

Tarabukin, Spengler, and the Art of Production*

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Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process. Thus a work is a stopping-place on the road of becoming and not the fixed goal.

—El Lissitzky, “Element and Invention” (1924)

What can oppose the decline of the West is not a resurrected culture but the utopia that is silently contained in the image of its decline.

—Theodor Adorno, “Spengler After the Decline” (1955)

Nikolai Tarabukin’s 1923 tract *From Easel to Machine* is among the most important theoretical articulations of Productivism, the second or “utilitarian” stage of Russian Constructivism. Like Boris Arvatov’s *Art and Classes* (1923) and *Art and Production* (1926), and the anthology *Art in Production* published by Osip Brik et al. in 1921, *From Easel to Machine* is a declaration of “the death of painting, the death of easel forms” and the triumph, in their place, of mechanized and collective forms of production and distribution.¹ In November 1921, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and other Constructivists renounced “easelism” [*stankovizm*]²—their pejorative neologism for the “bourgeois individualist” fine arts of painting and sculpture—and committed themselves instead, as Arvatov put it, to the shaping of the very stuff of people’s everyday lives.² Underpinning this new commitment lay the principles of formal integrity and material expediency developed during Constructivism’s first or “laboratory” stage. Of the various texts

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1. Tarabukin, *Ot mol'berta k mashine* (Moscow: Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1923), p. 18 (hereafter cited in the text and notes as *OM*). Unless otherwise noted, translations in this essay are my own.

2. Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Moscow-Petrograd: Gos. izd-vo, 1923), p. 87.



Antonia Sofronova. Front Cover of Nikolai Tarabukin, Ot mol'berta k mashine (From Easel to Machine). 1923.

that unpack the story of the Constructivists' shift to a Productivist platform in late 1921, *From Easel to Machine* is the best known to Western readers, having been translated into French (not once but twice), Spanish, and English, as well as excerpted in translation in anthologies of modernist documents. Tarabukin's book is also, however, a most unorthodox articulation of Productivism, for reasons that the present essay will endeavor to explicate.

Prior to his transformation into a zealous Productivist in the early 1920s, Tarabukin was a theoretically inclined art historian. His earliest efforts ranged from the elaboration of a "formal method" for the study of European and modern Russian painting (*Toward a Theory of Painting*, written in 1916 but published only in June 1923, a month before *From Easel to Machine*), to a book manuscript devoted to the icon (*Philosophy of the Icon*, also drafted in 1916 but published for the first time in 1999).³ Such range was not unusual. As Andrei Kovalev observes, it was precisely young historians involved in the reevaluation of old Russian art—Nikolai Punin is another case in point on account of his proselytization on behalf of Vladimir Tatlin—who were among the avant-garde's staunchest defenders.⁴

Born in 1889 in the province of Kazan', east of Moscow, Nikolai Mikhailovich Tarabukin was the child of a wealthy family of, apparently, mixed Russian and Tartar nationality. After a year studying philosophy and art history in the Faculty of History and Philology at Moscow University, he entered law school in Iaroslavl in 1912, but continued to pursue his interest in the history of art, making a trip abroad in 1913–1914 for the purpose of visiting museums and architectural monuments, and drafting the aforementioned monographic studies. In 1916, after graduating in law—a profession he was never to practice—Tarabukin moved to Petrograd where he became acquainted with Punin.⁵ It was most likely through Punin, and the latter's close association with the circle of artists and critics gathered around Tatlin, that Tarabukin was introduced to contemporary art. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution, Tarabukin moved to Moscow and began publishing art criticism in the newspaper and periodical press, as well as teaching and lecturing in various cultural institutions, such as the newly formed collection of contemporary Russian art, the Museum of Painterly Culture (MZhK).⁶

Tarabukin began writing *From Easel to Machine* in fall 1921. By March 1922, a

3. *Opyt teorii zhivopisi* (Moscow: Vserossiiskii proletkul't, 1923); *Smysl' ikony*, ed. A. G. Dunaev (Moscow: Izd-vo pravoslav'nogo bratstva sviatitelia filareta moskovskogo, 1999).

4. Andrei Kovalev, "Samosoznanie kritiki: iz istorii sovetskogo iskusstvovoznaniia 1920-kh godov," *Sovetskoe iskusstvovoznaniie* 26 (1990), p. 358.

5. Biographical information is drawn from conversations with Tarabukin's closest surviving relatives, Marina Dunaeva and Aleksei Dunaev, Moscow, October 29 and December 6, 1992.

6. *Smysl' ikony*, pp. 213–14; and RGALI [Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva] f. 664, op. 1, d. 11, l. 222.

*Photograph of Nikolai
Tarabukin. Early 1930s.*



substantial draft was completed, and the book was published by *Rabotnik prosveshcheniia* in July 1923. Throughout the period of its composition, its author was a member of the Institute of Artistic Culture (the INKhUK), a theoretically-oriented, state-funded research center for the arts founded in Moscow in March 1920. Tarabukin had joined the INKhUK on April 1, 1921; from September 1921 until its liquidation by the state in spring 1924, he also served as its academic secretary.⁷ It is thus from the point of view of an eyewitness that *From Easel to Machine* documents the INKhUK Constructivists' call in late 1921 for their own immediate transfer from the realm of the fine arts to the industrial arena. In emphasizing the book's documentary status, however, I do not mean to imply that it is a recitation of stenographic records. On the contrary: *From Easel to Machine* is an utterly partisan, forty-four-page prognosis for art's future direction—in short, it

7. RGALI f. 941, op. 10, d. 608, ll. 5, 5ob.

is a manifesto or polemical tract that helped to shape precisely the radical shift it sought to delineate.

Nowhere is the prognostic character of *From Easel to Machine* more manifest than in its dialogue with not so much the work of Marx, but rather—and herein lies part of the unorthodoxy of Tarabukin’s Productivist theory—with that of the then-fashionable right-wing German writer, Oswald Spengler, who, notoriously, declared Marxism and its Russian “derivative”—Bolshevism—to be but the “dregs” of western Europe’s “infiltration” of Russia.⁸ In the summer of 1918, a small Viennese press had published Spengler’s *The Decline of the West: The Contours of a Morphology of World History* (the first of a projected two-volume set),⁹ which represented an inaugural attempt, its author mistakenly claimed, to formulate a biological theory of the nature of historical change. Spengler’s ultimate purpose was to explain the “degeneration” of western European culture since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The writer himself reported that Georg Simmel had referred to *The Decline* as “the most important philosophy of history since Hegel.”¹⁰ But Simmel’s alleged appraisal was rarely to be repeated, partly because Spengler’s other, and equally fundamental, ambition was the writing of historical prophecy—an enterprise abhorrent to professional historians and social theorists on account of its determinism, its attribution of blind necessity to history.

Nevertheless, it was Spengler as diagnostician and prognostician of western European cultural degeneration that earned *The Decline* its phenomenal popularity and infamy in the early 1920s not only in Germany and Austria but also in Russia. Iurii Annenkov wrote in the Petrograd journal *Life of Art* that Spengler was one of the then three latest rages of the European intelligentsia (the others being Albert Einstein and the novelist Pierre Benoit).¹¹ Ilya Ehrenburg reported that “even a fragrance called ‘Decline of the West’ [had] appeared on the market.”¹² Familiarity with this major “event” in German cultural life quickly became a sign, the Marxist philosopher Abram Deborin commented, that one was “in the fashion.”¹³

8. *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich: Beck, 1922), trans. Charles Atkinson as *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980 [1928]), vol. 2, p. 495 n. 3 (hereafter cited in the text and notes as *DWII*).

9. *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umriss einer Morphologie der Welt-Geschichte* (Vienna and Leipzig: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1918), trans. Charles Atkinson as *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986 [1926]), vol. 1 (hereafter cited in the text and notes as *DWI*).

10. Oswald Spengler to August Albers, June 25, 1919, in *Letters of Oswald Spengler, 1913–1936*, trans. and ed. Arthur Helps (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 81.

11. *Zhizn’ iskusstva*, no. 14 (April 4, 1922); quoted in Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 45.

12. Ilya Ehrenburg, *Truce: 1921–1933* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1963), p. 14.

13. Abram Deborin, “Gibel’ Evropy ili torzhestvo imperializma?” in *Pod znamenem marksizma*, 1–2 (January–February 1922), p. 8.

The compulsiveness of the Spenglerian translation industry in Russia circa 1922 is alone testimony to the Russian intelligentsia's tremendous fascination with the controversial German writer.¹⁴ But there was something more to this fascination than celebrity fever.

Spengler was, in fact, the latest fall-guy in a long-standing struggle in Russia between two bitterly opposed camps: between, on the one hand, a "radical intelligentsia" composed of Marxists and other social revolutionaries, who were historically materialist, atheist, internationalist, and technophilic, and, on the other, a "counter-intelligentsia," composed of Slavophiles and other conservative groups, who were idealist, Christian, nationalist, aestheticist, and technophobic.¹⁵ The only thing both camps agreed upon apropos Spengler was his indebtedness to Slavophile Russian writers of the late nineteenth century such as Nikolai Danilevskii and Konstantin Leont'ev. On all other issues, they were antagonists. While Slavophiles worshiped Spengler's every word—*The Decline* is "our kind of book," wrote the conservative philosopher and cultural critic Nikolai Berdiaev in 1922¹⁶—Marxists decried both the "Slavophile from Prussia"¹⁷ and his recent acolytes, the Russian "Spenglerians."

