

Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ARTS IN RUSSIA OF THE 1920s

Julia Vaingurt



NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS / EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

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Northwestern University Press
Studies in Russian Literature and Theory

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Northwestern University Press
www.nupress.northwestern.edu

This book has been published with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vaingurt, Julia.

Wonderlands of the avant-garde : technology and the arts in Russia of the 1920s / Julia Vaingurt.

p. cm.—(Northwestern University Press studies in Russian literature and theory)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8101-2894-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Avant-garde (Aesthetics)—Russia (Federation)—History—20th century.
2. Russian literature—20th century—History and criticism. 3. Arts, Russian—20th century. 4. Art and technology. 5. Machinery in literature. I. Title. II. Series: Studies in Russian literature and theory.

N6988.5.A83V35 2013

891.70911—dc23

2012033499

⊗ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

In memory of my father, Mikhail Vaingurt
April 15, 1942–July 23, 2007

Kulbin said that a new muse made its appearance—the muse Tekhnè.

She was the muse of craftsmanship and professional skills elevated to art.

...
Tekhnè grew; she had presentiments of a struggle for new craftsmanship. It all ended, however, in the crimes of epigones. About ten years later, Shengeli made his appearance and began to write his books like *How to Write Articles, Poems, and Stories*.

These books were advertised alongside textbooks like *How to Repair Galoshes*, but they were cheaper and sold only for 90 kopeks.

Still cheaper was *How to Feed Canaries*, 50 kopeks.

This is how low Tekhnè sank.

However, this technique was not the technique of Tekhnè. This was the conceit of people who did not understand change in art.

—Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and His Circle*

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix	
Acknowledgments	xi	
<i>Introduction</i>	Imaginative and Instrumental Technologies	3
Part I. Homo Faber, Homo Ludens		
<i>Chapter One</i>	Poetry in Motion: Aleksei Gastev and the Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Biomechanics	25
<i>Chapter Two</i>	The Biomechanics of Infidelity: Range of Motion and Limits of Control in Meyerhold's Theater	54
Part II. Alternative Technologies		
<i>Chapter Three</i>	Writing as Bodily Technology in Zamyatin's <i>We</i> , or a Portrait of an Avant-Garde Artist as a Malfunctioning Machine	87
<i>Chapter Four</i>	The Incredible Heights of Organic Architecture: Tatlin, Khlebnikov, and the Technological Sublime	101
<i>Chapter Five</i>	Olesha's Suicide Machine	133
Part III. The Homeland of Technology		
<i>Chapter Six</i>	Convention, Play, and Technology in Russian Explorers' American Discoveries	149
<i>Chapter Seven</i>	Red Pinkertons: Adventures in Artificial Reality	182
<i>Conclusion</i>	Poetics of the Unconscriptable	224
Notes		233
Works Cited		279
Index		295

Illustrations

Fig. 1.	Kazimir Malevich, <i>The Knife-Grinder (Principle of Glittering)</i> , 1912–13. Yale University Art Gallery/Art Resource, NY.	33
Fig. 2.	El Lissitzky, <i>Tatlin at Work on the Monument to the Third International</i> , 1921. Private collection care of Grosvenor Gallery, London.	34
Fig. 3.	Liubov' Popova, set design for <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> by F. Crommelynck, Actor's Theater. Studio of V. Meyerhold of the State Actors' Studios, 1922. St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music.	70
Fig. 4.	Scene with the Cowherd. Zinaida Raikh as Stella, Igor' Il'insky as Bruno, N. Bogoliubov as the Cowherd in <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> , Act 3, 1928. A. A. Bakhrushin State Central Theatre Museum, f. 688, n. 180170/29, l. 30, exhibit number MF 29/37.	73
Fig. 5.	Marcel Duchamp, <i>The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)</i> , 1915–23. Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY.	74
Fig. 6.	Bruno (I. Il'insky), Estrugo (V. Zaichikov), and Stella (M. Babanova) in <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> , Actor's Theater. Studio of V. Meyerhold of the State Actors' Studios, 1922. St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music.	75
Fig. 7.	Igor' Il'insky as Bruno in <i>The Magnanimous Cuckold</i> , Actor's Theater. Studio of V. Meyerhold of the State Actors' Studios, 1922. St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music.	76
Fig. 8.	Vladimir Tatlin, the first model of <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> , 1919–20. Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies, London.	102

Illustrations

Fig. 9. Vladimir Tatlin, <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> , published on the cover of N. Punin, <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> . St. Petersburg: Izdanie Otdela Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv, 1920.	104
Fig. 10. Vladimir Tatlin, <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> , in N. Punin, <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> . St. Petersburg: Izdanie Otdela Izobrazitel'nykh Iskusstv, 1920.	105
Fig. 11. Vladimir Tatlin, counter-relief, 1915. Reproduced in <i>Brigada Khudozhhnikov</i> , no. 6, 1932.	107
Fig. 12–13. Vladimir Tatlin, the model of <i>Letatlin</i> . Reproduced in <i>Brigada Khudozhhnikov</i> , no. 6, 1932.	108–9
Fig. 14. Vladimir Tatlin, <i>Letatlin</i> , drawing of the body position in flight. Reproduced in <i>Brigada Khudozhhnikov</i> , no. 6, 1932.	110
Fig. 15. Vladimir Tatlin, <i>Letatlin</i> , detail of the wing. Reproduced in <i>Brigada Khudozhhnikov</i> , no. 6, 1932.	110
Fig. 16. Tatlin and assistants working on the model of <i>The Monument to the Third International</i> , 1920. Society for Co-operation in Russian and Soviet Studies, London.	114
Fig. 17. Velimir Khlebnikov, drawings of architectural structures, 1920. Pushkinskii Dom, St. Petersburg.	119
Fig. 18–20. Georgii Krutikov, the “City of the Future” project, 1928. State Shchusev Museum, Moscow.	128–30
Fig. 21. Aelita, <i>The Queen of Mars</i> , costume design by Alexandra Exter. <i>Aelita, The Queen of Mars</i> (Yakov Protazanov, 1924).	197
Fig. 22. Futuristic skyline of the Martian city, set design by Alexandra Exter. <i>Aelita, The Queen of Mars</i> (Yakov Protazanov, 1924).	198
Fig. 23. “American” poster advertising tires manufactured by the company Anta Odeli Uta and featuring the skyline of New York and the Statue of Liberty. <i>Aelita, The Queen of Mars</i> (Yakov Protazanov, 1924).	199
Fig. 24. Porfirii Podobed in the role of Mr. West. <i>Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i> (Lev Kuleshov, 1924).	210
Fig. 25. Cowboy Jetty (Boris Barnet) riding on top of the car. <i>Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i> (Lev Kuleshov, 1924).	211
Fig. 26. Cowboy Jetty (Boris Barnet) climbing the high wire between two buildings. <i>Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i> (Lev Kuleshov, 1924).	212
Fig. 27. The Shukhov radio tower in penultimate shot of <i>Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks</i> (Lev Kuleshov, 1924).	213

Acknowledgments

This book was long in the making, and there are many individuals whose generosity and advice helped to nurture its development. In its first incarnation it was a dissertation, and so, to begin, I would like to thank all my former professors and fellow graduate students at Harvard University for intellectual stimulation and support. I was truly fortunate to have Svetlana Boym, John Malmstad, and William Mills Todd III read my dissertation; their invaluable feedback made all the difference when I began to transform it into a book. I owe heartfelt thanks to many friends and colleagues: Julie Buckler, Katerina Clark, Caryl Emerson, Paul Josephson, Colleen McQuillen, Susan McReynolds, Lina Steiner, and Alfred Thomas read the book, either in its entirety or in fragments, and provided vital suggestions and criticism. I also greatly benefited from conversations with Alexander Etkind, Donald Fanger, Lioudmila Fedorova, Nina Gourianova, Loren Graham, Boris Groys, Serguei Oushakine, Harsha Ram, Stephanie Sandler, Bożena Shallcross, and Cristina Vatulescu. I am grateful to my colleagues at the University of Illinois–Chicago—Judith Gardner, Rachel Havrelock, Rosie Hernandez, John Huntington, Michał Paweł Markowski, Ellen McClure, Mary Beth Rose, and Astrida Tantillo—all of whom shared their time, expertise, and advice.

My deepest thanks must go to Julia Bekman Chadaga and Anna Katsnelson, whose friendship and concentration lasted through innumerable pages of drafts and hours of conversation on the subject of art and technology. I could not have asked for better friends.

Avram Brown subjected the manuscript to painstaking scrutiny and helped to put it in order. Gayane Arutyunyan was indispensable in procuring copyright permissions from various sources in Russia. I thank Gary Saul Morson and Mike Levine of Northwestern University Press who took on this project and made sure it saw the light of day. I was fortunate to have Gianna Mosser and Paul Mendelson attend to my manuscript with great care.

A year-long postdoctoral fellowship at the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University in 2009–2010 allowed me to complete this book. An NEH grant supported my participation in a summer

Acknowledgments

institute at the New York Public Library, “America Engages Russia, Circa 1880–ca. 1930,” that was instrumental for my work on Americanization. I thank the co-directors of the institute, Edward Kasinec and Robert Davis, for facilitating my research. My debt of gratitude also goes to the School of Literatures, Cultural Studies, and Linguistics at UIC, whose subvention money covered the expenses associated with illustrations for the book.

Over the years I presented parts of the book to various audiences. While I am grateful to every addressee who offered a willing ear, in the interest of efficiency I will single out just two of the groupings whose contribution was especially palpable. I would like to thank Sheila Fitzpatrick and the participants of the Modern Europe and Russian Studies Workshop at the University of Chicago for taking time to read my rather lengthy chapter 4 and for being such gracious, supportive, and incisive critics. I am also grateful to Tina Mai Chen and Aaron William Moore, the organizers of a workshop, “Human-Machines, Mechanized Modernity, and Mass Subjectivity Between Asia, the Soviet Union, and North America in the Twentieth Century,” held at Oxford University in June 2009. My paper “Human Machines and the Pains of Penmanship in Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*” was enhanced by the participants’ rigorous workshopping. Later published in *Cultural Critique* 80 (Winter 2012): 108–29, it went on, in modified form, to become chapter 3 of my book.

I also would like to thank Irene Masing-Delic and the editorial staff of *The Russian Review*, where a portion of chapter 1 appeared under the title “Poetry of Labor and Labor of Poetry: The Universal Language of Alexei Gostev’s Biomechanics” (*Russian Review*, April 2008); and the editorial staff of the *Harriman Review*, where an earlier version of an excerpt from chapter 6 appeared under the title “Base Superstructures and Technical Difficulties in Mayakovsky’s America” (*Harriman Review* 12, no. 4 [November 2000]: 5–11).

Most of all, I am grateful to my lovely family. *Wonderlands* would never have been completed without the unfaltering faith, enthusiasm, and support of my husband Tom Berman, our daughter Bella, my mother Rita Vaingurt Utschen, my grandmother Ara Kuritskaya, and my father, Mikhail Vaingurt, who did not live to see the publication of this book and to whom it is dedicated.

Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde

Imaginative and Instrumental Technologies

I don't want people to take this thing purely as something utilitarian. I have made it as an artist. Look at the bent wings. We believe them to be aesthetically perfect . . . like a hovering seagull.

—Tatlin on his *Letatlin*

The earth, assembling a quintet from the parts of the world, endowed it [America] with magical powers. In it a city stands on a single screw, all electro-dynamo-mechanical . . . Strange to be in Chicago! And marvelous!

—Mayakovsky on his America, “150,000,000”

“IT IS BAD FOR ME to talk about love,” confesses formalist critic and theorist of defamiliarization Viktor Shklovsky in his epis-tory antinovel *Zoo, ili Pis’ma ne o liubvi* (*Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, 1922). “Let’s talk a bit about automobiles.”¹ To avoid brooding over such things as unrequited love, revolution, homelessness, and exile, Shklovsky prefers to change the subject to technology, especially devices that embody movement and power: cars, ships, and industrial cranes. Amid feelings of stasis and loss induced by the exile during which this work was written, such machinery provides a mental escape, imbuing the critic’s words with direction and energy. More importantly, these devices are tools in the making of a poetic text, parts in the novel’s machinery of defamiliarization. Serving as metaphors, they transform the author’s ruminations upon his extratextual misfortunes into poetic experience.

In his seminal essay “Iskusstvo kak priem” (“Art as Technique,” 1917), Shklovsky explains how art shatters automatized perception, engendering immediacy and the sensation of seeing the world anew. In his semi-fictional *Zoo*, the author’s comparison of the experience of love to the operation of a vehicle is just such an artistic technique. The comparison not only defamiliarizes the trite literary subject of unrequited love; it also presents tech-

nology in a completely new light. Shklovsky utilizes technological metaphors artfully, that is, with the effect, ironically, of eliminating the automatization and numbness Walter Benjamin blames upon the advent of industrial technology in the first place.² Shklovsky's text induces an experience of technology analogous to aesthetic experience as theorized in "Art as Technique"; it effects a departure from the familiar, specifically, a defamiliarization of technology.

WHAT IS TECHNOLOGY?

From formalist technique to the constructivist artist-craftsman, from collages inspired by cinema to paeans to electricity and airplanes, a technological orientation defined the modernist project. It is thus unsurprising that many Russian modernists and avant-gardists either unequivocally embraced or actively polemicized with the changes wrought by technological advance. This book, however, is not concerned with describing how some perceived technology as a savior, and others as a destroyer; nor with cataloging the reflections and representations of various technological manifestations of modernity. My aim, rather, is to analyze visions of new aesthetic technologies, the imaginary machines and techno-spaces of Russian visual and verbal culture of the 1920s. This study will investigate the manner in which technology provided a new cultural framework wherein an artist could redefine knowledge, art, and self, and find new ways of seeing the world and his or her art in it. Shklovsky's *Zoo* does not substitute technology for love as a new aesthetic subject, but rather offers a new technique for thematizing love, underscoring the extent to which thinking and even feeling are conditioned by technological revolution.

An overarching aim of this analysis is to resolve, to the extent possible, a certain paradox. On the one hand, amid post-World War I and postrevolutionary desolation, with the new Soviet government initiating a program of rapid industrialization, Russian avant-garde artists declared their intent to serve the nascent revolutionary state, to refashion themselves from contemplators of life to its engineers, and to transform life in accordance with their aesthetic designs. On the other hand, their professed utilitarianism notwithstanding, most avant-gardists created works that can hardly be regarded as practical instruments of societal transformation. That is, whether we consider Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, Velimir Khlebnikov's projects for the radio of the future, or those of Andrei Platonov for electrification, we find the hybridization of art and technology—technology-inspired art, or artistic technology—leading to whimsy, to improbable, seemingly fantastic results. These outcomes are often interpreted as artists' unfortunate

failure to accomplish their creative tasks, and this interpretation seems the proper one, unless we venture to assume a less instrumental design.

The history of technology and science in twentieth-century Russia is so intertwined with the Soviet political experiment that technology has rarely been theorized as a phenomenon whose purpose could exceed its instrumentality: it has typically been viewed, both by historical agents and in scholarly analysis, either as an instrument of material transformation or a utopian means of myth-creation. And yet, only by divorcing technology from its compulsory association with instrumentality can we approach so complex a phenomenon as the “machine aesthetics” of the 1920s. This study will commence, therefore, with the delineation of two conceptions of technology: instrumental and imaginative.

DEFINITIONS

Andrew Murphie and John Potts begin their study *Culture and Technology* by pinpointing the historical moment in which the modern understanding of technology was formed. The authors suggest that the word “technology” was adopted in the second half of the nineteenth century to describe “the radical restructuring of Western society as a result of industrial processes.”³ Technology came to signify the complex of elements involved in industrial production, from abstract knowledge to concrete artifacts. In relation to this meaning of the term, it became common to think of technology as instruments for transforming and controlling the environment. This latter conception certainly informed the attitude of the new Bolshevik government in the 1920s. Lenin’s famous slogan “Communism equals electrification plus Soviet power” evinces a view of technology as a neutral (politically and socially independent) system of tools that can be utilized for the advancement of various political goals, in this case to render the new Bolshevik state a more amenable environment for the inculcation of socialism.

Avant-garde artists, intent on integrating life and art, were also drawn to technology as a mode and product of active creation, that is, creation which, engaged in the world, vigorously drives societal change rather than passively contemplating its effects. Particularly appealing to these artists in technological creation was the principle of utility; and yet, their imaginative approaches to technology led them away from the conception of usefulness narrowly understood as unilateral mastery, conquest, and control, and toward a more complex idea reminiscent of the Greek *techne*. In the Aristotelian conception, *techne*, the etymological root of “technology,” constitutes a contemplation of a particular instance of “coming-to-be”: “All art is concerned with the realm of coming-to-be, i.e., with contriving and studying

Introduction

how something which is capable both of being and of not being may come into existence.”⁴ In the process of making, one gains knowledge of the fundamental principle of life, of becoming. Making and contemplating are thus far from opposed in *techne*; they are, to the contrary, intimately connected. *Techne*, then, is a mode of cognition through making.

From this beginning, an epistemological lineage quite separate from the principle of narrow utility can be charted. The German philosopher Martin Heidegger called attention to the original inseparability of technology, in its Greek conception, from art: “*Techne* is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts. *Techne* belongs to bringing forth, to *poiesis*; it is something poetic.”⁵ The essence of technology, argues Heidegger, lies not in manufacturing, but in “revealing”; in this view, technology, which modern usage has reduced to a means of controlling the environment, in fact reveals ontological truth, discloses the circumstances in which humanity finds itself. Indeed, while humanity in its self-delusion fancies itself master of its tools, it scarcely suspects that technology dominates mankind’s very being. However, Heidegger’s *The Question Concerning Technology* hints at an escape hatch from this imprisoning relation of mankind to technology, namely, through the adoption of a critical stance, one that acknowledges humanity’s status of being at the disposal of technology, but also questions the very principle of techno-scientific instrumentality taken, in modern culture, as a given. *Techne*, technology’s beginning, suggests that this new possibility lies in the realm of aesthetics, which Heidegger sees as an inquiry into truth, concluding his essay with an ecstatic, almost mystical call to origins:

There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name of *techne*. Once the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendour of radiant appearance was also called *techne* . . . The poiesis of the fine arts was also called *techne* . . . The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought.⁶

The Frankfurt school theorist and Heidegger pupil Herbert Marcuse continued this train of thought, giving it a particularly optimistic spin. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse calls for the aesthetic enrichment of technology, arguing that artistic imagination encompasses that dimension of human experience that cannot be comprehended scientifically.⁷ Heidegger and Marcuse see affinities between technology and poetics, fusing these typically disparate concepts into a single intellectual project; and, not incidentally, rendering analysis of how artists creatively *transform* technology all the more critical.⁸ The complexity of imaginative technologies extant in the

very mechanics of *techne*, I would suggest, prevented their full conscription into the arsenal of political hegemony. An exploratory character of *techne* explodes any desire to be tethered to a single, unifying, overarching argument intended by the artist herself, the state, or any other totality to which she might aspire to belong. Imaginative technologies are not speculative in the sense that they are overly theoretical or risky or unsound, but in that they are driven by the desire to contemplate and explore, and this desire for exploration overpowers the will to power.

TECHNICAL RATIONALITY

In Heidegger's view, one of modern society's faults is its having transformed technology from a means of tapping into authentic being into one of manipulating "everywhere everything" to serve human interests, to be, in Heidegger's formulation, "standing-reserve."⁹ In postrevolutionary Russia, this transformation became an all too palpable political reality, with the whole universe of people, things, and the relations between them rendered "standing-reserve" for state goals. The Bolshevik view that technology is neutral, and can be made to serve the values of whichever political regime holds sway, is evident in Lenin's immediate initiation of the importation of Western technology (both technological know-how and actual machinery) toward the purpose of building socialism. Lenin participated in and often instigated the discourses of mechanization, industrialization, and Americanization that had become widespread in war-ravaged Russia, whose holy grail was now a quick-as-possible recovery. Stalin continued the transfer of Western technology on a massive scale, and the success of his five-year plans owed much to American technology.¹⁰

In his introduction to *Technology and Communist Culture*, Frederic Fleron Jr. argues that technology is an element of culture; industrial technology was born under the conditions of capitalist society and as such bears the values thereof. Fleron believes that with the introduction of Western technology, the Soviet state could not avoid the seepage into its own project of such capitalist values as technical rationality of production. Thus, Fleron states, socialist construction suffered from internal contradiction, with capitalist industrial dehumanization and automation of life militating against socialism's stated goal of human fulfillment.¹¹

As noted, the program of using Western technology to build socialism underscores the Soviet view of technology as neutral, as a mere means for the achievement of particular ends. Such separation of means and ends is precisely the core of technical rationality; discussing the history of this concept, William Leiss cites Max Weber: "For the purposes of the theoretical

Introduction

definition of technical rationality, it is wholly indifferent whether the product is in any sense useful. . . . In the present terminology there could well be a rational technique even of achieving ends which no one desires.”¹² Leiss further adduces the claim of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno that technical rationality, foregrounding as it does the separation of means and ends, is especially convenient in the construction of a totalitarian society, because this concept can justify the replacement of such humanist values as individuality and freedom with the technical values of productivity and efficiency.¹³ Beginning with the transfer of Western technology along with techniques of achieving efficiency and rationality, the Soviet government systematically substituted the development of its technical means for its ostensible goal of building a free, human-centric society.¹⁴

In the first years of the new state’s existence, a heated polemic regarding the nature of capitalist technology and its use in a socialist society revealed the extent to which Soviet conceptions of governance were bound up with those of technology. Lenin’s inclination to adopt Western technology unreflectively was challenged by, among others, the Proletcult theoretician Aleksandr Bogdanov, who saw technology not as neutral but, to the contrary, as embodying the values of the society that had engendered it. Thus, Bogdanov actively lobbied for the creation of “proletarian culture” and proletarian technology, calling in his *Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki* (*Short Course of Economic Science*), for instance, for the creation of self-regulating machines that would free the working class from manual labor and transfer it into the sphere of intellectual, creative work.¹⁵ Lenin vehemently rejected Bogdanov’s position, preferring the view of Bogdanov’s fellow Proletcult theoretician, the proponent of biomechanics and organizer of the Central Institute of Labor, Aleksei Gastev. A Soviet Taylorist, Gastev advocated a more practical approach. It was more rational, he argued, to import American technology and adapt oneself to it than to create, under the country’s dire financial constraints, Bogdanov’s humanistic, utopian-seeming machinery. Foregrounding pragmatism, Gastev stressed the need for technical knowledge, the cheapest form of Western technology Russia could acquire. Gastev’s work on biomechanics, the study of the living organism with the aim of perfecting its operation, sprang from the imperative to adapt in accordance with the American model. Lenin shared this no-nonsense attitude of technical rationality, deeming it, indeed, inseparable from the party’s main goal: “The sole economic basis of socialism is large-scale machine industry. He who forgets this is not a communist.”¹⁶ Thus, in the 1920s began an intensive introduction of American technology not only into Russia’s cities but also its countryside (Fordson tractors) and along with it, the American mindset and the philosophy of labor under industrial conditions—a mindset alien, however, to the majority of the Russian population.

The instrumental reasoning behind this technology transfer and its application became symptomatic of the technical rationality that guided the Soviet state, which, preoccupied with perfecting its means, lost sight of its stated goals. It may be that the quite abstract nature of these goals rendered them susceptible to being so easily misplaced; in the 1920s, the only way to gauge the extent to which socialism was being built was by substituting this progress with easily quantifiable benchmarks. The electrification campaign was significant not only because it emblemized Soviet-initiated enlightenment, but because it served as a system of visible markers, demonstrating the progressive transformation of an abstract concept into empirical reality.

Under Stalinism, the narrow focus on technical criteria was sustained, yet rerouted. Now technology had a new task: it was not only a socialism-builder, but a weapon in the struggle of “catching and surpassing the West.” This reorientation toward competition ensured that the appearance of success, a form of strategic bluffing, became more crucial than success itself.¹⁷ While much in the course of high Stalinist industrialization seemed to be nonsensical, utopian, and irrational, it could be argued that the switch from actual attempts at building socialism to the *appearance* of building socialism was a quite rational tactical move: the display of socialism, after all, is easier to accomplish than socialism itself. Soviet totalitarianism’s seeming irrationality, that is, does not preclude the functionality of its system.¹⁸ As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes: “The new conveyor belts often stood idle during the First Five-Year Plan . . . But even an idle conveyor belt had a function. In substantive terms, it was part of the First Five-Year Plan investment in future production. In symbolic terms . . . it passed on the message that Stalin wanted the Soviet people and the world to receive: backward Russia would soon become ‘Soviet America’; its great breakthrough in economic development was under way.”¹⁹ The “denial of the present empirical reality and its apparent constraints,” as Bruce J. Allyn characterizes Stalin’s rapid industrialization campaign of the late 1920s and early 1930s, does not preclude the Soviet government machine’s dedication to the principle of expediency.²⁰

The “gigantomania” typical of industrial projects under Stalin is interpretable as irrational and unproductive insofar as the aim of such projects is presupposed to be somehow commensurate with humanistic values, or even with the professed values of socialism.²¹ If the goal is the fulfillment of all human needs, then indeed, the Palace of the Soviets appears irrational. However, if we understand the goal as the *simulation* of socialism, then such projects as Dneprostroi and Magnitostroi, whose primary value lies in their “display value” (in the words of technology historian Paul Josephson),²² were quite consistent with that goal. A premium having been placed on visibility, one way to achieve this quality was to oversize.

Technology under the Bolshevik regime was to serve as a symbol of

Introduction

progress toward socialism, and Stalin took this function to its logical conclusion. The visibility of technology—its ability to be in plain sight, to make visible what is imaginary and conceal what might be obvious, that is, lack—became its ultimate worth. Projects connoting might and power were the ultimate mechanisms of decoy, the simulation of socialist space. If at first technological advancement was a sign, a measure of socialist construction that drew a kind of equivalency between the steps toward the goal and the goal itself, by the 1930s the sign completely replaced the goal, becoming it. There were no more ends beyond the means: the means served merely to create more means.²³

“Gigantomania,” explains Paul Josephson, “often results in waste of labor and capital resources, especially in centrally planned economies, where the state is the prime mover behind every project. In totalitarian regimes, projects seem to take on a life of their own, so important are they for cultural and political ends as opposed to the ends of engineering rationality.”²⁴ In Josephson’s formulation, engineering rationality amounts to cost-effectiveness, considered both in terms of materials and human life expended; this metric is quite separate from *instrumental* rationality, a rationalization of exploitation that dispenses with considerations of value(s) in favor of purely “technical” notions of productivity and functionality. Within the instrumental mindset, the most irrational actions can be regarded as perfectly valid, simply by virtue of fulfilling some function.

METHOD

Historians of the Soviet period have devoted a great deal of recent scholarship to reassessing the origins of totalitarianism. Rather than viewing Soviet sociopolitical realities as resulting from a monolithic, totalizing ideology imposed from above, many scholars argue that the diversity of these realities show Soviet life to have been a contested ground of various private and semi-private interests, ideals, and desires. Nevertheless, it seems warranted to suggest that a specific and rather common view on the nature of technology and its application for the purposes of state-building was shared by a majority of those in the Soviet milieu in any position of power,²⁵ and that this view resulted in an overriding and consistent state practice of the principle of technical rationality. Historians of Soviet technology view the utilization of technology over the seventy years of Soviet rule as virtually unchanging in nature.²⁶ The importation of Western technologies in the 1920s, the campaign of electrification, the stress on heavy industry, the “gigantomania” of the 1930s, the space program of the 1950s—all fall under a rubric whose overriding principle is instrumentality. Taking this view as a given, I

direct my critical attention in this study to the aesthetic-cum-technological products of the avant-garde, investigating their creations not only from the standpoint of commonality with various historical, political, and aesthetic discourses of the period, but also with an eye on their inevitable difference, their adherence to specific artistic methods or principles that depart from reigning period discourses; such departures typify the avant-garde, and allow me to speak of this extremely polyphous group of artists as a distinctive category. To be sure, the imaginary technologies discussed herein share with the instrumental technologies described above certain salient characteristics: some entertain hopes of becoming vehicles of enlightenment; others harbor aspirations of transparency, efficiency, utility, precision, and control; still others purport to be awe-inspiring, even sublime. And yet, I propose a qualitative distinction: in accordance with the logic of technical/instrumental rationality, which in Weber's formulation amounts to a complex of techniques interpretable as rational even when these achieve ends no one desires, the socialist state apparatus was functional; the artists under consideration here, on the other hand, despite their determination to stand as engineers and producers, never substituted the narrow technical values of efficiency and productivity for aesthetic ones, which omission ensured that the chances their art would evince *utility* were virtually nil. It is my aim here to demonstrate the complexity of these artists' goals, and the incompatibility thereof with instrumental reasoning.

CULPABLE TECHNOLOGY AND GUILTY ART

The most vociferous proponent of the instrumental view of technology in the Russian context, specifically that of technology as an instrument in the acquisition of power and control, is Boris Groys, who in his seminal study *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1991) argues that it was avant-garde artists who instigated the utopian revolutionary project of the state. In Groys's view, avant-garde artistic practices arose in response to the industrial-technical revolution. Technology rudely intruded into European life, destroying the formerly unifying idea of God—the basis of order and wholeness—and leaving, in the stead of this holistic conception, a sense of black chaos. Groys assigns sovereign importance to this technological deicide: “Of the Russian avant-garde, at least, one can state with certainty that its entire artistic practice was a reaction to this most momentous event of modern European history.”²⁷ The artists’ reaction was compensatory, a desire to reestablish order aesthetically, to transform a world devoid of meaning through technology, through the powerful image-creating imagination of the artist-engineer. The artists failed in this endeavor, but, according to this view, the Stalinist state inherited their

will to power, their urge to construct a new, well-organized, artistically complete world.

Groys's judgment of the avant-garde is not (as it were) total: he acknowledges that the avant-garde's declared project was fraught with contradictions preventing its realization, and that Stalin's regime was the more successful toward this end for its having removed these contradictions.²⁸ However, in his attempt to mold certain affinities between the avant-garde and Stalinism—cultural phenomena indeed shared, insofar as they were glaring products of modernity²⁹—into a continuous aesthetic paradigm, Groys argues that even the irrational, nonfunctional side of the avant-garde—its mysticism, so to speak—has its corollary in Stalinism, which was irrational and unproductive in its own right. Groys does not, of course, argue that this “unreal,” “magical” aspect of Stalinism was of a speculative nature; the avant-garde and Stalinism cannot be reconciled on the basis of the common drive toward exploration/contemplation. On the contrary, this conceptual move allows Groys to reconcile the nonutilitarian, “mystical,” and otherwise dysfunctional elements of avant-garde and the selfsame elements in Stalinist artistic practices on the basis of the shared (in his estimation) instrumentalist goal of political control. Objecting to those critics who take the avant-garde's turn toward utilitarianism at face value, Groys's insistence on the will to power as the primary *raison d'être* behind avant-garde creative practice suggests his own overreliance on the concept of instrumentality.

The assessment in *The Total Art of Stalinism* of the Russian avant-garde's creative practice is consistent with Peter Bürger's explication of the avant-garde.³⁰ Groys's attempt to elide the gap established in prior scholarship between artists of the Russian avant-garde and the regime—with the former wishing to serve, but eventually destroyed by, the latter—rehearses, on a country-specific scale, Bürger's theoretical undertaking to repeal *autonomy* as the defining characteristic of avant-garde creative practice. According to Bürger, diverse groups of the international avant-garde had in common the goal of redefining art as an institution, specifically, of eradicating its distinction as a sphere separate from social life. In suggesting that the critical divergence in approaches to technology renders the projects of the avant-garde and that of the Stalinist state incompatible, I do not propose to abandon Bürger's insight in favor of a return to some conception of art as autonomous, nor to disengage the avant-garde from the sociopolitical life in which it strived to participate.³¹ Neither do I intend to dehistoricize the avant-garde and claim that, in its quest for creative agency in a new culture, preoccupations of sheer physical survival were somehow alien to Russian avant-garde artists. Rather, my reassessment of avant-garde technologies suggests the possibility of simultaneous yet competing allegiances to a complex web of goals and values, all co-present in the preromantic, preindustrial idea of *techne*: estimations of

the possible; modes of testing and exploration; creative self-expression and introspection; and even some allowance for wonder.³²

By suggesting that technology is not coterminous with control of one's environment, I endeavor to show that more often than not, avant-garde technologies served contemplative rather than constructive aims, which renders the idea of aesthetic dictatorship as the avant-garde's ultimate goal problematic. Asserting the divergence of exploratory from exploitative approaches to technology, my inquiry into the cultural and individual meanings of technology aims to complicate notions of artists' complicity and collaboration in the creative experiment of the Soviet state.

TECHNIQUES AND VALUES

Whether grafting biomechanics onto theatrical theory, cultivating organic cityscapes, designing dysfunctional devices, animating machines, or fostering relations with phantasmagoric Americas, the artists discussed in this study have one element in common: none see their artistic technologies as value-neutral, and thus none practice technological rationality, nor lose sight of the ultimate values associated with their choice of techniques. In the eloquent formulation of Susan Buck-Morss:

These “products” of the avant-garde adhered to a different logic than machine efficiency or industrial engineering. They were dream images, expressing the wish for a transformed relationship between human beings and their environment. . . . This accounts for what Gassner has called the utopian surplus or supplement of production art. The point of this supplement was that it did not lose sight of why in a socialist society humans were making the machines: not to exploit nature but to enhance human existence within it. This goal remained palpable in the works of the revolutionary avant-garde at precisely the time that it was in danger of being forgotten by the political vanguard.³³

Paradoxically, the state, which accused the avant-garde of formalism, was steeped in a formalism of its own, preoccupied with means at the expense of ends; by contrast, the avant-garde's attention to form engendered a most profound association between means and ends, a supremely intimate union of form and content. What kept the artists under discussion focused on the end result of their artistic practice was a viewpoint directly opposed to “technical rationality,” namely, the particular aesthetic judgment that art is a means of “making it strange,” renewing one's perception. Artistic method is paramount in this regard, because these artists proposed to achieve the

sensation of newness by way of formal innovation; such faith in the innate relationship between artistic technique and aesthetic value precluded the possibility of instrumental thinking.³⁴ In this view, formal innovations are endowed with a peculiar ethical component; they righteously destroy complacency in thought; promote questioning; attune one to one's own existence and to the existence of others. Shklovsky asserts that "habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war."³⁵ It may be demoralizing to go about one's life unreflective regarding one's personal style, out of touch with one's material surroundings; but it is immoral to disregard one's wife, or take no heed of the dangers of war. It will be argued in this study that, in attempting to create aesthetic technology that would incarnate the ideal of perpetual newness—inseparably aligned with the traditional humanistic values embedded in the very theory of defamiliarization—Russian avant-gardists were producing imperfect machines. Avant-garde art would be bereft of utility in the narrow sense, for most artists never separated their artistic practice from the ultimate aesthetic value, which they perceived to be radical estrangement. This overriding artistic principle, the demand for constant renewal, ensured that the projects of the avant-garde were to remain unfinished, provoking perpetual ethical questioning and aesthetic wonder.

SYMBOLS AND METAPHORS

Thus while the artistic creations under consideration here are nonfunctional, this is quite a different negative in nature and form from, say, the nonexistence of the world as projected in socialist realist art. While the fantastic technologies of these artists do indeed create imaginary techno-spaces, their technologies ultimately serve, quite unlike the socialist realist aesthetic, as a means of dissimilation.³⁶ The effect of defamiliarization that artists strive for ensures that their explicitly fantastic imaginative technologies lay bare the basic device of the state, the simulation of reality. The Stalinist state apparatus attempted to erase the distinction between the imaginary and the real, asserting the imaginary space of its ideology as a new reality. In contrast, avant-garde artists viewed the imaginary space created by their art and the reality of the everyday three dimensions as related, but separate.³⁷ From the search for the fourth dimension to suprematist antireality, from Khlebnikov's "nature-inspired" cityscapes to Mayakovsky's and Shaginyan's America, the artists' wonderlands are parallel to, separate from, and yet connected with given reality. Metaphoric relationships are founded on the principle of simultaneity; and it should be emphasized that the metaphoric mode of thinking is central to avant-garde poetics, as opposed, in a fundamental way, to the symbolic mode characteristic of, say, high Stalinist culture.

