers interested in Russian art of 1910-1920s: Charlotte Douglas, who later headed New York Malevich Society [14] [15], Valentina Marcadé (née Vasyutinskaya) who laid the foundation of studying Russian avant-garde in France, then Jean-Claude Marcadé [17], Nicoletta Misler [18] of University of Naples, and John Bowl² who underwent a study course supervised by Dmitry Vladimirovich Sarabianov (1923-2013), at Lomonosov Moscow State University in 1966-1968. John Bowlt created and directed Institute of Modern Russian Culture, IMRC, at University of Southern California. Originally, he founded the institute in 1979 in Texas, together with the slavist Sydney Monas and the philologists who had emigrated from Leningrad, Konstantin Kuzminsky and Ilya Levin. Their main purpose was to consolidate all the emigrant archives, to found a library and a research centre; it seemed to be utopian, nevertheless it was accomplished. Now the institute accommodates richest archives including photo, phono and video materials, as well as a library. The "Experiment" almanac published by the institute has become one of the most reputable academic editions devoted to Russian avant-

garde studies³. Bowlt is the curator of many exhibitions, and the most outstanding of them was "Amazons of the Avant-Garde" on display at Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, 1999, and at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, 2000 [22].

Even a quick overview of foreign historiography on Russian avant-garde art demonstrates evident determination to more and more detailed research of factual material, to thorough cataloguing and documentary research. In Russia, the movement has been developing since mid-1990s only. In its motherland, the avant-garde has been struggling out of oblivion and the wrappings of the myth around it, the aura of indispensable greatness and fatality. Such a tone was set with the first officially approved and large-circulation edition published in the USSR in 1989, the album "Avant-Garde Held on the Run" [23]. The edition was prepared by the State Russian Museum workers who kept memory of the legendary researcher of avant-garde, art scholar, Nikolay Nikolayevich Punin (1888-1953). He had served in the Russian Museum since 1913; after the revolution he became People's Commissar of the Russian Museum and the Hermitage Museum; in 1918-1919 he headed the Petrograd Committee for Education (Narkompros); in 1927 he founded the Russian Museum section and exposition of the latest movements and became one of the most prominent and outstanding theoreticians and researchers of the new art [24] [25] [26]. A few years later after publishing the album, periodic "Punin readings" were organized at the Russian Museum, which accumulated the new generation of avant-garde researchers. In Leningrad and in the Russian Museum they grouped around Evgeny Fedorovich Kovtun (1928-1996). Kovtun had devoted himself to the theme since 1964, after his acquaintance with V. V. Sterligov and joining "Staropetergofskaya group" created by the latter, where he found a like-minded colleague, Alla Vasilievna Povelikhina [27]. Among his disciples and followers there is Irina Nisonovna Karasik and Elena Veniaminovna Basner, curators of many exhibitions and authors of brilliant articles. In 1999, E. V. Basner defended her candidate thesis, "Malevich's Painting of the Late Period. The Phenomenon of the Artist Reconstructing His Creative Development" [28], where she developed Charlotte Douglas' ideas of revising Malevich's datings of his pictures, decoded the artist's mystification and grounded the convincing real chronology of his late works.

In Moscow the young academic forces grouped around the above mentioned Dmitry Vladimirovich Sarabianov [29] [30] [31] [32] [33] [34], who had raised a constellation of disciples. Among them there is Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, whose bibliography now counts more than ten monographs, partly published in English [35] [36] [37] [38] [39] [40] [41]. She was the first to devote herself to multivolume edition of Kazimir Malevich's manuscripts. We should also mention Natalia Aytonomova who wrote one of the most convincing monographs about Vasily Kandinsky

² John Bowlt's bibliography counts more than 40 monographs. The earliest of them are [19] [20] [21].

³ The almanac "Experiment: A Journal of Russian Culture / The Institute of Modern Russian Culture" has been published since 1995. Last year's 25th anniversary issue was published in memoriam of D. V. Sarabianov.

(co-authored with D. V. Sarabianov); Ekaterina Degot [43], Tatiana Goryacheva [44] [45] [46] [47] and Ekaterina Bobrinskaya [48] [49], the author of brilliant researches on the meaning and nature of different phenomena of avant-garde art practice, and many others. In the mid-1990s, D. V. Sarabianov headed the special research group founded at State Institute for Art Studies and organized for studying the problems of Russian avant-garde. The main form of the group's activity was organizing of annual international conferences devoted to one of up-to-date problems. They resulted in more than ten digests edited by D. V. Sarabianov and later by G. F. Kovalenko, until the mid-2000s [50] [51] [52]. Those conferences became the ground for consolidating scholars from different Russian cities and different countries and confirmed the leading role of Russian science in studying the heritage of Russian avant-gardists.

V. CONCLUSION

Nowadays this field attracts more and more researchers. New projects are being born and carried out. Among the most remarkable publications of the 2010s there is a three-volume (in four books) "Encyclopedia of Russian Avant-Garde" edited by the Centre of Russian avant-garde headed by Andrei Sarabianov [53], and a multivolume by Andrei Krusanov [54] [55] who focused on detailed publication of the documents and materials of the art life in 1907-1932. At the same time, besides restoring the factual outline there is more and more research devoted to reconstruction of the original meanings of the terms and notions that determine the significance of avant-garde statements and ideas. It is remarkable that the two processes of demythologization are more and more incorporating, from the point of view of both facts and meanings, and they demonstrate the generation of new methodological approaches to studying the subject. The most spectacular example is the project for publication of N. I. Khardzhiev's archive, which had been transferred to Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI, *Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvennii Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva*) and the exhibition fundamentally prepared and timed with release of the first volume [56]. Everything above mentioned gives us hope that the Russian art of the 20th century's first decades, which has already outgrown the limits of the revolutionary poster style, will get rid of the myths created about it and discover the hidden opportunities of its innovative way.

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