What, then, was a Productivist theoretician in the leftist-oriented INKhUK doing, in 1923, with Spengler? Since April 1921, the INKhUK Constructivists dedicated themselves to the "communist expression of material structures."¹⁸ Tarabukin's fellow Productivist theoreticians—Arvatov, Brik, and Boris Kushner—were all members of the Russian Communist Party (RKP[b]), and since fall 1921 had dominated the INKhUK's Board. Although a leftist, Tarabukin was neither a Marxist nor a party member. In the territory of the radical intelligentsia, therefore, his invocation of Spengler was surely extremely provocative, especially given Lenin's denunciation of the German writer and his Russian followers in the daily

14. A plethora of Russian translations of excerpts from *The Decline* and various other essays by its author appeared in the periodical press or as inexpensive, widely distributed "brochures" in 1922. Two unabridged translations of the entire first volume were published in 1923. While the second volume was not translated into Russian in its entirety, its last two chapters—with which, as we shall see, Tarabukin was most especially concerned—were published as a separate title, *Den'gi i mashina* [Money and Machine], trans. German Genkel' (Petrograd: Mysl', 1922). A further important source for Tarabukin was Spengler's essay "Pessimismus?," *Preussische Jahrbücher* (April 1921), which appeared in three different Russian translations, all in 1922.

15. I have drawn the term "counter-intelligentsia" from Jane Burbank, *Intelligentsia and Revolution: Russian Views of Bolshevism, 1917–1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

16. Nikolai Berdiaev, "Predsmertnye mysli Fausta," in Berdiaev, Semen Frank, Fedor Stepun and Ia. Bukshpan, *Osvat'd Shpengler i Zakat Evropy* (Moscow: Bereg, 1922), p. 72.

17. V. Vaganian, "Nashi rossiiskie spengleristy," in *Pod znamenem marksizma*, 1–2 (January–February 1922), p. 28.

18. "Program of the Constructivist Working Group of INKhUK," trans. James West in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery of the University of Washington, 1990), p. 67.

newspaper *Pravda* in May 1922.¹⁹

Significantly, Tarabukin seems to have himself confronted this issue directly: On June 8, 1923, a month before *From Easel to Machine* was to be released, the critic presented to the INKhUK a paper in which he sought to illuminate the current pertinence of Spengler's prognosis for the "art of the future." Present in his audience were Arvatov and Brik, the sculptor Aleksei Babichev, and the Constructivists Stepanova, Rodchenko, Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Vesnin, Anton Lavinskii, Sergei Sen'kin and Gustav Klucis. In his paper, Tarabukin observed that

With regard to Russian artistic thought in its extreme left-wing expressions (the idea of production art), it is very interesting to trace the coincidence of Spengler's views concerning the degeneration of the easel forms of art. [His] views also shed light on the issue of the "nonobjective" forms of contemporary culture.

With the carefully chosen word "coincidence," Tarabukin avoided any inappropriate suggestion that Spengler may have influenced the Productivists. He also ruled out any possibility of ideological confluence:

Spengler's views are founded . . . on completely different premises than those of the Russian Productivists. Spengler is an idealist and imperialist. Our views have a materialist foundation. . . . [W]e cannot consider Spengler our fellow-traveler [*sputnik*].²⁰

Following Tarabukin's lecture, a discussion ensued in which Arvatov, Brik, Vesnin, and others participated. Unfortunately, minutes were not kept, but given the almost complete absence of reference to Spengler in the writings of Tarabukin's fellow Productivists, it seems plausible to suggest that the latter did not share the enthusiasm of not only their colleague but also nearly every other Russian cultural critic active in the early 1920s.²¹ In fact, even without inference of intellectual or ideological patrimony, Tarabukin's juxtaposition of Spengler's reactionary anti-modernism and the radical left's anti-easelism may well have caught his interlocutors by surprise. Was not the Constructivists' insistent technological rationalism after fall 1921 the very target of Spengler's charge—as it was

19. See V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th ed., 45 vols. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970), vol. 33, pp. 349–50, vol. 45, pp. 500–501.

20. Tarabukin, "Vzgliady Shpenglera na iskusstvo budushchego" (June 8, 1923); GARF [Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii], f. 4655, op. 1, d. 279, ll. 33–33ob.

21. One of the rare references in the Productivist literature to Spengler occurs in Arvatov's *Iskusstvo i klassy*, in which the author agrees with the German writer apropos the "Alexandrianism" of the present, but ultimately dismisses his theory of decline (p. 73). See also Andrei Kovalev, "Ot istorii iskusstva k sovremennosti: Sovetskoe iskusstvoznanie i kritika 1920-x godov v sisteme khudozhestvennogo soznaniia" (Ph. D. diss., Moscow University, 1990), chapter 3, p. 4 and n. 4.

then, and is still today, commonly understood—that science and technology were responsible for the dehumanization and thus decline of western European culture? Was not the Productivists' utopian vision—to shape the very stuff of people's everyday lives—at odds with Spengler's cultural despair? Would not, therefore, "antithesis" be a more appropriate description of their relationship than coincidence?

Tarabukin's assertion of a certain coincidence between Spengler and the Productivists had, I want to suggest, considerable cogency in the historical period of its articulation as both a perspicacious interpretation of Spengler's theory of the degeneration of the fine arts, and a critical formulation of Productivist theory. Although some might, in turn, dismiss Tarabukin's juxtaposition as simply another example of the way in which the extreme left and the extreme right often have more in common than not, unpacking the theoretical efficacy and historical significance of Tarabukin's invocation of Spengler affords a more complex understanding of the Constructivists' attempt to formulate a materialist foundation for their future cultural endeavor.

The Mortality of Cultures

In writing *From Easel to Machine*, Tarabukin had not one but two rounds or encounters with *The Decline*. The first—the one most familiar to critics and historians today—took place in fall 1921, and stimulated Tarabukin's critical reflections upon the death of painting in the opening pages of his book.²² These reflections had been first elaborated in a lecture Tarabukin presented to the INKhUK on October 30, 1921. Entitled "The Last Picture Has Been Painted," the lecture addressed a controversial exhibition that had opened the previous month in the rooms of the Poets' Union on Tverskaia Street in central Moscow. Of the twenty-five paintings in the group exhibition, Tarabukin discussed just one: Rodchenko's monochrome *Pure Red Color*—"a small, almost square canvas, painted all-over with nothing but red pigment" (*OM*, p. 12)—in which the critic believed he had found the precise moment of painting's death.

In order to elucidate the significance of *Pure Red Color*, however, Tarabukin did not present a historically materialist explanation of the monochrome, as his fellow Productivists might have done.²³ Instead, he resorted to two specific arguments

22. Tarabukin's debt to Spengler is noted in Yve-Alain Bois, "Painting: The Task of Mourning," in *Endgame: Reference and Simulation in Recent Painting and Sculpture* (Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1986), p. 49 n. 23; *Le constructivisme russe*, 2 vols., ed. Gérard Conio (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1987), vol. 1, pp. 168, 446, 449, 451 n. 3; and Andrei Kovalev, "Ot istorii iskusstva k sovremennosti," Chapter 3, p. 18 n. 54.

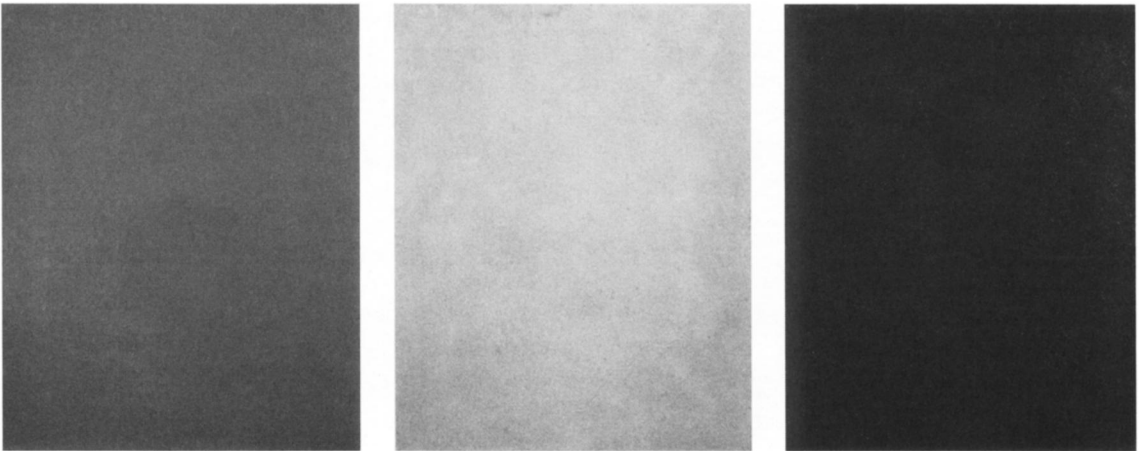
23. Although Tarabukin does refer in passing to the "social basis of the crisis of art" (*OM*, 15–16), this explanation is supplementary to the main thrust of his account of the death of painting, as Arvatov was to point out in his review of the book (*Lef* 4 [August–December 1924], p. 210).

presented by Spengler in the first volume of *The Decline*. The first is Spengler's relativist theory of the mortality—or temporal finitude—of cultures:

Every thing-become is mortal. [It is] not only peoples, languages, races and Cultures [that] are transient. In a few centuries from now there will no more be a Western Culture, no more be German, English, or French than there were Romans in the time of Justinian. . . . All art is mortal, not merely the individual artifacts but the arts themselves. One day the last portrait of Rembrandt and the last bar of Mozart will have ceased to be—though possibly a coloured canvas and a sheet of notes may remain—because the last eye and the last ear accessible to their message will have gone. Every thought, faith and science dies as soon as the spirits in whose worlds their “eternal truths” were true and necessary are extinguished (*DWI*, pp. 167–68).