In his analysis of two possible forms of linguistic operation—combination and selection—Roman Jakobson associates metonymy with the former and metaphor with the latter. In contrast to the metonymic aspect of language, which makes associations on the basis of a logical or substantive connection (what Jakobson calls contiguity or closeness), metaphors are based on similarity. Jakobson argues that prose is tied to the metonymic principle, while poetry thrives on the metaphoric; he further argues that various literary canons endorse either metonymy or metaphor. Thus, realism, which foregrounds cause and effect, is associated with metonymy, while romanticism, symbolism, or surrealism, which valorize imaginative, idiosyncratic, and extravagant ties between words and phenomena, are associated with metaphor.³⁸ While Jakobson does not specifically differentiate between symbol and metaphor, the gravitation of symbol toward unity and closeness seems to me to associate it with the more “natural” metonymy, whereas metaphor requires imaginative leaps and provokes estrangement. The affinity of symbol with metonymy hardly needs clarification: symbol erases the self-sufficiency of an object, absorbing it as a part into a greater totality of meaning. Metaphor, which shows resemblance between distinct entities, draws parallels between fragments without incorporating them into a single whole or allowing one fragment to subsume another; metaphor in my understanding is thus similar to Benjamin’s notion of allegory as preserving the dialectical tension between a sign and its meaning.³⁹

Socialist realism, which became the overarching artistic practice of the Soviet state in the 1930s, was founded on the use of symbols. “The basic function of Socialist Realism is not ‘lying,’ but substitution,” argues Evgeny Dobrenko.⁴⁰ Inasmuch as socialist realism constitutes a method of the simulation of reality, it practices substitution on the principle of complete identification; for example, technological progress stands as a substitute for—symbolizes—advancement toward communism. Symbolic substitution can only be successful if it conceals its own device: hence the absolute demand for verisimilitude in Stalinist discourse. In symbol, the act of substitution must go unnoticed, but metaphor, to the contrary, reveals its substitutive mechanism, exhibits the leap of imagination that the substitution demands. Steeped in symbolic tropes, socialist realist discourse affirms the stable, unshakable unity between symbol and what it stands for; meaning is determined and fixed, and misinterpretation is precluded. Conversely, for the avant-garde, art is conceived as so intimately connected with the process of estrangement that it cannot but provoke resistance to symbols and their affirmation of totality. (It might be said that even in its age of symbolism, Russia’s artistic vanguard had a very complex relationship with thinking in symbols.) Symbol thrives on recognition, but for the purposes of defamiliarization, open-ended testing—that is, metaphor, which establishes parallelism and similar-

ity between two dissimilar phenomena—is a much more effective device. A metaphor always stresses the incongruity between the elements it compares, illuminating, even as it suggests likeness, the fact that these are not ultimately the same. Simile is of course the most explicit form of simultaneous affirmation of continuity and discontinuity; to *be like* something is never to completely *be* it. But any metaphor precludes total identification, allowing for slippage of meaning, imaginative leaps, estrangement.

A most telling example of metaphoric thinking, indeed, is the very enlistment of the military term “avant-garde” to describe artistic practice. Analyzing the connotative vicissitudes of the “avant-garde” metaphor from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, Matei Calinescu finds that in the modern period, the transposition of the term into the aesthetic realm did not imply any entrance of art into political life, but rather emphasized the parallel, similar, yet separate advancement of the sphere of art.⁴¹ Similarly, the international Society of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Globe, established by Khlebnikov in 1916 as a gesture of opposition to World War I, exemplified metaphoric thinking, as it performed difference, underscoring the distance between the members’ imaginary dominion and the geopolitical boundaries to which, according to international law and everyday usage, they had no claim whatsoever. Khlebnikov’s induction of himself and other creative individuals into this society constitutes a travesty of the very idea of political power, and can hardly be interpreted either literally as a thirst for it, or symbolically as the confirmation of its possession. In contrast, Stalin’s designation as “great leader and teacher,” regardless of how one evaluates the actual relationship between the sign and the referent, is symbolically quite effective: the substitution is made on the basis of contiguity rather than similarity. Again, while symbolic thinking affirms unity, metaphor suggests similarity, but underscores difference. Distinction, difference, and dissent were the principles of avant-garde creative practice, and the chapters of this book represent case studies of how various imaginative technological creations underscore not only difference between various artists, but also distance from the technologies of the state. Imaginative technologies are metaphors for poetic exploration, daring conjectures, cognitive strivings, a poetics in search of purpose. As such, they remain unfinished by design, open-ended, purposelessly purposeful.

BIOMECHANICS AND AMERICANIZATION: SOME PRELIMINARIES

The vast scope of the relationship between art and technology in Russia in the 1920s makes it necessary to delimit this theme by concentrating on some of its most salient manifestations. Rather than organizing this study around

specific technologies, media and communication, say, or heavy machinery or transportation, I choose to focus on two closely linked cultural discursive practices that gained momentum in Russia in the third decade of the twentieth century, namely biomechanics and Americanization. These two cultural trends played a key role in organizing the conceptualization of and discourse surrounding the various new technologies that besieged the modern subject. I explore how artists, while participating in these discourses, formulated their own individual positions vis-à-vis the transformation, in the “mundane” sense, of the world around them, and in a broader sense, of ontological reality itself.

The discourse of Americanization and its offshoot biomechanics articulates more than simply an attitude toward technology and its place in a new society. Whereas biomechanics, the fashioning of the human body after mechanical models, deals primarily with technologies of the self, with biological enhancement and the search for self-improvement, Americanization—so far from simply symbolically instantiating efficiency à la Taylor—conceptualizes otherness (both the otherness of others and that of one’s self). The first two sections of the book, “Homo Faber, Homo Ludens” and “Alternative Technologies,” are dedicated to biomechanics, particularly the relationship between technology and the body, and hence the technologies of self; of self-preservation, -expression, -reflection, and -fashioning. Russian biomechanics is largely inspired by American models, but evinces homegrown influences as well: the theories, for instance, of philosophers Nikolai Fedorov and Pavel Florensky, mathematician Nikolai Lobachevsky, and physiologists Ivan Pavlov and Vladimir Bekhterev.

The last section of the study, “The Homeland of Technology,” dedicated to Americanization proper, deals with technologies of the other, or more precisely, the desire for communication or relationship between the self and its technological other, represented by America. The cultivation of machine aesthetics being an outgrowth of the larger trend of Americanization, these chapters describe actual and virtual travels to the United States. The fledgling Soviet state looked for inspiration to a country whose relative youth in no way hindered its prosperity; survival became synonymous with industrialization, and industrialization with Americanization. In a country famously declared to be no less than half-founded on electrification, the inventiveness of Edison acquired heroic laurels. The program of biomechanics developed by the state-sponsored Central Institute of Labor, whose chief organizer was Aleksei Gastev, was based on the principles of American industrialist Frederick Winslow Taylor’s scientific management of labor. Gastev was far from alone in hailing the organizational feats of such captains of American industry as Taylor and Henry Ford; Lenin endorsed Fordism in the workplace and Taylorism as a way of life, and Trotsky defended the rhetoric of American

Introduction

efficiency, success through hard work, and self-sufficiency as a moral ideal.⁴² While *America* so conceived was becoming a pervasive element in public discourse on the future of Russia, avant-garde artists, too, projected onto that country their own futurist ideals. In their writings, however, America functions not so much as a model for adaptation as an imaginary space, an artistic laboratory for exploring desirable (and undesirable) futures. For Russian modernists, technology associated with the *marvelous* becomes both the incentive for and the vehicle of virtual travel, enacting the dream of breaching the communication barrier separating one from the distant other—the futurity represented by America. Herein lies the difference between the state's instrumental technology—strictly a means to an end—and artists' imaginative technology, which, like poetry, becomes a method of communicating with the world, and in the process discovering truths about the self.

Part 1 of the book, “*Homo Faber, Homo Ludens*,” focuses on the impact of the technological imperative on theories of the body. Specifically, I address the biomechanics-infused reconsideration of the body vis-à-vis the machine. Although technology extended human capabilities, enhancing movement and communication by way of cars and airplanes, radio and cinema, it also exposed the body's deficiencies and limitations. The hungry, weak body unable to cope with the aftermath of World War I, the Civil War, and War Communism was a site of crisis. Technological innovation promised a better tomorrow, but bodies traumatized by the present and recent past were too exhausted to keep up. It was deemed critical to reconstruct the body itself, to discipline it, expunging every trace of wastefulness and weakness. Positivist theories were advanced to the effect that the body could operate with maximum efficiency if it modeled itself on a machine. Part 1 discusses the role of the arts in transforming the excessiveness of the human body into machine-like restraint and self-mastery; here the focus is the discourse of biomechanics as espoused by its two best-known proponents in the arts, Aleksei Gastev, a leading poet of the Proletarian Culture movement and chief organizer of the Central Institute of Labor, and Vsevolod Meyerhold, the legendary theater director. I examine the attempts of Gastev and Meyerhold to purge the intemperance from poetry and drama and, insofar as these genres are frequently associated with pathos, to reduce the complexity of human emotions informing these art forms to reflexology. Chapter 1, “Poetry in Motion: Aleksei Gastev and the Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Biomechanics,” explores the ties between Gastev's experiments in the scientific management of labor and his concomitant aspiration to discipline poetry. In his collection *Poeziia rabochego udara* (*Poetry of the Worker's Blow*), Gastev foregoes mimesis—“nature” was something not to imitate, but to leave behind—in favor of the rhythm of mechanical production. I begin my sur-

vey of the relationship between art and technology with Gastev, who among avant-garde artists came closest to internalizing the technical rationality of the state and incorporating it into his art. The remainder of the artists examined in this study propose alliances of art and technology that resemble not so much the extreme position of Gastev as the above-mentioned ideal of techno-creativity espoused by Bogdanov. Chapter 2, “The Biomechanics of Infidelity: Range of Motion and Limits of Control in Meyerhold’s Theater,” analyzes the director’s innovations and their enrichment of the concept of bodily mechanicity. Cultivating a biomechanics of the theater, Meyerhold pioneered, with a remarkable programmatic lucidity, the elevation of various technological contraptions from the status of tool to that of creative toy. The director’s high valuation of the economy of stylized gesture is counterbalanced by his insistence on the actor’s absolute consciousness of his or her every move, a self-awareness differing sharply from the pure machinism envisioned in the biomechanics of Gastev. Inspired by puppetry, and indeed, by the theoretical puppet’s-eye view, Meyerhold thus problematizes the one-sided, production-for-use relationship between machines and human beings. In this he harks, to some extent, to an earlier conception of the mechanistic body: as Jean-Claude Beaune demonstrates in his genealogy of automata, these self-sufficient machines were conceived as imitations of human beings precisely for the purpose of increasing humanity’s understanding of what it means to be human. As mirrors of people, they were interesting in and of themselves, in terms of what they showed, rather than in terms of the labor function they could perform. Only with industrialization, as Beaune notes, was *automaton* supplanted by *robot*, a term introduced by Karel Čapek in his 1921 play *R.U.R.* and derived from the Czech word *robota*, “work.”⁴³ Whereas robots stand as rather prosaic manifestations of technological utility (until, of course, they acquire, against any clear logic of profitability, the capacity to feel pain, and thus become human), automata reveal the curiosity of the human mind, its craving for self-discovery and tendency to dream. Beaune’s survey not only ambiguates the concept of *machine*, but also makes us ponder: should we not see early twentieth-century man’s desire to turn himself into a machine as a form of return, specifically, a return to self, to another form of the human? Chapter 2 suggests possible answers to this question.

Part 2 turns to descriptions of alternative technologies that oppose the mechanized aesthetics discussed in part 1 and propose their own paradigms for the relationship between art and technology. Chapter 3, “Writing as Bodily Technology in Zamyatin’s *We*, or a Portrait of an Avant-Garde Artist as a Malfunctioning Machine,” analyzes the novel that explicitly polemicizes with Gastev’s philosophy. Zamyatin conceptualizes writing as a corporeal, or-

ganic technology. While not expressly an avant-gardist in his own right, he creates a protagonist, D-503, who is the avant-garde artist-engineer par excellence and whose writing expresses the same internal doubt that is evident in Meyerhold's engagement with biomechanics. Akin to the way biomechanics ends up working against the director's grappling for control, the process of writing, instead of ensuring and maintaining robot-like D-503's mechanicity, has a reverse effect; language, which harbors the seeds of imagination and ambiguity, taints the flawless technicity of D's mind.

Chapter 4, "The Incredible Heights of Organic Architecture: Tatlin, Khlebnikov, and the Technological Sublime," continues the subject of organic technology with an exploration of the architectural projects of the poet Velimir Khlebnikov and the artist Vladimir Tatlin. The former envisioned cityscapes conceived and constructed according to natural, organic patterns, with buildings modeled, for instance, on beehives and poplar trees. For his part, Vladimir Tatlin designed a glider, the *Letatlin*, a sort of avian reincarnation, in the age of the airplane, of Leonardo da Vinci's flying machine. I contend that even Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International*, which became a constructivist emblem, is at the same time an organic machine, inspired by forms found in nature.

Chapter 5, "Olesha's Suicide Machine," analyzes Ophelia, a dysfunctional device created in a gesture of revolt against machine aesthetics. The rhetoric of machine aesthetics conceptualizes technology as beneficent in two key respects: technology serves as a protective shield separating the human body from a hostile environment; or as a prosthesis that compensates for the body's handicaps. The latter view, for example, was foregrounded by documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who, less sanguine than Gastev with regard to human perfectibility, exclaims in one of his manifestoes: "We cannot improve the making of our eye, but we can endlessly perfect the camera."⁴⁴ However, several writers, rebelling against such machine aesthetics, create memorable malfunctioning or outright broken machines, including the mad Ophelia, the invention of old-world dreamer Ivan Babichev in Iurii Olesha's *Zavist' (Envy)*. As distinct from instrumental devices that cordon the human off from the allegedly harmful world, the dysfunctional machine destroys such boundaries, exposing her creator's vulnerabilities and communicating his innermost feelings and desires. Conceived in protest against technocratic productivism, Ophelia consumes her creator.

As for this period's vaunted "homeland" of technology, chapter 6, "Convention, Play, and Technology in Russian Explorers' American Discoveries," discusses the United States as a rhetorical device and literary metaphor. The powerful allure of that country's technological luster is seen not only in such obvious manifestations of industrial prowess as America's sky-

scrapers, cars, and electricity, but also in her Taylorist fox-trots, the mechanical movements of her Charlie Chaplins, and the tricks and techniques of her Nat Pinkertons. Although this chapter traces the Russian conception of America in newspapers and journals, political articles, artistic manifestoes, and travelogues, at its center are the “American” writings of Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose claim in the poem “100%” to being more American than any American warrants this focus. Analyzing the trajectory of Mayakovsky’s relationship to America, from the epic he wrote prior to his 1925 journey there to his posttrip poems and travelogue *Moe otkrytie Ameriki* (*My Discovery of America*), I elucidate the divergence between the futures envisioned by the revolutionary poet on the one hand and the revolutionary state on the other, a discord which manifested itself in incompatible conceptions and applications of the metaphor of technology.

Chapter 7, “Red Pinkertons: Adventures in Artificial Reality,” continues to analyze the myth of techno-miraculous America with reference to virtual travels to that country in Russian science fiction. Specifically, I explore the extremely popular genre of the Red Pinkerton, an ideological adventure novel with elements of detective and science fiction. Examining four parodic novels in this mode, Valentin Kataev’s *Ostrov Erendorf* (*Erendorf Island*), Marietta Shaginyan’s *Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde* (*Mess-Mend, or A Yankee in Petrograd*), and Aleksei Tolstoy’s *Aelita* and *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina* (*The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin*, sometimes rendered *Engineer Garin’s Death-Ray*), as well as a film in this same category, Lev Kuleshov’s *Neobychainye priklucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol’shevikov* (*Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*), I expose the mechanisms by which the discourse of Americanization is both perpetuated and deconstructed, and highlight the exuberance with which the technological fantasy is conceived and exploited.

I have entitled this study *Wonderlands of the Russian Avant-Garde*. The word “wonderland” suggests an imaginary and aesthetic realm. Webster’s Online Dictionary defines it as a place of “great or strange beauty,”⁴⁵ the Oxford Dictionary as “a realm or place full of surprises and marvels.”⁴⁶ It is precisely the strangeness of this realm that allows no mere passive contemplation. The sublime splendor of avant-garde wonderlands, I propose, is a form of provocation; the state of *wonder*, after all, is closely associated with the experience of curiosity. Vladimir Nabokov believed that two qualities essential to the creation of art, curiosity and attention to detail, are inherently ethical categories. In the artistic practice of the Russian avant-garde, the requirements that new forms be continually sought, and that art serve life by nourishing the sense of wonder, give rise to imaginative technologies with artful imperfections. Malfunctioning machines demand improvement,

Introduction

and so keep humanity from the mire of automated, contented, thoughtless life. Today, amid debate on the ethical uses and abuses of technology, insight can be derived from an inquiry into how, a century ago, artists negotiated their relationship to a rapidly changing world—how they drew inspiration from creative technological potential, while infusing technology with an aesthetic ethos.

PART I

Homo Faber, Homo Ludens

Chapter One

Poetry in Motion: Aleksei Gastev and the Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Biomechanics

More than anything, artists are men who want to become inhuman.

—Apollinaire, as quoted in Lyotard, *The Inhuman*

Sitting on the gas tank of an airplane, my stomach warmed by the pilot's head, I sensed the ridiculous inanity of the old syntax inherited from Homer.

—Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Selected Writings*

“CEMENTED WITH BLOOD, the USSR stands firm,” boldly declare the founders of *Lef* in the inaugural issue of their journal.¹ Human blood as a building material of the new Soviet Union, albeit a visceral image, should not be understood purely figuratively, as this statement refers to the bloody wars—World War I, the Civil War—surrounding the state's creation. In and of itself, this metaphor is not particularly original. Of significance, however, is the assertion that the U.S.S.R. is built solidly because of this material and this material alone. Human blood here is a fit surrogate for cement, an advantage in a country that had much greater supplies of the former than the latter. But blood is just one component of the body whose productive potential was gaining attention at the time. Aleksei Gastev, the Proletcult poet and popularizer of the theory of biomechanics in Russia, asks, “Why are there mountains of books written on thermal energy, furnaces, boilers, steam machines, electricity, anthracite, white coal, and electrification, and none on the energy of the worker?”² At a time when the country was in dire need of materials and technology for its reconstruction, human bodies were its cheapest available material, its most basic technology.

A well-known couplet from “We were born to make fairy tales real,” the song eventually made famous in the 1930s as the official hymn of Soviet aviation, but actually composed in the 1920s—“Reason gave us steel wings for arms/And a flaming engine for a heart”—constitutes a popularization

of the idea that the human body is a mechanism with immense potential. This idea, which was rapidly gaining momentum in the 1920s in Russia, led to the emergence of a new artistic language and new artistic techniques. In the concomitant development of biomechanics, two cultural traditions, the increasingly popular machine aesthetics and the keen fin-de-siècle interest in cultivating the perfect physique, found their synthesis.³ Although much of Russian art of this period is informed and inspired by belief in the technological potential of the body, two Russian artists in particular, Aleksei Gastev and Vsevolod Meyerhold, systematically adapted biomechanics to their work, cultivating both its aestheticization and popularization. Meyerhold's biomechanization of the Russian theater is the subject of the next chapter; this chapter, after providing a brief history of Western and Russian techniques of controlling the body, will offer a comprehensive reading of Gastev's poetic experiments in the context of his work on biomechanics and labor organization. Paradoxically, the Russian cultural preoccupation with bodily chastisement led Gastev to turn to "Americanism." Here it will be argued that Gastev understood biomechanical transformation in national terms, and that the poet's taming of the Russian word was part of his project of purging the Russian in himself; both the word and the self were to be streamlined. In the process of practicing biomechanics and tempering the body with the help of poetry, Gastev sought to expel everything he associated with Russianness (disorder, weakness, wastefulness), transcending the concept of nationality and replacing it with the universal identity of the machine.

PRAXIS AND POETRY OF THE HUMAN MACHINE

Gastev was mistaken in perceiving a dearth of written material on human energy and its productive potential; in fact, throughout the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, an immense amount of attention had been paid specifically to this subject. Gastev's own adaptation of the theory of scientific management of labor, developed by the American industrialist Frederick Winslow Taylor, stemmed from these efforts. In *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, Anson Rabinbach traces the rise of the conception of the human body as thermodynamic machine. The preoccupation with human energy and its expenditure and economy influenced various studies of labor, resulting in the emergence of a science of work practiced by physiologists, psychologists, and social reformers and eventually politicized by communist and Nazi ideologues. As the first philosopher of labor Rabinbach pinpoints Hermann von Helmholtz, who laid the foundations of a modern understanding that does not differentiate between natural, mechanical, or human labor power: "Helmholtz did not

demote the living creature to the machine; he transposed the character of an energy-converting machine to the body, indeed, to the universe.”⁴ Following in Helmholtz’s footsteps, Marx treats the laboring body as indistinguishable from other natural sources of energy. Both Helmholtz and Marx conceived of the body as a field of forces capable of infinite transformation and conversion, simultaneously linking the cosmos to the body and to the productive arrangement of work.⁵ Rabinbach argues that it is precisely the belief that the body is not a separate entity, but only one of a myriad of natural and inorganic forces, that made it “subject to a sophisticated analytics of space and time.” Here enters Etienne-Jules Marey, whose photographic studies of bodies in motion inspired Henri Bergson’s *Creative Evolution*, Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, and the time-motion studies of the engineer Frank Gilbreth, an associate of F. W. Taylor. Marey, whom Rabinbach sees as a key link between cultural and social modernity, regarded bodies as motors, that is, organized systems with direction, subject to the laws of mechanics, and he dedicated his life to creating instruments and techniques of defining and measuring human motion.⁶

Marey’s work was based on two postulates: (1) that without movement, there is no life: “From the invisible atom to the celestial body lost in space, everything is movement . . . It is the most apparent characteristic of life,” and (2) that one can measure human motion by mapping it in time and space: “All movement is the product of two factors: time and space; to know the movement of a body is to know the series of positions that it has occupied in space in a series of successive moments.”⁷ Marey’s scientific interests had the very practical goal of “[measuring] the effort expended at each moment in the different actions of locomotion, in order to seek the most favorable conditions for utilization of that effort.”⁸ The potential for military application of Marey’s research was immediately apparent, and the French Ministry of War subsidized his laboratory’s work, offering financial assistance and the bodies of infantrymen as research material. Marey’s work, however, had obvious artistic merit as well; the bodies, suspended yet moving, possessed a poignant grace. Using technology of his own design, Marey managed to record what the eye cannot see. Suspending time, he captured the fleeting moment, recording the sensation of movement and thereby opening new vistas of perception. The ability of Marey’s instruments to probe beyond the ordinarily perceivable intrigued artists, preoccupied at the time with the invisible parameters of space and time. Moreover, Marey’s experiments visually rendered the progression of time as a series of simultaneously coexisting moments, thus materially instantiating Bergson’s philosophy of memory.

Marey’s attempts to grasp and perfect the life-movement of the human machine could only be achieved with technological assistance. His experiments bear a latent presupposition of the inferiority of the human motor,

a sense that the latter is perfectible only by way of technology. The human body is the link between the natural laws of mechanics and the technological, but it is a weak link. Marey's project evinces a recognition of the body's deficiency, its dire need of constant improvement.

After Marey, the body and its organization and utilization for work was investigated by many Western physiologists, from Paul Bert, who advanced the study of diet, or fuel for *la machine humaine*, to Jules Amar, who researched the alleviation of fatigue through the regulation of work. But no scholar of the human machine received as much attention in Soviet Russia as American industrialist Frederick Winslow Taylor, the popularity of whose study of labor was by the time of World War I immense in Europe, spreading thence to Russia. Taylor's "scientific management of labor" sees the human body as the focal point of the industrial process and strives to improve productivity by teaching workers to use their bodies in the most efficient manner possible. Like Marey, Taylor was interested in time-motion studies, but it was strict utilitarianism, not scientific curiosity, that led him to this juncture. Taylor moreover added a personal and moral dimension to what had previously seemed a purely scientific endeavor, as his private life was also subjected to fixed schedules and a rigid self-discipline. In *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, Richard Stites explains the ethics of Taylor's scientific method: "For [Taylor] the factory was not only an arena of production and an idyll of elegant precision but also a moral gymnasium for the exercise of good character."⁹

Productivism may bear strong hints of moral uplift, but insofar as it presents an area in which capitalism and communism may meet, it is also "politically promiscuous."¹⁰ In Soviet Russia, Taylorism met with great controversy, but its obvious success in conserving energy rendered it a subject not to be ignored.¹¹ The proponents of Taylorism saw its capitalist origins and its potential for exploitation as minor drawbacks, easily overcome within the industrial framework of socialism. Stites comments: "Taylorism and its efficiency craze spread across the country, becoming in the words of a contemporary 'a normal American madness.'"¹² An ardent promoter of Taylorism, Gastev earned the sobriquet of "the Soviet Taylor" when in 1920 he organized Moscow's Central Institute of Labor, which sought to inculcate Taylor's precepts in the Russian workplace and enjoyed the support of Lenin and Trotsky. The movement propagated by the institute became known as the Scientific Organization of Labor (Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda, or NOT), the institute's leadership, possibly in order to expunge the exploitative connotation of Taylor's doctrine, having replaced "management" with "organization"¹³—a switch highlighting the contradictions inherent in the socialist state's adoption of Western biomechanical ideology, and hinting at the

difficulties and criticisms Gastev would suffer in connection with his labor of love.

However, the quest to conserve human energy did not appear in Russia solely from abroad. On Russian soil, Western concepts of scientific management and rationalization of the body merged with the homegrown tradition—rooted in religion—of bodily chastisement. Taylor's contentions regarding the moral benefits of biomechanical training dovetailed with the outlook of Russian nineteenth-century visionaries concerned with the disciplining of the body. This idea that the body's supposed iniquitous weakness must somehow be dealt with found particularly dramatic expression in the eccentric rendition of Lev Tolstoy, who evinced an almost obsessive interest in controlling the body and channeling its energy. In *Anna Karenina*, for example, the estate owner Levin manages to sublimate his sexual energy, and with it his spiritual confusion, into productive physical labor, while in "Otets Sergii" ("Father Sergius"), the eponymous protagonist cuts off his finger (a gesture of symbolic castration) in order to suppress his desire for the beautiful divorcee Makovkina. While Tolstoy believed that the reformation of the human being must be achieved even at the expense of the extinction of the human race, the philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, on the contrary, demonstrated that the restructuring of the body could entail the annihilation of death. In her article "The Transfiguration of Cannibals: Fedorov and the Avant-Garde," Irene Masing-Delic discusses Vladimir Solov'ev's objection to Fedorov's concept of man-made resurrection, which Solov'ev saw as pointless insofar as the human body in its present sinful state of "cannibalism" is not worth immortalizing; Fedorov responded that "cannibalism," a stumbling block on the path of human evolution toward immortality, would naturally be solved in the resurrecting process.¹⁴ Fedorov's notion of the "cannibalism" to be overcome was broad, encompassing not only the killing and exploitation (including sexual exploitation) of human beings, but also the consumption of animals and plants, all of which offenses, in Fedorov's opinion, stemmed from uncontrolled bodily impulses that must be purged from the rational and enlightened human machine. In *Filosofia obshchego dela* (*The Philosophy of the Common Cause*), Fedorov stipulates that in the course of human evolution and with the help of scientific-technological restructuring, human beings will be rid of their digestive and sexual organs; using cosmic energy for nutrition, they will have achieved perfection and immortality. Fedorov's optimism, in contrast to the pessimism of Tolstoy's "Kreitserova sonata" ("The Kreutzer Sonata"), is enabled precisely by his belief in the possibility of solving the perceived problem by way of science and technology.¹⁵ Those inspired by Fedorov's project included Konstantin Tsiolkovksy, the father of rocket science; Grigorii Krutikov, the architect

whose ambitious project of the Flying City was an attempt to envision a habitat for Fedorov's cosmic people; and numerous avant-gardists captivated by the transformative potential of flight.¹⁶ Although the preoccupations of "the Soviet Taylor" pertained to a far more immediate reality, Fedorov's philosophy of the scientific transformation of human beings was foundational for Gastev's work as well. For Gastev, Taylor's method of body management was a step toward the realization of the future envisaged by Fedorov. Gastev's project, however, was necessitated not by the vast incongruity between human beings and cosmos, but between human beings and their immediate environment, an incongruity with glaringly dire implications in postrevolutionary Russia.

BODY TROUBLE AND SCIENTIFIC RESPONSES

The early Soviet preoccupation with the human body was intense and ambivalent. Modern technologies extended the capacity of the body, but also accentuated its deficiencies, its weakness and fragility, the latter especially underscored by the new military technologies utilized in World War I. The manic assurance that humans possess enormous productive energies, together with the paranoid sense that this energy is constantly depleted and wasted, that ultimately the human body is simply unequal to the task of surviving in the frenzied, demanding modern age—such motivations induced scientists and artists to search for solutions to the body's fatal inadequacy. It was imperative for human survival to adapt the body to the demands of the technological and industrial revolution, with technology serving as the model, impetus, and condition for human change. Theories were advanced that a body could operate as a perfect organism if it modeled itself on a machine. Russian scientists took up the goal of human improvement, seeking in reflexology, and other studies of the body, ways to render the body legible, to conquer it so as to make it responsive to the demands of the environment.

Ivan Pavlov's work on developing artificial (conditioned) reflexes in dogs was a step in the direction of improving control of the human mechanism. With "collective reflexology," Vladimir Bekhterev sought a scientific, would-be objective method of studying and improving human behavior. Not only individual human behavior, but also the actions of the collective, of social life (including mob behavior and military conflicts), could be explained as a series of "associated motor reflexes," and then controlled through laboratory work on these reflexes. Reflexology did away with the old dichotomy of body and soul by getting rid of the soul altogether: in this view, everything in the emotional life of a human being can be explained by the body's responses to stimuli.¹⁷ Bekhterev continues the tradition of regarding the

human body as inseparable from natural forces: “The nervous current must be regarded as a manifestation of one kind of universal energy.”¹⁸ In *Collective Reflexology*, Bekhterev develops the laws underpinning the mechanics of human behavior:

If a mechanic builds a new car, having planned in advance how it will work, he achieves this through thorough knowledge of a certain dependence of phenomena on the correlation between one lever and another. In the same manner, a physicist can calculate the number of joules needed to warm a body of a certain magnitude, by employing a certain dependence. We have the same ability, to some extent, in biological investigations . . .¹⁹

Bekhterev approaches collective behavior, like that of the individual, from the point of view of energetics. The first law Bekhterev cites in his opus is the law of conservation of energy, whose finalization he attributes to the above-mentioned first philosopher of labor Hermann von Helmholtz. In Bekhterev’s view, this law explains why humans utilize energy more efficiently than steam engines: the latter can only tap into energy sources input into them, whereas human bodies can derive energy not only from digested food, but also from the broader environment, for example, from participation in collective work. The human ability to process and regenerate energy was politically convenient in the context of Soviet Russia, whose citizens, provided with the proper environmental stimulus of an electrical infrastructure, were expected to emit a reciprocal output of energy.

As Marey used technology to calculate human mechanics, his investigations of the body offered new ways of perceiving time and space; indeed, these categories were fundamentally altered by technological advances, resulting in the disruption and reorganization of the daily life of the individual. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau postulates that social life is determined by spatial practices, which are in turn continually restructured by progress-privileging (or time-privileging) scientific technology. Similarly, Russian constructivists were so interested in changing the material environment because they believed such a change could transform human beings. According to such scientists as Bekhterev, who foregrounded the laws of adaptation and evolution governing both individual and social life, the constructivists were not entirely wrong.

As mentioned, Marey’s studies of the capabilities of the body and its technological enhancement took place against the background of the exigencies of modern warfare. Along similar lines, the contemporary field of cybernetics proceeded on the idea that it is easier to adapt a human being to a particular environment than to increase that environment’s amenability to human needs. In particular, cybernetics as a field appeared in the context of

space travel; thus to expand its knowledge beyond Earth, humanity needed first of all to change itself. Manfred Clynes and Nathan Kline, who pioneered the study of the body's nervous system, as well as the cybernetic control thereof, wrote in their article "Cyborgs and Space": "Altering man's bodily functions to meet the requirements of extraterrestrial environments would be more logical than providing an earthly environment for him in space."²⁰ Clynes coined the term "cyborg" to signify the concept of "persons who can free themselves from the constraints of the environment to the extent that they wished."²¹ With the help of technology, cyborgs, human-machine hybrids, would optimize the regulation of their organisms in such a way as to adapt to any environment. In this connection it is worth noting that work performed by Gastev's Institute of Labor was later continued by the U.S.S.R. Institute of Cybernetics. In 1962 the leading Soviet cybernetician A. I. Berg stated that "modern cybernetics—the theory of the goal-directed management of complex processes—can be viewed in the USSR as the heir and successor of scientific management."²²

BODY TROUBLE AND ARTISTIC RESPONSES

The art of the early twentieth century echoes the scientific preoccupations outlined above, as well as the anxieties underlying them. Take, for instance, Kazimir Malevich's *Tochil'shchik* (*The Knife-Grinder*); considered a celebration of movement and labor, the violence of the image is nevertheless unmistakable (fig. 1). The painting conveys a heady sense of movement by allowing the viewer to simultaneously see the depicted image from different points in time and space. But the central images of the round blade of the steely grinding machine and the knife seem to cut the worker to pieces. In this powerful action, human melds with machine; Malevich's superimposition of several consecutive movements onto a single plane, which hastens the work and conserves time by way of violating the human body through an unnatural simultaneity, contrasts with Marey's deliberate arrangement of each moment in consecutive frames, resulting in slow motion. Marey's study of motion imposes a sense of precision and order, and is almost a paean to the body; in Malevich's painting, by contrast, movement erases and disfigures the body, inflicting upon the viewer a painful sensation of chaos. Another suprematist, El Lissitsky, depicts a similar instance of violence inflicted on the body with a sharp metal instrument in his *Tatlin at Work on the Monument for the Third International* (fig. 2). Here a tiny man stands on a chair in front of one of Lissitsky's enigmatic *Proun* spaces. A sharp measuring instrument is sprouting from his eye, rendering him a cyborg. His other eye is hidden from view. The man's lack of normal eyes allows him, paradoxically, to collect



Fig. 1. Kazimir Malevich, *The Knife-Grinder (Principle of Glittering)*, 1912–13

himself and focus his body on his task, the measuring of space, undistracted by the enormous female face floating above him. In contrast to “Tatlin,” this giantess is all eyes; the fact that her body is severed, and her mouth gagged with what appears to be duct tape, focuses attention on her profound ocular sadness. In one of his manifestoes, Tatlin announces: “We declare our distrust of the eye, and place our sensual impressions under control.”²³ The disembodied, silenced woman represents the feminine realm of sensuality from which Tatlin is liberated. Freed of *former* constraints, the new man inhabits a new multi-dimensional reality, attained by way of cognition and calculation. Clarity of perception can only be achieved, suggests the painting, if the human being becomes a machine.

In “The Cine-Eyes. A Revolution,” Dziga Vertov sings encomia to the

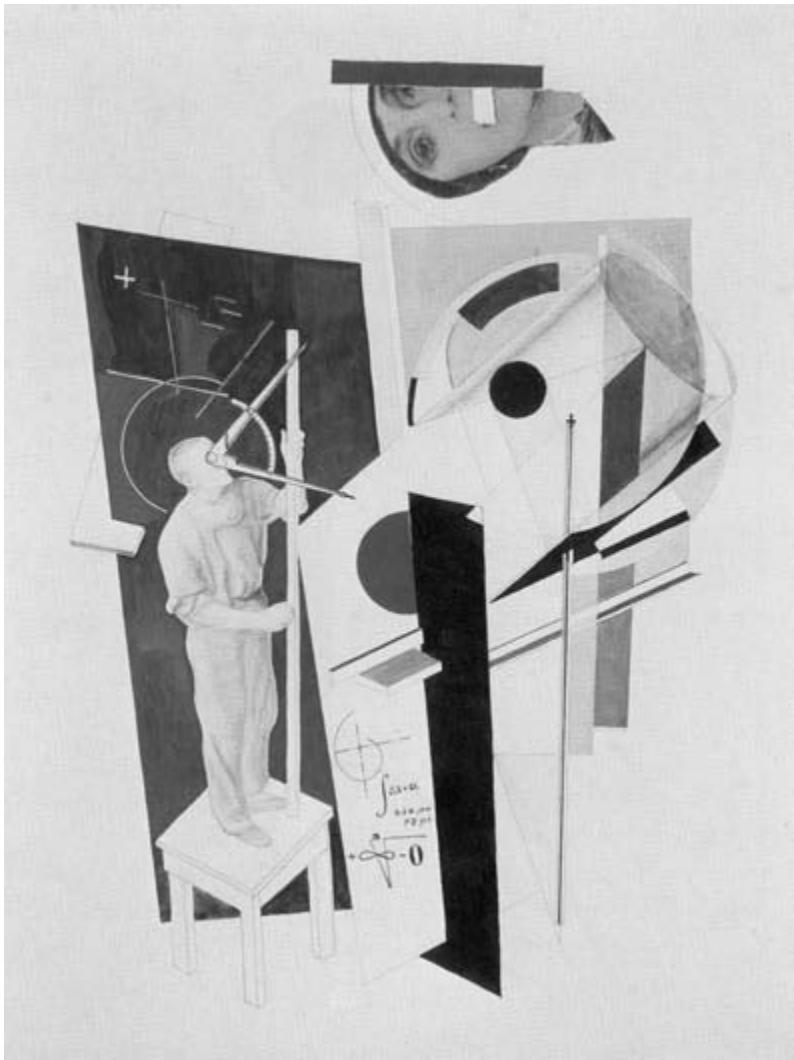


Fig. 2. El Lissitzky, *Tatlin at Work on the Monument to the Third International*, 1921

aesthetic defamiliarization wrought by such a mechanical device as the film camera: “I am the Cine-Eye. I am the mechanical eye. I the machine show you the world as only I can see it. . . . My path leads towards the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I can thus decipher a world that you do not know.”²⁴ Technology casts doubt upon Western civilization’s long-standing

belief in the primacy of vision; it discredits the human eye, the body part hitherto seen as most central to the process of cognition. X-rays, microscopes, aerial photography, and the camera demonstrate how much indeed the human eye has missed. Dziga Vertov's ecstatic ode to the camera is concomitant with the belief that human transformation is possible only if man acknowledges his physical inadequacy and adopts the camera as a prosthesis for his own deficient body:

I am the Cine-Eye. I create a man more perfect than Adam was created . . .
I take the strongest and most agile hands from one man, the fastest and best proportioned legs from another, the most handsome and expressive head from a third and through montage I create a new, perfect man.²⁵

In such a montage, the “perfect man” is an assemblage of perfect parts harvested from various bodies. It stands to reason that the remains of these donor bodies are discarded, like defunct machines cannibalized for useful parts. Thus perfection by means of technology entails that man should regard violence done to his body merely as a kind of industrial reassembly.

I use “man” and “his,” moreover, pointedly here, for industrial and military demands focused attention on masculine as opposed to feminine physicality. It was the male body especially that became the site of crisis and controversy, and of optimism and pessimism. Among technologists, those least confident in the body’s capabilities, like Vertov, imagined technology as an armor or prosthesis for the incapacitated human being. Gastev’s biomechanical vision is in a way more positive regarding man’s abilities. Biomechanics proposes that man does not need external mechanical prostheses to survive; the body itself is a machine that can develop its own armor or be utilized as a tool. Man’s body contains within itself the ability to become a machine, and in so doing survive in the machine age.

A telling source for the conception of the body-machine can be seen in the Greek origin of the word “technology” itself. *Techne*, signifying craft and art, encompasses anything human-made under the rubric of technology, and this can include the body: during their lifetime, bodies adapt and learn a wealth of culturally transmitted techniques (running long distances, dancing the Riverdance, eating with a knife and fork, writing). Gastev’s biomechanics shares the following premise pronounced by Marcel Mauss in his “Techniques of the Body”: “The body is man’s (or woman’s) first and most natural instrument, or more accurately, not to speak of instruments, man’s (or woman’s) first and most natural technical object, and at the same time his (or her) first technical means, is his (or her) body.”²⁶ Mauss theorizes that in many ways these bodily techniques are inherited and habitual; hence, the instrumentality of the human body is of a fixed and regular character neces-

sary for its proper functioning, Gastev's biomechanics was to bring man back to his own instrumentality, using the machine as a model.

ON THE ROAD TO MACHINE AESTHETICS

Gastev's concern regarding the body's weaknesses preceded NOT and his interest in productivity and biomechanics; his biological engineering and productivism originated in the idea, popular at the time, that biological instincts inevitably wreak chaos both in man's internal life and his environment.²⁷ His first short story, "Proklyatiy vopros" ("The Accursed Question," 1914), gives expression to the notion that sexual passion militates against one's humanity rather than contributes to it. The narrator articulates a belief that biology reduces him to an animal, and only his resistance to his own biology "let the human being within him triumph."²⁸ Despite the fact that Gastev's father was by the time this story was written already devising technological panaceas for bodily problems—Gastev's biographer Johansson states that the poet's father "invented among other devices an electrical apparatus for the treatment of rheumatic ailments"²⁹—it would be several more years before Gastev would discover in technology the solution to the problem of biological chaos. Not yet able to channel his desire into a machinistic passion for technology, Gastev's hero must fall back on the ancient technique of ascetic isolation. Gastev published the story under the pseudonym "Odinokii" (The Lonely One), the disconsolate connotation of the word emphasizing, possibly against the author's intention, that asceticism is not a perfect solution.³⁰ In time, Gastev was to solve this problem of loneliness through the idea of a new collective humanity united in machinism.

In his antiutopian novel *My* (We, 1920), Evgenii Zamyatin fashions along Gastev's projections the world of OneState (*Edinoe gosudarstvo*—gloss by Clarence Brown), in which regularity, uniformity, and communal rule. This world, Zamyatin imagines, will be devoid of individualism, and hence intimate feelings such as passionate love will be alien to it; when such feelings intrude into the ordered world of OneState, they wreak havoc on its icy harmony. And yet, the ideal world of Gastev, albeit uniform, regular, and communal, is far from devoid of passion; the poet envisions loneliness as brought to naught by the individual's melding with the collective, and his desire for the perfect unity of one and all is marked by an almost sexual intensity:

The harmonious chords of mass creativity will constantly give birth to desires, they will educate and foster the man who is continuously renewing himself. It will be possible to want him passionately, we can strive toward him with inex-

pressible vigor, he can be attained, but it is impossible to give concrete birth to him, he cannot be made an individual, he cannot be given a personal name. In their mad, joyous search for him, no one will remember or be aware of themselves. All they will know is the one, objective, great, growing, thrilling, world of harmony felt by all.³¹

Everyone will be part of this harmonious collective Man, and as such the desire for this man is auto-erotic. Gastev's language here plays the role of stimulant; it invokes desire for an absent, future man, for an abstraction, the live body thus substituted by a sign, a symbol of unified being. Technology plays a fundamental role in the achievement of this transformation; as Gastev exclaims, "This beautiful, this marvelous thing can be created by the modern force of machinism!"—understood here as the modeling of man upon machine: "Since the rhythm is uniform, since machines are related to each other through their mechanical structure, is it not clear that the proletariat reared by the machine must and will also grow up as a quantity that is in the highest degree not only determined, but leveled, uniform?"³²

In Gastev's view, sexual passion, as an expression of individuality, leads to chaos and disorder; but through machinism, desire can be channeled into the order-serving project of unifying humanity. Recourse to the machine thus stems from the problem of difference, a phenomenon Gastev distrusts as immoral, fearing perhaps most of all his *own* difference, that side of himself he perceives as alien and better off purged. In *Male Fantasies*, Klaus Theweleit analyzes the image of the ideal body-machine as envisioned in the interwar writings of the German Freikorps: "The most urgent task of the man of steel is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines, and feelings that calls itself human—the human being of old."³³ What differentness, for his part, does Gastev find so troubling? In the rest of this chapter, we will examine how Gastev localizes and identifies this threatening force emanating from within as his Russianness, and how he seeks to eradicate it.

THE BODY IN PAIN, OR THE ROMANCE OF SUFFERING

The distress in the face of human weakness that marks Gastev's early writings becomes more accentuated as he contemplates the work environment, wherein the uniformity and regularity of machine performance all too glaringly underscore human disorder and disproportionality. Perhaps surprisingly, given Gastev's eventual status as hymner of machinism, the disparity

between the body and the machine initially induces in the poet a dissatisfaction with the tediousness of the latter; in his autobiographical “Iz dnevnika tramvaishchika” (“From the Diary of a Streetcar-Driver”), exultation in the audacious speed of technology (“ignoring the protests of the overdressed passengers and disregarding safety precautions, I switch on both motors at once”) turns to dismay at its speedy routinization (“There is only the hum of the motor, which also seems to be saying out loud: ‘And again, and again, and again . . .’”).³⁴ As opposed to his eventual hearing of a life-sustaining pulse in the repetitiveness of machinery, Gastev in a number of early articles seems to view technology, as Johansson has emphasized, as “soulless” and “cold,”³⁵ its automatic consistency as hypnotic and oppressive:

Gold for the owner pours automatically from the trough, the machines work automatically, even the people work like automatons. This eternal motion creates such an oppressive hypnosis and such work habits that it has given rise to a kind of tacit affirmation of order . . . It is as if someone strong were pressing and breaking the cooled steam of steel lava, as if people, cowed into submission by its thunder and bulk, stuck to it like flies and forgot about their own existence.³⁶

Although Gastev manages to cast a nod of blame in the direction of capitalism in thus addressing the abusive repetitiveness of labor, he does not elaborate on how such monotony relates to capital, nor hint at how it might be alleviated under a different sociopolitical system. In Gastev’s later writings, monotony and automatism do not disappear under the more desirable socialism; indeed, nothing changes in Gastev’s descriptions of machines other than the poet’s attitude toward them. The distinction appears to be not so much a political as a purely psychological (albeit ideologically useful) one.³⁷ It is as if Gastev has simply learned to mechanize the self-sacrificing, ascetic impulse articulated in “The Accursed Question.”

In his first collection of short stories, *Romantika* (*Romanticism*), the factory stands as a symbol of oppression, maiming and killing workers with its bloodthirsty technology. In most of the stories, the only source of action per se is the occasion of a strike, the resulting (and rebellious) *inactivity* allowing Gastev—whose early work foregrounds a multiplicity of voices—to fashion a narrative: idleness provokes workers to conversation. The conflict between words and work is thus thematized already in Gastev’s early writings. Disorganized, unregulated, lively words contrast with the death-like passivity of mechanistic labor.

The protagonists of Gastev’s early stories feel victimized by the factory, which like some cosmic force seems to encompass the entirety of their lives:

And so heavily, so bulkily-sluggishly did he move about the silenced factory, as if he were led as a tribute, a sacrifice, a live ransom for the wonders, the striking luxury, the barbarically cruel beauty of gods unknown to him . . .

And the dusty stone arches, grave as the dusk, sorrowful as midnight, oppressive as the clouds, covered and enclosed this procession of hunched and tormented men in a tomb-like, cold, indestructible, tightly shut crypt.³⁸

But already in these early stories, there seems to be nothing beyond the factory; if this is a “crypt,” it is one that stands for life itself. The repetition of a synecdochical construction in which factory walls weigh upon people like elements of the environment creates the impression that the factory is simply in the order of things, its subjugation of humans part of a natural cycle. The passive-voice constructions used to convey one protagonist’s perception of life (“he was led through the land of miracles, he was pierced by an arrow, he was stricken by the wound”)³⁹ underscore the old man’s inability to give meaning to his life, life amounting, for him, to little more than reaction to external influences. Gastev’s characters are forced either to succumb to meaningless pain or, since escaping pain is not a possibility, to find meaning therein.

Along these latter lines, then, Gastev’s oeuvre begins to feature love poems addressed to monuments of the age of technology. This falling in love with one’s oppressor can be said to constitute a reappropriation of the will; welcoming oppression, Gastev ceases to be oppressed.⁴⁰ The poem “Ia poliubil” (“I Have Fallen in Love”)—the perfective aspect of this construction marking this crucial emotional shift—is prepared by the poem “Dumy rabotnitsy” (“Thoughts of a Woman-Worker”) which explains how this transformation was achieved. In the poem, a young woman who pines for the pastoral landscape of her childhood comes to realize that since there is no road back to it, she may as well love her new environment. This realization comes through a disruption of personal identity, marked grammatically by the persona’s switch from the first person to the second, as in this injunction: “Cover the machines with fresh flowers,/Encloud them, entwine them with caresses and tender reverie.”⁴¹ A similar disruption is experienced by the poem’s author, who has taken on a female persona in order to stay within the bounds of acceptable discursive practices while singing his love for a factory, a word of masculine gender. There is, of course, a fundamental distinction between reconciliation and active welcoming. Gastev achieves the latter with regard to the oppressor-factory by harking to the Russian ascetic tradition, which valorizes suffering: “We know there will be a sharp pain in our chest . . . But greatness comes with pain.”⁴²

Gastev thus follows the trajectory of a search for meaning and continu-

ity in a world seemingly bereft of these. Appearing in his first cycle of poems as a response to the fundamental discontinuity of death is the idea of the collective, which he associates with the continuity of life that gives meaning to the death of individuals: “We march! We cannot but march. The gloomy phantoms of recently slain warriors have risen. The living legends of the past have risen—forefathers felled by wounds. We walk behind them—in the very front, stronger, braver than us, young warriors, brought to life anew, are marching.”⁴³ In an article from this time, Gastev declares: “Joyously, perhaps at times not without suffering, but with a suffering that is great and shared by all, we would give birth to a new, as yet unheard-of people who are proud, great, superior to ourselves.”⁴⁴ A worker present at a reading of Gastev’s famous poem “My rastem iz zheleza” (“We Grow from Iron”) was annoyed by the loudness of the delivery: the reciter “does not speak, he yells like out of a trumpet.”⁴⁵ Rolf Hellebust explains such “yelling” as originating in the recitation of religious liturgies; the raising of one’s voice as if in song mimics the invocation of the deity, and so here the Christian God has been supplanted by an “iron demon.”⁴⁶ I, however, hear in this loudness the primal scream of a human being in torment—the pain concomitant with the throes of self-re-creation. Gastev has come to believe that if he stops resisting the machine and instead makes love to it, the resulting union will give birth to a new being.

TRANSGRESSING BORDERS

In the second cycle, fittingly enough entitled “Machines,” machines become heroes and subjects, with human beings shunted into the background. While in the first cycle, machines are lifeless, in this second they are animated; whereas formerly the human individual seemed insignificant, with meaning found only in collective evolution and collective continuity, the second cycle features a more prominent hero. In this second cycle, the reevaluation of the scale of life, and the remodeling of the human along machinistic lines, is accompanied by Gastev’s first experiments in technologizing language. The poet realizes the central role to be played by the word in his transformation of the human; in fact, it is through the act of naming that humanity’s relationship to machinery—formerly its oppressor—has been transformed: “Long ago we were given hammers instead of bread, and forced to work. We were tormented . . . But clutching the hammer, we called it a friend, and each blow added iron to our muscles; the energy of steel penetrated our soul. And we, slaves once, now dare take on the entire world.”⁴⁷ In the first cycle, the lyrical persona can only helplessly wish for some sort of word-weapon—“If only I could curse you, pierce you with an unuttered, burning,

molten word, you world sold to gold!”⁴⁸—whereas in “Machines,” Gastev actively searches for such a word. Much of the cycle is organized in the form of a dictionary or itemized list; the first seven poems have one-word titles that describe some industrial or plant feature (Whistles, Gates, Tower, Rails, Crane, Girders, Hammer). Such acts of naming will allow the subject to attain an active voice.

In “Machines,” Gastev gives meaning to the pain and suffering he sees around him by inscribing it into the creation-tale of the new man born of the cosmic marriage of men and machines. Realizing that such colossal transformation must have catastrophic overtones, Gastev intensifies his ascetic outlook, essentially condemning life in general for the sake of a better, mechanistic world. While earlier there was no world beyond the factory walls, now no outside world is *needed*, as the monstrosity of the factory has been discursively transformed into beauty.

Gastev is enthralled by the marvel of the machine’s monstrosity. Like Goethe’s Mephistopheles, despite its destructive intentions, the devil-like factory eternally works good. Every poem presents an allegory in which the industrial machine personifies the virtue of defiance. The feeling of being devoured by the factory becomes subsumed in the sensation of being enrapturedly swept up in its satanic twirl. In this dynamic, workers become fallen angels; they sacrifice themselves to the factory, which in return endows them with its satanic powers. In “My posignuli!” (“We Have Dared to Take On!”) the appeal “Let’s plunge downward!” (“Rinemtes’ vnilz!”) verbalizes the rejection of both the human and the divine in favor of the Luciferian passion for negation.

Indeed, the passionate melding of man with machine carries an overtone of sexual transgression, the union of different species: “I threw myself on the sharpened cutters of the machines. I crushed them, but I myself thrashed about in the vise-grip of the metal. It is I who a hundred years ago flooded the streets of the world’s cities with blood.”⁴⁹ *Tiski*, literally a vise, can have the connotation of “passionate embraces,” and given the constant declarations of love to metal throughout this cycle,⁵⁰ it is hard not to see this transformation into a new being, complete with references to bloodletting, as a form of sexual initiation. The violence of the imagery might have suggested rape were it not for the reciprocity with which the participants mutilate one other. The lyrical persona’s passionate melding with the machine is a rite of passage initiating him into a new world, that of mechanistic perfection. This maturation ritual is presented in spatial terms, as the acquisition of the ability to transgress borders:

It was I who struggled then and tormented my own body on both sides of the border. And now, reborn, I march in the ranks again. Everything passes

through my hands and tools. I create viaducts, roads, machines, microscopes. I feel the most treasured thoughts through the pulse of my workbench and the stroke of my saw. I am the bearer of the merciless cutting tool of knowledge. I go everywhere with my hammer, chisel, and drill. Over the whole world . . . I march across borders, continents, oceans. I make the entire globe my homeland.⁵¹

Gastev's new collective "I" having left behind the spatial confines of country to be at home anywhere in the world, the fusion with the machine is accompanied by the privilege of transnational identity.

Gastev's preoccupation with spatial transformation and his valorizing of an identity free of nationhood is especially evident in the cycle's major poem, "Ekspres" ("The Express"), singled out by the poet as a favorite.⁵² Significantly, the poem inaugurates the theme of desirable America (envisioned by Gastev as a nation having already entered the brave new mechanistic world)⁵³ and articulates a desire to abandon Russianness in favor of a more cosmopolitan, more modern identity. The feat of the construction of the Trans-Siberian express, completed in 1916, the year Gastev wrote the poem, likely inspired Gastev to prophesy a glorious future for Siberia, replete with miraculous technological and social developments that would meld the old world with modern, industrially advanced America.⁵⁴

The poem, set in the distant future, follows the trajectory of the Siberia-traversing express train "Panorama." Initially, the anthropomorphized Siberia "sleeps, having donned a white brocade of snow."⁵⁵ This state of hibernation, and the purity of snow, suggest great untapped potential.⁵⁶ Gastev metaphorically transforms the white expanse of Siberia into a screen, which, once touched by the bright radiance of the aurora borealis, becomes an immense organic cinema.⁵⁷ Light playing on the snowy Siberian expanse illuminates a scene, a vision-mirage, of great technological advancement: Siberia is the center of a nationless, united world. "An enormous projector burst forth, ready to spill over and flood both sky and earth with beams of light. It dashed forth! It struck upward with its flaming spray, lighting a mirage of clouds in the cold heights."⁵⁸ The poem invites the reader, situated as if a moviegoer at an imagined theater, to be seduced by the wondrous illusion; in a way it thus re-creates that epoch-making moment in film history when the Lumière brothers screened the arrival of a train at a station. In the poem, the "curtain" of the northern lights rises to reveal an approaching train. But whereas the Lumière brothers sought to scare and delight audiences by feigning the train's bursting from the screen into the theater, Gastev is not interested in exploiting such modernist tropes for shock effects. On the contrary, he desperately wishes to create the illusion that his audience-readers can board the train and accompany it on its path.

The train's trajectory is well delineated: it sets out from the middle of Russia and, turning its back on the old world of Europe, follows a one-way route to the queen of industrialized nations, America. The poem refers several times to this desired destination:

Radio telegraph and telephone stations are constructed on aerial platforms. From here one can communicate with oceans and continents; from here, borne on invisible waves, capital governs not only Siberia, but aims through Vladivostok at America.⁵⁹

The city of Bering. It knows only two slogans: "To the Pole!" and "To America!"⁶⁰

The fictitious city of Bering symbolizes Siberia's openness to America; from here an underground tunnel connects Siberia with Alaska, the tunnel the "Panorama" is destined to traverse toward its final destination:

[The express train] rushes toward the curve of a high embankment, like a banner unfurled upward; it roars over the rails, with a raging song of steel it flies up a bridge, and from the bridge to an undersea tunnel, from Bering to Alaska. Constructing this tunnel cost two thousand lives: five hundred perished in the polar cold, and the ocean devoured fifteen hundred during underwater work . . . But now there is no border between the Old and New worlds. The tunnel has become the symbol of workers' unity.⁶¹

The metaphorical power of the "Panorama" lies in its almost magical ability to cover Siberia, an amalgam of all peoples and nations, and direct its inhabitants toward America, the imagined land of promise and progress. The tunnel under the Bering Strait offers a long-awaited climax to this exuberant journey: "Stormily, boominly, the motors breathe, pumping air, and the tunnel is shaking like a steel pulse in the sleeping waters of the ocean. One more half hour to America."⁶² When the Lumière brothers made their train enter the theater, fearful, trembling viewers recognized in this eruption the advent of a new technological age. Gastev grants his projected passengers (and readers) a similar thrill: a lighthouse is erected directly over the tunnel entrance, and the train seems to aim right at it. The trepidation this illusion of imminent danger induces in those aboard ("An involuntary tremor seized the passengers. What would happen?")⁶³ is a necessary accompaniment to the great conversion, the transformation undergone in their passage to America.

This passage is the final result of the process of the disappearance of Russian specificity, initiated by the spatial transformation of Siberia. The old

Russian culture is completely eradicated in the new Siberia, now inhabited by settlers from all over the world: “No one speaks of centuries long past, of their free, but idle songs, of their dulcet, but passive prayers.” Characteristically, the Russian language also undergoes a fundamental change through its confluence with American English: “The debates [of the International] are being conducted in an international language composed of a synthesis of Russian and American English.”⁶⁴

BIOMECHANICS VS. RUSSIA

Articles written by Gastev during his period of involvement in the Scientific Organization of Labor make it clear that by this time he had come to ascribe his former antipathy toward the monotonous rhythm of the machine, and his “nonproductive” sentiments generally, to the Russian character. In an article describing the methodology of the Institute of Labor, he begins by stating that “Russia differs from the West in that the former is either lazy or elementarily impulsive; its population in general shows little persistence and labor tenacity.”⁶⁵ These elements of the Russian character Gastev considers a bane and disease, curable only by means of “an injection of work culture” (*privivka trudovoi kul'tury*).⁶⁶

In “Snariazhaites’, monter!” (“Get Ready, Fitters!”), published in 1923 in *The Young Communist*, Gastev introduces a concept that would become one of his most beloved, that of the “self-colonizer” (*sobstvennyi kolonizator*), which bespeaks his view regarding man’s need and ability to restrain, order, and, in a word, *conquer* himself. Gastev summons his readers to wage war on themselves, on their own Russianness, “to seize Russia by an assault from within, treat its mold and backwardness, and put everything now sleeping to work.”⁶⁷

The Russian word for “fitter” (*monter*), moreover, can also be associated with the creation of montage, a film-editing technique Gastev invokes by way of expressing the creative principle behind his call for rebuilding Russia.⁶⁸ Montage is a word borrowed from French, and Gastev uses it pointedly to emphasize the need to impose foreign principles of life and work onto the Russian landscape:

We must declare the mobilization of new Robinson Crusoes, thinking city-dwellers, for the most part, and equip them for a grand expedition through dirt roads, forests, villages, and untouched marshes, where they will build new housing, from huts to skyscrapers, inculcate the dialect of tools from ax to motor, and fill Russia with cultural montage.⁶⁹

These “Robinson Crusoes,” whom Gastev invokes throughout his didactic-theoretical works, suggest the possibility of adaptation to, and cultivation of, a wilderness. Such adaptation is a vital concept for Gastev, as the reconstruction of the human is required in part because of Russia’s “wild” state: “In a country devoid of machines, you are the best mechanism.”⁷⁰

Gastev’s emphasis on adaptation to external conditions was likely informed by the studies of Russian reflexologists, who seemed to have uncovered a whole hidden world of organic mechanistic behavior demonstrating the enormous influence of outside stimuli. In a 1921 article defining the goals of his Institute of Labor, Gastev explains the new environment for human development provided by machinism.⁷¹ Gastev’s incorporation of the concepts of labor and human mechanization into the evolutionary paradigm can be seen in the context of the technological reading of evolution, the view of progress as the attainment of new techniques.⁷²

Gastev’s evolutionary philosophy hit a snag, however, insofar as the widespread inculcation of machinery had not yet reached Russia, so that, in a sense, his institute’s task became that of fostering certain reflexes *without* the presence of external stimuli. Gastev’s biomechanics is hence a peculiarly Russian method of body engineering, taking into consideration a deficit of the very technology that theoretically catalyzes human regeneration. Gastev proclaims: “Biomechanics . . . can be cultivated in a refined laboratory setting, but it can also be set up in any room of the house, in the open air, on sites, in any workshop.”⁷³ Gastev readily concedes that he is attempting to go further than Taylor: the latter meant only to solve the problem of production, while Gastev, in adopting Taylor’s strategies, seeks to solve the problem of culture.⁷⁴

Marcel Mauss posits that bodily techniques are learned and habitual, and as such are cultural constructs. Hence, the instrumentality of the body is of a fixed and methodical character, its repeated regularities necessary both for proper somatic functioning and the subsistence of culture. Gastev similarly redefines culture by removing its association with intellectual knowledge, artistic achievement, or refined taste; its meaning is to be limited to social customs and patterns of behavior. While nature, according to Gastev, presupposes chaos and disorder, culture is the ability to train one’s body to perform systematic actions, and to break with previous cultural patterns.⁷⁵ Gastev sees his restructuring enterprise as particularly alien to the Russian context: “Culture is the sum of a people’s habits, its ability to work, the sum of its processed capabilities. We are a country devoid of traditions.”⁷⁶ The poet means to return culture to its etymological origins: at the root of the Latin *cultus* is “tilling,” a working upon nature. Culture involves compulsion and habit rather than the cultivation of pleasurable activities: “Orientation

toward mood, toward the constant motivation of adults and children . . . inevitably leads to the disruption of labor.”⁷⁷ Pursuit of pleasure is at the core of our natural predilections but is antagonistic to the cultivation of order. For Gastev, then, the body is situated somewhere on the border between the natural and the cultural; it is a machine in embryo. The body needs culture, with its mechanisms of order and compulsion, to achieve its proper productive functioning.

The machinistic body, in this view, becomes in turn a virtual stronghold of culture. Gastev believes that through the training of the body, one tempers the psyche to be more able to cope with cultural shifts. Biomechanics thus provides a palliative to the cataclysmic changes visited upon Russia: “Social automatism is a guarantor of the integrity and indestructibility of human culture at a time when its material foundations are crumbling.”⁷⁸

Despite avoiding discussion of the arts in his definition of culture, Gastev formulates his cultural project in aesthetic terms, conceptualizing the scientific organization of labor as subject to a sense of order and harmony⁷⁹—a kind of spatial arrangement contributory toward an economy of gesture, the “shortest line, the saving of space, the laws of motion of numerous objects with different velocities intersecting on a limited number of lines.”⁸⁰ Gastev similarly geometrizes human movement (much as it was conceived in contemporaneous cubist works): “The movement of a working human is a combination of lines, points, angles, and weights, all working with a certain tolerance, with a habitual efficiency.”⁸¹ A hybrid of productivist rhetoric and modernist aesthetics, Gastev’s biomechanical man is drawn from art rather than observable reality.

How, then, is the dysfunctional, flesh-and-blood human to become a functional assemblage of sharp points and straight lines? Biomechanics aspires to be the science of inculcating total bodily self-awareness and the transformation of this awareness into the unconscious regulation of one’s body. Gastev’s training follows several stages: first, the training of plasticity of bodily movement; second, of plasticity of mind, which can be disassociated from wants, likes, and dislikes; and finally, of the skills of organizing and planning in space and time. The regulation of one’s body would not be complete without strict control of food and even oxygen intake.⁸² To cultivate his machine-like nature and survive in a machine-like world, man must heed his own energy consumption; hence Gastev’s divorce of food from its traditional associations with pleasure, knowledge, celebration, and communion. Food is nothing more nor less than raw energy:

The science of the nourishment of the working organism must be as exact as the thermal sciences, as the science of the powering of a steam engine or electric motor. The consumption of human energy must be instrumentally

measured to the thousandth of a calorie, and the regulation of the work of the human organism must be modeled on the system of carburetors feeding thermal organisms. There mustn't be anything sacred here.⁸³

PRODUCTION AND CONTROL OF LANGUAGE

Gastev's insistence on regulating consumption and minimizing bodily inefficiency extends to language as well; just like food, language stands as a power source whose intake and outflow must be strictly regulated. Gastev never seems to tire of repeating (which is perhaps ironic) the necessity of minimizing the time and energy wasted on empty talk: "The most complex thought can be laid out in five minutes."⁸⁴ The title of his final book of poetry, *Slovo pod pressom* (*The Word Under a Press*), articulates the task Gastev sets for himself as a poet: to compress language for maximum efficiency. Poetry becomes an energy source, what Gastev calls an instrument of "sharp verbal impact" (*ostroe slovesnoe vozdeistvie*), and as such it must be conserved.

In the introduction to the sixth edition of his *Collected Works* (1925), Gastev remarks that literature has become irrelevant in the technological age, when "radio is so successful at arguing not only with a word, but with a thought."⁸⁵ In *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, Friedrich Kittler argues that modern information technologies such as the radio, typewriter, phonograph, and film de-individualized verbal expression, divorcing it from the realm of interpersonal communication.⁸⁶ Language ceased to be a carrier of meaning or thought, and became instead a product of the body machine, a machine that can emit sound. "Psychophysics advances, beyond all attribution of meaning and its transparent arbitrariness, to the meaningless body, which is a machine among machines. A roaring in the ears and the roaring of trains are equally capable of providing disordered brains with assonances, alliterations, and rhymes."⁸⁷ The period Kittler describes also witnessed an upsurge of poetic experimentation that conceived of language as a physiological activity, foregrounding such qualities as automatism, reflexivity, and repetition. Poetry was to compete with other technologies in recording the sound produced by the body-machine.

In Gastev's final and most experimental poetic collection, *Pachka orderov* (*A Packet of Orders*), language (that is, bodily sound) echoes the noise of the times. In the preface, the poet declares that an epochal sound passes like electricity through the body and is recorded in language: "Humankind is on guard. It is waiting for the factory whistle. A split second, and triumphant recognition of the coming roar of events will burst through the dim chaos of these days."⁸⁸ Gastev furthermore provides technical instructions stipulating the machine-like output of his poems for the listener's ear and specifying

the speed and manner in which they should be recited: “A *Packet of Orders* reads in even sections, as if fed to an apparatus. In their recitation there should be no intonation, no pathos, no pseudo-classical elation or emotive stresses. Words and phrases follow one another at a uniform speed.”⁸⁹ Gastev models the speaker of the poems as a kind of longshoreman, who loads verbal material directly into the audience’s brains: “A loading action takes place, and the packet is given to the listener as a libretto of stored events.”⁹⁰ In this last cycle and the articles that followed, Gastev attempts to reproduce mechanistic tempos, his speech becoming a conveyer belt of stimuli meant to catalyze and train the modern man-machine.

Gastev opens his collected works with the poem “We Grow from Iron,” in which, in the process of melding into iron, the lyrical persona loses the ability to speak, to create narrative; the iron man can pronounce nothing but a minimalist victory vow: “Not a story, not a speech, but just my one iron cry: we will win!”⁹¹ This near-aphasia purges the faculty of speech of any hint of pleasure, and aptly models Gastev’s attitude toward poetic expression. The meagerness of the poet’s diction was mocked not only by ideological opponents like Zamyatin, but Proletcult colleagues as well:

Iron, iron, iron,
Cupola furnaces and screws aren’t bad,
But you, O Gastev, hammer out poetry,
Having mistaken jelly for verse!

Iron, iron, iron,
You have enmeshed us in iron,
The Marseillaise is weeping iron,
Parnassus is sobbing iron.⁹²

The author of this parody does not seem to realize that it is precisely Gastev’s intent to make poetry productive, that is, to make it *express iron*, and to turn readers “fed” with it into iron men. The parodist’s claim that Gastev fails to distinguish between jelly and poetry is thus also off the mark; for Gastev, poetry *is* a kind of jelly, the iron man’s nourishment, and just as in the making of preserves, this poetry foregrounds economy. Words prominently featured in Gastev’s texts are those that can be continuously recycled; such conservation is necessary insofar as biomechanics is meant to compensate for Russia’s deficiencies, its dearth of technology, its lax bodies and slack minds.

Indeed, according to Gastev, Russia’s national ills stem from a culturalized verbal wastefulness: “In short, instead of simple words—‘I’m listening,’ ‘yes,’ ‘no’—[we have] an entire philosophy. It’s no accident that we have so many philosophers and psychologists in Russia. This may be the flip side of

passivity, of sluggishness.”⁹³ This is why cultural biomechanics must include the reconstruction and reorientation of language toward the new “speech” (*govor*) of machinery; language is a form of bodily technology and is subject to the mechanics of the organism as a whole. If the body works like a machine, the language it produces to signal its needs should correspond to machine-like rhythm.

Disciplining and restraining Russian letters (*slovesnost'*), a central constituent of national culture, is moreover an effective means of eliminating Russian specificity. Gastev declares: “That patriotic sloppiness characteristic of all our *bylinas* [folk epics], anecdotes, and literature must be eradicated irreversibly. We must train the people to observe sharply and record precisely.”⁹⁴

THE WORD UNDER A PRESS, OR COPERNICAN ART

Adopting Taylorism, Gastev intends to supplant Russia’s philologically oriented culture with the culture of the working body. Indeed, the more he emphasizes the culture of the body, its gestures and gesticulations, the more vituperatively does he chastise language.⁹⁵ In contrast to language, which Gastev laments as complicated, amorphous, and confounding, the body is simple, accessible, and easily organized. Gastev can conceptualize the body as transparent—unlike opaque language—because in a sense he rejects the body’s materiality. The internal organs, the infinitely complex sensory apparatus of a physical body would seem to complicate, even play havoc with, the organization of meaning; but to Gastev the body is a sign, and biomechanics is the discursive practice that formulates, defines, and organizes this sign, rendering its functioning beyond this discursive field impossible. Outside the realm of labor, Gastev’s body does not exist; disorganized, it has no meaning or function. To Gastev, a poet, the body is a textual construct, as such infinitely malleable.⁹⁶ Like Fedorov’s envisioned scientifically produced man of the future, who will have no internal organs, Gastev’s body is vacuous. “Growing from iron,” Gastev’s poetic persona is a construct without reference to actual bodily dynamics: “I grow shoulders of steel and immensely strong arms. I have merged with the iron of construction. I have risen.”⁹⁷ It is notable that Gastev places the poem containing this image at the beginning of his collected verse. Fedorov saw in man’s first standing upright the beginnings of human creativity and hence self-creation: this decisive act marked a new stage of human evolution and, crucially, a willful rebellion against the prescriptions of nature. The rising of Gastev’s persona at the end of the poem constitutes a further evolutionary step, the man-to-machine transformation continuing the trajectory of standing upright. Such cybernetic meta-

morphosis is inseparable from Gastev's creativity as poet and his persona's creativity as laborer.

Fedorov's formulation of the “common task” rests on the premise that man's most powerful creative activities stem from an antimimetic urge: standing upright, and the realization of self concomitant with it, is *unlike* nature. Fedorov divides art into two categories: the “Ptolemaic” art of imitation (or false creative reproduction) and the “Copernican” art of reality (actual resurrection); in this view, the imitation of nature is passive, ineffectual, even immoral: “The art of imitation is the representation of a life-depriving heaven, an earth that devours the living.”⁹⁸ Such art serves the sensual cult of woman rather than the sensible and ethical task of ancestor resurrection and the achievement of immortality, from which goal, Fedorov maintains, true aesthetics is inseparable. According to Fedorov, true (transformative rather than imitative) art aims to unify all men, all generations, and all human endeavors, but particularly religion, ethics, and science, in the quest for immortality.⁹⁹ Thus, the reorganization of life from chaos to cosmos is inseparable from the abandonment of the principle of mimesis.