Spengler's theory of the inevitable death of any given form of cultural expression was the bedrock of his denunciation of modernist painting as sure evidence of that medium's incontrovertible, “Alexandrian” decline (*DWI*, pp. 293–94).

The second argument of pertinence to Tarabukin's explication of the significance of the monochrome was Spengler's contention that the chief cause of painting's degeneration was its increasing submission since Manet to “analytical thinking” that, following Goethe, he associated with death. The space of Impressionism, Spengler regretted,



Aleksandr Rodchenko. Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color. 1921.

is cognized, not experienced, seen, not contemplated. . . . It is the mechanical object of physics. . . . The modern artist is a workman, not a creator. He sets unbroken spectrum-colors side by side. The subtle script, the dance of the brush-strokes, give way to crude common-places, pilings and mixings and daubings of points, squares, broad inorganic masses. The whitewasher's brush and the trowel appear in the painter's equipment; the oil painting of the canvas is brought into the scheme of execution and in places left bare. It is . . . meticulous, cold, diseased—an art for over-developed nerves, but scientific to the last degree, energetic in everything that relates to technical obstacles, acutely assertive of programme (*DWI*, pp. 49 n. 1, pp. 288–89).

Cultural mortality and the terminal implications of analysis were concepts crucial to the composition of *From Easel to Machine*, which opens with a “diagnosis.” For the past few decades, Tarabukin tells us, European art has proceeded “under the sign of ‘the crisis of art.’” Since Manet and the Salons of the 1860s, the history of modernist painting has been celebrated as a “gradual process of the perfecting of pictorial form,” but the experience of the last few years has afforded a rather different perspective. It is now possible to grasp the double-cut of painting's “progress”: on the one hand, we have “the steady dismantling of the once integral pictorial organism into its constituent elements” and, on the other, “the gradual degeneration of painting as the typical form of artistic endeavor” (*OM*, p. 5). Inherent in the modernist painter's desire to reveal the essence of his or her medium, Tarabukin thus suggests, is that medium's certain death. Modernism's ontological drive, insofar as it subjects painting to analytical thinking—precisely the kind of endeavor which Tarabukin himself championed in *Toward a Theory of Painting*—necessarily culminates in necrosis.

For Tarabukin, the concluding example of the gradual degeneration of easel painting under modernism's necrotic, analytical gaze was *Pure Red Color*, one of a troika of small oils of identical dimensions, each saturated with a pure primary.²⁴ In a catalogue accompanying their exhibition at the Poets' Union, Rodchenko assigned his monochromes separate object numbers, entitling them like laboratory specimens: *Pure Red Color*, *Pure Yellow Color*, *Pure Blue Color*. The remainder of his entry consisted of a deadpan, résumé-style enumeration of his innovations since

24. On Rodchenko's monochromes, see Bois, “Painting,” pp. 38–41 and passim; Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” *October* 37 (Summer 1986), pp. 41–52; Thierry de Duve, “The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas,” in *Reconstructing Modernism*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), p. 257; *Le constructivisme russe*, vol. 1, pp. 445–52; and Hal Foster, “What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?” *October* 70 (Fall 1994), pp. 18–19.

1918: A series of unprecedented “declarations,” Rodchenko tells us, culminating in the present exhibition where “the three primary colors are declared, for the first time in art, by me.”²⁵ In responding to Rodchenko’s declaration, however, Tarabukin addressed not the painter’s primaries, but rather the eschatological significance of his monochromy. Rodchenko has succeeded in a final painting out of the picture, the critic argued, a sealing of the plane of representation into an absolute contraction of depth, into a smooth, licked, opaque surface unbruised by differentiation of figure and ground. Rodchenko’s “stupid, dumb, blind wall” boasts neither aesthetic value nor use-value (it is not a model for a decorative mural painting) (*OM*, p. 12); it brings to an end modernist painting’s self-reflexive pursuit of its own irreducible materiality.

But it was precisely this destitution, Tarabukin continued, that afforded Rodchenko’s gesture its historical eloquence. The monochrome demonstrates, by negation, that the essence of painting was not, in the end, to be found in its irreducible materiality, but rather in its abiding capacity for representation: “[it] persuades us that painting was, and always will be, a *representational* art, that painting cannot transgress the limits of representation” (*OM*, p. 13 [original emphasis]). *Pure Red Color* is thus

the last, final step of a long journey, the last word, after which the speech of the painter must fall silent, the last “picture” to have been created by an artist. This canvas eloquently demonstrates that painting, as a representational art, as it has always been, has become obsolete (*OM*, p. 12 [emphasis added]).

In this passage, Tarabukin has adopted the precise rhetoric of Spengler’s lament that the art of Wagner and Manet

signifies . . . the beginning of dissolution. . . . As a step, it is necessarily *the last step* . . . it is the mark of the end. . . . And the bitter conclusion that it is all irretrievably over with the arts of form in the West. The *crisis* of the nineteenth century was the death-struggle (*DW I*, p. 293 [emphasis added]).

For Tarabukin, Rodchenko’s monochrome concludes not only the history of modernist painting, but also the entire trajectory of easelism. As the painter’s “last word,” it marks an historical rupture [*delat epokhu*], thereby contesting any possibility of the medium’s further development. Here, Tarabukin’s argument is again subtended by *The Decline* insofar as Spengler’s model of historical development was anti-linear—Spengler derides the “professional historian . . . [who] sees

25. 5 x 5 = 25: *Vystavka zhivopisi* (Moscow, 1921), n. p.

[history] as a sort of tape-worm industriously adding onto itself one epoch after another" (*DW I*, pp. 21–22). Tarabukin likewise scorns the custodians of the Tretyakov Gallery who, he predicts, will have no comprehension of the historical rupture that Rodchenko's monochrome signifies, but will instead seek to acquire it as they would any other picture lest their collections otherwise betray a gap in the unfolding linear sequence of artistic movements that acknowledges neither beginning nor end (*OM*, pp. 11–12).

Tarabukin was not the only member of the INKhUK for whom Spengler's theory of the mortality of cultures had profound resonance in 1921. His colleague El Lissitzky, a newcomer that fall, also invoked Spengler's theory of cultural mortality, but in support of an alternative declaration of the death of painting. The same exhibition that had inspired Tarabukin to formulate his account of the end of easelism also partly inspired Lissitzky in his, albeit negatively: "We have nothing in common," Lissitzky was soon to write, "with . . . painters who propagandize for the end of painting by means of painting itself."²⁶ On September 23, 1921, less than a week after Rodchenko's monochromes were installed in the Poets' Union, Lissitzky presented a lecture to the INKhUK on his own new art of the *proun*—or "project for the affirmation of the new"—consisting of mixed-media works that he defined as neither painting nor architecture but midway stations between the two. One of the ambitions of his lecture, entitled "*Prouns: Towards the Defeat of Art*," was to demonstrate that the *proun* represented not only a path to the future, but a specifically Constructivist path.

Lissitzky epigraphed the original manuscript of his 1921 INKhUK lecture and two versions of it published in 1922²⁷ with a loose paraphrase of Spengler's passage on cultural mortality that I quoted above. Eliding and condensing the German writer's expansive prose, however, Lissitzky writes:

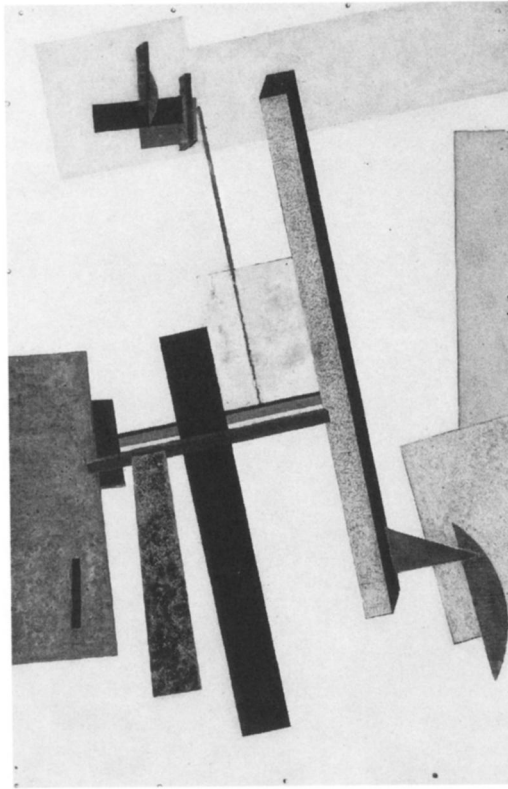
All the arts are mortal, and not just individually, but also as a whole. One day Rembrandt's last portrait will cease to exist, even though the painted canvas will still be intact: but the eye which apprehends this language of forms will disappear.²⁸

26. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "Blokada Rossii zakonchaetsia," *Veshch'* 1–2 (March–April 1922), p. 2.

27. "*Prounen: überwindung der Kunst*," trans. John Bowlt in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), pp. 60–72. According to a report on the INKhUK's activities published in 1923, Lissitzky gave his "Prouny" lecture at the INKhUK on September 23, 1921 ("Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury," *Russkoe iskusstvo* 2–3 [1923], p. 88). On the erroneous dating of the lecture to 1924, see Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), p. 54 n. 3. On the other versions of the lecture, see *ibid.*, pp. 53–54, 59–61, 153 n. 42.

28. Lissitzky, "*Prouns*," p. 60. Nisbet first located Lissitzky's citation within *Der Untergang* in *El Lissitzky*, p. 49 n. 56.

El Lissitzky.
Proun 2C.
Circa 1920.



What is the function of Lissitzky's citation of Spengler (other than its crucial relevance, as Peter Nisbet and Yve-Alain Bois have demonstrated, to the relativist account of numeration systems that Lissitzky presents in his INKhUK lecture)?²⁹ As an outsider now on Constructivist territory, Lissitzky foregrounds the mortality of the "eye"—that is, the historical specificity and cultural relativism of perception—in an attempt to convince his skeptical new colleagues that the *proun* was, in fact, a construction (rather than an easel painting). Underlying this argument was Lissitzky's refusal to define the principle of construction (and, by implication, the Constructivist object) in terms of material dimensionality: "For us," the artist asserted, "the space of the two-dimensional surface is of the same character as the three-dimensional volume and is just as strong and as inexorable as the earth."³⁰

In order to substantiate his claim for the *proun's* status as a construction, Lissitzky distinguishes the *proun* from that very body of work to which it was explicitly indebted—the Suprematist paintings of Kazimir Malevich, his colleague and

29. See Nisbet, *El Lissitzky*, p. 49 n. 56, and Nisbet, "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought, 1919–1927" (Ph.D. diss, Yale University, 1995), pp. 154–57; and Yve-Alain Bois, "De $-\infty$ à 0 à $+\infty$: L'axonométrie, ou le paradigme mathématique de Lissitzky" in *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941: architecte, peintre, photographe, typographe* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1991), pp. 27–37.

30. "Prouns: Towards the Defeat of Art," p. 67.

mentor at the Vitebsk School of Art since 1919. “For all its revolutionary force,” Lissitzky told the INKhUK,

the Suprematist canvas [nevertheless] remained in the form of a picture. Like any canvas in a museum, it possessed one specific perpendicular axis (vis-à-vis the horizon), and when it was hung any other way it looked as if it were sideways or upside down.

The *proun*, on the other hand, possesses a rotational force that destroys the perpendicular axis proper to the easel picture. Insofar as it destroys one of painting’s cardinal principles, Lissitzky argues, the *proun* can no longer be thought of within the terms of that medium:

The painted picture has been smashed to bits. . . . In continuing to paint with brush on canvas, we have seen that we are now building and the picture is burning up. We have seen that the surface of the canvas has ceased to be a picture. It has become a construction and like a house, you have to walk round it, to look at it from above, to study it from beneath. The picture’s one perpendicular axis (vis-à-vis the horizon) turns out to have been destroyed. We have made the canvas rotate.³¹

Lissitzky’s analysis of the *proun*’s rotational force is the most direct argument advanced in his claim for the *proun* as a construction, and it relies upon his performative embrace of Spengler’s theory of the mortality of cultures. The “eye”—the “easel eye”—which would incorrectly perceive the *proun* as an easel painting, Lissitzky suggests, no longer exists. With rotation, the familiar apparatus for the apperception of the easel picture (the perpendicular, frontal conditions of spectatorship), has been abolished. In Lissitzky’s utopian present, the “eye”—the “Constructivist eye”—registers the *proun* not as a painting but as a construction. Lissitzky’s analysis of the *proun* thus constituted an alternative declaration of the death of painting: instead of propagandizing for the end of painting by means of painting itself (the monochrome), Lissitzky propagandized for its end by means of construction (the *proun*).

Such perceptual relativism failed to convince, however, the INKhUK Constructivists. When the institute made its collective decision on November 24, 1921 to abandon easelism altogether in the name of production, Lissitzky resigned. In December 1921, he joined Ehrenburg in Berlin, where together they published the journal *Veshch’ Objet Gegenstand*, in the inaugural editorial of which they attacked the INKhUK’s newly adopted Productivist platform: “Primitive utilitarianism is alien to us.”³² In response, Tarabukin dismissed Lissitzky and

31. Ibid., pp. 63, 65, 66.

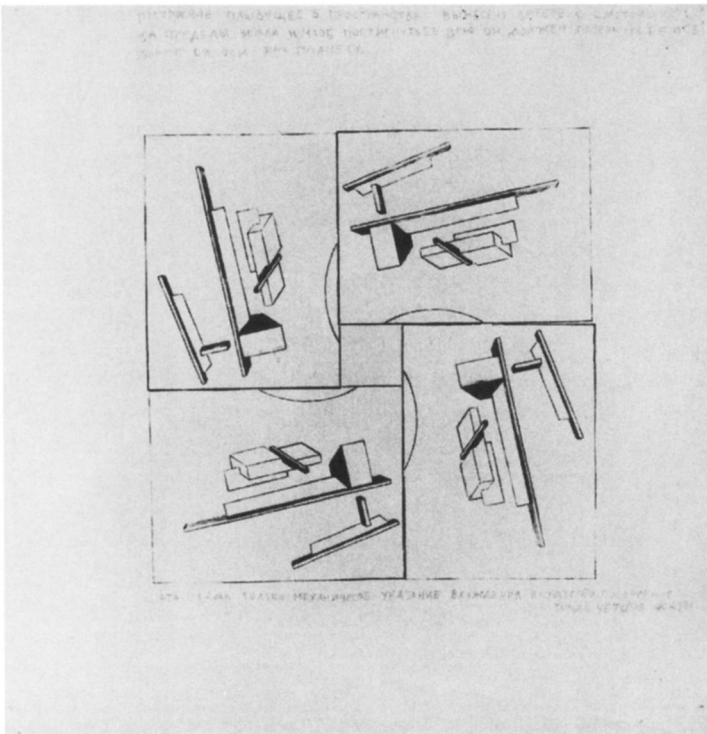
32. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, “Blokada Rossii zakonchaetsia,” p. 2.

Ehrenburg's enterprise as mere "objectism" [*veshchizm*], that is, as an easelist theory of the object derived from the Moscow Constructivists who had themselves, however, already abandoned it (*OM*, p. 28, n. 2).³³ Spengler's theory of cultural mortality thus helped to shape not only Tarabukin's and Lissitzky's critical interventions apropos the death of painting, but also Constructivism's further development along two competing but often intersecting trajectories—Muscovite and international.

The Utopia Silently Contained in the Image of Decline

Tarabukin's second, and previously unexamined, encounter with Spengler took place in late 1922, and has directly to do with his formulation of Productivist theory. At a couple of key moments in *From Easel to Machine*, Tarabukin inserts strings of citations to the second volume of *The Decline* (April 1922) and other related publications by its author. Significantly, this second round with Spengler

33. See also "Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury," pp. 86, 87.



El Lissitzky.
Construction Floating
in Space. Circa 1920.

occurred after both Slavophiles and Marxists had consolidated their opposed positions apropos Spengler in print, and after Lenin's May 1922 denunciation of the writer and September 1922 exiling from the Soviet Union of the latter's most prominent Slavophile defenders. Spengler is not our *sputnik*, Tarabukin was thus careful to note in proposing, in 1923, the coincidence of Spengler's thinking with that of the Russian Productivists. In order to defend his conjecture as to their coincidence, however, Tarabukin sought to delineate a positive dimension to Spengler's theory of decline that would accord with the Productivists' vision of the future. However much Spengler lamented the coming to an end of western European culture (which he called "Faustian" in order to emphasize the European "will" to transform and dominate nature), Tarabukin was eager to demonstrate that the German writer envisaged not only a cultural future but a cultural future predicated upon an embrace of the machine. In order to do so, two critical interventions were required.

First, Tarabukin needed to dislodge the standard perception of Spengler as a cultural pessimist who predicted that the decline of the Faustian arts would necessarily lead to the extinction of human creativity altogether. Such overdetermination of Spengler's enterprise had originated with the domestic reception of the first volume of *The Decline* in 1918, at the moment of Germany's military defeat and humiliation at Versailles, and was still in force in Russia in the early 1920s. "The question of Spengler's views on art . . . and its future role has already been raised several times in the Russian literature," Tarabukin acknowledged in his 1923 INKhUK paper, "but all these judgments, uttered by 'pure' aesthetes, have [only] explained the cheerless prospects described by Spengler in his prognosis for the future."³⁴ Tarabukin's chief target in this regard was the young and "optimistic" art historian Viktor Nikitich Lazarev, who had just published a book-length study of Spengler's aesthetic concerns, *Oswald Spengler and His Views on Art* (1922).³⁵

Tarabukin's problem with Lazarev and other Russian aestheticians was their dismissal of *The Decline* on the grounds that it was premised on an indefensible attitude of utter "hopelessness" (*OM*, p. 27, n. 1). Although Lazarev conceded that Spengler's "verdict on modern art" contained "significant truth," he nevertheless insisted that the decline of the West was really far from "imminent," and that European culture continued to have tremendous vigor:

We deeply believe in the vitality and power of European culture, at least for another century. . . . The hour when the setting sun of Europe will cast its last ray is still a long way off, and so, would not it be better

34. Tarabukin, "Vzgliady Shpenglera," l. 33.

35. Viktor Lazarev, *Osva'd Shpengler i ego vzgliady na iskusstvo* (Moscow: Izdanie A. G. Mironova, 1922).

to make good use of the achievements of western European culture rather than giving it a premature requiem for its proclaimed death?³⁶

As Tarabukin saw it, Lazarev was but a custodian of aesthetic tradition, who overemphasized Spengler's pessimism in order to avoid confronting the imminence of the degeneration of the traditional easel arts, such as not only Spengler but also the Productivists had proclaimed.