Gastev's final biomechanics-inspired cycle, which serves as a bridge from his poetic endeavors to his practical scientific experiments, is grounded in this same antimimetic principle. The poet adopts the Fedorovian view that the contemplation and pursuit of sensual pleasure extant in mimesis is inimical to action, to the creation of the collective superman. Attempting to combine art with science, specifically, with applied technology, Gastev makes the rhythm of the machine his guiding compositional principle.

LABORING POETICS

Fedorov's ideas on art do not, however, present specific instructions for action, or at least, Gastev's notion of what constitutes action. With his distaste for Russian culture and its passive verbosity, the latter looks for inspiration elsewhere. Neither does Taylor, offering though he does a poetics of labor, provide models for laboring poetics. In lieu of these sources, Gastev finds instruction for the writing of active poetry in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature.”¹⁰⁰ Marinetti's manifesto aims at freeing words from the constraints of immaterial thought, while Gastev's reform of words, on the contrary, entails their constraintment; but both thinkers evince a predilection for rendering language a material product worthy of taking its place in the new, machinistic life. Gastev, who in an attempt to avoid mimesis turns to the buzz of machines for inspiration, clearly was stirred by Marinetti's poetics, which as the futurist theoretician himself told it had been whispered to him by an airplane propeller.

Let us consider in this regard *A Packet of Orders*, a collection of ten “orders” that—poetry being productive—hammer at listeners’ ears, chiseling new men. Gastev follows Marinetti’s instructions: his orders contain neither adjectives nor adverbs, parts of speech Marinetti held to be meditative and hence inimical to dynamism. According to Marinetti, poetry should first and foremost comprise nouns, the most material of words; Gastev’s poems are noun-heavy, a quality the poet believed to render expression as economical as possible. The Italian futurist allows for the presence of verbs, but only in their infinitive forms, on the grounds that only these forms are independent of the individual psychology of the poet; Gastev’s orders too are sprinkled with infinitives and imperatives, foregrounding an action-oriented purposefulness. Finally, Marinetti’s propeller insists on the creation of compound neologisms that speedily evoke images in all their complexity:

Just as aerial speed has multiplied our knowledge of the world, the perception of analogy becomes ever more natural for man. One must suppress the *like*, the *as*, the *so*, the *similar to*. Still better, one should deliberately confound the object with the image that it evokes, foreshortening the image to a single essential word.¹⁰¹

Gastev, for his part, speeds up expression with his coinages, compressing words into compound forms: “Cast-iron stripe glances” (*chuguno-polosa vzgliady*), “missileflight” (*snariadopolet*), “labor-attacks-extra” (*trudo-ataki-ekstro*).¹⁰² Most of Gastev’s compounds conjure body parts for cyborgian men à la Vertov’s *kinoki* (cine-eyes), and these parts are duly incorporated into the assembly line of production: “Brain-machines—loading, cine-eyes—installation, electro-nerves—labor, arterio-pumps, pump!”¹⁰³ Gastev employs musical terminology to forego sense in favor of sound and rhythm, as in the beginning of Order 4: “Asia is all in D, America a chord higher. Africa is B flat. Radio-bandmaster. Cyclone-cello—solo.”¹⁰⁴ To impart weight, density, and immediacy to his verbal product, Gastev incorporates geometric shapes and numbers: “Shoot out a square of black. Toss cubes of yellow to the electric cranes. Scatter events on planes and cubes. Give a circular motion. Intersect everything on an axis. Turn twenty centuries into a ladder.”¹⁰⁵

For all the simplicity of Gastev’s orders, their aspirations are grand; they entail the reorganization of space and reinvention of time. Order 1 aims to sort people, the technical “material” of the world’s further reorganization. In this order, two instruments are applied toward the biomechanical restructuring of the human: a manometer, presumably utilized here to measure the extent to which people can be pressed into ordered columns, and a gun that finalizes the order. Those unable to fit into the perfect column are shot; according to Gastev’s succinct formulation “defective people” (*liudi v*

brak), human beings become manufactured articles, with those unable to meet production standards rejected and eliminated. The mention of the gun establishes that this universal reconstruction will entail military discipline.

Order 1 ends with a rare (for this collection) imperative, “freeze” (*zamri*), which marks a pause in poetic tempo and a departure from traditional human time; Order 2, for its part, begins with reference to a chronometer and initiates a new reading of time. Here the frozen column of the previous order is integrated into the process of production. What is being produced is never specified; the emphasis rather is on the establishment of a certain pace of work, as if machines manufacture a new time—the rhythm of the new life:

Chronometer, report to duty.
To the machines.
Rise.
Pause.
A charge of attention.
Supply.
Switch on.
Self-propulsion.
Stop.¹⁰⁶

The language mimicking a machine’s tempo, the act of reading these lines becomes an exercise in biomechanics.

These first two orders having put in motion a machinistically humming conveyor belt for new men, the several that follow describe the process of bioproduction. Onomatopoetically, *A Packet of Orders* enacts its subject: reading instructions on how to remake philistines into man-machines by squeezing language from their bodies and pumping logarithms and geometry in, the reader experiences a hypnotic rhythm, as if herself undergoing the preparatory processing for this great reordering; in this sense, the orders are fulfilled.

The machine-like rhythm of the poems, their technical and austere diction, and their presentation in the form of industrial and military orders are all consistent with Gastev’s experimental conceptualization of language as a technical medium for manufacturing a new world. Gastev’s poetry is a performance or product of the man-machine, and given the all-importance of technology in modernity, his experiments result in something more closely approaching the futurists’ ideal of a universal language than the creations of the latter themselves.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the Russian futurists were, paradoxically, too attached to their native language to fashion a universal one. Khlebnikov’s experiments in “trans-sense” language, for example, celebrate the Russian

tongue by interrogating all the potentialities of its morphology and syntax. By contrast, Gastev's attitude toward Russian is not reverent in the slightest, and he substitutes it whenever possible with foreign borrowings, which renders his poetry eminently translatable. But even untranslated, his verse can have meaning for a nonspeaker of Russian: numbers, musical terms, and industrial and military jargon are, after all, international property. Foregrounding technical terms and foreign borrowings, Gastev attempts to press the Russianness out of the new man. The transformation of language—formerly a chain binding the individual to a specific culture—becomes an integral facet of Gastev's biomechanics, which must be understood as entailing the transcendence of national limits. Russianness, which Gastev codes as passive and feminine, is incompatible with the active, masculine new man, and biomechanics is meant to eliminate the Russian within.

Gastev's vocabulary of self-colonization exposed the innate connection between Soviet Russia's need for technological modernization and its adulterous desire for the West. More so than any other element of Gastev's innovations in the labor and manufacturing realm, the lust for the foreign implicit in his internationalization of language—an adulterer's adulteration thereof—was incompatible with the siege mentality officially cultivated in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. In 1938, Gastev was purged.

The Biomechanics of Infidelity: Range of Motion and Limits of Control in Meyerhold's Theater

Nothing is more nonsensical than an imitation of reality, nothing more superfluous: there is enough reality already.

—Max Frisch, as quoted in Kiebzinska, *Revolutionaries in the Theater*

GASTEV'S IMPORTATION OF Western military-industrial biomechanics onto Russian soil constituted an attempt to preserve the doctrinal purity of the scientific management of labor under economic, political, and cultural conditions distinctly different from those in which the theory had developed. Biomechanics was to enter and transform Russian culture, introducing new aesthetic principles for various modes of creation. In the hands of Vsevolod Meyerhold, the visionary avant-garde theater director, it is biomechanics itself that undergoes adulteration and eccentric interpretation. The already pronounced foreignness of biomechanics to Russian culture was compounded, as Meyerhold combined the discipline with classical Greek pantomime, adding for good measure a dose of the medieval Italian tradition of commedia dell'arte, and a pinch of the Japanese kabuki theater. Submerged in this stylistic cauldron, biomechanics reemerged reincarnated from a conveyor belt Taylorist science of the body in motion into a timeless, ludic art. Discovering the potential in biomechanics for play, subtlety, and subterfuge, Meyerhold's theater at the same time underscored, quite unwittingly, the ideological threat this theory posed within the Soviet environment. Despite its theoretical emphasis on *de rigueur* productivity, theatrical biomechanics, by which Meyerhold meant a system of actors' training, in practice entailed a combination of scientific rigor, artistic detachment, and liberating play, with the body serving as an instrument of investigation and self-discovery rather than of societal change. In 1922, to showcase his new system of biomechanical actor training, Meyerhold staged *The Magnanimous Cuckold*,¹ a play by Belgian playwright Fernand Crommelynck, which provided fitting material for Meyerhold's display of the full range of

The Biomechanics of Infidelity

potential delights and difficulties associated with the aspiration—which preoccupied postrevolutionary culture at large—of total control of the body, its cultivation into a machine.

The Magnanimous Cuckold featured content so shocking that opponents of Meyerhold's training were scandalized; his supporters, for their part, either skirted the issue or proposed that the stylized performance in Meyerhold's theater somehow effaced the salaciousness of the content, distancing the viewer from the obscene matter at hand. Crommelynck's play concerns a poet, Bruno, desperately devoted to his wife Stella, whom he begins, quite groundlessly, to suspect of infidelity. Bruno is confronted by that universal epistemological problem, the radical alterity of the other. One, after all, can never be fully sure just what the other really *is*, and to avoid this excruciating uncertainty, Bruno compels Stella to sleep with all the male residents of their village, one after the other. This bizarre solution is meant to expose the hidden lover, who Bruno is sure will not show up to take his place in line; more importantly, it will free Bruno from his painful doubt, rendering his wife precisely that which he suspects her to be, an adulteress. Thereby, physical, external reality will finally harmonize with the poet's imagination. Despite his efforts to orchestrate and control his wife body and soul, however, Bruno ends up losing not his doubt and uncertainty, but Stella. Attempts by Meyerhold and his followers to downplay this plot notwithstanding, I would emphasize that the choice to stage precisely *The Magnanimous Cuckold* is a significant one; and that content is indelibly connected to form. I will argue in this chapter that the interplay here between content and form allegorizes the director's relationship to his craft, allowing Meyerhold to probe his philosophy of art, as well as all the trappings and entrapments of theatrical biomechanics. Paradoxically, in the gap between the play's biomechanical form and its antibiomechanical content lies the true nature of Meyerhold's artistic enterprise, which is not the utility-driven affirmation of aesthetic dictatorship, via biomechanical control as previous scholarship has argued, but a cognitive exercise investigating its potential failure. Meyerhold's biomechanical theater, dedicated on the face of it to the promulgation of the rhetoric of efficiency, functionality, and control, thrives precisely on its opposite: dysfunctionality, rupture, and excess. But first let us sketch an overview of the most salient elements of biomechanics as practiced by Meyerhold.

THE LANGUAGE OF MOVEMENTS

Just as Gastev's interest in the body predated his adoption of biomechanics, Meyerhold began thinking of ways to subject the body to artistic control

years before instantiating his new theatrical technique in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. But unlike Gastev, Meyerhold became fascinated with the body as a locus not of human weakness but of strength and expressivity. Long before taking up the modish terminology of biomechanics and “the mechanistic man,” the theater theoretician sought new acting techniques originating in the body. Except, naturally, for their absence of the vocabulary of biomechanics per se, Meyerhold’s theoretical writings of the 1910s are uncannily mirrored in his biomechanical teachings of the 1920s.

In his 1912 essay “Balagan” (“The Fairground Booth”), Meyerhold presented an exposition of his new theatrical program. The piece begins with an objection to the critic Aleksandr Benois’s review of *The Brothers Karamazov* as staged by the rival Moscow Art Theater. Meyerhold seems especially irritated by Benois’s remark that theater should be free of deception and *cabotinage*, and maintains that, to the contrary, it is precisely the cult of *cabotinage*, with its reliance on movement and gesture, that can revive the Russian theater.

Meyerhold foregrounds the expressivity of the body and the need for the modern actor to study the culture of its movements. Delving into the history of medieval theater, Meyerhold notes the powerful impact of pantomime on late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century French mysteries: “The mime stops the mouth of the rhetorician who belongs not on the stage but in the pulpit; the juggler reveals the total self-sufficiency of the actor’s skill with the expressiveness of his gestures and the language of his movements—not only in the dance but in his every step.”² Words are rendered superfluous by the “language of movements,” and are, the passage implies, somehow less democratic than bodily movements; one uses words not to communicate *with* an audience but to preach *at* it. The one-sidedness of verbal communication is underscored by the image of the rhetorician, whom we might imagine as fond of his own eloquence. In contrast to the extravagance and concomitantly deficient meaning of rhetoric, the expressive art of the mime necessitates the utmost efficiency.³

Pursuant, perhaps, to this interest in mime, Meyerhold’s biomechanics would later stress the importance of schematization as a sine qua non of efficiency. To Meyerhold, theatrical schematization is an affirmation of artistic style, of the individuality of artistic expression. Peculiarly, Meyerhold sees in this schematization or stylization the actor’s opportunity to express his or her analytical point of view, his or her vision of the world: “the stylizer remains an analyst *par excellence*.”⁴ Later, with the help of biomechanics, Meyerhold will attempt to create this stylized outlook, in which schematized gestures are to express a new artistic vision; but even in his early theoretical writings, Meyerhold champions a paradoxical interdependence between, on the one hand, the restrictiveness of schematized, disciplined gesture and, on the

other, expressive freedom and individuality. Emotion, according to Meyerhold, is not impeded by artistic laws, which, to the contrary, allow emotion to attain expressive form: “The ritual in honor of the god of wine was composed of predetermined rhythms, steps, and gestures. That is one example of the actor’s self-discipline unaffected by the display of emotion. In the dance the Greek was bound by a whole series of traditional rules, yet he was at liberty to introduce as much personal invention as he wished.”⁵ Improvisation is only effective, then, when it is based on the masterful acquisition of technique, and art exists in the interplay between creative will and the environment that influences and limits it. Without rules, art is reduced to “the most alarming chaos”—or, put another way, mere life. Bemoaning the dominance of the mimetic principle in contemporary theater, Meyerhold argues for a reorientation toward other artistic goals. “The public expects invention, playacting, and skill. But what it gets is either life or a slavish imitation of life.”⁷

WILLFUL PUPPETS

Seeking an appropriate analogy to explain this interdependence of laws and inventiveness in theatrical art, Meyerhold turns to puppetry. Thus already in this early article we find Meyerhold tapping a vein similar to the main concept informing biomechanics: the correlation between man and machine. Meyerhold describes two puppet theaters: in the first, the director strives to make the puppets imitate human beings, while in the second, the puppets resist mimesis, thus preserving their individual identities as puppets and sustaining their world of make-believe. It is to these willful, self-consciously aesthetic puppets that Meyerhold likens his ideal actors. In this second, preferred type of theater, “things are not as they are because nature is like that but because that is how the puppet wishes it—and it wishes not to copy but to create.”⁸ Meyerhold insists that those puppets who recognize and affirm the charm of their mechanicity are the real artists, because their expressiveness is born of an understanding of themselves, their mechanistic potential, the rules of their operation, and the grace of their idiosyncratic movement. A talented director is one who sees that he cannot “part with the puppet which had created a world of enchantment with its incomparable movements, its expressive gestures achieved by some magic known to it alone, its angularity which reaches the heights of true plasticity.”⁹

Puppets, of course, are machines, aggregates of parts that are set in motion. Moreover, they are machines modeled on human beings. But, unlike automata, conceived as self-sufficient, puppets require the application of external force to figuratively come to life; hence their traditional status as “a symbol of a man manipulated by higher forces or beings.”¹⁰ In such an

interpretation, the puppet would not seem to differ much from the human. However, as Roman Paska observes, Eastern and Western traditions alike emphasize the puppet's inhuman otherness; it is precisely their glaring lifelessness, the spectacle of an object animated by a person, that fascinates the viewer:

In the puppet theater, the use(fulness) of the object is far more significant than the object in itself. And when the object does take human form, sometimes even reproducing anatomical features quite extraneous to its integrity as a puppet, it often does so self-consciously, as if the attempt to camouflage its otherness were in fact a subterfuge for displaying it.¹¹

The simultaneity of puppets' human likeness and their otherness is key here; in their capacity as animated matter, they provoke reflection on the human condition, on the source of life and the state of death. Watching puppets, spectators can reflect upon the border, and the interplay of differences, between the animate and inanimate. The liminality of the puppet, the starkness of its same-yet-differentness, creates an atmosphere where the uncanny reigns. And it is precisely this ontological uncertainty of the puppet, who is at once more and less than human, that renders it amenable to use in the aesthetic representation of such abstractions as God or the immaterial. Thus were the romantics, preoccupied with both external and internal universes of the unknown, so fond of puppets;¹² the symbolists, as well, returned to puppets as mechanisms for the interrogation of materiality vs. spirit. But Meyerhold, whose interest in puppets was certainly provoked by the symbolist fixation thereon, seems concerned not so much with their metaphysical implications as with how their ontological uncertainty can serve as a generative metaphor for artistic creativity, and specifically, the creative doubt of the artist.¹³ The notion of condensing an abstract idea into a compact, visually expressive object no doubt also appealed to this champion of efficiency; puppet design suggests the perfect union of scientific rigor and aesthetic vision. But ultimately, it is the puppet's *will* that intrigues Meyerhold, the notion that an object ostensibly designed for the purposes of imitation and compliance seems to assert its autonomy and exhibit a creative urge: in the puppet's jerky, erratic gestures, imperfectly reproducing the intention of the puppeteer, Meyerhold sees a rebellious attempt to be a subject rather than object. Whether the puppet succeeds in this uprising is irrelevant; the very exhibition of the battle between creative will and the delimiting forces of external reality symbolize ambiguity, an ontological stance not positivistic, but rather ambivalent and exploratory.

The antigravitational pull of puppet strings, moreover, suggests otherworldly movement. But in this phenomenon we sense not only hints at these

entities' transcendence, but at the same time, their contingency, the fact that they belong to a provisional and circumscribed domain of play which does not coincide with everyday life. Their angular movements underscore that they belong to the realm of spectacle, and as such are subject to laws different from those of the everyday. This ludic aspect of puppets is emphasized in Meyerhold's theater, play standing as the opposite of the mimetic principle, as an element of pure artifice, pure theatricality. Rising above the mundane, puppets do not lead Meyerhold to some mystic invisible realms, but rather embody for him the alteration of perception, re-vision, the play of visual ambiguities. To reiterate the argument of Paska cited above, the humanoid form of puppets appears to camouflage their otherness so insufficiently as to act as a subterfuge for displaying it. The spectator must adopt an aesthetic point of view vis-à-vis puppets, accepting their invitation to be concerned less with what they represent or mean and more with how they do so; not with what they stand for, but how they appear. Their appearance being all-important, they flaunt and thereby legitimize their artifice as supreme truth, and the spectator is in turn enthralled by the artful design of their mechanicity. Meyerhold concludes "The Fairground Booth" with an affirmation of the triumph of form over content, and the triumph of formalism's fellow traveler, theatrical defamiliarization:

The fantastic will exist in its own right on the stage; *joie de vivre* will be discovered in the tragic as well as in the comic; the demonic will be manifested in deepest irony and the tragic-comic in the commonplace; we shall strive for "stylized improbability," for mysterious allusions, deception and transformation; we shall eradicate the sweetly sentimental from the romantic; the dissonant will sound as perfect harmony, and the commonplace of everyday life will be transcended.¹⁴

Thus in 1912, influenced by formalism and futurism, Meyerhold was intent on transcending the tedium of the everyday through the defamiliarization wrought by the stylized, graceful gesture of the theatrical performer. In his famous essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky explains that art defamiliarizes the object and liberates perception from the confines of habit; in the realm of the theater, Meyerhold adds the somewhat paradoxical corollary that such de-automatization of perception can and should be achieved through the stringent automatization of the human body.

To fashion his actors into self-conscious puppets, embodiments of the otherness of theatrical spectacle, Meyerhold introduces a number of exercises, which later will be taught in his courses on biomechanics, in his newly organized acting studio. In the spirit of playfulness with which he approaches his new actors' training program, Meyerhold inaugurates the studio under the

pseudonym Doctor Dapertutto. The evil sorcerer of Hoffman's "The Story of the Lost Reflection," Dapertutto conspires with the bewitching courtesan Julietta, who wields her charms to entice men and steal their mirror reflections. Julietta is a mirage, a painted image haunting Western art, and Dapertutto is an illusionist, a conjurer of visions and dreams; he controls the victims of his magic as surely as he does the marionette-like Julietta. Meyerhold's adoption of the sorcerer's name plays with the notion of control, of the spectacle, its tools, and spectators: by manipulating perception (Julietta's image and mirror reflection alike belong to the realm of appearances) and challenging the norms of material reality, the director wields the power not only to stimulate the viewer's imagination, but even affect his or her sense of self. A sort of mask, Dapertutto's name both exposes and disguises the director's relationship to his craft; but this ambivalence is overshadowed by the sorcerer's association with the transformative power of appearances. Dapertutto is a trickster, the very essence of which persona is the mastery of technique. And insofar as Meyerhold attempts to reorient his theater toward the display of skill and technique rather than mimetic faithfulness, Dapertutto and his trickery valorize technique as the supreme value of theatrical art.

The exercises developed by Meyerhold for his training program are later taught in his course on biomechanics. In their study *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*, Alma Law and Mel Gordon provide a list of the sixteen études with which the latter-day Doctor Dapertutto attempted to cover the full gamut of expressive situations on the stage; the authors also note the innate relation of these early exercises to Meyerhold's future biomechanics:

[These exercises] differed from his later Biomechanics in a purely functional manner—the Sixteen Etudes pertained mainly to Meyerhold's pre-Revolutionary studio work, which was a synthesis of many traditional theatre conventions, while Biomechanics, based on physiological principles of movement, was designed as a more universal system for many kinds of theatre.¹⁵

A glimpse at the études reveals the extent to which Meyerhold's biomechanics owes to various theatrical conventions. The material employed includes "the Ophelia scene [*sic*] in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*"; Arlecchino, "a pantomime in the style of the French harlequinade of 1850"; "Chinese scenic conventions as might be interpreted by Carlo Gozzi"; "The Street Jongleurs. A pantomime in the style of the popular performances of late eighteenth-century Venice"; and even "Three Oranges, the Astrological Telescope, or What One's Love for the Stage Masters May Lead To. A circus buffonade."¹⁶ Several of the études contain the explanatory note "antics appropriate to the theater," one elaboration further suggesting "the use of trick properties." "Antics" and theatrical "tricks" would subsequently become integral to

biomechanics-informed performance; Law and Gordon note “other resemblances to Biomechanics, for example, in the circus buffonades and in the use of shouts and cries instead of words.”¹⁷

THE ACTOR OF THE FUTURE

Despite these invocations of the spirit of playfulness (the alter ego of sorcerer; “antics”), it is clear that Meyerhold sought from the very beginning to define theatrical art as a science, to approach it systematically and discover tangible methods of increasing its effectiveness. Asserting that “movement is the basis of the theatrical spectacle,”¹⁸ Meyerhold attempted to liberate the Russian stage from its former reliance on inspiration and intuition—in this view, nebulous categories—and impart to theatrical craft a material basis that could be taught and learned. The professional curiosity informing Meyerhold’s scientific approach is already evident in his voracious study of various theatrical traditions and his desire to subsume the whole of theatrical culture into the service of his new experimental form.

The October Revolution showed Meyerhold that the new language of theater must be sought not only in theatrical traditions of the past, but in contemporary life as well. Developing his experimental system of actor training, Meyerhold turned to scientific methodologies and cultural discourses beyond the realm of theater. Such artistic-industrial convergence was in keeping with the spirit of the time: by the early 1920s, Taylorism had spread from the field of labor to a wider cultural context; Aleksei Gastev was writing extensively on the scientific management of labor and biological engineering. In 1920, the Central Institute of Labor, which housed a department of biomechanics, was established; in January 1921, the First All-Russian Initiating Conference on the Scientific Management of Labor convened, and in the autumn of the same year Meyerhold included a course on biomechanics in the program of the newly created State Higher Directors’ Workshops.¹⁹ Furthering this picture of general biomechanical fermentation is the fact that, according to Law and Gordon, Meyerhold did not adopt the term “biomechanics” from his reading of Gastev. The authors concede that the theater director and the Proletcult poet-turned-labor theoretician knew each other and that Gastev took a keen interest in Meyerhold’s work, but argue that the question of “who came first?” is nearly impossible to answer, proposing instead that we attribute the coincidence in the naming of their respective teachings to their study of the cultural and scientific ideas (for example, Bekhterev’s reflexology) in circulation at the time.²⁰ Aleksandr Gladkov, one of the actors in Meyerhold’s theater, recalls seeing a Gastev article on labor organization in his director’s possession, “all marked up in pencil notes”²¹—

which demonstrates that Meyerhold reciprocated Gastev's admiration and that some kind of cultural cross-fertilization took place between these two artists of the body.

Intellectual property questions regarding the term “biomechanics” aside, we can note that by 1920, Meyerhold's rhetoric had come to sound, if not more Gasteivist than before, then definitely more Taylorist. In the 1910s, movement and effective gesture conjured fantastic illusion and expanded vision; in the 1920s these same categories were reconceptualized as the essence of productivity and efficiency. For example, Meyerhold begins his lecture “Akter budushchego i biomekhanika” (“The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics”) (delivered June 12, 1922) with an excursus describing the new society of laboring people and the need for the actor to adapt to this emerging industrialized world. Meyerhold applies vitalist metaphors to this rising culture of joyful labor, which is not antonymous to but rather synonymous with rest. Sounding a constructivist note, the director concludes that in this society, art should be “organically vital,” a dictate that reiterates the same foregrounding of movement and bodily mechanics featured in Meyerhold's earlier, pre-Soviet theorizing:

[It is] essential to discover those movements in work which facilitate the maximum use of work time. If we observe a skilled worker in action, we notice the following in his movements: 1. an absence of superfluous, unproductive movements; 2. rhythm; 3. the correct positioning of the body's center of gravity; 4. stability. Movements based on these principles are distinguished by a dance-like quality; a skilled worker at work invariably reminds one of a dancer; thus work borders on art. The spectacle of man working efficiently affords positive pleasure. This applies equally to the work of the actor of the future . . . The art of the actor consists in organizing his material; that is, in his capacity to utilize correctly his body's means of expression.²²

Here Meyerhold expresses essentially his same former principle of the effective, meaningful gesture and the actor's ability to communicate somatically rather than verbally; but now the director is equipped, or even armed, with the current scientific (and pseudo-scientific) vocabulary. “The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics” includes, for instance, explicit reference to Taylorism, methods of which “may be applied to the work of the actor in the same way as they are to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity.” (The “Taylorization of the theatre,” we are informed somewhat bizarrely, “will make it possible to perform in one hour that which requires four at present.”)²³ Meyerhold furthermore appeals to reflexology, at the time a popular trend in Soviet psychology, to explain how such outstanding productivity can be achieved, coining the term “reflex excitability” to de-

The Biomechanics of Infidelity

scribe “the ability to realize in feelings, movements and words a task which is prescribed externally.”²⁴ The actor, he continues, should be able to place his body in a position such that the emotion associated with this position is induced in him or her and communicated to the audience; all psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes:

By correctly resolving the nature of his state physically, the actor reaches the point where he experiences an excitation that communicates itself to the spectator and induces him to share in the actor's performance . . . From a sequence of physical positions and situations there arise those “points of excitation” which are informed with some particular emotion.²⁵

In a 1932 lecture to his students, Meyerhold borrows from American pragmatist William James an example of this emotion-following-position principle, the basis of the theater director's conception of biomechanics:

The well-known psychologist James has said that a man pretending to be running away from a dog that is chasing him rouses in himself the same emotions typical of a person actually running away from a pursuing dog. That is, often the position of our body in space influences what we call emotion and the intonation of an uttered phrase, as if there's some sort of jolt to the brain.²⁶

Thus does Meyerhold sharply depart from the method of his teacher Konstantin Stanislavsky, who insisted on the artistic movement *from* inner feeling *to* external expressivity; to the contrary, Meyerhold proposes that external expressivity leads to the experience of emotion. Meyerhold reminisced that acting under the tutelage of Stanislavsky, he felt as if he were losing his mind; the method of emotional immersion into the role had a “narcotic” effect upon Meyerhold.²⁷ By contrast, his own technique helped him to alleviate inner chaos, promoting emotional health through the organization and control of his body; Gladkov recalls Meyerhold once saying that the great Sicilian tragedian Grasso would have gone mad at the end of each performance were it not for his remarkable technique, which allowed him to convey the impression of unbridled emotion on stage.²⁸ A *healthy mind in a healthy body* was prominently featured in the discourse of creating the new Soviet man, and Meyerhold's biomechanics was to assist in this transformation. In his “Notes on Biomechanics,” Meyerhold's pupil Sergei Eisenstein comments: “Biomechanics is a method for giving the actor healthful excitation (which is a condition achieved by means of organized muscular activity).”²⁹ Such “healthful excitation,” moreover, was meant to be communicated to the audience, imparting to it a vigorous vitality, and even some aspect of the skill displayed. Meyerhold reminisced that “when [he] was staging *The Lady*

of the Camellias, [his] dream was that a pilot who attended a performance would fly better afterwards.”³⁰

It should be emphasized that the language of Meyerhold’s theorizing signified a remarkable shift in notions of what the theater was supposed to be. Both Dapertutto’s studio and Meyerhold’s proposed “Theatrical October” program were to transform their audience; but the former in particular aimed to alter the spectator’s perception, creating a new spectacle, an illusory space the audience could nevertheless inhabit. The effect on the spectator was not unequivocally positive. Dapertutto’s title of “doctor” was at least in part ironic; the enchantment he provided was not purely beneficial to the spectator’s health. This ambivalence did not match (to say the least) Soviet discourse. The revolutionary director was to take his place among the builders of new reality and contribute to the forging of new men; and Meyerhold indeed assumed this productivist role, envisioning the task of his theater as not the creation of beautiful illusions, but rather the production of energy. But the ambiguity inherent in Dapertutto’s name did not entirely disappear; rather, it seeped into and permeated the very texture of Meyerhold’s performance.

ACTOR SPLIT: BIFURCATION

Equipping himself with findings from reflexology and the language of Taylorism and constructivism, Meyerhold proceeded to turn theatrical movement into artistic science. In the 1920s, the constructivist rhetoric of crafting life and creating useful art slipped into Meyerhold’s lectures, while such concepts as mask, trickery, antics, magic, and fantasy—the appurtenances of flight from mundane life into the world of make-believe—disappeared from his vocabulary. And yet, his lectures and productions alike remained true to the aesthetic vision of his days as Doctor Dapertutto, and his biomechanics, so far from impeding the creation of the theatrical wonderland, in fact made it possible.

In one respect, Meyerhold’s biomechanics differs dramatically from the Taylorist version of Gastev. The latter envisioned the man-machine as bereft of autonomy, his every activity regulated and habitual. Motivated by pure reflex, this entity does not require any mental involvement, and is dictated to externally (by either managers under capitalism or the collective under socialism). In fact, this external guidance, which some perceived as evincing an elitist preference for the rule of educated engineers over “mindless” automata-workers, left Gastev open to the charge (leveled for instance by Aleksandr Bogdanov in *Proletarskaiia kul’tura* (*Proletarian Culture*) that his system necessarily relied on an intellectual elite.³¹

By contrast, Meyerhold always maintained that intellectual involve-

ment was integral to his biomechanical instruction. The ability to react automatically and habitually to external directives was a matter of training, concomitant with the actor's constant awareness of his or her body and its place in time and space. Moreover, while asserting the necessity of self-restrictions and rules, Meyerhold never abandoned the idea of improvisation. Like the puppets whom the director had earlier admired for their individuality and independence, biomechanical actors were to preserve their agency and remain capable of spicing up their regulated movement with improvised, idiosyncratic play.

From various notes taken during Meyerhold's lectures, it is evident that the director strongly emphasized the peculiar formula for the ideal actor of $N = A1 + A2$, where N = the actor; $A1$ = the artist who conceives an idea and issues the instructions necessary for its execution; and $A2$ = the executant who fulfills the conception of $A1$.³² In this formulation, the actor bifurcates, becoming simultaneously "the artist and engineer" or "the material and the organizer," or else "the body and the artist," as well as "the product of realization and the criticizing master" and "the instrument and the instrumentalist."³³ The actor divides himself into body and mind, or more specifically, compartmentalizes that part of himself which is completely objectified (the body as raw material) separate from that part that imbues him with agency (mind). Instead of having its place in a holistic approach to personality, the body is stripped away, cast out so as to be transformed into an object for use. The thread between the internal and the external is broken. Writing about film director Lev Kuleshov's work with masks and facial gymnastics devoid of meaning, experiments akin to and inspired by Meyerhold's biomechanical investigations of the body, Mikhail Iampol'skii argues that

the super-rationalization of the Constructivist man comes about by way of the elimination of all chance, all unpredictability, from any connection with psychological mysticism. The new man of the Soviet utopia was called upon to control himself as he would another, thereby turning his body into something akin to a marionette. In this, the faculty of reason that controls the body like a mechanical agglomeration acquires a certain impersonal character—it becomes the reason of "the other."³⁴

This utter dissociation, by which both mind and body are distanced from the self and become "the other," implies that what the actor learns about his body and how to manipulate it is not an expression of his peculiar individuality, but rather of his panhuman essence, his quality of belonging to a species. Iampol'skii notes that in the 1910–20s, the mask was associated with essence, "objectivizing" a person as a member of mankind, whereas the face was associated with individuality, particularity, chance, and hence falsehood.