Spengler's overdetermination as a pessimist was something that the writer had himself sought to rectify in a polemical reply to his critics entitled "Pessimismus?" (1921), which appeared in three different Russian translations in 1922.³⁷ This essay, Tarabukin argued, "casts a completely different light on the general tendency of [Spengler's] thinking with regard to the forms culture [will take] in the future."³⁸ In *Pessimism?*, Spengler argues that if pessimism is defined—as the idealist would define it—as the refutation of the notion of universal mankind—then he is indeed "a complete and utter pessimist" since it is his conviction that "mankind is a zoological entity" for which there is no "progress, goal nor path . . . no universal soul, still less a singularity of purpose, feeling or idea." But if, as he himself defines it, "pessimism means to not have any more tasks to fulfill," then he is not at all a pessimist, since he sees "so many unfulfilled tasks that [he] is even anxious as to whether there will be enough time and people to carry them all out."³⁹

It is Spengler's reference to these future (but as yet unnamed) tasks that seems to have encouraged Tarabukin's conjecture about the coincidence of his thinking with that of the Productivists. "The death of painting, the death of easel forms does not mean the death of art in general," Tarabukin writes. "Art lives on, not as a specific form, but as a creative substance" (*OM*, p. 18). How, precisely? "In the future when, as a consequence of the increasing 'Americanization' of life, interest in pure art will have diminished, talented people will become practical workers instead of practitioners of pure art" (*OM*, p. 26). Spengler, Tarabukin continues, "advances the very same view-point" concerning the "disappearance of easel forms of art." Documenting their shared convictions on this score, Tarabukin strings together numerous quotations from Spengler's *Pessimism?* and *Philosophy of the Future*⁴⁰ (the latter being a separate Russian edition of most of the "Introduction" to the first volume of *The Decline*):

36. Ibid., pp. 149, 150, 151–152.

37. "Pessimizm li?," trans. I. Rumer, in the journal *Kul'tura i zhizn'* 4 (1922); *Pessimizm li eto?*, trans. with intro. by P. Popov (Moscow, 1922); and *Pessimizm?*, trans. with intro. by German Genkel' (Petrograd: Academia, 1922). References in the present essay are to the Academia edition.

38. Tarabukin, "Vzgliady Shpenglera," l. 33; see also *OM*, p. 27 n.1.

39. *Pessimizm?*, pp. 25, 26–27, 27 n. (Hereafter cited in the text as *P.*) See also *DWI*, p. 41.

40. Spengler, *Filosofia budushchego* (Ivanovo-Voznesensk, 1922). (Hereafter cited in the text as *FB.*)

“Epochs without genuine art and philosophy can nevertheless be great epochs” (*OM*, p. 27, quoting *P*, p. 29). “Practical people, industrialists, organizers and so forth, write better, more soundly, more clearly, and more profoundly than the majority of literati who have transformed style into a sport” (*OM*, p. 27, quoting [with elisions] *P*, p. 31). “If people of the new generation were to take up technics [*tekhniku*] instead of the lyric, navigation instead of painting, politics instead of epistemology, then one could wish nothing better for them” (*OM*, p. 27, quoting [with elisions] *FB*, 38). “For the highly-intellectual, startlingly clear forms of a speedboat, a steel works, or of a machine, I am prepared to sacrifice all the stylized nonsense of contemporary applied art, along with painting and sculpture” (*OM*, p. 27, quoting *FB*, 43). “I believe that the touch-stone for measuring the value of a thinker is the level, discovered by him, of his understanding of the great facts of our time.” “This [understanding] opens up majestic horizons for people of action; of course, for romantics and idealists unable to conceive their relation to the world other than by composing verse and drawing pictures, it [reveals] a hopeless prospect” (*OM*, p. 27, quoting *P*, p. 28).

What especially fascinates Tarabukin is Spengler’s proposal that the energy once reserved for easelism should now be redirected toward “practical useful action.” Focusing thus on an aspect of Spengler’s cultural prognosis ignored by Lazarev—the rise of technics in the reconfiguration of cultural activity—Tarabukin argues that Spengler is an advocate rather than opponent of the machine, who offers an “optimistic” rather than pessimistic interpretation of western European cultural decline.

The second—and more difficult—intervention required of Tarabukin in order to support his coincidence theory was the dislodging of the standard overdetermination of Spengler as anti-technological, as a Luddite. In fact, the real key to understanding Tarabukin’s recourse to Spengler lies in the critic’s analysis of where the German writer places technology within the dyadic structure of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* that drives *The Decline*. Spengler understood the interrelationship of culture and civilization in a periodic rather than ethical sense—as the expression of “a strict and necessary organic succession” (*DWI*, p. 31). Civilization, he argued, is the decline that is the “inevitable destiny” of every culture: “Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, rigidity following expansion. . . . They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again” (*DWI*, p. 31). Western European culture had entered the period of its civilization, its inevitable decline, at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Within this dyadic structure of culture and civilization, where does Spengler position technology? In most then-contemporary commentaries on *The*

Decline, Spengler is considered to have placed technology securely within the realm of civilization. This perception was based upon Spengler's condemnation of technological rationalism as Faustian culture's most hostile antagonist, a condemnation he shared with many conservative European intellectuals who lamented the erosion of the traditional values of humanist culture by, as they saw it, technology and industrialization. More recently, however, the historian Jeffrey Herf has sought to complicate this standard interpretation of *The Decline*. In contrast to most commentators, Herf argues that Spengler's ambition was to extract technology from the domain of civilization (rationalism, pure science, capital, internationalism) so as to recuperate it in the realm of culture (the soul, "creative" or applied science, nationalism).⁴¹ Some sixty years earlier, Tarabukin, drawing upon the final chapters of the long-promised and long-awaited second volume of *The Decline*, similarly read Spengler against the grain of the perception standard among his contemporaries.

In the two final chapters—one on "Money," the other on the "Machine"—of the second volume Spengler presents a "flying survey" of the morphology of economic life ("Economic thought sets in," he writes, "only where art and philosophy have irrevocably passed away" [DW II, p. 470]). These chapters quickly attracted the attention of the St. Petersburg publisher, Mysl'. In late 1922, German Genkel' translated both chapters for Mysl', which then issued them as a separate volume entitled *Money and Machine* in a large, and therefore presumably expectant, edition of five thousand.⁴² It was *Money and Machine* that enabled Tarabukin to sort out Spengler's positioning of technology within the dyadic structure of *The Decline*, and thereby substantiate his coincidence theory. Just as *Pessimism?* was an attempt to overturn the common characterization of Spengler's thinking as unrelentingly pessimist, *Money and Machine* constituted the strongest possible refutation of the popular perception of Spengler as anti-technological. Tarabukin evidently had the latter text on his desk in the months before he sent *From Easel to Machine* to press, since his second string of citations to *The Decline* are all drawn from the Genkel' translation (although unacknowledged as such).

Money and Machine makes two important arguments apropos the place of technics in western European culture. The first is that technics must be rescued from its overdetermination in contemporary thought as a product of rationalism. The contemporaneous advent in the late eighteenth century of, on the one hand, the "steam-engine" (a fundamentally transformative development) and, on the other, rationalism as a philosophical system (*DiM* p. 67; *DW II*, p. 502), prompted

41. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), pp. 49–50, and passim.

42. Spengler, *Den'gi i mashina*, trans. German Genkel' (Petrograd: Mysl', 1922). (Hereafter cited in the text and notes as *DiM*; references to the corresponding pages in *DW II* will also be given.)

“materialist thinkers” in the nineteenth century, Spengler regrets, to situate technics within the world of rational thought in the mistaken belief that an essential and causal link existed between technology and rationalism. Spengler, by contrast, seeks to sever that link, suggesting instead that technics is as old as animate life itself (*DiM*, p. 61; *DWII*, p. 499), that every culture has its own specific technics, and that technics was fundamental to Faustian culture before its descent into civilization.

Spengler draws a qualitative distinction between the technics of culture and that of civilization: in the realm of culture, technics is creative, active, and concrete (tied to a specific sensation or sense-judgment), whereas, in the realm of civilization, technics is intellectual, pure, and abstract (detached from any specific action or experience) (*DiM*, pp. 61–63; *DWII*, pp. 499–502). (The writer’s general drift here is one of speech-act versus language system, praxis versus theory, applied versus pure science.) According to Spengler, the cause of thought’s emancipation from sensation—which he takes to be epochal, but negatively so—is the advent of language. When thought develops into theory, it becomes detached from the technics of the day, it becomes “a piece of waking-consciousness uncommitted to activity.” One now knows what one desires, not as a result of the specific encounter at hand, but through repeated and thus accumulated experience. Spengler opposes such forms of knowledge. In his view, it was the Faustian soul, rather than rationalism, which was responsible for the extraordinary achievements of the second industrial revolution, as well as all later inventions. The modern preoccupation with flight, for example, was merely the return to the passions of that soul:

That which the glowing and soaring inwardness of St. Bernard [of Clairvaux] sought at the beginning, that which Grünewald and Rembrandt conceived in their backgrounds, and Beethoven in the trans-earthly tones of his last quartets, comes back now in the intellectual intoxication of the inventions that crowd one upon another (*DiM*, pp. 67–68; *DWII*, p. 503).

Grünewald, Rembrandt, Beethoven, and the modern engineer share, in other words, one and the same Faustian soul.

Spengler’s second argument in *Money and Machine* is that technics does not belong to capital, nor to capital’s “political weapon,” democracy. It is capital itself, Spengler warns, which in fact now threatens the future of the Faustian machine. Spengler thus puts into opposition two camps conventionally thought of as allied: industrialists and financiers. In order to do this, he returns to an opposition drawn in the money chapter between the productive and acquisitive economies (agriculture, which is tied to the earth, versus trade, which is rootless and thus “parasitic”).⁴³

43. Herf discusses the way in which this opposition underpins Spengler’s anti-Semitism; see *Reactionary Modernism*, pp. 59–61.

To this pair, he had earlier added a third, the “preparatory economy” (manufacturing and processing industries). In the machine chapter, this third economy is now aligned with the productive economy of agriculture, in opposition to the acquisitive economy of trade and finance. Spengler notes that the manufacturing industries, although originally but one small part of the larger category of manual labor, have actually come to dominate all other vocations, so that Faustian culture in general is governed by the “economy of the machine industry.”

Production no longer depends on the peasant’s hand but on practical thought (which in Spengler’s mind was distinct from theoretical abstraction), that is, on the engineer’s capacity to organize and orchestrate a “play of intellects in which hands are mere auxiliaries.” “The peasant, the craftsman, even the merchant suddenly lose almost all their significance before the three figures *which the machine itself has nurtured . . . the entrepreneur, the engineer and the factory-worker*” (*DiM*, p. 69; *DWII*, p. 504 [original emphasis]). But the future of the machine industry’s productive economy, and of the machine itself—which Spengler believes will win the war against civilization and therefore give birth to a new culture—is now under threat, he argues, from two quarters: mysticism (anti-machinism) and, much more profoundly, money (capital). The “ancient wrestle” between the productive and the acquisitive economies intensifies into the “despairing struggle of technical thought to maintain its liberty against money-thought.” The machine, the “real queen” of the twentieth century, is in danger of succumbing to money (*DiM*, pp. 72–73; *DWII*, pp. 506–507). On this millenarian note, *Money and Machine* concludes, Spengler’s eulogy to the machine instantiating the hope, only hinted at in the first volume of *The Decline*, that gifted people take up technics instead of the lyric. The modern engineer, whose intellect is rooted in practical action rather than theoretical abstraction, is catapulted into the position of Faustian culture’s messiah.

From Tarabukin’s perspective, the views of Spengler and the Productivists coincided in their mutual quest for a production-driven economy. But Spengler’s assertion—in accordance with his view of Russia as other to the West—that the “Russian soul” was deeply antithetical to the machine (“the Russian looks with fear and hatred at this tyranny of wheels, cables and rails” [*DiM*, p. 70 n. 1; *DWII*, p. 504 n. 1]) could only have reconfirmed for Tarabukin the necessity and radicality of the Productivist platform: that it was the Constructivists’ responsibility (as members of the radical intelligentsia) to overcome their compatriots’ traditional aversion to the machine. Nevertheless, there still remained the fundamental ideological difference: Spengler was no Productivist *sputnik*. Whereas Spengler’s quest for technology’s Faustian soul shifted the machine over to the realm of culture, the Productivists sought to establish the realm of civilization—technological rationalism—as culture.

Nonobjectivity: Urphänomen of Contemporary Culture

In his reading of *Money and Machine*, Tarabukin ignores Spengler's anti-Marxist diatribes and infusion of the machine with Faustian soul, in order to focus instead on the writer's reflections upon the increasing intangibility or incorporeality of economic life (both of the good machine and of bad capital): "High finance is," Spengler writes, "wholly intangible [*ungreifbar*]" (*DW* II, p. 505; *DiM*, p. 72).⁴⁴ Significantly, Tarabukin interprets Spengler's negative concept of intangibility or incorporeality as "nonobjectivity" [*bespredmetnost*'], thereby inserting it within another discursive context—that of the Russian avant-garde—for whom "nonobjectivity" was a positive term signifying various modes of abstraction in the 1910s and early 1920s. Spengler has demonstrated, Tarabukin suggests, the ways in which the "nonobjectivity of contemporary culture" has been "revealed to us through nonobjective forms of art" (*OM*, p. 34). Such modes of artistic production are, in turn, associated with the critical work of the literary formalists: "Nonobjectivity in painting is . . . a method of 'laying bare the device,' to use the term of the 'OPOIAZists'" (*OM*, pp. 33–34).⁴⁵ For Tarabukin, nonobjectivity is the "prime symbol" [*Urphänomen*]⁴⁶—in the Spenglerian sense⁴⁶—of contemporary culture: "nonobjectivity is symptomatic of the period in which we live, it is the essence of contemporary culture" (*OM*, p. 33).

The concept of western European culture's increasing intangibility or incorporeality is introduced by Spengler in volume one of *The Decline*, in a discussion of Impressionism. Acknowledging that the word "Impressionism" came into use only in the age of Manet, Spengler argues that it nevertheless summarizes well the "special quality" of Faustian easel painting since the Renaissance. Impressionism signifies

44. Genkel' translates *ungreifbar* as *neuiazvim*, that is, "unassailable" or "invulnerable" (literally, "untouchable") (*DiM*, p. 72).

45. OPOIAZ is the acronym of the Society for the Study of Poetic Language, a research circle founded in 1916 in Petrograd by Brik, Kushner, Viktor Shklovsky, and Boris Eikhenbaum. The expression to which Tarabukin refers—"the laying bare of the device" [*obnazhenie priema*]⁴⁵—was coined in 1917 by their colleague Roman Jakobson in the Moscow Linguistic Circle, and quickly became a major critical preoccupation of both circles. An aesthetic form or device was said to have been "laid bare" if it was presented without external function or "motivation" within the overall structure of the work; a work composed of such devices suspended or destroyed narrative, illusionistic, and other more conventional forms of coherence.

46. According to Spengler, every culture has a "soul," the identity of which is expressed in outward form by the culture's "prime-symbol" [*Urphänomen*]. The *Urphänomen* is "operative through the form-sense of every man, every community, age and epoch and dictates the style of every life-expression. It is inherent in the form of the state, [its] religious myths and cults, ethical ideals, forms of painting and music and poetry, fundamental notions of each science." "The prime-symbol of the Classical soul," for example, "is the material and individual body," while "that of the Western [is] pure infinite space" (*DW* I, pp. 174–75).

the deeply-necessary tendency of a waking consciousness to feel pure endless space as *the* supreme and unqualified actuality, and all sense-images as [but] secondary and conditioned actualities “within it”. . . . Impressionism is the inverse of the Euclidean world-feeling. It tries to get as far as possible from the language of plastic and as near as possible to that of music. The effect that is made upon us by things that receive and reflect light is made not because the things *are* there but as though they “in themselves” *are not* there. The things are not even bodies, but light-resistances in space, and their illusive density is to be unmasked by the brush-stroke . . . if there is one art that *must* exclude [Impressionism] on principle, it is Classical sculpture. . . . For the Impressionists, the end and the culmination of art was the conjuring up of a world in space out of strokes and patches of colour. . . . Everything merges in bodiless infinity (*DWI*, pp. 285–86, 292 [original emphasis]).

According to Spengler, the inception of the decline of Faustian culture into Impressionism begins with Leonardo and Giorgione, with whom

The technique of oils [became] the basis of an art that [meant] to conquer *space* and to dissolve things in that space. . . . While Michelangelo tried to force the whole meaning of human existence into the language of the living body, Leonardo’s studies show the exact opposite. His much-admired *sfumato* is the first sign of the repudiation of corporeal bounds, in the name of *space*, and as such it is the starting-point of Impressionism. Leonardo begins with the inside . . . and when he ends . . . the substance of colour lies like a mere breathing over the real structure of the picture, which is something incorporeal and indescribable. . . . *Leonardo discovered the circulation of the blood.* . . . Leonardo investigated the life in the body . . . and not the body-in-itself as Signorelli did. . . . [Leonardo’s] discovery . . . signifi[ies] the victory of the infinite over the material limitedness of the tangibly present (*DWI*, pp. 239, 277–78 [original emphasis]).

The qualities Spengler associates with Impressionism are manifest not only in the visual arts, “but in a thousand other ways as well”: Impressionism “is the comprehensive expression of a world-feeling, and it must obviously therefore permeate the whole physiognomy of our ‘Late’ [i.e., declining] Culture” (*DWI*, pp. 285–86).

At no point in his later discussion of the incorporeality of economic life, however, does Spengler refer to or otherwise recall his early discussion of Impressionism. But it is these early passages on Impressionism that underwrite Tarabukin’s major focus on Spengler’s discussion of the incorporeality of economic life. Tarabukin introduces a long string of quotations to the second volume of *The Decline*—all drawn from the Genkel’ translation. Each pertains to the “world-life

of economy” and circulates around the notion of the dissolution of the integral object in the Faustian drive for infinitude:

“The world of classical economy is divided into material and form.”
 “The world of our economy is divided into power and mass” (*OM*, p. 34, quoting [with elisions] *DiM*, p. 51). In contemporary economic conditions, “coal is not an object but the richest supply of energy” (*OM*, p. 34, quoting [with elisions] *DiM*, p. 56). “The concept of form [sic] is theorized as a completely impersonal and incorporeal center of force, whose influence radiates out to infinity” (*OM*, p. 34, quoting [with elisions and modifications] *DiM*, p. 57). “The peasant, the craftsman, even the merchant,” who operate with specific concrete objects or goods, “lose almost all their significance before the three figures which the machine itself has nurtured; these figures are the entrepreneur, the engineer and the factory worker” who handle money, thought and energy (*OM*, p. 34, quoting [with elisions] *DiM*, p. 69). “The engineer is the farthest from Roman legal thinking, and he will ensure that his economy will secure its own law, in which forces and their manifestations will take the place of personality and the object” (*OM*, p. 34, quoting [with modifications] *DiM*, p. 71).