But this essence/particularity dichotomy does not exhaust the actor's bifurcation. In one of his lectures, Meyerhold suggests that inside the actor there are two people, one who exists and another who will materialize in the future: "It is as if, in each actor setting to work on a part, there exist two people: the first—the actor proper, de facto extant, corporeal, about to bring to life (incarnate on stage) the assigned role; and the second, de facto still nonexistent, whom the actor will send ready-made to the stage."³⁵

This latter description would seem to render the true potential of biomechanical art most apparent: biomechanics enables the actor to coexist in two temporal and spatial dimensions simultaneously, to fixate and record the movement of time. Biomechanical theatricality leads to a kind of out-of-body experience by which the individual anticipates and experiences himself in the future. In "The Fairground Booth," Meyerhold pinpoints the all-important aspect of modernity that necessitates changing the conception and creation of art: "We are short of time!"³⁶ The director saw his own hyper-consciousness of time as crucial to the acting craft; biomechanics, he explains, teaches the sense of rhythm—for Meyerhold, a form of taming time through its precise organization.³⁷ It should be emphasized that Meyerhold's stance vis-à-vis time suggests not catching up to it, but catching and conquering it; the biomechanical man exists both in the present and the future, suggesting a kind of overcoming of time via imagination. When Meyerhold in 1922 decided to showcase his biomechanics with a staging of Crommelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, the production's fans and detractors alike seemed to agree that Meyerhold had transported them to some other place and time. In *Teatral'naia Moskva* (*Theatrical Moscow*), the critic M. Zagorskii, as if telepathically sensing Meyerhold's preoccupation with temporality, fashions his review around the premise that Meyerhold has achieved the impossible, has "conquered all-powerful time." In the spirit of the play, Zagorskii suggests that Meyerhold "cuckolds time itself—oh, that is indeed his specialty," insofar as, in the brief span of two hours, he whisks his audience to the theater of the future—"the theater of ten years from now, when electrification is finished."³⁸

CHILD'S PLAY

The formula of the bifurcated actor renders overcoming the constraints of time and space integral to the acting craft. In one of his lectures, Meyerhold invokes Gastev's formulation of the "high-speed man" (*skorostnoi chelovek*), and it seems that this particular Meyerholdian bifurcation, the coexistence in two temporal dimensions, present and future, realizes Gastev's idea of the high-speed man with especial poignance. In Eisenstein's notes taken upon a Meyerhold lecture on acting, the formula of bifurcation is followed by the

notation: “The play of a child: 1. an element of imitation (of adults) and 2. fantasy.”³⁹ As in the play of children, this division of self, a game of pretend in which automatic imitation and creative improvisation coexist, is an activity not *productive* per se, but mythic and revelatory. In play, a child slips the constraints of his or her time and space and becomes an all-powerful being. The pleasure afforded by biomechanics lies in a similarly exuberant exercise of one’s fantasy and creativity. Children’s games create a parallel reality without actually transforming the given one, in this respect too—the assurances of the director notwithstanding—quite similar to Meyerhold’s theater. As is hinted in Eisenstein’s note, the actor’s bifurcation that enables the conquest of time is an act of fantasy, a leap of the imagination. The scholar of play Brian Sutton-Smith explains: “Children’s play fantasies are not meant only to replicate the world, nor to be only its therapy; they are meant to fabricate another world that lives alongside the first one and carries on its own kind of life, a life often much more emotionally vivid than mundane reality.”⁴⁰ Sutton-Smith would likely characterize the task with which Meyerhold charges theater, the conquest of reality—“Why should we reflect this contemporary life? We need to overcome it”⁴¹—as akin to the aims of a child at play. And yet, the child is aware that his victory over reality is play-acting, both illusory and temporary—which would seem to have profound implications for the place of Meyerhold’s biomechanics within Soviet discourse. From Eric Erikson’s definition of play as “the illusion of mastery over life’s circumstances,” Sutton-Smith extrapolates that “an irrational act of gaining pleasure through one’s own illusions is hardly consistent with the rationality of the rhetoric of progress.”⁴² The rhetoric of conscious self-study, of total control of movement, deconstructs itself when the rhetoric of fantasy comes into play, as the latter questions the validity and endurance of this control. The question remains whether this control is an act of wishful thinking, fantasy, illusion. Not only does playfulness prevail in Meyerhold’s theater, it is elevated to the status of organizing principle. In the staging of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, for example, the atmosphere of playfulness is an especially cultivated effect, as Alma Law observes: “The larger-than-life and consciously nonrealistic nature of the properties served to reinforce the production’s atmosphere of child-like innocence, which so startlingly undercut at every turn the erotic content of the play.”⁴³

THE GROTESQUE

Whether the childlike elements of the production—the rattle carried around by Mariia Babanova in the role of Stella, or the clown’s pom-poms dangling from the neck of Bruno/Igor’ Il’insky—were meant to downplay eroticism,

they indeed engendered a grotesque incongruity between the adult content of the play and its decidedly nonadult staging. The most important element of the Meyerholdian understanding of theatricality, the grotesque, is defined in the director's essay "The Fairground Booth" as "a conflict between form and content,"⁴⁴ thus involving both the creative task of stylization as well as the means of this task, the body. The expressivity of stylized gesture creates the aesthetic effect of the grotesque. Meyerhold elucidates: "The grotesque does not recognize the purely debased or the purely exalted. The grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity and relying solely on its own originality."⁴⁵ In this synthesis of opposites, or what Eisenstein would later call collision montage, the grotesque becomes the ultimate vehicle of theatrical transformation.⁴⁶ This theatrical principle by which the grotesque inhabits a moving human body produces a transformative shock-effect upon the audience, which feels transported into a different, enchanted world. Meyerhold writes: "The basis of the grotesque is the artist's constant desire to switch the spectator from the place he has just reached to another which is totally unforeseen."⁴⁷ The biomechanical man, the man-machine, is precisely such a grotesque vision; its body, balancing the automatic and spontaneous, recalls Bakhtin's explication of the grotesque body of marketplace culture. In *Rabelais and His World*, the theorist of the carnivalesque discusses the folk culture of the same periods that inspired Meyerhold, the Middle Ages and Renaissance, and the prominent place therein of the body, especially its lower stratum. Specifically, the genitalia are associated with destruction and debasement, but also with regeneration and renewal.⁴⁸ The ambivalence of the lower stratum of the body conditions its use as a site of cathartic transformation or as a material equivalent to the abstract idea of fertility and rejuvenation.⁴⁹ The grotesque image of the body in the culture of the marketplace represents the desire to disrupt the boundaries of the individual, to open up the body to other bodies.

Meyerhold's theater foregrounds the ambivalence of the body, which is both animate and inanimate; mechanical and organic; solid yet constantly changing; subject to rules, yet capable of improvisation; an instrument, yet also a plaything. Similarly, Bakhtin emphasizes that the "grotesque body . . . is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body."⁵⁰ The grotesque body, with all its chaotic connotations, would seem to be far from the man-machine, but Gastev saw his entity in a similarly eternally unfolding light: "We must work so that humankind will suddenly realize that man himself is one of the most perfect machines known to our technology. But that is not all. We must make a second discovery: we must admit that the technological progress of this machine is limitless."⁵¹ With the metallic man, Gastev sought to sublimate inchoate sexuality. For Meyerhold, however, the

transformation of humanity was informed by combining the theory of biomechanics with the principle of the grotesque. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* underscores the mechanicity of the body in all its manifestations—sexual, athletic, and ludic—in a way revealing the correspondence between the biomechanical man and the obscenely grotesque man of the medieval marketplace; Gastevian functional mechanicity is additionally furnished with lewd and ludic undertones. The lower body stratum is covered, but that which it symbolizes, the principle of perpetual motion, the eternal life of mankind, or in Bakhtin's words, “universal animatization,”⁵² become embodied in Meyerhold's grotesque version of the biomechanical man. Bakhtin declares: “The world is not an aggregate of elements but an animate being in which each part is an organ of the whole.”⁵³ In biomechanical terms, this definition would seem to render the world itself a machine.

Indeed, for Meyerhold, the stage models just such a world in which “each part is an organ of the whole.” Biomechanical exercises train actors to treat their bodies like machines in which every part has functional significance—“The whole body participates in the work of the most insignificant body part”⁵⁴—and like parts of a more complex, larger machine, which is the stage itself. The actor must be constantly aware of his relationship to every other element of the performance. This organically mechanistic universe, being a microcosm of the world, is in perpetual motion, in the nonlinear process of becoming, transforming itself; and the actor's body is the key locus of this movement.

SET DESIGN

In order to instantiate in his staging of *The Magnanimous Cuckold* such a microcosm of the organically mechanistic universe, Meyerhold employed the services of the constructivist Liubov' Popova. Her set design, in effect the most ostentatiously playful element of the whole production, became itself a stage on which a drama of contending interpretations played out (fig. 3).

Popova's design incorporated Meyerhold's idea of naked theatricality, which stipulated the laying bare of the devices of theatrical illusion and the elimination of the barrier between stage and audience. The set was open and bare, with the exception of a peculiar structure Popova called *stanok* (machine-tool or lathe) and *konstruktsiya dlja razvitiia akterskoi igry* (structure for the development of acting).⁵⁵ Theater has always utilized various kinds of machinery, but the constructivist ethos allowed for only the working, functional parts of the set: the decorative fabric normally used to hide the mechanism, rendering it “secret,” was deemed purely atmospheric and superfluous, and had to be gotten rid of—hence the naked *stanok*.

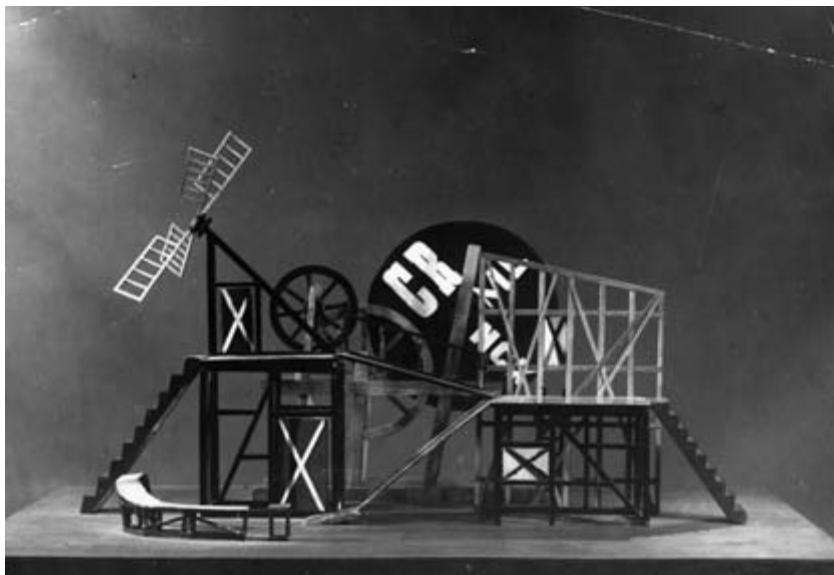


Fig 3. Liubov' Popova, set design for *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922

Fellow constructivists denounced Popova for agreeing to participate in a theatrical production and thereby betraying the constructivist principle of abandoning art for the sake of the engineering of life.⁵⁶ In her defense, Popova argued that her apparatus embodied the principle of constructivist rationality. The “structure” was supposed to provide actors with a work area and assist them in the newly acquired acting technique, that is, biomechanics. On the one hand, it looked like a peculiar piece of gymnastics equipment, with various platforms for leaps, jumps, and other acrobatic antics of the biomechanical actor. On the other hand, it was designed to resemble industrial scaffolding; yet, as Edward Braun remarks,

despite the skeletal austerity, the grimy damp-stained brickwork of the exposed back wall, and the absence of wings to hide either stage-crew or cast, Popova’s contraption evoked inevitable associations with the windmill in which the play was supposed to be set, suggesting now a bedroom, now a balcony, now the grinding mechanism, now a chute for the discharging sack of flour.⁵⁷

To anyone familiar with playground jungle gyms, Popova’s ostensibly functional machine cannot but recall a children’s toy, with all its potential for games of pretend. Describing the contraption, Robert Leach underscores

The Biomechanics of Infidelity

its affirmation of the principle of pure fun rather than utility: “It suggests a child’s playground, with elements of the climbing frame, the slide and so on, a toy propeller which can never hope to lift the machine off the ground, but is fun in itself.”⁵⁸ And the most ostentatious and kinetic element of the machine, the wheels that rotated at varying speeds throughout the performance, evoke the windmills that propelled the imagination of Don Quixote to impossible heights.

With its promotion of the atmosphere of fun and the arousal of the imagination, Popova’s machine would seem to constitute a purely aesthetic rather than utilitarian artifact. Braun cites art theorist Nikolai Tarabukin’s description (1931):

The wheels of the windmill, the white letters on a black background, the combination of red with yellow and black—they are all decorative elements derived from painting . . . Its lightness and elegance are entirely in keeping with the style of Crommelynck’s farce, but as a utilitarian construction, it does not stand close scrutiny of all its components. One needs only to mention the door on the second level and the difficulty the actors have in making exits on to the landing behind it.⁵⁹

This description casts doubt not only on the philosophical purity of the constructivism informing Popova’s set design, but on the biomechanical efficiency of Meyerhold’s production as a whole. In fact, while numerous positive notices proclaimed Meyerhold the “Edison” and “Taylor of the theater,” Ippolit Sokolov, the organizer of his own system of theatrical expressionism, which also incorporated Taylorism, registered a damning, hostile review. In his criticism of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Sokolov denounces Meyerhold’s biomechanics as “blatantly anti-Taylorist,” his acrobatics, contra Meyerhold’s claims of salutary health benefits, as injurious, causing “excessive strain on the heart and lungs through inadmissible hard work,” “irreparable ruin” to correct breathing, and “harmful pressure on the abdomen.”⁶⁰ Sokolov concludes his diatribe: “Meyerhold’s Biomechanics is a deliberate maiming of man under the cover of pseudoscientific terminology.”⁶¹ Assessing Sokolov’s assertions would require a good deal of anatomical and mechanical analysis. Through Sokolov’s hostility, in any event, I discern a thought that strikes me as perceptive: the critic finds it hard to see what the circus acrobatics and active play so characteristic of Meyerhold’s theater have to do with the Taylorist principles of economy and precision of movement:

In spite of the fact that Biomechanics is based on elements of circus acrobatics, plastics, active play, plus Sokol pyramids (a little from everywhere),

Meyerhold, for some reason, attaches to his Biomechanics the so-called rationalization of muscular movements . . . Biomechanics as a whole is not an economy of strength but an exorbitant waste of it.⁶²

Indeed, many elements of Meyerhold's theater—the principle of the bifurcated actor; the childlike play; the stylized gesture; the bawdiness, antics, clowning, and the grotesque—would seem to valorize not economy but excess. It is especially amusing to see Meyerhold's admirers recognize this excess, at the same time attempting to shoehorn it rhetorically into constructivist aesthetics. For instance, in his review, the *Lef* theorist and playwright Sergei Tret'iakov enthusiastically declares that in the production, “gesticulatory garbage is discarded—the simplest, most economical, well-aimed gesture is sought—the Taylorized gesture,” but virtually in the next breath mentions “the wheels—it is the scenery itself that smiles and cracks jokes as the action progresses.”⁶³ Here we are faced with a constructivist inadvertently admitting to being charmed by the illusion of anthropomorphic decorations. M. Zagorskii is even more ecstatic, declaring himself “in awe of the country to which this wonderful aviator delivered me on his theatrical machine.”⁶⁴ Zagorskii here, of course, means Popova's kinetic stage contraption, which he dubs a “Wellsian time-machine” and sees as “fantastic” and “miracle-working.” Its fantastic quality lies in its ability to become a living organism (“This machine is alive—it sings and plays”),⁶⁵ in the process also miraculously animating the actors, who through contact with it realize their kinetic and expressive potential.⁶⁶

This “structure for the development of acting” generates action for actors and excitement for spectators, thereby integrating them into the atmosphere of communal fun. Thus it is surprising that symbolically, on the level of the play's content, the machine represents quite the opposite of fun, namely, the protagonist's tragic isolation, the mechanism of Bruno's imagination, which triggers action and excitement, yet imprisons Bruno himself. The photograph of the performance in which Stella is followed by suitors on the top level of Popova's machine while Bruno writhes in despair below recalls the machine depicted in Marcel Duchamp's almost contemporaneous *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1923) (figs. 4 and 5). In this piece, the machine separates the bride from her suitors, their longing sustained by a kind of desire-producing mechanism that works by way of promise, deferral, and interruption. By contrast, Popova's machine, like Duchamp's replete with watermill wheels, is the representation not of desire, but rather of Bruno's imagination, doubt, and angst; and the distance and isolation it ensures are catalysts not of desire but despair (figs. 6 and 7).⁶⁷ Nick Worrall notes that the interaction between Il'insky and Popova's ma-



Fig. 4. *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. Scene with the Cowherd. Act 3. 1928



Fig 5. Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 1915–23



Fig. 6. Bruno, Estrugo, and Stella in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922



Fig. 7. Igor Il'insky as Bruno in *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, 1922

chine suggests that Bruno is “caught in the structure as in a trap, as in a world in which he has not found his place.”⁶⁸ In the surrealist Duchamp’s work, distance and inability to possess only lead to desire; in the work of the constructivist, distance is the ultimate destroyer of illusion, the repudiation of the creative task. The content of the play further muddles the theoretically utilitarian aspects of Popova’s machine, burdening it with metaphoric meaning. From the meticulous recording of every *mise-en-scène* (1923) in the director’s stage notes, presently housed at the RGALI archive of the Meyerhold Theater, it appears that the white wheel’s rotation externalized pure, almost platonic feelings, while that of the red wheel quite clearly signaled the appearance of lust (the tap-dancing of the men lined up for Stella’s services is matched by the rapid rotation of the red wheel), and the black wheel accompanied fits of jealousy and violence. The question remains whether by externalizing inner drives and emotions, the machine unleashed them or localized and controlled them. Either way, however, the superimposition of the play’s content onto Popova’s stage design exemplifies my contention above that playfulness of the sort produced by this “structure” is the state of being captivated by an illusion, all the while fully cognizant of its limitations.

CONTENTIOUS CONTENT

Meyerhold’s choice of precisely *The Magnanimous Cuckold* to introduce his biomechanics to the Russian audience seemed a strange one; as one reviewer remarked, the play shows not a hint of “revolutionary ideology”: “This is a farce written by a Symbolist: you can find a dozen meanings in it and none of them has anything whatsoever to do with the elimination of illiteracy or the tasks of the Red Air Force.”⁶⁹ In the early 1920s, when Aleksandra Kollontai’s ideas about the family as an outmoded proprietary institution were not yet in complete disfavor, the play was useful for Soviet ideological purposes in only one regard: it mocks the theoretically antisocialist proprietary feelings of the husband Bruno. In fact, Meyerhold himself stated that the play is a study of jealousy; and the production’s ideological supporters, as if on cue, emphasized the denunciatory subtext of the play as directed against the oppression of women in bourgeois society. Some, however, including Aleksei Gvozdev, less certain of the socio-critical message of the production, suggested that the subject matter was nearly irrelevant, that the Meyerholdian technique guarantees the audience to be so mesmerized by the actors’ movement that the obscenity of the play becomes an afterthought.⁷⁰ The health and power of the movement, he contends, remains unsullied by the content; the stylized biomechanics whitewashes the play.⁷¹

In this production the actors execute the Meyerholdian program: they bifurcate, their bodies both connecting and disconnecting them from that which they enact. The actor playing Bruno, for instance, the great Il'insky, is excessive. Bifurcation allows Il'insky not only to portray Bruno, but also to distance himself from the role and act out his attitude toward it, to provide his own commentary on the character. Such disassociation makes it possible for this story of imprisonment and hopelessness to be read as a “romantic play in honor of a free human being.”⁷² Stella and Bruno are overcome by Bruno's imagination, but the actors who play these characters remain in full control; Bruno, who in Crommelynck's stage directions actually ages as the play unfolds, is almost physically destroyed by angst and uncertainty, but the actor who plays him invariably exhibits perfect form.

The actor's attitude toward or commentary upon his or her character was to be expressed through the precision of movement inculcated by biomechanics. The slapstick exercises and performers' antics were to arouse laughter in the audience even as the protagonists reached the depths of despair. Biomechanical movements thus appear as a form of satiric commentary on the characters' follies, despite the fact that these follies are bound up with the mechanicity of their behavior.

In his well-known essay on the nature of the comic, Henri Bergson posits a close interconnection between the comedic and the mechanical in human lives. Bergson observes that laughter arises in situations wherein, instead of “the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being,” “a certain mechanical inelasticity” is in effect.⁷³ “The attitudes, gestures, and movements of the human body,” maintains Bergson, “are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine.”⁷⁴ Tellingly, Duchamp, too, referred to his *Large Glass* as “hilarious,” perhaps because he found the predictable reproducibility and mechanicity of our inner drives laughter-inducing. Laughable mechanicity also befalls the protagonist of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Bruno, who behaves like a machine impelled by an obsessive idea, in full accord with Bergson's description of the comic character who “errs through obstinacy of mind or disposition . . . in short, through automatism.”⁷⁵ Bruno moreover makes his wife mechanistically perform repeated sexual acts devoid of any meaning for her personally, her body becoming pure machine; her subsequent leaving of her husband is thus an affirmation of her will and desire to exit the circle of mechanistic behavior.

The biomechanics informing Il'insky's performance seems to highlight the mechanicity of Bruno's behavior, eliciting laughter by underscoring the ridiculous inflexibility of Bruno's character.⁷⁶ Like any modernist, Meyerhold found it crucial to lay bare his devices, denuding the stage so as to expose theatrical machinery and puncture theatrical illusion. The biomechani-

cal gesture was intended to have an analogous function, that of laying bare the unconscious. Human beings were to become transparent, their bodily gestures reflecting with the utmost precision that which transpired in their minds and souls, their experiences at a given moment. Simple, transparent bodies were to exhibit their psyche in the same way that the lack of scenic decorations was supposed to ensure, in Meyerhold's words, "agitation laid bare" (*obnazhennaya agitatsiya*)—the end of theatrical mystifications.

The automatism of Bruno's psyche is laid bare in the gestures of the actor who portrays him. Moreover, the laughter induced in the audience by this performance is a complex one. While valorizing the mechanicity of the body, Meyerhold seems to utilize it in order to mock and correct mechanistic, automatic, that is, *uninspired* behavior. Meyerhold once stated that "the body must be inspired/animated" (*telo dolzhno byt' odukhovorenno*), and it seems that biomechanics underscores this point, rather than contradicting it.⁷⁷ When the audience is laughing at Bruno and his clownish behavior, it is laughing at the naked sight of his humiliating compulsion.

Bergson suggests that laughter is a corrective, that it "pursues a utilitarian aim of general improvement."⁷⁸ In a sense, the audience's laughter can be interpreted as an attempt to correct Bruno's antisocial, inelastic behavior. Laughter integrates the one who laughs into the community; as Bergson notes, laughter always belongs to a group. In a review of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Aleksandr Smirnov notes that "what is truly horrifying . . . quite naturally takes on a comic form for an observer."⁷⁹ This comment presupposes a distancing between the tragic hero in his travails and the spectators in their enjoyment. And yet Bergson suggests that socialization through laughter secretly relies not only on the disgrace of the comic character, but also, paradoxically, on his or her appeal; the audience is always tacitly sympathetic with the plight of the comic hero. Does audience sympathy stem from the fact that, as Bergson posits, "in following automatically his idea, [the comic hero] ultimately thinks, speaks, and acts as though he were dreaming"?⁸⁰ Is it the candid vulnerability of a person engaged in dreamlike behavior that promotes a feeling of kinship? The protagonist's flaws, while held up for ridicule, are of course not completely alien to the spectators, and through laughter, the latter disavow those weaknesses they perceive and fear in themselves.

The triumph of free personality the play was supposed to enact, then, could be called a rapture achieved through rupture. *The Magnanimous Cuckold* seems to instantiate doubts and attempts to overcome them. *What renders the play amenable for the exhibition of biomechanical training, the emphasis on the body and the task of its control, is also precisely that which undermines biomechanics as an unqualified success.* Bruno's attempt to mas-

ter reality by controlling Stella's body is thwarted, called into question by the play on both ethical and practical grounds.

Bruno writes love poems to order, and through his choice of occupation he becomes attuned to the unreliability of words, suspecting moreover that other channels of communication are just as untrustworthy. Spencer Golub writes that, against the background of New Economic Policy-era opportunism and turbulence, Crommelynck's text "can be read as the representation of cultural and linguistic instability and collateral gapping in terms of behavioral and representational signs."⁸¹ What renders words so deceptive and inauthentic, in a way, is that they are shared by all, hence incapable of transmitting genuinely unique emotions. Bruno is overcome by doubt and the fear of inauthenticity, suspecting his wife's fidelity to be a deception. Everything appears false to him, and this crisis of appearances leads him to seek out ways of achieving elusive legibility. Moreover, Bruno possesses, and is possessed by, an overactive imagination, which stirs him to action. Scenarios suggested by his mind surpass real life; their incommensurability means he must either shrink his imagination, or make reality conform to it. The combination of these three factors—the quest for transparency and legibility; the desire to be in control; and the overabundance of imagination—lead him to Stella's body, just as Meyerhold is led to the biomechanical training of his actors. Bruno becomes the director of a play with Stella as his marionette-like star; Stella, in a way a biomechanical actor, has Bruno as her Meyerhold, her body assuming positions dictated by her husband's will. The sexual acts she performs are devoid of internal meaning; she is an adulteress, but in a purely formal sense. Like a Meyerholdian actor, she plays the part of the adulteress with emotional detachment and full self-consciousness. Bruno's invasive imagination inscribes itself onto Stella's body. He attempts to reduce her autonomy by denying her the depth and illegibility essential for an autonomous being, by scripting her behavior and schematizing her movements to conform to his design. Rendered a machine, an object governed by the collective, Stella's body becomes a synecdoche for the external reality over which Bruno attempts to exercise control. His ontological loneliness, evident in the distance between what the world is and what he imagines it to be, can be alleviated, he hopes, under circumstances in which everything is legible, communal, and accessible to all, yet also subject to his design. Golub argues that in Meyerhold's staging of Crommelynck's play, adultery becomes a metaphor for the anxious desire surrounding the creation of self, an attempt to inscribe individual desire into the mechanics of collective anonymity.⁸² As compelling as this reading is, to me the play is less about the interplay between individual and collective and more about self vs. other; less about self-creation and more about self-doubt. That is, while on the sur-

face biomechanics was perfectly relevant and applicable to the demands of the times, implicitly for Meyerhold it was associated with questions ranging beyond the specific preoccupations of Soviet political culture. For Meyerhold, the affirmation of creative will was not so much a social problem—that is, involving the integration of the individual into the community—but an ontological one. Thus through adaptability and calculation, Bruno attempts to transcend the chaos and volatility of life, its lack of design.

Consider, in this light, Crommelynck's Stella, who is bifurcated like a Meyerholdian actor: she plays the part of the adulteress, never forgetting that she is only acting, that in fact she is something completely different—a faithful wife. But here is implied an inconsistency in Meyerholdian actor training: on the one hand, the actor is supposed to be faithful only to theatrical truth, that is, supposed to hyper-consciously *play-act* rather than represent his or her character. But on the other hand, as mentioned above, Meyerhold held that adopting a certain external position creates an internal effect, and not only in the mind of the spectator, but within the performer herself. And this is what happens in the play: Stella becomes that which she has initially only play-acted—an adulteress.⁸³ Her internal life and its external form begin to correspond, and she leaves Bruno for another man. But what might be tragic not only for Bruno, but perhaps for Meyerhold himself, is that this ending is not accidental, but perfectly consistent with the overall idea of the play, in which any attempt to control anything is doomed to fail. The more legible Bruno tries to render his position vis-à-vis Stella and the world in general, the less certain this position becomes. Certitude and control are an illusion, which is in turn a form of imprisonment more terrifying than even Stella's plight. Thus is Stella able eventually to resist and escape, while Bruno is doomed to remain in the thrall of his fantasies and doubts and broken by his attempts at authorship and authority. Indeed, the Aksenov-Meyerhold script highlights the dilemma of authorship by strategically changing one essential word in a line directed at Bruno: "You have gotten mangy, shriveled, broken, as if you were the author of all these feats!"⁸⁴

Thus it is curious that Meyerhold chose this content to demonstrate biomechanics; the play would seem to undermine precisely what Meyerhold's theater was to affirm. Or perhaps Meyerhold's adaptation of this play constitutes a scripting of creative doubts and their denial. Denial is indeed a central mechanism of Meyerhold's production, which rises above the clichés of the bourgeois plot of romantic love, family drama, and adultery, and sublimates the would-be sexual charge of the play's content into energy-producing antics and feats of athleticism. But then, perhaps it is precisely the conflict between the co-present affirmation and denial that draws in the spectator. Either way, it is safe to say that, as a propaganda piece, as a theatrical contribution to the project of building the "new Soviet man," the pro-

duction undid itself, staging, rather, a complex meta-play, a game of pro and contra in which the spectator is compelled to take a side and, ultimately, make an aesthetic judgment.

DANGEROUS BIOMECHANICS

Meyerhold's fate echoes that of Gastev. In the 1930s, the director found himself rapidly falling into official disfavor, despite several attempts to produce theatrical productions palatable for the new Stalinist regime; and his international fame could not save him from suppression of his work, persecution, imprisonment, and execution. Could biomechanics have played a significant part in Meyerhold's fate? Meyerhold himself seemed to think that it did, though as offenses go, he found it an absurd one; as Gladkov recalls the director saying: "The basic law of Biomechanics is very simple: the whole body takes part in each of our movements. The rest is elaboration, exercises, études. Tell me, what is there in this that could disturb people, provoke protests, seem heretical, unacceptable?"⁸⁵

In late 1931, a directive from the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) denounced Meyerhold's biomechanics as harboring the seeds of theosophy and compared the director's theory of rhythm to the anthroposophic constructs of Mikhail Chekhov and Andrei Bely.⁸⁶ The same year, *Sovetskii teatr* (*Soviet Theater*) featured an article by R. Pel'she, "Mechanizm i formalizm v TİMе" ("Mechanism and Formalism at the Meyerhold Theater"), which presented a retrospective of Meyerhold's career with the intention of pinpointing the pluses and minuses—that is, aspects beneficial to the state, and those detrimental to it—of his work. Like the RAPP directive, Pel'she finds Meyerhold's biomechanics to be philosophically idealistic—since Lenin's *Materializm i empiriokrititsizm* (*Materialism and Empiriocriticism*), an accusation of dangerous detachment from reality. At the same time, Pel'she finds that Meyerhold's biomechanics, inspired by the teachings of reflexologists and "nutty Freudians" (*prishiblennye freidisty*), vulgarizes materialism by reducing all human action to mechanistic reflexes.

But perhaps to Pel'she what is most degrading in biomechanics is not that it characterizes the human being as a machine, but as an animal. "A number of movements in the 'biomechanics' of Comrade Meyerhold are of a purely animalistic, mechanistic-reflexive nature; intellect is completely absent from them."⁸⁷ Pel'she's "animal" assessment relies on Meyerhold's own words, the director's allusion to the graceful, rhythmic movement of a lion as exemplifying the organic mechanicity inherent in all animals and connecting them to nature. To reclaim and reexperience this organic mechanicity is the task of the new actor. Meyerhold remarks: "A caged lion paces as if to a

metronome and sets its paw in the exact same spot where it had stepped. This repetitiveness is caused neither by stupidity nor by exhaustion of the mind. No, it is the permanent longing for a rhythmic existence within time.”⁸⁸ Subsequently in the same lecture, Meyerhold enjoins his actors to acquire the sense of rhythm that will bring them and their art closer to nature. Just as he elides the mechanistic and the organic, thus does Meyerhold also break the traditional barriers between nature and culture. The categories within which he operates being timeless, the director evinces a peculiar disconnectedness from pressing sociopolitical concerns; biomechanical rhythm becomes a way to investigate the mysteries of existence, questions that transcend the immediate tasks of building Soviet power. The accusations of “theosophy,” then, are not so far off the mark.

Pel’she further accuses Meyerhold of valorizing pure mechanicity, denying content in favor of form. Moreover, for Pel’she, form is biology, and content is social life; especially incompatible with Soviet ideology is the implicit foregrounding of the human being’s *biological* rather than social nature. Meyerhold’s theory, of course, does not deny that a person is a social creature; biomechanics presupposes that the bodily experience of organization and communalism leads to a socialized existence.⁸⁹ Neither does Meyerhold’s teaching insist on pure mechanicity; rather, it stipulates that actors combine reflexive spontaneity with consciousness of their every gesture, and with individual improvisation. However, the audience, complains Pel’she, is meant to be influenced passively: actors must manipulate their bodies in such a way as to arouse the viewer by working on his or her unconscious, whereas the critic would prefer, it would seem, that the production agitate the viewer by influencing his or her *mind*. Here we might recall Katerina Clark’s explanation of how socialist realist literature was to provide “lessons in the working-out of the spontaneity-consciousness dialectic.” Each socialist realist work is an allegory exemplifying the “Leninist model of historical progress”; thus in each work the hero “achieves greater harmony both within himself and in relation to his society” by becoming a politically aware member, conscious of his role and place in the building of communism.⁹⁰

Pel’she’s complaints (the attempt to influence the unconscious; biological determinism; and so on) seem to all flow from one and the same source: a suspicion that, despite Meyerhold’s aim of changing the human being, it is unlikely that biomechanics can ultimately effect such a transformation. Given that *The Magnanimous Cuckold* undoes, or at least severely complicates, its own main precepts, there is a certain validity to Pel’she’s claims.

The grotesque body of the biomechanically trained actor becomes the locus of the coexistence of various conflicting aspects of life. For Meyerhold, the body stands at the threshold of the animate and inanimate, life and death, organic and mechanistic, social and natural. By attempting to open

The Biomechanics of Infidelity

the body to the world and the world to the body, Meyerhold tries to create a space in his theater where society can exist harmoniously. His biomechanics allows for everyone to participate in the world—but in a theatrical world of make-believe, a world that asserts its fantasy as it lays bare its contingent, provisional nature.

PART II

Alternative Technologies

Chapter Three

Writing as Bodily Technology in Zamyatin's *We*, or a Portrait of an Avant-Garde Artist as a Malfunctioning Machine

Man loves creating and the making of roads,
that is indisputable. But why does he so
passionately love destruction and chaos as
well? . . . In short, man is comically arranged,
there is apparently a joke in all this.

—Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

SHORTLY AFTER THE nascent Soviet government consolidated its power and launched a program of rapid industrialization, Evgenii Zamyatin's novel *We* (1920) scandalously questioned the validity of techno-scientific instrumentality, a central principle of societal transformation in Soviet Russia. The first major work of fiction to be censored by the new regime, the novel was smuggled to the West, translated into English, and became an ur-text of twentieth-century science fiction, in particular standing, alongside Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and George Orwell's *1984*, as progenitor of a new antiutopian subgenre warning of the mass cultural homogenization of humanity in the name of progress. Set in a future totalitarian OneState, the novel records the internal conflict and gradual self-awakening of the initially robot-like rocket engineer D-503, torn between his faith in state orthodoxy and yearning for perfect order on the one hand, and on the other his growing awareness of his own disorderly, irrepressible, idiosyncratic subjectivity. The catalyst of this subversive development is the act of writing—paradoxical insofar as this act functions, in the totalitarian system envisioned by the novel, as one of the instruments of the state's all-pervasive control. In this chapter, I will discuss how Zamyatin, in the process of critiquing the man-machine ideal espoused in Soviet political culture, reconceptualizes the very meaning of technology in human life.¹

THE QUESTION CONCERNING TECHNOLOGY

Broadly speaking, twentieth-century cultural responses to the power and expansion of technology foregrounded either the utopia of peaceful human coexistence with and benefit from machines or the dystopia of machine-wrought destruction. In Soviet Russia, intent on quickly overcoming its backwardness and marginal status vis-à-vis the West with the help of machinery at times conceived almost as magical, the predominant mode of relating to technology was emphatically utopic. The wishful thinking of utopian writers was counterbalanced by the paranoid vision of dystopians, who envisioned machines turning their power against humanity in a struggle for autonomy. As noted earlier, one of the most influential of the technological dystopias, the Czech writer Karel Čapek's drama *R.U.R.* (1921), left an ominous stamp on Western culture in the form of the word "robot." Here robots, work machines with an uncanny likeness to humans, in the spirit of the rational self-interest² they embody, rebel against their subservient status and destroy humanity. The vicissitudes of Čapek's plot, however, rely upon the same conception of technology as that of the "dreamer in the Kremlin" Lenin³ in his utopian aspirations for the Soviet future; in either case, it is a tool for political-industrial transformation, for ill or good.

Zamyatin's antiutopian novel⁴ establishes a counterpoint to the purely instrumental technologies conceived by technophiles and technophobes alike insofar as the author consistently deprives technology of its defining characteristic in industrial-age culture, namely, its functionality. In its place, *We* imbues technology with various human traits, transforming machines into great vehicles for reflection. As opposed to the aspirations of Soviet "new men" to become machines, Zamyatin's text features "reflexive technologies"⁵ in which pure instrumentality is marred by human idiosyncrasies. In this effort to aesthetically reassess technological potential, to view technology as a medium for contemplation rather than societal change, Zamyatin's *We* takes its place within a canon of artistic works that responded to technological advancement with an urge not to exploit but to explore. In the Russian context, for example, Valentin Kataev's *Povelitel' zhelezza* (*The Sovereign of Iron*, 1924) features machines that exercise their newly acquired independence from humans by resisting violence, refusing to participate in mankind's wars. Alternative technologies discussed in this and the next two chapters all seem to be to some extent a reaction to the Gastevian concept of a mechanistic man (discussed in chapter 1) and a complementary view on the concept of machine aesthetics.

Several critics have argued that Gastev's poetry, and that of other representatives of the Proletcult movement, inspired the utopian rhetoric and vision of OneState and its inhabitant D-503, the setting and the protagonist,

respectively, of Zamyatin's *We*.⁶ Patricia Carden, for example, reads *We* as an uncompromising satire of Gastev's hyperbolic rhetoric and a condemnation of his vision of man's ecstatic melding with machine.⁷ Lewis and Weber's discussion of the novel's metaliterary preoccupations is similarly cogent, but I would emphasize that *We* is more than just a parody of Proletcult's poetic clichés. Zamyatin attempts to polemicize with Gastev's lyrical concerns, his technologization of poetry, by creating his own poet-engineer, D-503, who wishes to cultivate himself as a machine, and in the process uncovers a fatal flaw in the biomechanical worldview. Through D's treatment of writing as a form of technology, Zamyatin exposes both technology's lack of instrumentality (it does not lead to intended results) and its power of revelation.

HUMANITY AS A CADRE OF MALFUNCTIONING MACHINES

Taking up Gastev's challenge, Zamyatin in *We* conceptualizes the human being as a machine. Gastev can in fact be regarded as a prototype for the writing automaton D, the avant-garde artist-engineer par excellence, whose wish to remake himself into a perfectly operating organism echoes Gastev's biomechanics. But under experiments conducted by Zamyatin's protagonist, Gastev's theory betrays an error: a human being is an organism that does not and cannot work perfectly. In fact, erring and ailing is one of the human machine's defining characteristics. The rhetoric of ailment is frequently employed in Zamyatin's utopic OneState to characterize anything beyond its rigidly prescribed parameters; yet early in the book it becomes clear that the antiseptic atmosphere of this "utopia" is no guarantee against "viruses" and "germs." The state machine operates under constant threat of the manifold ailments to which its imperfect human parts are so pitifully prone. Moreover, as humanity makes machines, machines in turn reflect humanity: they err and ail as well.

In *The Word Under a Press*, Gastev attempts to formulate language as a product of the man-machine, a theory Zamyatin puts to the test in his novel. In *We*, writing is a bodily technology, a mode of operation of the man-machine, but as such it exposes shortcomings in Gastev's theory of biomechanics and the place of the word therein. Zamyatin was not immune to the interesting prospect of the effect of technological advances on literary development. In his "Auto-Interview," in a discussion on writing about technology and industrialization, Zamyatin touches upon the subject of the technology of writing itself; in speaking of machines, the author does not neglect "the technology of literary craftsmanship."⁸ But Zamyatin believed, as he demonstrates in the case of even the most favorable conditions—OneState

as the ideal setting for the advent of a new technological poetry—that language inevitably escapes automatization, and delivers humanity therefrom.

WHAT WENT WRONG IN THE PERFECT STATE?

We takes place in the thirtieth century; its setting is the glass-enclosed, nature-deprived totalitarian OneState founded on the ideals of technocracy, rationality, and happiness, this last as calculated in the state-imposed regimentation of every citizen's behavior. But does We thus constitute a warning regarding the alleged perils of technology? The reading of Zamyatin or his novel as technophobic is vitiated by the fact that OneState's technology is to some extent primitive and outmoded, even from the standpoint of the 1920s, when the novel was written. For example, the protagonist D is one of OneState's most esteemed engineers—he is after all in charge of its greatest scientific achievement, the interplanetary rocket Integral—and yet, as Brett Cooke shows in his excellent study of the novel, D's mathematical calculations evince numerous flaws.⁹ According to Cooke, the happiness offered by OneState, so far from mathematically perfect, is built on a knowledge of math and physics that is, by twentieth-century standards, rudimentary at best. In contrast, the state's opponents, the secret conspiratory group known as the Mefis, who aim to free OneState's citizens and reunite them with nature, employ advanced mathematical concepts (irrational numbers, non-Euclidian geometry, n -dimensional space) to defend their revolt.

The fact that the Mefis aspire to seize the rocket Integral with the purpose of freeing the universe, rather than confining it as the state intends, implies that we are not to blame science and technology for the rise of OneState; to the contrary, the state's control of society has *hindered* meaningful scientific exploration—which may explain why thirtieth-century technology here seems not particularly advanced.¹⁰

We might ascribe OneState's technological torpor to its curtailment of artistic freedom; insofar as this polity has achieved “happiness,” it now exists in a state of stasis, uninterested in progress or change. It is also possible that the state intentionally adheres to inaccurate knowledge for the purposes of political expedience.¹¹ Finally, it may be that the state's focus on perfecting its social apparatus and the human mechanisms that form it has hindered progress in other areas. Whatever the reasons for OneState's technological backwardness, its condition in this regard is in many ways reminiscent of that of postrevolutionary Russia: it is isolated, alienated, and in a state of dire disrepair; its rhetoric of unity masks chaos and dissolution; its abject and widespread hunger renders even the rather literal notion of OneState's “petroleum nutrition”¹² palatable. Gastev's theory of the mechanization of

humanity should be seen in the context of life in a technologically backward country, where humanity's transformation into a machine would (theoretically) compensate for the shortage of more typical equipment. OneState relies heavily on the proper functioning of its human machines for its own survival; thus its technology—its Integral, its execution machine and transparent architecture—is manifest primarily as the instrumentality of coercion. As in Gastev's theory, OneState's primary technical endeavor is biomechanics, the perfecting of the human body.

WRITING AS BODILY TECHNOLOGY

Despite the technological lag described, machines figure in virtually every aspect of OneState life. The creation of music is left to the musicometer, robots educate the young, aeros simplify and accelerate transportation; there is synthetic food for sustenance, a complex system of devices for surveillance, the execution machine for capital punishment, the Gas Bell for torture, and even a rocket for the conquest of other worlds. OneState boasts some inventions as yet unknown in the 1920s, and yet one device in wide use at the time of the novel's composition is conspicuously absent: the typewriter. This absence may very well be the key factor in the dissolution of D's tempered psyche, his exit from the world of proper mechanicity. D writes his journal, it should be emphasized, using a pen.

In his own antiutopian novel, *Bend Sinister*, written seventeen years after *We*, Vladimir Nabokov associates totalitarianism with media technology. Aware that handwriting expresses personality, Nabokov imagines that a strictly regimented, totalitarian state would attempt to control it, in this case by way of the padograph, "a portable affair looking like a typewriter made to reproduce with repellent perfection the hand of its owner."¹³ This mechanism is named for Paduk (an anagram for *durak* [fool], if the Russian *r* is read as the Latin *p*), the tyrannical ruler of the police state in which the novel takes place, and the leader of its party of the Average Man; it is a contraption that the leader's father, an untalented inventor, created when Paduk was still a child. Satirizing (as was his wont) totalitarianism, Nabokov thus conjures, as a typical appurtenance of such a regime, a device devoid of purpose (except perhaps forgery), its sheer pointlessness underscoring its function as symbol: "Philosophically speaking, the padograph subsisted as an Ekwilist¹⁴ symbol, as a proof that a mechanical device can reproduce personality, and that Quality is merely the distribution aspect of Quantity."¹⁵ Characteristically, the ill-conceived padograph backfires and is used against its owner. Illustrating the absurdity of attempting to capture a complex personality mechanically and reduce it to a code, Nabokov condemns the totalitarianism this device symbolizes.

“Our writing tools are also working on our thoughts,” proclaimed Nietzsche.¹⁶ In his history of the typewriter, Friedrich Kittler interprets Nietzsche’s pronouncement on the connection between ideology and writing instrument as foregrounding the loss of writerly agency, by which authorship and authority give way to a state of being *written upon*, being a surface to be inscribed. Heidegger analyzes the distinction between writing by hand and typing:

Man himself acts [*handelt*] through the hand [*Hand*]; for the hand is, together with the word, the essential distinction of man . . . Mechanical writing deprives the hand of its rank in the realm of the written word and degrades the word to a means of communication. In addition, mechanical writing provides this “advantage,” that it conceals the handwriting and thereby the character. The typewriter makes everyone look the same.¹⁷

Handwriting in this view is not only a reflection of personal character, but also the site of its fashioning. Through the act of handwriting, humans realize and distinguish themselves, authenticating their being. In contrast, the typewriter interferes in the physical chain of thought transferred from hand to page, and homogenizes authorial eccentricities. Elaborating on Heidegger’s idea, Kittler declares that handwriting is the realm of creation, authority, and authorship, a view connecting it with individuality and the human soul, as against the typewriter’s association with the age of information and total war. And while, as Kittler notes, media technologies were created to smooth over individual quirks, and to make up for personal physical and psychological shortcomings, handwriting, by contrast, exhibits idiosyncrasy. Kittler’s argument may underestimate the human capacity to standardize handwriting¹⁸ or overestimate the typewriter’s ability to erase human subjectivity; but his faith in handwriting as a window to ontological authenticity finds its echo in Zamyatin’s novel.

THE ACES AND PAINS OF PENMANSHIP

Zamyatin has his OneState commit a crucial mistake: in directing that propaganda be composed, it does not disseminate the proper instruments for doing so. In so essential a realm as writing, the life of OneState citizens is unmediated by advanced technology. It is not surprising, then, that the act of writing brings D closer to his body—with all its wants, pains, and disrepairs—and hence closer to his self. The human body is an imperfect machine, and handwriting its blemished product and reflection: as if in a mirror, D sees himself

in his writing, noticing all his shortcomings. D has been trained to see his body as a well-functioning machine, but in his diary-keeping he constantly stumbles upon signs of illness and infection. Pointing as these signs do to the fallibility of bodily machines, they lead D syllogistically to the realization that machines, models for human perfectibility, do break down: "I'm like a machine being run over its RPM limit: The bearings are overheating—a minute longer, and the metal is going to melt and start dripping and that'll be the end of everything."¹⁹

OneState permits some ailing mechanisms to be repaired, discarding others. But *any* blemish, no matter how tiny, betrays the state's failure to attain perfection, and hence represents the gravest ideological threat. However, viruses and germs are not extraneous to the human machine, but integral to it; recognizing this, as if extrapolating from it that bodies contain within themselves seeds of a creative drive not subject to the vaccination of rationalized control, D time and again characterizes innately human qualities—personal consciousness and self-reflexivity, for instance—as microbes. Fittingly enough, to D, who has internalized OneState's aspiration to sanitize and regiment all life, the most "frightening" of microbes is the spermatozoon.²⁰ By association, D recognizes that he himself is not one of society's sanitizers, but a potential target thereof: "Maybe I'm no longer a phagocyte calmly going about the business of devouring microbes (with blue temples and freckles). Maybe I'm a microbe, and maybe there are thousands more of them among us, pretending like me to be phagocytes."²¹ The danger to the utopic state implied in this spontaneous transformation is borne out not only in the metaphor of the subversive spermatozoon, but in the very etymology of "microbe" (Greek, "mini life"): anything alive, however small, threatens OneState's fragile health.

Critics are usually divided between ascribing D's newfound self-awareness either to his illicit love affair with I-330 or to his writings. Writing indeed seems paramount: D becomes self-attuned as soon as he picks up a pen, while sexual desire for I-330 comes later, possibly even as a result of D's writing. In my interpretation, the two catalysts are inseparable. Writing draws D's attention to his body, the locus of his differentiation and the seat of his sexual desires. Unaccustomed to listening to his own thoughts or even to having them, D begins by recording the movements of his body; D's body transcribes his thoughts.

We might imagine that had D had access to a typewriter from the very beginning, his performance of copying the notice in the OneState newspaper—the act with which D begins his immersion into the life of written language—would have been closer to mechanistic perfection. The text on his page would look exactly like the printed text, and the marked difference

between the mechanical OneState print and D's own personal handwriting would not be evident. To underscore how relevant this absence of mimesis is, one might cite Ray Parrot's pinpointing²² of the importance in the novel's imagery of eyesight: in OneState, as evidenced by its omnipresent glassy transparency, clarity of vision is one of the most valuable political tools, and discursively, the most valorized human attribute. But from his first entry, D is forced to confront what is, in his handwritten text, most clearly visible: his foreignness to OneState mechanicity. Once begun, writing immediately attunes D to his body. The first line he thinks to write on his own constitutes the recording of a bodily sensation that occurs during, and as a result of, the act of writing: "As I am writing this I feel my cheeks burning."²³ This line is repeated twice in the first entry. When it appears the first time, D's stimulus is ambiguous: it could be either the subject of the entry—the Integral's coming conquest of the universe, as described in the official announcement he is copying—or the act of writing itself. This ambiguity disappears upon the second instance of the line; here the cause of burning cheeks is clearly the pleasure of writing itself. Caught up in the act of creation, D feels like a pregnant woman: "As I write this I feel my cheeks burning. This is probably like what a woman feels when she first senses in her the pulse of a new little person, still tiny and blind."²⁴

Unwittingly, D immediately exposes here the crucial divergence of his writing from the state's intention. Reflecting OneState's view of words as weapons, the article that D copies enjoins citizens to compose writings (specifically, encomia to OneState) that will be taken as the Integral's first cargo to other planets. But instead of engaging in the masculine forging of a word-weapon, D imagines himself as a woman gestating a helpless child. In thus reading authorship as feminine, Zamyatin undercuts the gender code informing Gastev's program of tempering man through language.²⁵ In one of his lectures on literature, Zamyatin reiterates the fertile alignment of authorship with biological femininity, even as he remains constant in his identification of the writer's sex as male: "A writer, like a woman, like a mother, creates living people who suffer and rejoice, mock and are laughed at. And like the mother, who creates the child out of herself, the writer also creates his people out of himself, nourishes them with his own self—with a certain nonmaterial substance which is part of his being."²⁶ This "nonmaterial substance," moreover, problematizes the precise schematic of the biomechanical man, forged with rigid rationality from solid, industrial-grade materials.

Zamyatin thus implies that words are not fit to be weapons or instruments; rather, words are self-propagating and revelatory. The need to procreate is instinctual and primal, and sexual desire is codified within human nature toward its fulfillment. D's readiness to submit to the natural reproduc-

tive urge and anticipation of giving birth, provoked by writing a manuscript, prefigure and condition his sexual desire for I-330, and with her assistance, he fathers a child with O. As soon as D picks up a pen, his fate is sealed.²⁷

Words thus melt D's steely biomechanical frame, blurring his boundaries and feminizing him.²⁸ The sensations of changing gender and housing another human being within oneself induce in D a strange feeling of duality, though during this first writing exercise he does not yet realize the dangerous ambivalence this feeling will create.

It should be emphasized that D's feeling of gestation, moreover, valorizes novelty: "Probably, this is similar to what a woman experiences when for the first time she senses within herself the pulse of the new—a still tiny, blind human being."²⁹ The dash here underscores the connection between writing and the desire for the new, a transgressive urge in the entropic world of OneState, which, insofar as everything worth wanting has officially been achieved, is "finished." The possibility that his reader (whoever that might be) might have a different value system only intensifies D's feeling of newness. Though D initially trusts that his values are the only correct ones, the implied otherness of a potential addressee leads him into a sort of dialogue with himself, the process of explaining the bases of a reality always taken for granted—"I've looked over what I wrote yesterday and I see it wasn't as clear as it should be. . . . Maybe you don't even know the basics—like the Table of Hours, Personal Hours, Maternal Norm, Green Wall, Benefactor?"³⁰—inevitably leading him to rethink long-accepted truths.

Writing moreover draws D's attention to the ambiguity inherent in language; he discovers that words can betray him, that state-imposed formulas do not always correspond to his state of mind. Without meaning to, D turns his diary into a truth-mirror: "I've looked over these records of mine; and it's clear to me that I've been fooling myself, I've been lying to myself."³¹ He instinctively realizes that it is precisely that which has been written unintentionally, as if by mistake, that has penetrated to the very core of his being. In "Misreadings and Slips of the Pen," Sigmund Freud asserts that inadvertent blunders in speech and writing are never accidental; it is in fact that which is said by mistake that is most meaningful, and with due analysis the underlying truth, the human unconscious, resurfaces precisely through these slips.³² D's diary-keeping allows him to direct his scientific gaze inward, to become at once his own patient and analyst.

The duality of self D instinctively feels in writing his first entry gradually leads to unexpected self-examination:

And it's just so weird to sit here calmly, reasonably, thinking over every word, and write down what just happened between R and me. It'd be just the same

as you sitting down in the chair next to your own bed, crossing your legs, and looking with some curiosity at yourself, your very own self, twisting and turning on that bed.³³

It is noteworthy that D materializes his thoughts and impulses in somatic metaphors, with inner turmoil verbalized as visible bodily struggle. This practice can be explained in part by D's propensity to negate everything immaterial, his need for visibility and transparency; but here I would stress that it is the physical process of writing itself that leads D to constantly witness his body in action. Writing by hand sustains a constant relationship between the eye, the hand, and each letter formed, while in typewriting, these three are dissociated, as letters appear entirely apart from where the hands work.³⁴ In typing, one looks at a blank spot on the page where the letter is to appear; in handwriting, one looks at one's own hand. According to Kittler, this distinction fundamentally changes the essence of writing, which in typewriting ceases to coincide with the act of reading, whereas handwriting requires that one reread oneself. Had D been using a typewriter, his eyes might have been diverted from his hairy, atavistic hands. His hairy hands expose not only his difference but also his unconscious state of being. Just as Dora's coughing and foot-dragging signaled to Freud the latent workings of her mind, D's hairy hands reveal to him that "inside [me] there is something cloudy, something spidery, something cross-shaped like that four-pawed X. Or is it my own paws bothering me, the fact that they've been in front of my eyes so long, these shaggy paws? I don't like talking about them. I don't like them. They are a holdover from the savage era."³⁵ This encounter with his own physicality upsets D so much that for the first time he fails to follow the outline prefacing a diary entry, which in this case reads, "Synopsis: The Square, Rulers of the World, A Pleasantly Useful Function." Contemplating this unexpected blunder—that of allowing personal, subjective information to invade a tract on OneState—he resolves against crossing it out, reflecting his decision to change the technical function of his writing; instead of serving as a weapon of interplanetary conquest, the manuscript will, "like the most delicate seismograph . . . register the least little wiggles in my brainwaves, however insignificant."³⁶

The sight of his own hands produces such brainwave wiggles. D is ashamed of his hairy hands not only because they are a reminder of his connection to the premodern, primal world, but also because they distinguish him from others. The body constitutes the site of difference. Each "number" that we encounter in the novel, despite the uniform garb, the cropped hair, and even the practice of eugenics, possesses distinguishing, personality-symbolizing bodily characteristics: D's hairy hands signify his mental confusion, I's X-like eyebrows metonymically express the seductive enigma she rep-

resents, and O's roundness emphasizes her desire to swell with child. These and other physical distinctions bear witness, furthermore, to the body's stubborn resistance to state control. Eugenics laws have been in operation for hundreds of years, and yet the goal of physical standardization has not been achieved. D bemoans the troubling variance in citizens' noses;³⁷ but noses aside, every character's physical idiosyncrasies mock the biomechanical goal of the state: O is short; D, hairy; R has African-seeming features; S, abnormally large ears; and U, visible signs of aging.

We proposes that the body is far from malleable; to the contrary, it is ever on the brink of revolt. Writing, which as a bodily activity puts one in touch with one's corporeality, urges on this revolt. Moreover, through writing, a body encounters language, the inherent ambiguity of which, as noted earlier, contains the seeds of nonconformism. The bodily stubbornness foregrounded by Zamyatin casts doubt on the viability of biomechanics. In his polemic with Gastev and the proponents of Proletcult, who aspired to engineer a human machine, Zamyatin goes beyond the question of whether such a transformation is desirable; rather, his text asserts, it is impossible, the illusion of uniformity revealed as such especially in the act of writing.

Bodies are not just stubborn, moreover; they are also opaque, incorporating within themselves an unseen, hence uncontrollable world. D laments bodily murkiness in entry 6: "The way the human body is built, it's just as stupid as those [pre-OneState] 'apartments'—human heads are opaque and there is no way to see inside except through those tiny little windows, the eyes."³⁸ The body conceals a rebel cell; after all, in first putting pen to paper D himself was unaware he was conceiving a child-manuscript, just as he was unaware that in writing, he was re-creating himself. Is it a coincidence, then, that each physical variation seems to be a material sign of an inner variation, a personal departure from OneState norms? At one point or other, in fact, each of the novel's characters disrupts the synchronized harmony of the state. Even U, its most faithful citizen, in a crucial episode acts on a personal wish (to save D) in violation of sanctioned behavior. Instead of mechanical men, OneState has produced something like "Maelzel's chess player,"³⁹ the automatic movements of which are a sham and which in fact conceals a living, thinking human being within.

In rendering the human machine's insubordination to the state the rule rather than the exception, *We* is not proclaiming free will as the ultimate value. In fact, when D switches from automatic compliance with OneState regulations to individualized, improvisatory actions, this shift is not accomplished voluntarily, nor is it a matter of gaining control over his own self, but rather of capitulation to the force of an inner drive, be it sexual desire or the creative impulse. Zamyatin's text devalues such concepts as power and control as unsustainable and entropic; in their place, it celebrates the sheer

unknowability of human beings as complex organisms and of the universe as an intricate machine. This affirmation of inscrutability does not amount to a lapse into religious mysticism; on the contrary, Zamyatin bases his vision of ever-potential discovery on recent scientific advances. Life as energy is sustained by this potential, which OneState has attempted to erase by the enforced delimitation and simplification of all living systems. The failure of OneState implies that each human number embodies a universe of the unknown and unintegratable. Further, in keeping with the thrilling complexity and unpredictability of life, machines in their turn, being products of human inspiration, contain the same ills, pains, malfunctions, and idiosyncrasies as their creators.

ROBOTS THAT CRY AND ROCKETS THAT DON'T FLY

D reminisces that he was first introduced to the irrational number $\sqrt{-1}$ by a robot-teacher the schoolchildren called Pliapa, so dubbed because, every time the infirm and dilapidated machine was switched on, he would begin his lesson with the funny noise “Plia-plia-plia-tsh-tsh-tsh.”⁴⁰ As with D’s faithful recording throughout his manuscript of slips of the tongue in dialogue and his own slips of the pen, here again language functions as a site of the unconscious and of man’s tendency to err or *wander*. Stuttering just as if he were human, this robot’s name evokes, so far from machine-like perfection, sloppiness (*tiap-liap*, “slapdash”), clumsiness (*rastiapa*, “bungler”), and messiness (*kliaksa*, “ink-blot”). This last association recalls the ink-blots of which, composing his manuscript, D is in constant fear. These dark stains often taint the transparency of his writing—and of his being, reflecting as they do murky feelings and confused thoughts. The first time D sees an ink-blot next to his name, it causes him to make a mistake in the calculations for his work on the Integral. At the end of the novel, when the Benefactor insinuates that D’s lover I-330 was just using him, D, his grammatical structure faltering, becomes himself a great big ink-blot: “But what He told me . . . You know, it was like having the floor suddenly jerked out from under you—and you, along with everything on the table there, the paper, the ink . . . and the ink splashing out and making spots.”⁴¹

And it is the automaton math teacher Pliapa who, like an oracle, foretold, or as it were calculated, D’s emotional instability long before his falling in love with I. Or perhaps Pliapa injected this chaos into D upon introducing his pupil to the irrational number, awareness of which brought home to D the irrational in himself, and led to irrational behavior. D’s breakdown in discipline has thus provided experiential evidence to Pliapa’s conceptual claim: “I remember how I cried, I beat my fists on the table and bawled:

'I don't want $\sqrt{-1}$! Take it out of me, this $\sqrt{-1}$!' This irrational root grew in me like some alien thing, strange and terrifying, and it was eating me, and you couldn't make any sense of it, or neutralize it because it was completely beyond *ratio*."⁴² It may be that the funny noise Pliapa produces (*plia-plia*) should be associated with crying (*plach*), this robot who represents knowledge of the irrational thus figuratively beweeping the world's imperfection. Nothing underscores the shortcomings of mechanical aesthetics—and indeed, of everything based on mechanical principles—like a faulty machine.

The ambiguity of machines implicit in Pliapa is underscored in Christopher Collins's Jungian analysis of the Integral, the rocket D has built. Invoking a Jungian term for an object one identifies with and infuses with symbolic significance, Collins calls the Integral D's "bush-soul," describing the relationship between rocket and designer thus:

Its flight is his flight. Its fire is his fire, and they are both extinguished together. The rocket is at once a symbol of transcendence, like the bird-like cranes constructing the Integral and like the birds flying into the city, and a symbol of the thrust of the unconscious against the conscious, fire against steel and glass, or (to use Zamyatin's terms) energy against entropy. The rocket is associated with nature, creation, sexual intercourse, childbirth, and psychic and political revolt by the repeated image of fire contained by a shell but seeking to burst forth.⁴³

The Integral, then, as the physical representation of humanity's aspirations and drives, contains antagonistic principles that clash, commingle, and complement one another. This ambiguity is evident in the Integral's very name. The authorities have dubbed it thus to mark its function of uniting the universe under the rule of the rational OneState, thereby delimiting the borders of the cosmos and completing it. In fact, however, the Integral represents an entirely different concept of completeness, what Collins calls "the balance of thrust and containment, irrationality and rationality, a sort of model of an integrated psyche."⁴⁴ While I find Collins's thesis cogent, I would suggest that the ambiguity and antagonism embodied in the Integral signifies and affirms the radical incompleteness and unbalancedness of all organic and inorganic systems, which characteristics render the project of OneState so futile.

The ambiguity of the Intergral's meaning allows different groups to associate its existence with their goals: OneState sees it as a weapon of subjugation, while the Mefis claim it as an instrument of liberation. For his part, its designer D, inspired by the realization of his individuality, sees it as a poem, and not a civic ode to the state, but an intimate lyric to his love: "What magnificent, powerful blasts, and for me each one was a salute to her, to the only one, and to this day."⁴⁵ This interpretation occurs to D prior to his love's at-

tempt to utilize the rocket for her own conspiratorial ends; here D conceives of the Integral as pure poetry, devoid of any consideration of utility. His tender words to his creation demonstrate that for him this machine instantiates not servitude to a purpose but life for its own, messy sake: “Bending over, I stroked the long cold tube of the engine. Darling . . . what a precious darling. Tomorrow you will come to life, tomorrow for the first time in your life you will shudder from the fiery burning flashes in your womb.”⁴⁶ The fact that D here for the first time feminizes the Integral—“Darling . . . what a darling” (*Milaia . . . kakaia milaia*)⁴⁷—and that it is said to have a womb, implies that not only is this machine about to be born, it is also pregnant. While this simultaneity might appear unnatural, it underscores the association of living with creating, and the Integral as the triumph of this idea. It is appropriate that the Integral does not fulfill its destiny as an instrument either of subjugation or liberation; its trial flight remains nonutilitarian, purposeless, pure poetry. In contrast to Gastev’s machine-like poetry, Zamyatin offers, in the body of the Integral, a model of poetic technology.

Zamyatin’s ailing technologies, including his writing automaton D, are some of the myriad of nonfunctional or malfunctioning machines created in response to the cultural formation of the mechanistic man. These imaginatively imperfect technologies reflect the Russian modernists’ search for perpetual newness, their aesthetic credo that art’s calling is to offer liberation from the habitualized perception of reality. Zamyatin expresses this view quite explicitly when he conceives of writers as nomads and heretics,⁴⁸ while his mouthpiece in the novel, I-330, reveals to D the principle of this life-sustaining disorder and incompleteness: just as there can be no final number, there can be no final revolution. This state of imperfection is preserved in malfunctioning machines, which demand repeated recalibration, thereby preventing a state of intellectual stasis and complacency. Such reflexive technology, so far from constituting a vehicle of progress, offers instead imaginary transports; it is less an instrument of human control of the environment than a kind of poetry enabling reflection, introspection, and revelation.

Chapter Four

The Incredible Heights of Organic Architecture: Tatlin, Khlebnikov, and the Technological Sublime

Technology is not the mastery of nature but of
the relation between nature and man.

—Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*

A spiral; a winding staircase in the Tower of
Babel; the path of an airplane rising aloft in
circles—such is the way of art. The equation of
the movement of art is the equation of a spiral.

—Zamyatin, “On Synthetism”

TWO MACHINES

In his article “Structure and Design in a Soviet Dystopia: H. G. Wells, Constructivism, and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*,” William Hutchings argues that D-503’s Integral could have been modeled in part on Vladimir Tatlin’s famous *Monument to the Third International* (1920–21). Hutchings points out the similarities between the two: both feature skeletal structures with glass as the main building material, both boast gigantic proportions that dwarf human scale, and finally both “were designed to carry the proclamations of the Revolution into space” (fig. 8). According to Hutchings, the *Monument*’s spiral construction is a visual representation of Leninist dialectical materialism. Because of its shape, the *Monument* became not only a symbol of revolution, but also specifically a representation of Lenin, who was called “the great screw within the collective machine.”¹

The parallels Hutchings draws between the two structures are compelling.² Hutchings’s point can be reinforced by Katerina Clark’s observation on the Tatlin Tower’s centripetal structure: its imprisoning, integrational movement inward instead of a freeing movement out.³ However, we might note one more characteristic shared by the Integral and Tatlin’s work: ambivalence and resistance to being used as political tools. Zamyatin never lets the Integral become an instrument of political subjugation. In fact, the rocket,

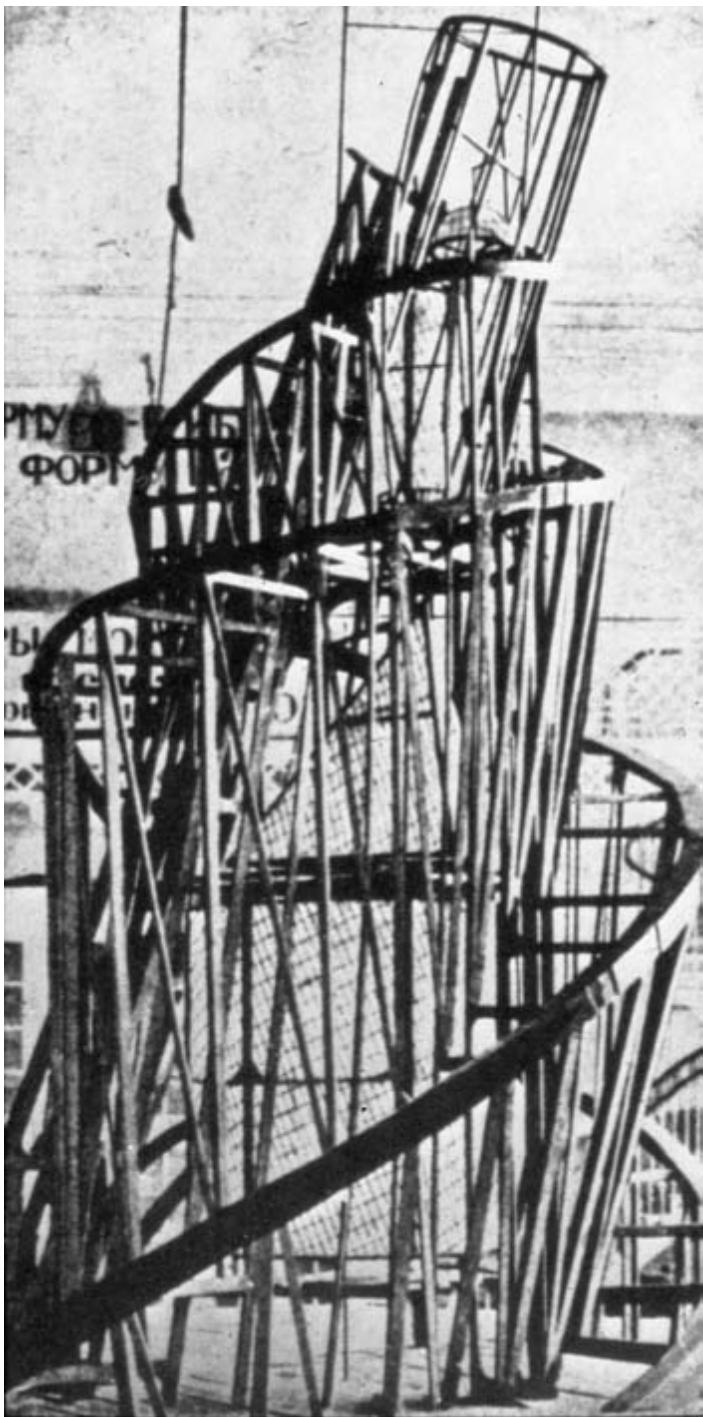


Fig. 8. Vladimir Tatlin, the first model of *The Monument to the Third International*, 1919–20

a major “screw” in D-503’s technology of self, plays a part in his attainment of self-awareness and rebellion, since it motivates D’s writing and also D’s encounter with I-330. Tatlin’s Tower is similarly nonfunctional; arguably, this lack of functionality is programmed in its conception.

When Tatlin began work on the sketches for his fantastic monument in 1919, the tower did not yet have a name. *Monument to the Third International* was by no means his first choice, but rather conceived as a way to secure a future for this improbable creation. By promising to house the members of the Third International, Tatlin was hoping to get funding for the materialization of his castle in the air. Of course, despite this functional official name, the lyrical unofficial name, Tatlin’s Tower, alluding to its mythopoetic predecessor, the Tower of Babel, was widely used.

As envisioned by Tatlin, the tower was to be larger than the Eiffel Tower, supplanting it as the symbol of modernity. It was planned as a skeletal, spiral structure made of iron that would house three glass geometric volumes, one on top of the other. Unlike the upright, static Eiffel Tower, Tatlin’s Tower would embody the principle of dynamism; unlike the tower of Pisa, its lean would indicate the opposite of falling. Its diagonal structure suggested a thrust upward, into the unknown, as if propelled into the sky by the movement of the planet itself. (Its angle was to equal Earth’s axial tilt.) Moreover, each glassy structure was supposed to rotate at three different speeds. The lowest cube, accommodating conference halls and meeting rooms, would revolve on its axis once a year; the middle pyramid, housing executive offices, once a month; and the upper cylinder, the information station, featuring telegraph and radio, would turn on its axis once a day (figs. 9–10). With such movements, then, this pinnacle of technological achievement would recall nothing so much as . . . the cycles of nature. In this way, Tatlin’s *Monument* was the embodiment of his friend Velimir Khlebnikov’s visionary teaching of the interrelationship between man’s endeavors and the movements of Earth, sun, and moon.

TATLIN’S TACTILE AND KHLEBNIKOV’S VERBAL REVOLUTIONS

In 1932 in an essay entitled “Iskusstvo v tekhniku” (“Art into Technology”), Tatlin elaborated on his differences with constructivism, the movement of which he is often considered the father and main representative. The constructivists, he writes, apply technology mechanically to art. He, on the contrary, applies art to technology, endeavoring to remain faithful to form and material, to the dynamic potential contained therein.⁴ In this way, Tatlin makes a connection between his early sculptural work, based on the investigation and poetry of various materials, his *Monument*, and his latest project,



Fig. 9. Vladimir Tatlin, drawing for *The Monument to the Third International*, 1920

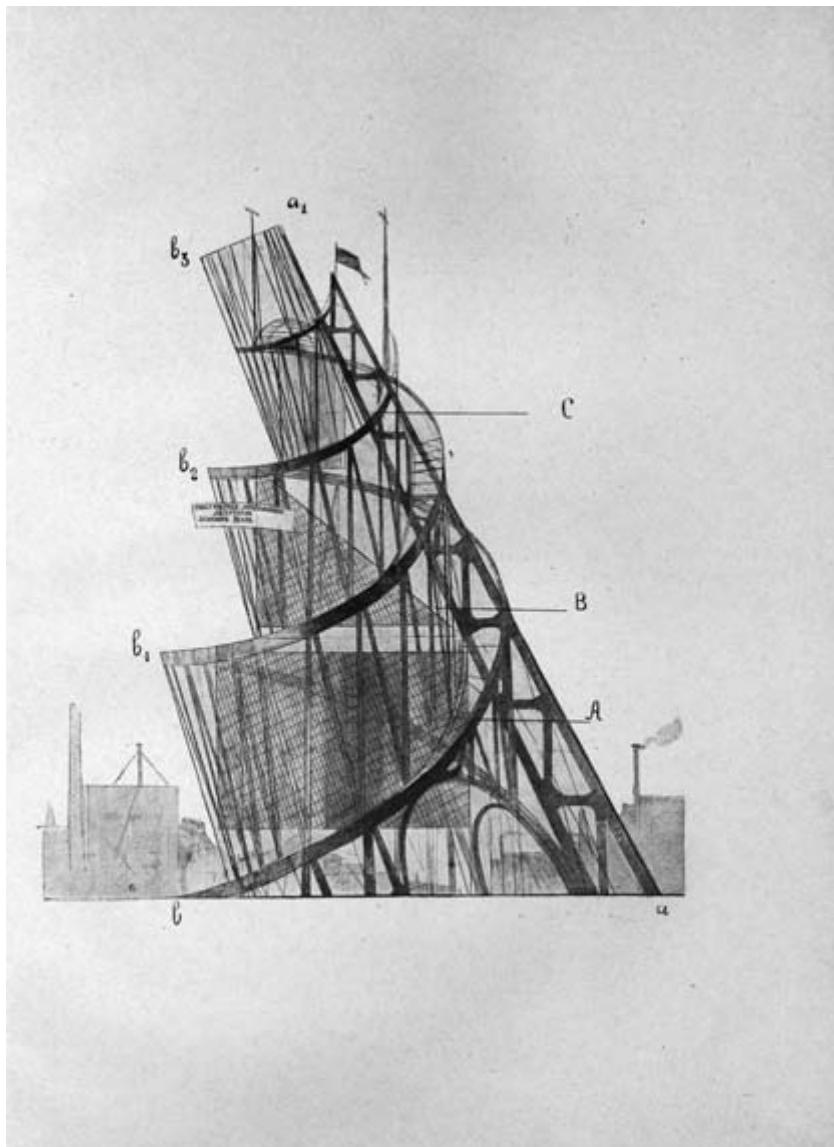


Fig. 10. Vladimir Tatlin, drawing for *The Monument to the Third International*, 1920

a flying machine, *Letatlin* (1929–31), built on the principle of organic, natural form. Retrospectively, Tatlin emphasizes his art as subject to timeless (“natural”) laws rather than temporal social, ideological, or political goals.