Given that Spengler does not himself connect his reflections on economy with recent artistic practice, how does Tarabukin defend his claim that the German writer has demonstrated the ways in which nonobjective forms of art have revealed the nonobjectivity of contemporary culture? In positing nonobjectivity as *Urphänomen*, Tarabukin draws upon another fundamental opposition within *The Decline*: the antithesis of concrete experience (which marks culture) and abstract thinking (which characterizes civilization). In the chapters on money and the machine, this general antithesis inflects that of the productive versus acquisitive economies discussed above. It is also mapped over the two most significant new developments of Faustian civilization, namely, high finance and machine-industry, both of which share the same tendency toward abstraction, incorporeality and dematerialization. Capital is abstract: because it is not rooted in the land, it transforms objects and money from concrete entities into abstract functions. (Spengler’s argument here is analogous to his earlier comparison of the modern numeration system of algebra with the ancient concrete number system, a comparison that was to have tremendous importance for Lissitzky, as Nisbet and Bois have shown.⁴⁷) But modern machines are also abstract, Spengler suggests, to the

47. See note 29 above.

extent that they weave “an infinite web of subtle forces, currents and tensions” over the earth, their own “bodies become more and more immaterial,” “their rollers, wheels and levers no longer speak.” The minds of the organizer, manager, and above all engineer—and no longer the worker’s hand—hold production together. Hands become mere auxiliaries. Force and efficiency replace both producer and produced (*DiM*, p. 68–71; *DWII*, pp. 504–505).

Both capital and the machine thus turn labor into pure process. Unlike the weaver at the hand-loom, the mass production worker no longer sees the consequences of his or her labor. Spengler dismisses Adam Smith’s labor theory of value (wherein the value of an object is measured by the amount of labor expended on its production). Smith, Spengler claims, understands work only in terms of its result, as, that is, something which is made, and which has tangible, physical existence in the world. (Spengler also incorrectly lumps Marx together with Smith on this front.) Whereas, in modern mass production, work, Spengler suggests, is a *process* within a complex of such processes, a kind of “working” which in its internal worth, intensity and significance is endlessly varied, and which, like electricity, can be measured but never delimited. Within mass production, the work of individuals does not “add up” in a Euclidean sense but exists instead in an interdependent functional relationship (*DiM*, pp. 53–54; *DWII*, pp. 491–92).

Notwithstanding the dematerializing tendencies it shares with capital, however, the machine is redeemed in the end by the fact that “industry remains [ultimately] earth-bound.” Industry has “its station.” Its raw materials are drawn “from the earth” (mining is Spengler’s industrial paradigm). Despite its tendency toward dematerialization (of itself, of labor), the machine retains this fundamental connection with the land, and thus, for Spengler, with a nationalistically inscribed corporeality. Whereas, abstracted from the land, high finance (capital) is “wholly intangible,” and thus of the greatest detriment to such corporeality. Nothing but “blood”—the most fundamental “corporealization” of a culture’s soul—can stop capital (*DiM*, pp. 72–74; *DWII*, pp. 505–507).

However much Tarabukin may have been dazzled by the rhetorical charge of Spengler’s morphology of economic life, he totally flattens Spengler’s polemic by ignoring its nationalist and racist underpinnings. Most particularly, he suppresses the negative cast that Spengler gives to the process of dematerialization, to which private finance and, to a lesser extent, the machine, have subjected Faustian culture. Instead, Tarabukin champions Spengler’s portrait of contemporary culture in terms of dematerialization and nonobjectivity. This is so much the case that he makes a very revealing mis-citation of *Money and Machine*: “The concept of form [sic] is theorized as a completely impersonal and incorporeal center of force, whose influence radiates out to infinity” (*OM*, p. 34, quoting *DiM*, p. 57). Here, Tarabukin has replaced Spengler’s phrase “the concept of the ‘firm’” [*der . . . Begriff der ‘Firma’*]; in the Genkel’ translation, *poniatiiie ‘firmy’*] with, instead, “the concept of form” [*poniatiiie formy*], which fits much better his own purposes—to grant to nonobjective art the status of contemporary culture’s *Urphänomen*.

Tarabukin's Art of Production

What was the theoretical efficacy of Tarabukin's emphasis on nonobjectivity vis-à-vis his formulation of Productivism in *From Easel to Machine*? On the face of it, nonobjectivity would seem to have little to do with the Productivist platform, insofar as the latter was most typically understood as an exhortation to the production of utilitarian objects. But it was precisely his emphasis on nonobjectivity that enabled Tarabukin to identify a fundamental tension at the heart of that platform. On the one hand, the Productivists sought to remake the conditions of daily existence. Having been abandoned by art, everyday life is, Tarabukin regrets, "filled with objects which are ugly in every sense." Russians "live surrounded by objects which are inconvenient in form, false in their usage of materials, inexpedient in function." In their stead, the Productivists will create objects according to Constructivist principles of formal and material integrity, clarity and expediency of function. Aesthetic satisfaction will henceforth be found in the practical experience of everyday life. Eliminated will be the need for the "narcosis" provided by museums, or for one's pleasurable "distraction" by objects of rare beauty and virtuosity (*OM*, p. 23, 37).

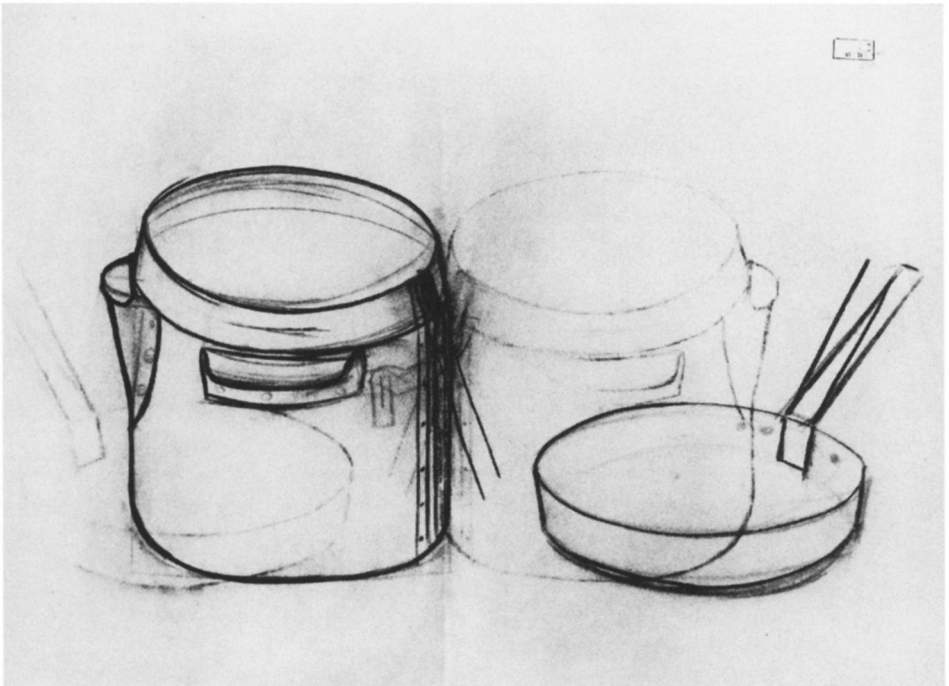
On the other hand, the very possibility of the integral, discrete object—whether easelist or Productivist—has been increasingly undermined, Tarabukin argues, with the advent of electricity, modern physics (Einstein's theory of relativity), and especially the new technologies of mass production. These are the contemporary historical conditions for which nonobjectivity is, the critic suggests, the *Urphänomen*. Tarabukin does not seek, therefore, to trace a straightforward shift from the easelist to the Productivist object, but rather attempts to grapple with the fact that the terms and conditions of industrial modernity reconfigure not only the producer's relation to the object, but also the formal integrity of the object itself. The millenarian iconoclasm of *From Easel to Machine* thus extends beyond the death of painting to the death of the object's integral self-sufficiency—what Tarabukin calls its "formal conception" (*OM*, p. 33). In that sense, *Pure Red Color* represents, therefore, not simply "The Last Picture" but also *the last object*.

Taking up his fellow Productivist Kushner's insistence that "the theory of production art must be built upon the basis of mass production,"⁴⁸ Tarabukin argues that the greatest obstacle to the forging of a new material culture—an authentic, post-easelist art of production—is the Constructivists' refusal to relinquish the traditional concept of the discrete object. The contemporary artist, "abandoning the easel . . . at which . . . he has made 'artistic' objects" and "deciding

48. Boris Kushner, "Proizvodstvo kul'tury"; quoted in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 101.

... to take up a position at the factory bench in order to produce utilitarian objects,” has not yet understood how deeply conservative his revolutionary gesture is becoming—conservative because the notion of the object that he brings to the bench is still derived, in fact, from the easel.