Several critics mention that the *Monument to the Third International* reveals the influences of President of the Terrestrial Globe Velimir Khlebnikov.⁵ Robin Milner-Gulland proposes that Khlebnikov not only inspired the design of the *Monument* with his teachings, but even, in his poem “Tatlin!” (1916), specifically exhorted the artist to build it. In the poem, which proclaims the artist the “secret seer of blades and stern bard of the screw, from the detachment of suncatchers” (trans. by Milner-Gulland), Khlebnikov espouses a view of Tatlin’s art as an investigation into the secrets of the universe.⁶ At the time, Tatlin was busy with creating sculptural installations, which he called counter-reliefs (fig. 11). The counter-reliefs are nonrepresentational and lack any association with the objects of everyday life. In a way, Tatlin’s search for self-valuable, self-expressive material has close affinities with the quest of Khlebnikov and his fellow cubo-futurists for “the word as such.” Indeed, the *Monument*’s resemblance to the various representations of the Tower of Babel cannot but make one think of the search, undertaken by Khlebnikov, for the universal language or *zaum*.⁷ At the same time that Tatlin was seeking forms hidden in materials, Khlebnikov was exploring secret, primordial meanings hidden in verbal sounds and in the shapes of letters. Khlebnikov felt that if sounds and letters are released from the fetters of conventional, socialized sense, one could tap into the universal laws of time, and see cosmos through the apparent chaos of life. This search for a deeper understanding of being and the laws that govern it through the study of material reality linked Khlebnikov to Tatlin.

SPIRAL COURSE

Khlebnikov calls Tatlin a secret seer, acknowledging the legitimacy of Tatlin’s own vision of his art as the discovery of the energy “hidden” in material.⁸ Khlebnikov’s poem “Tatlin!” is a poetic recapitulation of the method by which Tatlin permits prosaic, everyday tools such as blades and tongs and materials such as iron and tin to express their surprising power. The materials respond to Tatlin’s attention and initiate him into their world, bestowing upon him the fantastic ability to “catch the sun.” The mention of a screw and a spider web in this cosmic context might have suggested to Tatlin the future form of his Tower. The spiral structure of Tatlin’s Tower reflects not only upon the trajectory of dialectical materialism, but also a shape often found in nature in general and in the human body in particular, a shape both aesthetic and utilitarian, like the movement of planetary galaxies and

The Incredible Heights of Organic Architecture

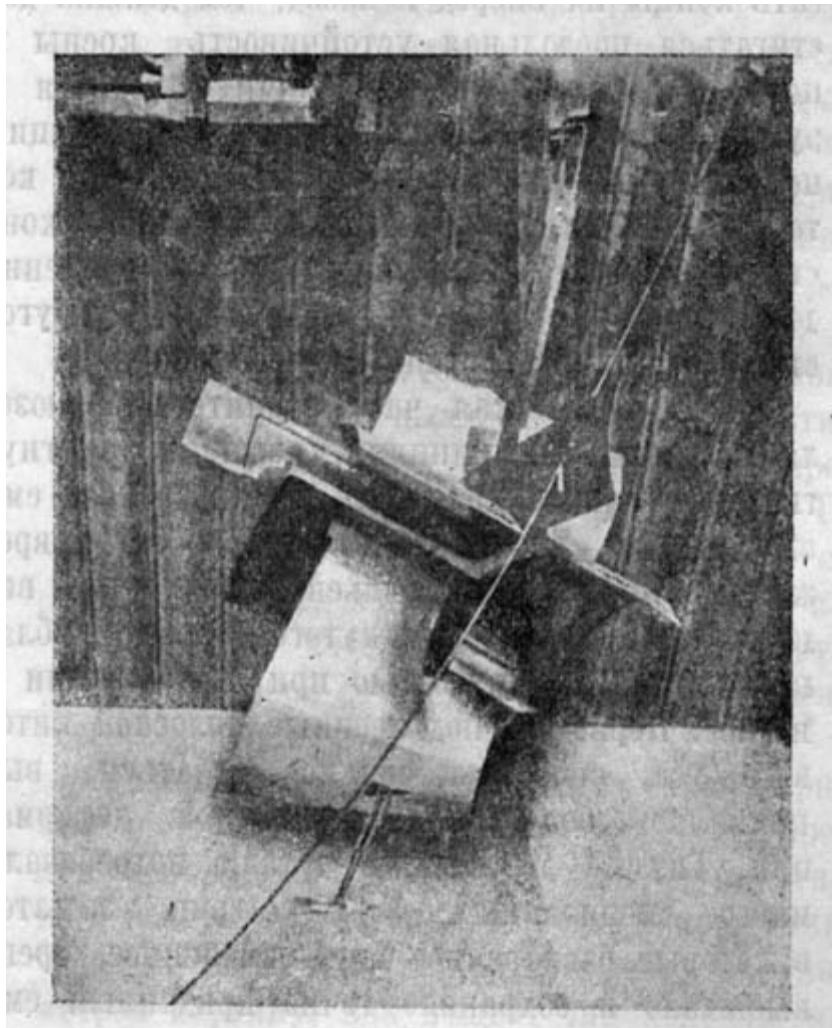
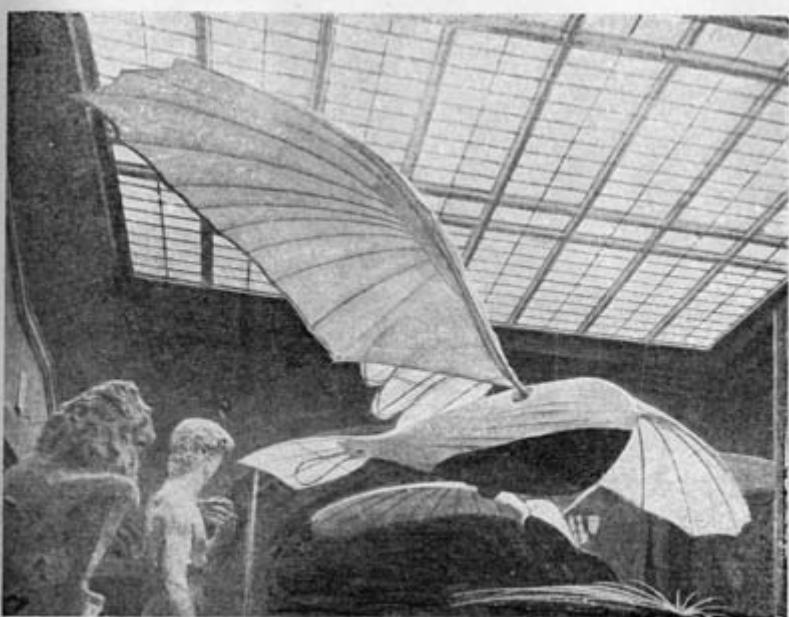


Fig. 11. Vladimir Tatlin, counter-relief, 1915

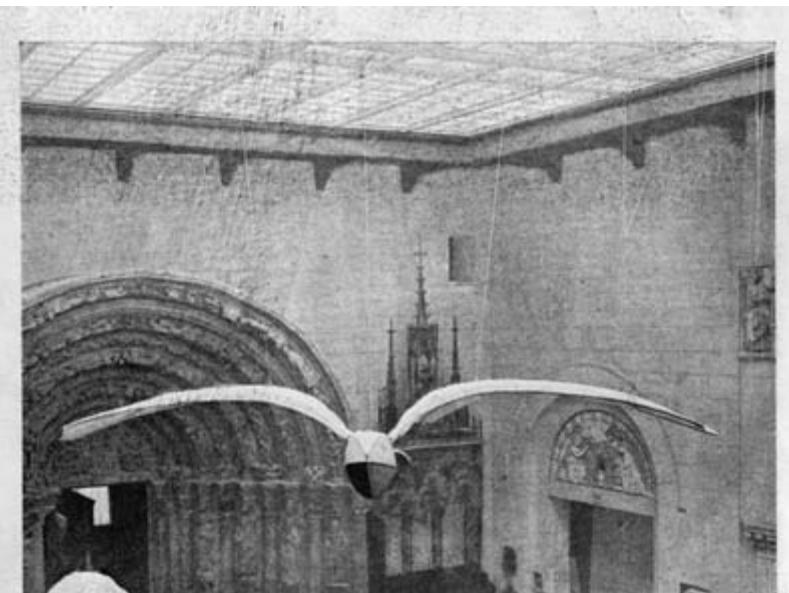
the molecular structure of DNA, the shape of the spider web or the human ear. Hubertus Gassner remarks that the spiral form of Tatlin's Tower is the only shape in his art that can and has been understood symbolically.⁹ But since Tatlin in general eschews symbolic, representational art, and since he himself never supported the symbolic explanations of his monument, does it not make more sense to look at it as an aesthetic object inspired by nature, similar to the artist's future *Letatlin*, built between 1929 and 1931?

Letatlin, whose name is a combination of the Russian word *letat'* (to fly) and Tatlin's own name, is the artist's conception of a flying bicycle and his last artistic project (figs. 12–13). As a counterpart to modern aviation, which Tatlin felt did not contribute in any way to people's desire to feel their bodies in flight, the artist models his motorless vehicle on a bird: "I want, also, to give back to man the feeling of flight. This we have been robbed of by the mechanical flight of the aeroplane. We cannot feel the movement of the body in the air."¹⁰ Putting on the wings of *Letatlin*, a human being would become at once a cyborg and a bird, destroying the breach between the artificial and the natural, or perhaps exposing their inseparability. This vehicle would be propelled by the movement of the human body, and its rider would discover his or her own promise as well as fulfill his or her timeless dream of flight. Tossing aside contemporary aviation in favor of a design à la the Quattrocento contraption of Leonardo da Vinci, Tatlin shows that, so far as he is concerned, human flight is not an appurtenance of progress; he thinks of it, rather, atemporally (figs. 14–15). In one of his interviews, Tatlin states that *Letatlin* will realize a dream cherished by humanity since the time of Icarus.¹¹ Technology ungoverned by the aesthetic principle is harmful, antagonistic to human beings, who are part of the organic, living world: "In 'Letatlin' there won't be a passenger as in a Junkers, i.e., a person who's bored, sitting in a leather chair and suffering from air sickness."¹² Thus Tatlin feels that the new socialist state, which aspires to "truthful" and harmonious existence, should seek inspiration in the natural world: "Our everyday life is built on healthy and natural principles and an object from the West cannot satisfy us . . . It is for this reason that I show such a great interest in organic form, as a point of departure for the creation of new objects."¹³ *Letatlin*'s design would underscore that the superiority of natural, live organisms to aesthetically uninspired technology lies in the plasticity, the flexibility of the former: "Birds are arranged more perfectly than aeroplanes. They are plastic in their construction, while aeroplanes are rigid. Birds have living, soft wings while aeroplanes have dead, rigid ones."¹⁴

The same curves that would be featured in *Letatlin*'s wings visually organize Tatlin's Tower.¹⁵ In contrast to the ideal of the constructivist artist-engineer, the efficient straight line, Tatlin stresses the curved line as an aesthetic element (an element of artistic agency), remarking in his interview with Kornelii Zelinsky, a founder of the Literary Center of Constructivists: "I don't want people to take this thing purely as something utilitarian. I have made it as an artist. Look at the bent wings. We believe them to be aesthetically perfect."¹⁶ At the same time, the existence of the curved line is not purposeless. The contemporary organic architect Javier Senosiain remarks that "in nature the maximum movement is found in the curved line."¹⁷ When a tiger runs, it practically curves itself into a ball.



В. ТАТЛИН. Модель Летатлина



Модель Летатлина в музее изобразительных искусств.

Fig. 12–13. Vladimir Tatlin, the model of *Letatin*, 1932

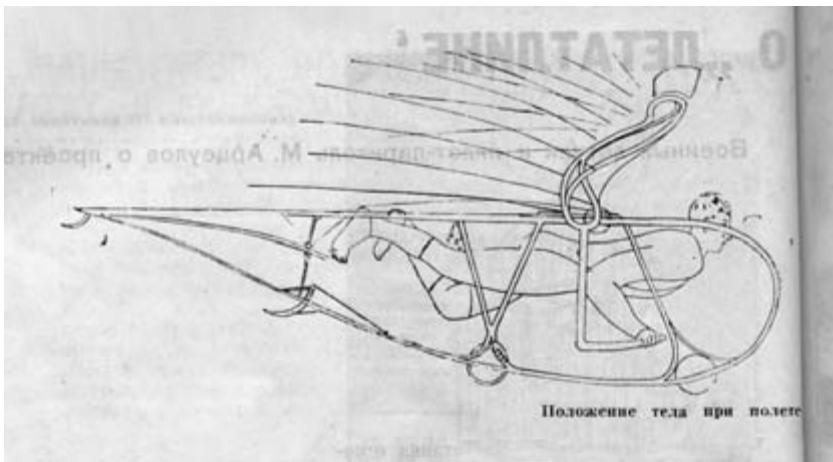


Fig. 14. Vladimir Tatlin, *Letatlin*, drawing of the body position in flight, 1932

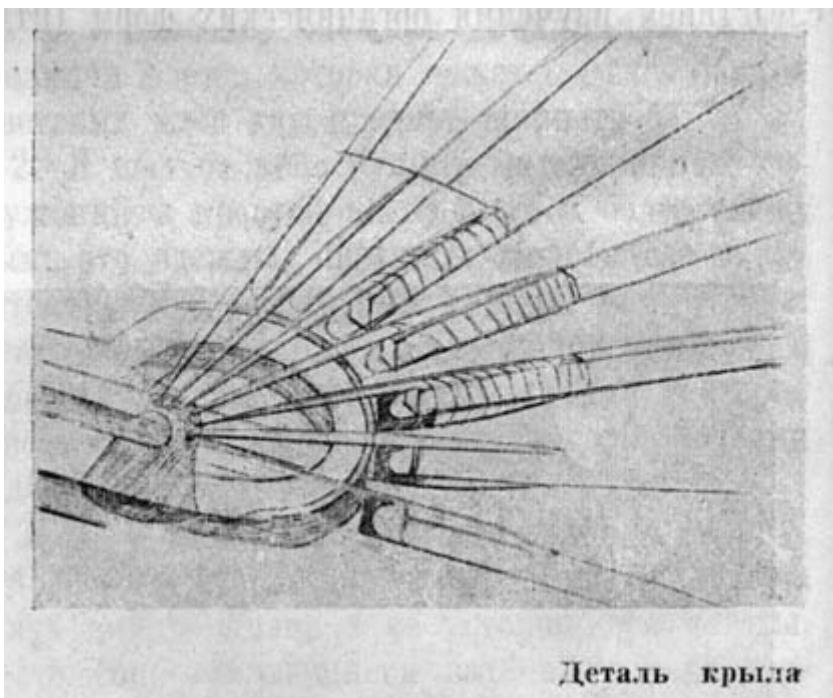


Fig. 15. Vladimir Tatlin, *Letatlin*, detail of the wing, 1932

In “Nasha predstoishchaia rabota” (“The Work Ahead of Us,” 1932), Tatlin expresses his wish to combine the utilitarian and the aesthetic.¹⁸ By imitating natural forms, the artist discovers that the curved line represents just such a dual principle of aesthetics and functionalism. For Tatlin’s moving monument, the curved line provides a perfect basis. It prevents the assumption of entropy that Zamyatin bemoaned in OneState: “The line of OneState is a straight line. The great, divine, precise, wise straight line—the wisest of all lines.”¹⁹ Could there be any relation between the *curvature*-based conception of Tatlin’s Tower and the fact that the Integral was to “integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe . . . to unbend the wild curve, to flatten it to an undeviating line”?²⁰ The spiral shape of Tatlin’s Tower is inimical to the notions of symmetry and equality that Zamyatin believed were foundational for a totalitarian state.

Valerie Fletcher, discussing one of the ongoing attempts to rebuild the model of the Tower in our time, describes the extraordinary complexity of the double spirals:

In the 1920 model the spirals in their concentrated movement upwards undoubtedly escape any symmetry or uniformity. Their arches ascend in different tempo, in some parts somewhat relaxing, and in others sharply shooting upwards. Furthermore, Tatlin displaced these upward fluctuations: the angles of both spirals, changing in the process of moving upward, do not symmetrically correspond (even reverse symmetry, when one spiral would reflect the other in reversal, is absent here). All these irregularities give birth to a special energy, almost the energy of a gesture, when the spirals look completely differently from different points of view.²¹

To a discerning eye, Tatlin’s Tower spins into space like a body in a dance rather than severely penetrating it like a corkscrew. The “energy of a gesture” noted by Fletcher creates the impression of an organic and interdependent relationship with the surrounding space, as if communication were taking place; and, as curved lines make one think of question marks, this communication seems tinged with hypothesis and interrogation. Upon seeing the first model of the *Monument*, Shklovsky remarked that its rotation has “the character of experimentation rather than realization.”²² In *Literatura i revoliutsiia* (*Literature and Revolution*), Trotsky declares this experimental *Monument* excessive and useless. In his eyes, the rotation of the Tower underscored its nonutilitarian character:

Meetings are not necessarily held in a cylinder and the cylinder does not necessarily have to rotate. I remember seeing once, when a child, a wooden temple built in a beer bottle. This fired my imagination, but I did not ask

myself at that time what it was for. Tatlin proceeds by a reverse method; he wants to construct a beer bottle for the World Council of People's Commissioners that would sit in a spiral concrete temple. But for the moment, I cannot refrain from the question: What is it for? To be more exact: we would probably accept the cylinder and its rotating, if it were combined with a simplicity and lightness of construction, that is, if the arrangements for its rotating did not depress the aim.²³

Trotsky with his characteristic perspicacity notices that Tatlin's project is successful in just one aspect: it "fires the imagination." It is possible that this indeed was the purpose of this otherwise unbuildable piece of architecture from the start. It seems that by proposing his nonfunctional architecture, Tatlin challenged and gifted the world with a puzzle. To this day, people still attempt to create the building, most likely not to discover what it could have symbolized for Tatlin's era, but rather to discover what it (and through it, its designers) can say atemporally about the world.

To round out this discussion of the *Monument* as a locus of the intersection of the mechanistic and organic, we might cite the artist El Lissitsky's well-known collage *Tatlin at Work on the Monument to the Third International* (1921), originally appearing as an illustration to Il'ia Ehrenburg's short story "Vitrión" (fig. 2). The story, about an inventor named Belov who is working on a living machine, features several parallels between Belov and his Vitrión and Tatlin and his *Monument*. Ehrenburg's plot, however, motivates the invention of the living machine with quite private emotions rather than a state purpose. The machine that Belov constructs is not approved by the communist state; its function turns out to be completely apolitical. Belov is in love with a woman whom he cannot understand and Vitrión seems to be his compensation for his lack of control over the situation. His love, he laments, cannot soar; so he is at work on a machine that can. The machine is the projection of Belov's unconscious, and it is no surprise that it ends up acting out its inventor's desire. Belov is a flawed Pygmalion; instead of a female machine ("the only one"),²⁴ he creates a masculine machine that not only can soar but that also impregnates Belov's beloved.

Lissitsky's illustration implements this projected union between the mechanistic and the organic. The artist in the illustration is a flesh-and-blood man (in fact, Lissitsky uses a photo of Tatlin at work on a model of the monument, fig. 16), except for the compass sticking out of his eye. The *Monument* here resembles a collection of geometric shapes; the top of it looks like a giant eyeball, diagonally directed past a floating woman's head (presumably, that of the artist's lover) into infinity. Lissitsky confuses the categories of the organic and mechanical, rendering the *Monument's* eye more anatomically correct than the eye of its creator. It appears as if the constructor, whose eye-



Fig. 16. Tatlin and his assistants working on the model of *The Monument to the Third International*, 1920

compass is incapable of visually grasping his beloved, has attempted to utilize this same mechanical eye to build a surrogate eye, which in turn affords him sharper vision, a more attuned perception of being. Thus, this cyborgian interplay of the mechanical and the organic results in enhanced vision.

The calculations drawn on the space between the artist and his *Monument* contain a logarithmic spiral, a curved line. Lissitsky, who was pursuing the task of penetrating into the fourth dimension through his art, thought of a spiral as analogous to an imaginary number, “the square root of plus infinity minus.” Gassner writes that “the spiral describes that trajectory by which Lissitsky wishes to screw himself into the imaginary space.”²⁵ Lissitsky’s conception of a curved line as an entrance into imaginary space must have derived from the non-Euclidian geometry of Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky (1792–1856), then popular among avant-garde artists. Lobachevsky disproved the Euclidean axiom that through any point outside a straight line it is possible to draw only one straight line, parallel to the given line. Lobachevsky’s assertion that, to the contrary, an infinite number of parallel lines can be drawn is based on the existence of a plane with a special integral curve.

Lissitsky names Tatlin’s counter-reliefs as examples of such a curved line that stands on the brink between the known and the unknown.²⁶ Khlebnikov, who labored intensely on a theory of numbers in general and imaginary numbers in particular and who himself designed utopian cityscapes built on Lobachevsky’s laws of space, might have discerned in the curved lines of Tatlin’s art the same reflection of imaginary space.

THE FURRY HIDE OF THE MACHINE-LIKE UNIVERSE

While Tatlin was on a quest to penetrate the essence of material, Velimir Khlebnikov was on his own pilgrimage; his goals were three: “the siege of time, word, quantities (number).”²⁷ These three roads lead to the same destination: a vantage point from which the universe appears as a machine governed by precise and logical rules, in which everything is interconnected and nothing is subject to chance. Khlebnikov’s worldview resembles very much the teachings of the Jewish philosopher Baruch Spinoza, who saw the universe as the interdependent whole of God/Nature; science as contemplation, rather than domination, of the universe; and man as a dependent part of the whole. For Khlebnikov, all the matter in the universe is already given but remains unperceived until an artist with a heightened poetic sense discovers the harmonious organization of cosmos and his own place in it. No matter what preoccupied Khlebnikov at a given moment, calculating the immutable laws of time or deciphering the universal trans-rational language, he saw himself as an architect, a builder of a new world based on the natural

laws of cosmic harmony. Khlebnikov dubbed Tatlin a “builder” (*zodchii*), and defined his own creativity in similar terms. Announcing himself and his like-minded comrades the Presidents of the Terrestrial Globe, Khlebnikov explains, “We are architect-workers” (*rabochee-zodchie*).²⁸ Khlebnikov sees his work on *zaum'* as part of this constructive creativity. In his dramatic poem “Zangezi” (1920–22), language becomes a construction material: “A story is made of words, the way a building is made of construction units. Equivalent words, like minute building blocks, serve as the construction units of a story . . . Narrative is architecture composed of words.” And further: “Speech is an edifice built out of blocks of space.”²⁹

By attempting to explode the language, to release it from its conventional socialized frame of reference, to discover an inner sense in the form of letters and in the sound of phonemes, Khlebnikov sought to build a new basis for communication that would be freed from temporal interests, both public and private. Khlebnikov points to language’s primordial nature, its furry hide: “Scrape the surface of language; and you will behold interstellar space and the hide that encloses it.”³⁰ Numbers, according to Khlebnikov, are also primordial; he writes in his early poem “Chisla” (“Numbers”): “I peer into you, numbers, and to me you appear to be dressed in animals, in their skins.”³¹ While such a view of nature as a repository of essence may seem suspect, it differs from biological determinism and positivism in that it underscores the role of imagination in accessing nature, and as such presents nature as an imaginary space.

In *Doski sud'by* (*The Tables of Fate*), Khlebnikov writes:

The construction of humanity into one whole, that is, the reduction of humanity’s fractions to one common denominator, the lightland [*ladomir*—gloss by Paul Schmidt³²] of bodies . . . is impossible without the lightland of the spirit, that is, the one sacred and great idea, into which all other ideas would transmute. This thought is given to us in a number; a number is that one element which unites all thoughts. It is the foundation, the cornerstone for thinkers of the new age.³³

Just as trans-rational language releases humanity from conventional patterns of thought, opening vistas into space and time, so is Khlebnikov’s investigation of the numerical laws of time meant to uncover the fourth dimension³⁴ which, despite being invisible, was thought to have a profound impact on people’s lives. Khlebnikov calculated numerical laws according to which certain occurrences were supposedly destined to happen independently of the temporal interests and desires of human beings.

The idea of the interdependence of all moments in time, the past’s influence on the future and the future’s influence on the past, is articulated

in Khlebnikov's use of "metabiosis," that is, the influence of a past event on subsequent events that take place in the same geographic location. Khlebnikov's theory of meaningful absence explains his great interest in imaginary numbers. One of the most important numbers for Khlebnikov is $\sqrt{-1}$, which he explains in "Ka²" precisely in terms of metabiosis, the influence through absence: "Soon I understood that if a person who is loved, expected, but absent is a negative being, then any being who is hostile, foreign to a group (absent from it) will be $\sqrt{-1}$, an imaginary being."³⁵ Khlebnikov's partiality for the imaginary number $\sqrt{-1}$ brings us back to Zamyatin's hapless hero D-503 and his uneasy relationship with the same quantity. Like D, who viscerally feels this irrational number dwelling in his very body and sees it in his furry hands, Khlebnikov imagines it as the living (animal) number, the primordial number.³⁶ For Zamyatin's D, the existence of the irrational number signals not only the presence of an extra-material dimension, the irrational dimension of life in general, but the presence of this dimension within himself, his self becoming an instance of the whole—a realization leading to the collapse of D's entire vision of the fully disclosed and rational universe. For Khlebnikov, similarly, the imaginary number is a microcosm of the inner experience of the world, intimately connected to the macrocosm of the universe.³⁷ This imaginary number belongs to the realm of the possible, and hence it expands the horizons of human vision, releasing humanity from petty preoccupations with everyday material life: "We are enamored of expressions such as $\sqrt{-1}$, which have always repudiated the past, and we thus attain freedom from things."³⁸

Khlebnikov's understanding of the imaginary number is akin to the religious philosopher Father Pavel Florensky's explication of the imaginary number as the entrance into the infinite, trans-rational space unavailable to mundane senses but accessible through the creative power of the spirit, which allows one to imagine such a phenomenon as an imaginary number.³⁹ Both conclude that a human being can be present simultaneously in his body in three-dimensional reality and in his thought in other extrasensory planes of being. This fourth dimension is accessible through the microcosm, that is, the inner world of the human being. In the conclusion to his *Mnimosti v geometrii* (*Imaginary Quantities in Geometry*, 1922), Florensky writes:

The sphere of imaginary quantities is real, graspable, and is designated "Empirium" in the language of Dante. We can imagine space divided into two parts: real planes and parallel imaginary coordinate planes. But the transfer from the real plane to the imaginary one is possible only through a break in space and a turning of a body through itself. For now we know that the increase of the velocity of various particles of the body to the maximum speed of light is the only means of accomplishing this process, but we have no proof of the impossibility of some other means.⁴⁰

Khlebnikov believes that his trans-rational language and his numerical laws of time would serve precisely as these other means of entering the other dimension, of moving beyond the speed of light: “Man lives in ‘this world,’ in the light of day with its maximum speed of 186,000 miles per second, and dreams of an ‘other world’ where the speed of light is greater.”⁴¹

TECHNOLOGY AS ORGAN PROJECTION

Florensky’s essay “Organoproektsia” (“Organ Projection,” 1922) demonstrates the philosopher’s faith that the fourth dimension resides in the microcosm of the human body and that the discovery of the body’s possibilities can lead to the discovery of metaphysical reality. The essay puts forward the idea that technology is an unconscious imitation, a projection of the human body. Florensky adopts the term “organ projection” and the theory behind it from the work of the first self-proclaimed philosopher of technology, Ernst Kapp, a forefather of bionics, who in his 1877 book *Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik* ventured the idea that techniques, by which he understood everything devised by people, from an axe to a state or a language, in some unconscious way constitute projections of the human body. Techniques are people’s unconscious responses to needs, to organic deficiencies. A human body then is an organic model for the whole inorganic world, while the unconscious projects itself through the body onto technology.

In his essay on organ projection, Florensky takes Kapp’s theory of techniques as his point of departure: “technology is a replica of a living body, or of a living principle in our bodies.”⁴² The philosopher agrees with Kapp that studying techniques as the projections of the human body will lead to greater self-awareness. Florensky sees technology not as a mediator between humanity and nature but as a method of self-cognition and cognition of the potential existent in the universe. He believes that the study of technology will reveal the latent potential of the body (“organs that have not yet been discovered in a body”) and “thus can and should provoke further developments in biology” as biology provokes technology.⁴³ Florensky finishes his tract with a philosophical statement on the reciprocity between technology and human life, propelled forward by the drive for knowledge: “Searching in ourselves and in life in general, we discover unrealized technology; investigating technology, we discover unexplored areas of life.”⁴⁴

Both Tatlin’s and Khlebnikov’s creations betray a similar desire for the extension of the natural potential of humanity through art and reveal the same impulse toward self-realization through an aesthetic approach to technology. Tatlin’s *Letatlin* was intended not simply to compensate for human deficiency (in this case, flightlessness), but also to provoke humanity to dis-



Fig. 17. Velimir Khlebnikov, drawings of architectural structures, 1920

cover its own latent abilities: “We have to learn to fly with ‘Letatlin’ in the air, just as we learn to swim in the water or ride a bicycle.”⁴⁵ Tatlin’s hopes for self-enhancement bear some affinities to the cultivation of “new men” in the Soviet state, of which Gastev’s biomechanics is the prime example. Yet, in its lack of a specific mass formula, in its affirmation of experimentation and flexibility (evident in the fact that Tatlin created models of things and not things themselves), Tatlin’s organ projection in his *Letatlin* rather resembles Meyerholdian puppets engaged in a perpetual search for self-definition and self-operation. Tatlin’s models, intended to effect metamorphosis and movement, are tentative, searching steps rather than definitive instructions. The same principles of metamorphosis, plasticity, and movement lie at the heart of Tatlin’s *Letatlin*, Florensky’s theory of organ projection, and Khlebnikov’s utopian cityscapes (fig. 17).

ORGANIC CITYSCAPES AND THE AESTHETICS OF METAMORPHOSIS

According to Roman Jakobson, metamorphosis is the basis on which Khlebnikov’s creativity rests. Metamorphosis expresses the principle of $\sqrt{-1}$, the principle by which one object imparts energy and vitality to another (expanding in the process), by which humans leave impressions behind them on their environment and on one another. In 1916 Khlebnikov writes:

We climbed aboard our $\sqrt{-1}$ and took our places at the control panel. Our Tracksubplane [*khodnyrlet*] was a merge of glass, steel, and ideas—it could

fly, run on dry land, submerge in water. Wheels, plane surfaces, propellers. Whatever could be observed from the windows of the subplane-booster [*nyrletskach*] was constantly recorded and printed photographically, very rapidly and clearly. We made a careful study of what the lightprints revealed. Here were the faces of our escort. There a flight of swallows. Then sea gulls, foam, water, schools of fish. We were now underwater and could hear the snickering of the enemy on the far side of Planet Earth. I was transmitting revisions in an essay to a distant city, choosing words very slowly. I paused, full of thought: centuries of warfare passed before me.⁴⁶

This short prose poem enacts the motif of metamorphosis: thought transforms the imaginary number into a fantastic amphibian machine, *khodnyrlet*—that is, a vehicle that “goes, dives, and flies”—that with the acceleration of speed transmutes in turn into *nyrletskach*, as the livelier *skach* (gallop) supplants the neutral *khod* (go). The movement of the machine is revelatory: it imprints its information with light (rather than ink) onto its passengers’ imagination, enlightening them. The vistas revealed by the fantastic machine are not extraordinary, but natural: human faces, birds, water, fish. Moving further, probing deeper, the machine descends into subterranean realms. And suddenly having traversed these levels of biosphere, the passengers aboard the imaginary number become privy to the voices at the other end of the globe. This extraordinary ability signals their entrance into the fourth dimension, where the rules of three-dimensional space do not apply. Appropriately, since the fourth dimension is the space-time continuum, time unfolds its nature for one of the passengers, and events of the past and future, separated by thousands of years of history, pass before his eyes in a single instant. The journey in the imaginary machine ends in a reverie (“I paused, full of thought”) that engulfs the lyrical persona. This reverie, an exercise of advanced cognition and perception, seems to be an end point in itself, the destination toward which Khlebnikov has always aspired. In Khlebnikov’s essay “My i doma: Ulitsetvortsy” (“Ourselves and Our Buildings: Creators of Streetsteads”—gloss by Paul Schmidt; 1914), the journey of the narrator into the new city similarly culminates in a reverie: “I stood on the bridge: I was full of thought.”⁴⁷ Movement for Khlebnikov is an investigatory and communicative act; hence his conviction that buildings should be designed to move. In his self-assumed capacity as President of the Terrestrial Globe, Khlebnikov proposes the creation of utopian cityscapes that would ensure communication between various parts of the world, granting every individual “the right to have a room of your own in any city whatsoever and the right to move whenever you want (the right to a domicile without restrictions in space). Humanity in the age of air travel cannot place limits on the right of its members to a private, personal space.”⁴⁸

As presented in “Ourselves and Our Buildings: Creators of Streetsteads,” Khlebnikov’s first and most important remedy for the problems of the urban environment is the construction of iron-framework buildings around the world that will be able to house moveable glass cubicles. This proposal drastically alters the concept of travel, as a person could stay at home, in his or her moveable glass cubicle, and at the same time be engaged in a “stroll” (*progulka*)⁴⁹ through the world. In this way, a human being can feel at home anywhere he or she goes. Home ceases to be defined in geographic, national, or political terms; it is no longer associated with stasis but with the idea of movement, the idea of taking a tour of one’s own personal domain. Home exists not just as a spatial unit, but a temporal unit as well, as it fulfills its design in the process of the journey. Khlebnikov calls these modular glass units “cocoons,” with all the connotations of protectiveness and transforming power that this word entails. At the same time, the human beings who inhabit these glassy cells turn them into the cells of a living organism, animating the skeletal framework structures that have “awaited their glass occupants” like a “tree in winter [anticipating] leaves or needles.”⁵⁰ Like blood cells, these modular units carry living energy. The movement of various cells in and out ensures that the form of the building undergoes constant mutation. Like organic phenomena, these buildings are not rigid; they are capable of changing shape and evolving.

Khlebnikov’s adoption of the pen name Lunev (apparently derived from *luna*, “moon”) may thus hint at a desire to see the world in a completely different light and also from a completely different angle. The writer of the essay seems to elevate himself above the modern cityscape. From this lunar perspective, the city appears to be composed of currycombs and hairbrushes. Needless to say, such a comparison to prosaic everyday objects makes cities appear not only unattractive but also unexciting. Khlebnikov calls such cities the cities of *proshletsy* (roughly “people of the banal past”—a neologism associating *proshloe* (past) with *poshlets* (a vulgar and banal person)—as if indicating that the etymology of “the past” includes the concepts of “vulgarity” and “triviality.” In contrast, the cities of the future are deemed to be inhabited by *budrye*. Here, instead of using his usual term for the futurist, *budetlianin*, Khlebnikov coins a word that contains the root of the future (*bud*) and yet is a sound away from *bodrye* (alive, buoyant, vigorous). As in the rather romantic worldview informing Tatlin’s creations, a direct correlation is drawn between beauty, nature, and health. The levitating viewpoint that the narrator assumes prompts the thought that buildings should look beautiful three-dimensionally. Khlebnikov proposes that houses should exist in harmony with their environment: “We want to go . . . toward those glass sunflowers in the iron shrubbery, toward cities whose patterns are as harmo-

nious as a fisherman's net stretched out on the beach, cities of glass, shiny as inkwells as if they were part of the vegetable kingdom.”⁵¹

Khlebnikov's metaphoric imagination sees the city as a forest, a plant, but also as verse. There is no contradiction here for Khlebnikov, since poetic language is an organic creation, nature itself. In order to pulsate with life, cities should strive for the “alternation of the density of stone with the immateriality of air, the alternation of substance and void; a similar relationship between stressed and unstressed syllables is the essence of a line of verse.”⁵² Among such organic forms of future buildings as poplar-tree buildings, strand-of-hair buildings, and honeycomb buildings, Khlebnikov imagines also a building in the form of an open book. This image of a readable cityscape appears again and again in Khlebnikov's poetry.

The symbolism of urban readability, clarity, and accessibility includes, of course, the transparency of glass. But there is more to the idea of the readable city. In his diary notes, Khlebnikov presents the village as life itself, while the city appears as a reproduced life, a story about life. The city is a materialized reflection of inner aspirations and hopes, the thirst for a vertical existence, the desire to reach the stars:

To read the traits of human life,
Having placed them on their spines.
So that the wind roams and stirs glass leaves,
Full of thirst for the sun,

.....
The large flower of the city opens its glass pages by day
and closes them at night.⁵³

The air leafs through the pages of the glass book, turning them into the petals of a flower. The opening and closing of a flower in response to the rays of the sun becomes the model of a sensual, exploratory relationship between the city and its environment.