As an example, Tarabukin cites Tatlin’s honorable declaration “that he would no longer make useless ‘counter-reliefs’ but apply himself to the manufacture of useful ‘saucepans.’” But, in so doing, the critic argues, Tatlin remains a “handicraftsman”: “any work created by [the artist] is harmoniously worked with his hands and constitutes a unique object.” Whereas the full mechanization of production erases this hand—the last trace of the now obsolete, defunct culture of easelism—not only in the sense of eliminating manual production, but also by destroying the conception of the hand as the manifestation of individual judgment. But, by virtue of the backward “technology of his production,” the Constructivist—and here Tatlin is categorized as such—unwittingly transfers his “handicraft’ notion of the ‘object’ to the context of large-scale industry at the very moment when that industry is destroying altogether the notion of the ‘object’” (*OM*, pp. 27–28).



Vladimir Tatlin. Design for Multi-Purpose Metal Dish: Pot + Teapot + Frying Pan. 1923.

In opposition to the Constructivists' faith in the possibility of the discrete object, Tarabukin thus foregrounds a central paradox—for the Constructivist—of mass production: that the more technologically advanced the process of the object's production, the less corporeal, tangible, object-like that object, in fact, becomes. Three factors, he argues, account for the object's vanishing act under contemporary conditions of production: First, the integral object "disappears" because of the way in which mass production is organized: "Various production processes are necessarily involved in the manufacture of any finished product. The object [thus] loses any individualization in the process of its production. A large collective contributes to its creation" (*OM*, p. 30). (Here, the rhetoric of the collective displaces the critic's earlier concern for the worker's concomitant alienation from the product of his or her labor.)

A second cause of the object's disappearance results from the profound impact mass production has upon traditional patterns of consumption. Its seemingly infinite capacity to reproduce in standardized form factors into the object a new principle—that of rapid obsolescence—by which the object loses altogether any trace of resistance to temporal finitude that it may once have had:

Mass production cancels out the [hitherto established] conception of the object; it brings about an extreme reduction of the period of its utilization to a single act of consumption. Transformed from an object intended for a significant period of usage into an object ... produced for single-use only, transformed from a solid "elephant" into an "ephemeral," the object loses its fundamental character (*OM*, p. 30).

Within the context of a culture historically plagued by material scarcity, the principle of rapid obsolescence signified not only an increase in the potential quantity of a particular object, but also the transformation of that object's fundamental identity.

But it is the third cause of the object's vanishing that provides the key to Tarabukin's problematization of the possibility of the Productivist object:

Many modern products are no longer objects as such. Instead, they are either complexes of a number of objects which are linked inseparably in the process of consumption and thereby form a system, or, they represent a kind of non-corporeal energy. Such is, for example, the use of electrical energy which is itself an intricate system of installations from which is derived a number of "utilities" [*poleznosti*] in the form of light, heat, moving force and so forth. Thus we arrive at a new concept, unknown in the conditions of a less developed material culture, namely, that of the "installation" [*ustanovok*] (*OM*, p. 30).

In the material culture of the future, Tarabukin prophesies, the "modern product" will take the form not of an integral object but an installation—a system or network of interrelated components. The precise form the Productivist

“installation” will take—whether apparatus, device, mechanism, or plant (and the Russian word *ustanovka* encompasses all of these⁴⁹)—will be less important than the relationality of its functioning. In this regard, Tarabukin’s example of electricity is paradigmatic. Just as the functioning of the components that produce electrical energy—turbogenerators, transformers, transmission wires, control and distribution circuits—is fully interdependent, the logic of any installation is fully relational: if one component is removed or altered in any way, this produces compensatory changes in the overall system. The concept of the installation thus encapsulates Tarabukin’s own definition of the principle of construction: “a complex of elements unified in a single whole according to a definite principle, and which, in their unity, constitute a system” (*OM*, p. 13).

Tarabukin’s citation of electricity is not random in the formulation of his Productivist theory, since it was the electrification of industrial sites that was to enable their conversion to full mechanization. But electrification’s significance in the early 1920s was more than narrowly technical—it was in fact the technological discourse most privileged by the Bolsheviks as the immediately feasible architecture of communism, as Lenin’s famous equation, “Communism = Soviet power + the electrification of the entire country” suggested. By placing quotation marks around the word “installation,” Tarabukin marks the advent within Productivist theory of a concept derived, via Kushner, from the discourse of electrotechnology (*OM*, p. 30 n. 1).⁵⁰ Just prior to joining the INKhUK, Kushner had served in the electrobureaucracy of Vesenkha (the Supreme Council of National Economy, VSNKh), and had contributed to the Bolsheviks’ controversial 1920–1921 national plan for the electrification of Russia (GOELRO).⁵¹ In a run of lectures delivered at the INKhUK in March 1922, Kushner presented the argument that, in the new material culture of communism, the concept of the installation—or rather, of a system of installations—would eventually come to replace that of the object.⁵²

49. The semantic value of the word *ustanovka* increased rapidly in the 1920s, transcending the overtly technical sense in which Tarabukin here deploys it to signify also within psychological and ideological discourses as “orientation” or “positioning.” A prime example of the latter sense of *ustanovka* is its usage within Aleksei Gastev’s Central Institute of Labor in Moscow (see my “Switched On: Notes on Radio, Automata, and the Bright Red Star,” in *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design 1917–1937*, ed. Leah Dickerman [New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996], pp. 47–50).

50. In a footnote, Tarabukin credits his colleague Kushner with the introduction of the concept of the “installation,” along with two other related expressions, namely, the “decorporealization” [*razveshchestveniiia*] and “deobjectification” [*obespredmechivaniia*] of contemporary culture (*OM*, p. 30 n. 1).

51. See Jonathan Coopersmith, *The Electrification of Russia, 1880–1926* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 143.

52. See Kushner, “Organizatory proizvodstva (Doklad, chitannyi v Institute Khudozhestvennoi Kul’tury 30 marta 1922 g.),” *Lef* 3 (June–July 1923), pp. 97–103; and also Elena Sidorina, *Skvoz’ ves’ dvadtsatyi vek: Khudozhestvenno-proektnye kontseptsii russkogo avangarda* (Moscow: Russkii mir, 1994), pp. 357–358, n. 117.

Kushner further developed his argument in a curriculum for a course of seventeen lectures to be read at the Vkhutemas—the pedagogical correlative of the INKhUK—during 1922–1923. Therein, Kushner defines the “rudiments of communist culture” in terms of the destruction of the concept of the object, the functional integration of objects, and the introduction of the concept of installation into mass production.⁵³

Having drawn upon Kushner in positing the installation rather than the object as the appropriate goal of Productivist ambition, Tarabukin goes on to theorize the role of the Constructivist in production not as a “designer” of utilitarian objects—such as Tatlin and others had attempted to become—but rather as the engineer of production itself:

If everything I have said about modern production’s tendency to destroy our formal conception of the object is to be taken into account, then, the artist-producer in production is called upon, first of all, to design the process aspects of production. For the worker in production, the process of production itself—which is but the means of the object’s manufacture—becomes the goal of his activity (*OM*, p. 33).

Tarabukin’s formulation of the problem of production in terms of process reintroduces into the heart of Productivist theory the OPOIAZ formalist Viktor Shklovsky’s argument that “art is a means by which to experience the making of an object, in art what is made is not important.”⁵⁴ This cardinal maxim of early formalism underpins Tarabukin’s insistence in *From Easel to Machine* that “neither ideology . . . nor form in itself, nor material . . . constitutes specifically the sign that defines art as a creative category *sui generis*. That sign, which reveals the essence of art, lies only in the process itself of work” (*OM*, p. 21). Some pages later, Tarabukin reiterates his emphasis on process, but specifically within the terms of contemporary culture’s *Urphänomen*: “Nonobjectivity is inherent in the process of any work, insofar as the artist works with the material and methods of production, for the essence of any process is nonobjective” (*OM*, p. 33). Its tautological nature aside, this last statement suggests not only that, for Tarabukin, nonobjectivity—as dematerializing process rather than integral product—is prime symbol enough to encapsulate the new art of production, but also that it simultaneously transcends its contemporary specificity: “Nonobjectivity is inherent in the process of *any* work.”

Tarabukin’s invocation of a right-wing, manifestly anti-Bolshevik German ideologue in *From Easel to Machine* was thus motivated by something more than a

53. Boris Kushner, “Outline for a Course for the Basic Division,” n.d.; RGALI f. 681, op. 2, ed. khr. 165, ll. 3–5. My thanks to Leah Dickerman for her transcription of this document.

54. Shklovsky, “Art as Technique” (1917), trans. (modified) in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 12.

polemic with Russian aestheticians such as Lazarev. Tarabukin used Spengler in order to gain a measure of critical distance from the Productivist platform as it was most typically theorized within the INKhUK—as the production of utilitarian objects. Spengler enabled Tarabukin to formulate and defend, instead, a theorization of the Constructivist’s role in production in terms of a direct confrontation with industrial modernity’s central paradox—the loss of the discrete object. In the place of that object, Tarabukin hypostatized the “laying bare” of the process of production itself as the essence of the Constructivist’s future endeavor. It was thus in part the lessons of the OPOIAZ that drove Tarabukin’s recourse to Spengler in support of his particular and dissenting formulation of Productivist theory. What better way for the critic to disguise his return to formalism—at the very moment of the INKhUK’s *en masse* rejection of the analytical necrosis of modernism—than to bury it within a mis-citation of Oswald Spengler: “The concept of form [sic] is theorized as a completely impersonal and incorporeal center of force, whose influence radiates out to infinity.”