In “Gorod budushchego” (“The City of the Future,” 1920), a published poem Khlebnikov wrote around the same time as these lines from his diary, the glassy leaves of the city-book preserve the same orientation toward the acquisition of knowledge and the inquiry into the unknown, yet here the city turns into an instrument, wielded not by people but by nature itself:

Book-buildings, palaces of pages,
glassy volumes on display,
the whole city is a sheet of reflecting windows,
a flute in fate's uncompromising hand.⁵⁴

The glass of city buildings reflects here not the aspirations of man but the workings of fate, the patterns of time, that invisibly yet palpably organize the universe. Khlebnikov ends the poem at the point where the glassy tops of the city grow in a sharply bent trajectory into space:

Waves of transparent weave you curl one on another,
floor upon floor you pile beyond exhaustion;
you speak, and words resound in lions' mouths;
you grow in multitudes of curved mirror fragments.⁵⁵

This poem dedicated to the city of the future concludes with a curve (*izlom*), thus situating the urban tomorrow in Lobachevsky's imaginary space, the projected motion along the curved line Khlebnikov called for in his epic poem, "Lightland" ("Ladomir," 1921):

And from this moment on, let Lobachevskian space
stream from the flagpoles of night-loving Petrograd.

.
Let Lobachevsky's curves descend
as ornaments over all the city,
let them rest like strongbows on the sweating shoulders of
Universal Labor.⁵⁶

In "Ourselves and Our Buildings," the future city exists in the imaginary space where linear time does not exist. In this essay that outlines Khlebnikov's project for building the city of the future, the future city already appears in all its glory, inhabited by citizens and welcoming the designer himself.⁵⁷ Khlebnikov deliberately confuses the reader's perception of time by using the past tense to describe the city of the future and the present tense to describe contemporary cities. It is as if the city of the future *preceded* those of the present, thus standing as something primordial, a point of origin. The modifiers "past, present, and future" stop referring to a point in a chronological progression of time and signal qualities of being.

Immersed in the organic world of the future city life, the narrator himself is unable to assess which temporal dimension he inhabits, the past legend or the future reality:

I thought about fairy-tale flying horses, about magic carpets; what were fairy tales really, I wondered: merely an old man's memory? Or were they visions of a future only children can foresee? I thought, in other words, about the flood and destruction of Atlantis: had it already happened, or was it yet in the future? I was rather inclined to think it was yet in the future.⁵⁸

The future is present in the past as a seed; imagination evokes the future, retrieves it from its hiding place in the depths of space, and allows it to coexist with and illuminate the past and the present. Khlebnikov's pantheist vision of the universe sees natural ties between the organic utopian city of his imagination and the form the city will eventually attain. In "O pol'ze izucheniiia skazok" ("On the Usefulness of Studying Fairy Tales," 1915), Khlebnikov credits fairy tales with prophecy, as if they constitute a clear-sighted gaze into the fourth dimension: "And so it was that mankind as a seed dimly foresaw itself as a flower. The flying carpet transported people to fairy-tale worlds long before it soared into the darkening twilight sky above Russia in the shape of Farman's ponderous butterfly, borne aloft by the human imagination."⁵⁹ The poet does not use this metaphor simply to express the resemblance between an airplane and a butterfly; in Khlebnikov's vision, an airplane, a flying carpet, and a butterfly are manifestations of the unitary skyward search for knowledge. The striving of thought toward the secrets of the universe, or metaphorically, the assumption of the levitating position, a position above the Earth, offers vistas through which a human being can see both into the past and future; in other words, he can attain the position of Matiushin's *zor'ved*.⁶⁰ For Khlebnikov, the cosmos, the harmonious coexistence of everything in the universe, resides in imagination. Poetic imagination integrates humanity into the natural world, which for Khlebnikov is not so much the purely rational space of scientific truth or the unadulterated repository of essence, but the imaginary space that embodies the principles of flexibility and movement, the iconoclastic aesthetic principles of the avant-garde.

In such visions as "Lebediia budushchego" ("Swanland in the Future," 1918), the "creators of streetsteads" re-create nature technically, building gigantic beehives as their habitats (*ulochertogi*). The organic necessity of such a form is provided by the "truth" inherent in language: the words for "street" (*ulitsa*) and "beehive" (*ulei*) begin with the same meaningful sound: *ul*. Moreover, Swanland, the ancient name for the steppe between the Don and the Volga, suggests the color white for the design of technical innovations: hence, the white shadow books projected onto white clouds, white skyships that plow the land from the clouds, white sails on dry-land steppe vessels.⁶¹

Although the comfort of man is calculated into the man-made landscape, human happiness is secondary to Khlebnikov's considerations. Such happiness will automatically be achieved when man is integrated into the universe and achieves a harmonious coexistence with his environment:

But the equation of human happiness was found and solved only after people understood that it twisted like a delicate hopvine around the trunk of the universe . . . And this is the reason that city children cut off from nature are always unhappy, while for country children happiness is familiar and as inseparable as the leaves of a tree.

arable as their shadows. Man has taken the surface of Planet Earth away from the wise community of animals and plants and now he is lonely.⁶²

This loneliness, Khlebnikov believed, could be overcome through organic technology, which would create the sensation of freedom from the gravity of time and space, the sensation of being swept along like a particle in accord with the natural rhythm of the universe.⁶³

MAGICAL TECHNOLOGY AND POWER

In “Utes iz budushchego” (“A Cliff out of the Future,” 1921–22), Khlebnikov weighs the physical experience of nature against the phantom pleasures of power: “Sometimes just taking off your shirt or going for a swim in a creek in springtime is a source of more happiness than being the greatest man on earth.”⁶⁴ Khlebnikov contrasts the feeling of power with the sense of oneness with the universe. In the poem “Ia i Rossiiia” (“I and Russia,” 1921), the human body is a kind of city, wherein “every hair on a human head is a skyscraper, and from its windows thousands of Sashas and Mashas look out in the sun.”⁶⁵ In this gesture of baring the body to the sun, the persona liberates the inhabitants of this “somapolis”:

And I took off my shirt
and all those glassy skyscrapers of my hair,
every pore
in the city of my body
hung out rugs and red calico linens.⁶⁶

The act of giving oneself up to the world through the baring of one’s body reverberates with the creation of transparent, weightless cities that offer inhabitants to the natural world rather than segregate and protect them from it. This act of baring one’s body is a humbling act of exposure, abnegation of one’s power.

Questions of power and ownership preoccupy Khlebnikov. His cityscapes overcome the laws of ownership by appealing rather to the laws of time, which the poet reckoned would free man from subjugation to transitory powers and interests: “The laws of time do not vary depending on the location of a point occupied by a person who studies them, who investigates time.”⁶⁷ The poet explains how the laws of time will liberate the world from wars and physical violence, associated with power struggle.

And yet Khlebnikov, with his gaze diverted into the fourth dimension, might have been unable to perceive the dynamics of power relations in the

three-dimensional space he inhabited and the role that technology could play in it. The poet fails to see, for instance, that the vision he unfolds in “Radio budushchego” (“The Radio of the Future,” 1921) of radio technology as a self-sufficient, natural being is fallacious. Here Khlebnikov calls the radio of the future “a giant,” “an iron reader,” and “a self-voice” (*samoglas*), forgetting that this future medium, which is to serve as the centralized consciousness of the people, is in somebody’s hands. “The Radio of the Future” differs dramatically from his other utopian pieces. While the other pieces are more hypothetical and poetic, “The Radio of the Future,” intended specifically for the promotion of the Bolsheviks’ central news agency Rosta,⁶⁸ has an agitational feel. Khlebnikov cheerfully writes that “the least disruption of Radio operations would produce a mental blackout over the entire country, a temporary loss of consciousness.”⁶⁹ Khlebnikov posits Rosta’s future manipulation of citizens’ taste buds—such that people will be made to think the water they are drinking is wine—as an achievement to be celebrated, rather than a most ominous form of brainwashing. Khlebnikov unwittingly exposes how such a vast power over people’s consciousness can be misused, how coveted information can give way to misinformation, manipulation, and indoctrination. In his desire to fuse all mankind, Khlebnikov posits universal laws of time, trans-rational language, and cities constructed uniformly of prefabricated housing units; but as the poet’s pronouncements on the radio of the future suggest, the unification of humanity these tools help to build might also entail a leveling erasure of identity.

In “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception” (1944), Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer use radio as an example of mass culture that can be used as an instrument of coercion by those with economic and political power. Adorno and Horkheimer discuss mass culture in bourgeois society but concede that the same mechanism of the erasure of identity and loss of individual freedom takes place under other political regimes, arguing that “the basis on which technology acquires power over society is the power of those whose economic hold over society is the greatest.”⁷⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer state that the facelessness of technology and the anonymity of the people involved in mass production hides any notion of social inequality, since “something is produced for all so that none may escape.”⁷¹ Furthermore, the philosophers determine that it is exactly the discourse of nature—to which, as we have seen, Khlebnikov imputes salvific power in the face of technological development—that will be co-opted in the service of human standardization and commodification: “The peculiarity of the self is a monopoly commodity determined by society; it is falsely represented as natural.”⁷² Those who control faceless technology remain anonymous and disguise their mastery as the natural order of things. In his “Radio of the Future,” Khlebnikov fails to acknowledge that a universal synchronicity

achieved by succumbing to the great magician, the radio, produces precisely the opposite effect from the one he so ardently desired, the attainment of freedom.⁷³ Placed in the specific historical context of the postrevolutionary creation of the new socialist state, Khlebnikov's visions inadvertently expose both the erasure of identity and the constructed quality of cultural standards in the socialist state.

WHERE ARE THE FUNCTIONAL MACHINES?

And yet, the question of utility and aesthetics helps to foreground the differences between Khlebnikov's and Tatlin's visions and the socialist state's utopian project. In "Proizvedenie iskusstva kak nefunktional'naia mashina" ("The Work of Art as a Nonfunctional Machine," 1993), Boris Groys discusses Tatlin's machines and suggests that the very magic of organic technology, its lack of functionality, links it inseparably with Russian communism. Groys states that Tatlin's machines, especially *Letatlin*, were purposefully antiutilitarian, because a machine can become a work of art only when it does not fulfill its aesthetic function: "The machine and technical progress must first suffer defeat, in order to be aestheticized later; they must first lose practical value in order to gain artistic value."⁷⁴ Khlebnikov is named as another member of the Russian avant-garde who in contrast to Western artists oriented their art toward archaic, magical-seeming technology. Groys asserts that despite the official rhetoric of effectualness, the socialist state apparatus was just like the nonfunctional machines of the Russian avant-garde, "a synthesis of archaism, magic, and technology."⁷⁵ In the "Introduction," I questioned whether the socialist state apparatus was in fact as unproductive as Groys asserts. But even if we assume for the sake of argument that the socialist state apparatus was indeed an aesthetic nonfunctional machine, like the technologies of the Russian avant-gardists, the underlying principles of these respective technologies cannot be reconciled. As this chapter demonstrated, Tatlin's *Monument* and *Letatlin* and Khlebnikov's organic cityscapes were ultimately hypothetical and exploratory. Khlebnikov's insistence on the existence of the fourth dimension, the imaginary space that must exist parallel to three-dimensional reality without ever merging with it, lays bare the basic device of the state: simulation of reality. While the very being of the socialist machinery depended on the existence of this myth, in the avant-garde creations the myth was constantly explored and questioned by the artistic machinery.⁷⁶ Furthermore, for the avant-garde, aesthetics was a purpose in itself and would never be compromised; while socialist realism, which became the official artistic practice of the Soviet state in the 1930s, was guided

by purpose with a capital P, in the words of Abram Tertz,⁷⁷ and yet the artistic integrity of this purpose was constantly compromised in ways large and small. Neither Tatlin nor Khlebnikov ever compromised aesthetic taste in the creation of their fantastic machines for the purposes of political or ideological expediency. The fact that their creations seemed fantastic, laying bare the make-believe quality of all art, only underscores how little they were directed by self-preservation and survival in their work; their well-being was not the measure of their own success.⁷⁸ Unwilling to compromise their aesthetics of perpetual newness and incompleteness, these artists were creating poetic technologies, impractical in their blatant improbability.

THE TECHNOLOGICAL SUBLIME

Possibly one of the most interesting and the most telling projects of such artistic investigations of the time was the Flying City of Georgii Krutikov. A student of architecture at Vkhutemas,⁷⁹ Krutikov presented his project “The City of the Future” as his graduation thesis in 1928 (figs. 18–20). It is telling that Krutikov called his project a quest. It was a quest for mobile architecture. Krutikov’s project was as much a child of its age as Tatlin’s machines and Khlebnikov’s city-plants. Just like these artists, Krutikov was fascinated by movement and flexibility. Departing from the rigid forms dominating the architecture of the time, his city would incorporate living, plastic structures capable of changing qualitatively and quantitatively in accordance with changes in the environment itself. The goal of Krutikov’s work was to prove the theoretical possibility and preferability of mobile architecture.

In his project, industrial and commercial spaces are located on the ground, while residential quarters are suspended in the air. The architecture itself is not in motion, but it will mobilize its inhabitants, who will be able to reach their homes only via individual flying capsules. Selim Khan-Magomedov, who first brought Krutikov’s project to a wider audience in 1973, studied Krutikov’s thesis and concluded that its author “was fully aware that the project of housing structures suspended in space has significance only (at least, for the near future) as an essentially investigatory (speculative) idea.”⁸⁰ At a time when the state was taking a pragmatic and utilitarian approach to its existence with the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan, Krutikov envisioned a project whose value to immediate tasks at hand was very ill-defined. Despite the awareness Khan-Magomedov mentions of the complex’s utter unfeasibility, at least for the foreseeable future, Krutikov was determined to prove its physical possibility. The scale of the project humbled inept contemporaries and mocked the scarcity of the material means at their

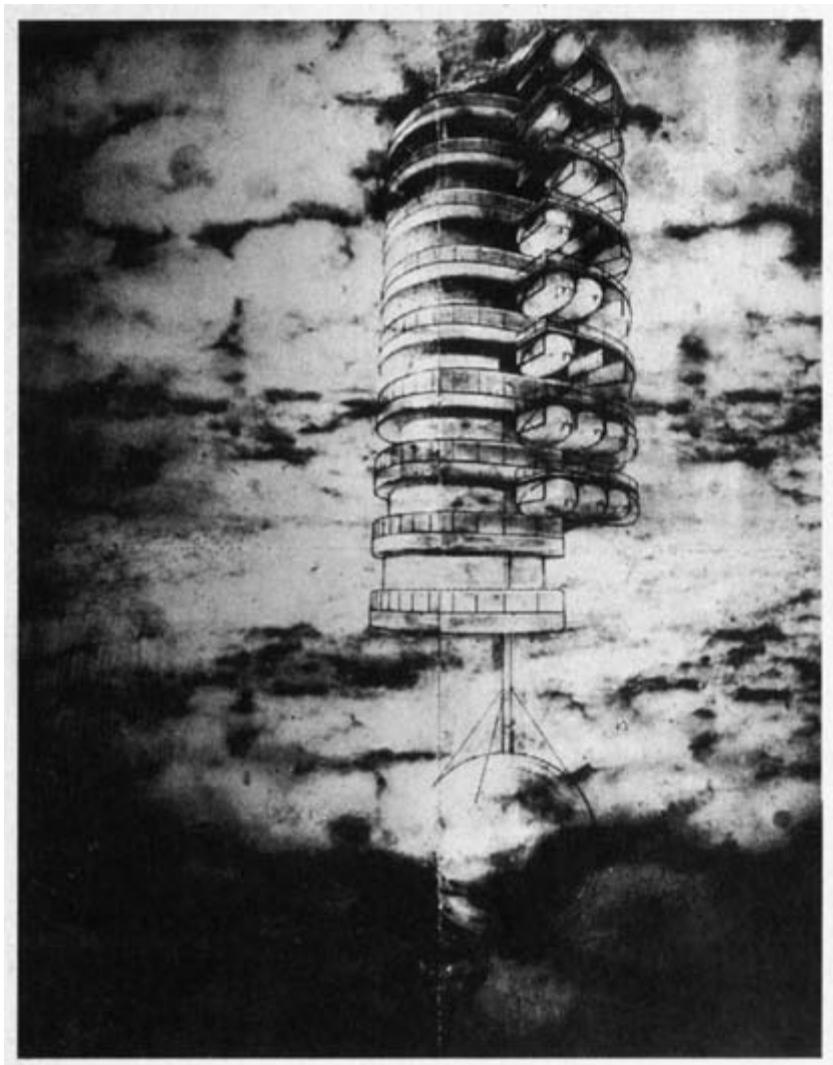


Fig. 18. Georgii Krutikov, the “City of the Future” project, 1928

disposal while exposing the riches of the universe and its offerings to humanity. In this theoretically possible and practically impossible project, technology becomes a part of “nature”—since the potential for this undertaking is present in it—and takes on its sublime quality. Even eighty years later this project lends itself primarily to aesthetic appreciation, its sheer magnitude

The Incredible Heights of Organic Architecture

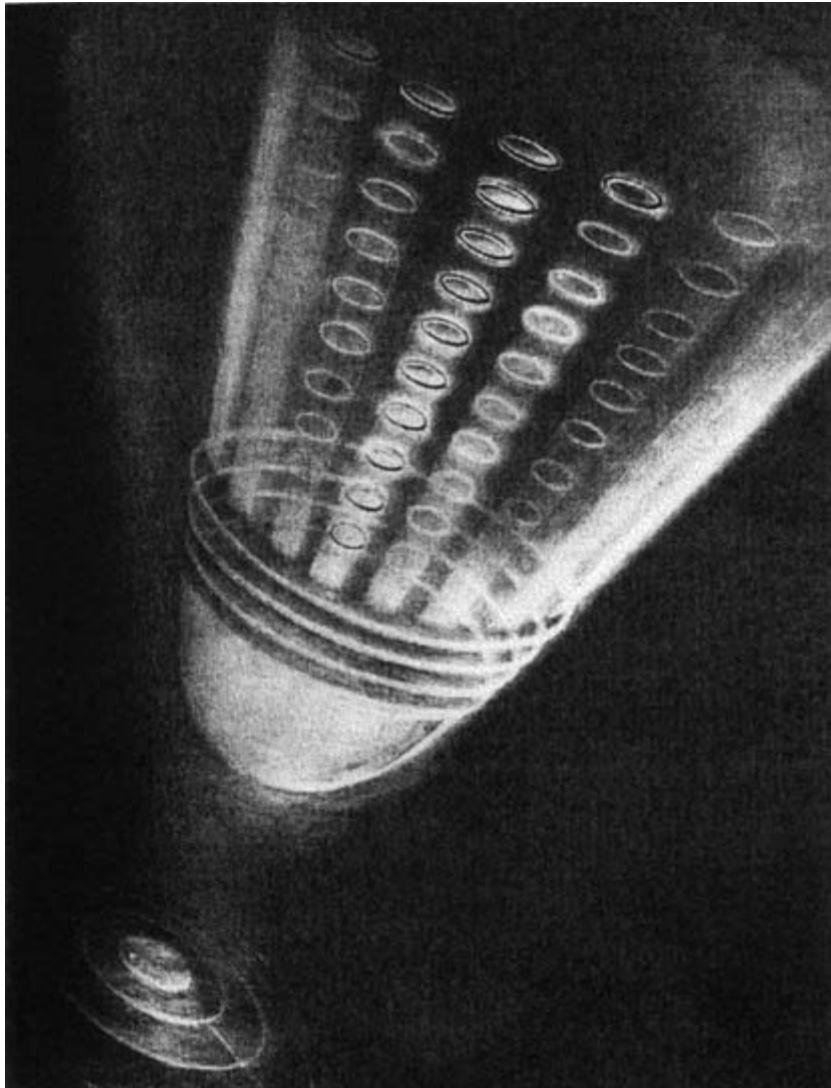


Fig. 19. Georgii Krutikov, a drawing from the “City of the Future” project, 1928

arousing feelings of awe and incredulity. The pleasure that Krutikov’s project offers is the pleasure in the sublime, a disinterested pleasure in perceiving something immense that transcends a moment and a place.

Krutikov’s uncompromising project seems suffused with the spirit of Prince Vladimir Odoevsky’s romantic tale “Opere del Cavaliere Giambattista

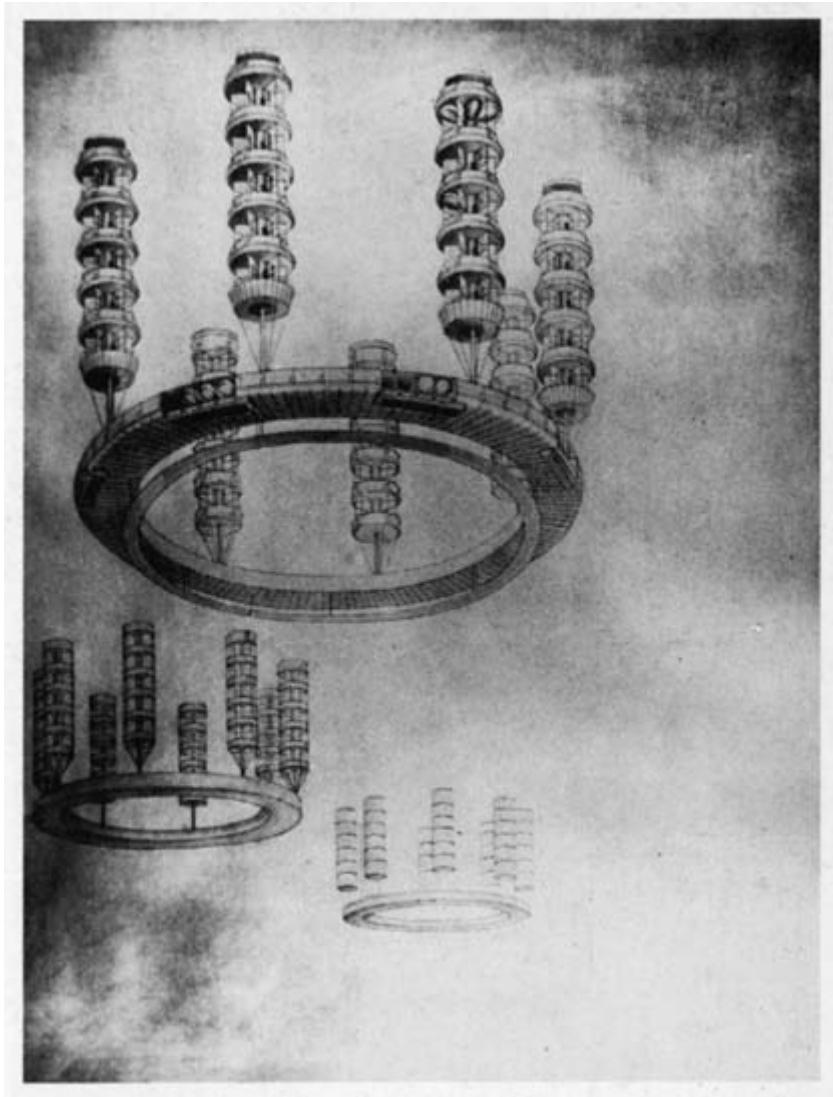


Fig. 20. Georgii Krutikov, a drawing from the “City of the Future” project, 1928

Piranesi” (1830), written a century earlier, about an encounter between a bibliophile and an old eccentric who claims to be the ghost of Giambattista Piranesi (1720–1778). The colossal scale of Piranesi’s pleasure palaces establishes a ratio of incompatibility between the imagination of a genius and the practical value of his creations. It seems that the aesthetic worth of Piranesi’s incredible fantasies is in reverse proportion to their utilitarian value. But it is not specifically their uselessness that makes them artistic; it is the artist’s refusal to compromise with the immediate means at his disposal. An artist’s solvency is not one of the criteria of aesthetic value. Tormented by desire for fame and fortune, haunted by the longing to see his projects realized, Piranesi’s phantom cannot give up his tremendous aesthetic visions and is doomed to suffer the mockery of his living peers and the hateful energy of his creations. Piranesi’s imaginary pleasure palaces in fact are the very source of his permanent residence in physical deprivation and spiritual hell. And yet, the thought of scaling down his vision to more useful proportions has not crossed his mind for centuries. The frame of Odoevsky’s story clarifies the philosophical purpose of his interest in the useless, such as the obsessions of bibliophiles or the insanity of Piranesi wannabes. It is eccentrics, much more than their pragmatic compatriots, who exemplify the unyielding intellectual curiosity and constant striving for the unknown so essential to artistic endeavor. While the useful is indeed important and possesses its own inner poetry, only the poetry of the useless can bring diversity to human life; Odoevsky contends: “a whole city of houses with identical facades . . . would seem all right, but the city would oppress one with its unbearable boredom.”⁸¹ Odoevsky conceives of his Piranesi in part as a peculiar remedy against the plague of American railroads. Writing in 1830, Odoevsky foresees the perils of globalized culture brought about by technological advances:

Michel Chevalier, one of the famous advocates of industrialization, speaks ironically of difficulties which existed for ancients in undertaking a journey from poetic Sparta to poetic Athens and back, and by means of indisputable facts and numbers he tries to prove that when perfected steam engines become commonly used one will be able to complete a journey around the earth—what a horror! in *eleven* days! But the penetrating mind of this remarkable writer did not overlook the question: What will the moral state of society be when man reaches this stage?⁸²

Odoevsky attempts to answer this question by looking at industrialized America, where he claims the speed of communications has caused the erasure of all differences. Encountering sameness wherever they go, Americans can never experience enjoyment and are doomed to incomprehensible boredom (nothing new, interesting, attractive awaits them): “the full consequence

of such a useful, comfortable, and prudent life—is *an invincible, unbearable boredom!*⁸³ American technology and the salvation it represents in the fantasies of Russian avant-garde writers will be the subject of this book’s final two chapters. Here, Odoevsky’s insistence that the human need to seek the new and the different finds its realization in seemingly useless aspirations takes us back to the improbable architectural projects of the 1920s. Their primary motivation is curiosity and hypothesis, and as such they stand in stark opposition to the socialist state and the art of socialist realism that it produced. While the latter provide answers, the former ask questions. Paradoxically, it was the very hypothetical aspect of avant-garde uses of technology that made them so enduring. In the process of striving for discoveries, their creators tapped into incredible possibilities. If we expand the time frame of reference, some of the projections have proved to be quite realizable. For example, Khlebnikov’s prophetic vision of television has materialized. And almost as a tribute to Khlebnikov’s imagination, strange architectural constructions have sprouted up all over the world thanks to a new trend toward organic technology. Frank Lloyd Wright’s famous house Fallingwater integrates itself into the environment; it seems to grow out of the earth like the forest around it. Vlado Milunic and Frank Gehry’s Astaire and Rogers Building in Prague just cannot stop dancing; in California Eugene Tsui has built a house that looks like a dragonfly. Such structures as the Soft and Hairy house in Japan, the Snail house in New Jersey, and the snake-like Cité Scolaire Internationale in Lyon benefit from a combination of insights derived from ecology, biology, and engineering. The hymner of “suncatching” Khlebnikov would be gratified to discover that solar energy is used more and more widely to heat houses.

While the socialist state machine has exhausted itself, the future of organic machines seems to be far from over. And it is only now, at a century’s remove, that we realize in awe that the latter were hardly utopian. It is not completely out of the realm of possibility that in a hundred or so years, people will be enjoying the sensation of maneuvering *Letatlins*.

Chapter Five

Olesha's Suicide Machine

We are taking the machines that have ceased to be useful, and also a few others that were beginning to be useful, to the bottom of the water, at great expense, and it is a pleasure to see the mud voluptuously paralyze things that used to work so well.

—Andre Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*

Noble ideas are alien to your mind. You do not know how to die.

—Aleksandr Radishchev, as cited in Lotman, 1985

THE IDEAL OF the man-machine came into being in response to the rise of all-powerful technology and fears of losing control over the monster man had himself created. It is suggested in Zamyatin's *We* that the mechanical men of OneState were inspired to turn their flesh-and-blood bodies into machines in the aftermath of a Thousand Years' War, which no doubt featured particularly lethal technology. Only the steeliest specimens could survive such an onslaught against their bodies. Khlebnikov's impetus for seeking the fourth dimension, the laws of time, was to put an end to World War I, and to random slaughter in general. He hoped that by discovering the laws of time he would give humanity the power of effortless, mental entryway into imaginary space, where conflict would be resolved with painless cogitation instead of bloody weapons. In 1927, when the machine aesthetics and the ideal of man-machine were widely disseminated in Soviet culture, Iurii Olesha created Ophelia, a most improbable machine that epitomized not humanity's desire to emulate technology nor merely its threat, but the trauma that humanity sustained in the process of transforming itself into a machine. Ophelia, I argue, as a dysfunctional, suicide machine, exposes all the weaknesses and psychic wounds that ideal machines prosthetically are supposed to correct, compensate for or, at least, conceal. It is in its complicated mechanism of exposure that Ophelia joins the ranks of the other non-instrumental, antiutilitarian, antiproductivist technologies discussed here.

Unlike avant-gardists who on the whole did not court ideological dissent in their creations, Olesha, quite cognizant of his novella's sedition, displayed through Ophelia the full extent of subversion that avant-garde imaginary technologies were capable of.

FAMILY DYNAMICS IN THE NEW STATE

Upon its appearance, Olesha's novella *Envy* (1927) immediately produced a tidal wave of critical response whose reverberations have not subsided to this day. Ambiguous and complicated, *Envy* is told largely from the point of view of Nikolai Kavalerov, a man who feels out of place in the new Soviet reality. Kavalerov is ambivalent toward the new world he inhabits; it arouses in him a mixture of hatred and admiration. He wishes fervently to join in the life around him, yet at the same time he feels that this new world repulses him (in both senses of this word: he feels rebuffed by it, and finds it repulsive in turn). Kavalerov is an outsider; and much of the novella consists of his attempts to formulate his place in the new society by building a relationship with one family, the Babichevs.

The Babichevs consist of two brothers, Andrei and Ivan,¹ and their two children, Volodia and Valia. This dysfunctional family represents postrevolutionary Russia in microcosm. Andrei, the organizer of a new communal food trust, the Quarter, is one of the men who created the revolution and on whose ideals of equality, utility, and productivity the new Soviet state is being built. Ivan, an inspired drunkard, embodies old Russia, his small, rotund form giving refuge to every element of life, high or low, that has been rejected by the new state. Volodia and Valia, who is Ivan's biological daughter, are Andrei's wards, as such representing the new generation of young Soviet people, built upon Gastev's blueprint.

Volodia prides himself on being a man-machine and "Edison of the new century."² He admires technology and cultivates his body to work as productively and efficiently as a machine. Volodia is a professional athlete, a soccer player, but he attempts to integrate the precision of athletic movement into every sphere of his life. Characteristically, his sexual life has been taken under strict control: he has forward-looking plans to synchronize his first kiss of his fiancée Valia with the opening of Andrei's food trust, the Quarter—which is supposed to revolutionize food service, rendering it super-efficient—and to marry her in exactly four years. Needless to say, the regimented first kiss as the celebration of the Quarter indicates that Volodia and Valia view their union in productive terms and do not allow it to be marred by useless, excessive passion.

The Babichev family seems to have an overabundance of fathers and

a lack of mothers. Both Volodia and Valia have biological fathers, and Andrei, by acting as their second surrogate father, creates an excess of the masculine element.³ Andrei both in his professional life and in his private one seems to strive to play the role of mother. His communal kitchen, the Quarter, is supposed to take over familial kitchens, formerly a mother's domain. Andrei's brother and Valia's father, Ivan, interprets Andrei's Quarter, and all such idolizations of machinery, as an attempt to create a self-sufficient masculine world. Ivan, who still harbors such old-fashioned values as individualism, private life, creativity, passion, and other romantic notions and emotions, associates them with femininity: "Woman was the best, the most beautiful, the purest flower of our culture. I looked for a being of the female sex. I looked for the sort of being in whom all feminine qualities would be united . . . We are dying, Kavalerov. I wanted to carry woman over my head like a torch. I thought that woman would die out along with our era."⁴ By embracing such an outdated association, Ivan reveals himself as a representative of the old, prerevolutionary age.⁵ Ivan feels that a specific instance of this total banishment of the feminine has catastrophic repercussions for his own family: Valia, he believes, has been stolen from him, the sanctity of his family life has been violated. He fears that Valia, instead of acting as a symbol of abstract ideas of love and beauty, a muse and an object of lofty thoughts, will be reduced to serving a (re)productive function as "an incubator" of new men.⁶ Ivan bemoans such a mechanization of Valia not so much for her own sake, but for what such a transformation of his ideal woman signifies for him. To avenge his lost ideal and his lost epoch, Ivan creates Ophelia.

THE DEATH MACHINE OPHELIA

Ophelia is the most mysterious character in *Envy*. This is not so much because Ophelia never appears outside of somebody's dream or story; after all, the whole plot is filtered through the distorted prism of an unreliable narrator's point of view. *Ophelia's* fundamental mysteriousness, rather, lies in its seeming indescribability. Otherwise eloquent and astute, neither Ivan nor Kavalerov seem capable of articulating what the machine looks like. At one point, its outlines, elastic and fluid, seem to suggest a bird; in another instance, it features an enormous metallic needle. Its formlessness might be indicative of its essence. Ivan's ambitious plan to input so much in his machine renders it unimaginable. Its universality is beyond language.

The name that Ivan bestows upon his machine constitutes its one definitive and defining characteristic, yet even that moniker succeeds in evoking nothing but mystery and uncertainty. Ivan explains his choice of the name:

"And I gave it the name of a girl gone out of her mind from love and despair—the name of Ophelia . . . The most human, the most touching."⁷ The machine consciously carries on the ambiguity that characterized its enigmatic Shakespearean namesake. Anthony Vanchu in his illuminating analysis of Olesha's Ophelia suggests that the seed of discord might already be planted in Ophelia's very name, which may derive from two very different, seemingly competing etymological sources: the Greek *ωφελία*, which means "help" or "succor," or the combination of *ωφις* ("serpent") and *ηλώσ* ("marsh").⁸ The dichotomy embedded in her name prompts Ophelia's beloved, Hamlet, to treat her with suspicion and coldness, and the same doubt triggers critical debate as to the motivations of this seemingly obedient and loving woman who goes mad and commits suicide from the abuse suffered at the hands of men she trusts. Scholars such as Gabrielle Dane read a degree of agency in the character, analyzing Ophelia's madness as "her unconscious revolt" and her suicide as "a first autonomous choice."⁹ In the same vein, Vanchu claims that Ivan Babichev's failure lies in misreading Shakespeare's Ophelia as nothing but a passive victim "manipulated and abused by men."¹⁰ According to Vanchu, then, Ivan is a bad cultural critic blind to the deeper dimensions of Ophelia's agency as well as the power of the Eternal Feminine that she symbolizes. Ultimately, in Vanchu's reading, Ivan overestimates his own ability to control his feminine machine because he underestimates the force of the irrational and chaotic in the human psyche, "fail[ing] to understand . . . that the power generated in the process of Ophelia's journey into madness and death can be neither appropriated nor controlled."¹¹

I would suggest that a degree of underestimation affects Vanchu's own reading of Ivan's perspicacity, for by choosing Ophelia as the name for his machine, Ivan intentionally invites his own undoing.¹² In entertaining the idea of Ophelia, Ivan indulges in mourning for himself and his old age; the machine Ophelia, like a scar on the face of perfection, exhibits everything that was lost in the building of the new order. By undertaking the making of a dysfunctional machine, Ivan in effect chooses not to be, while his preference for death constitutes in turn a revolt against the Soviet discourse of life-building.¹³ Ivan's choice of death is indeed a logical continuation of his rebellion against the utilitarian, productivist principles of his newly transformed country. Death signifies the ultimate wastefulness; and in creating an instrument of his own destruction, Ivan de facto demolishes his brother Andrei's utopia of productivity and sustenance.

The machine Ophelia is a site of loss. Its own loss is the prerequisite of its final function. In its conception, Ophelia is a universal machine that is capable of doing everything, but that will do nothing. Ivan's original idea was to create an all-purpose machine that would be able to serve a human

being in all matters, large or small, from rearing life to reaping death: "It can blow up mountains. It can fly. It lifts weights. It crushes ore. It replaces the kitchen range, the baby carriage, the long-range weapon."¹⁴ Universally functional, Ophelia is the very epitome of technological instrumentality. And yet, this mechanistic instrumentality is invoked only to be subverted. In a world where numbers become the ultimate value—Volodia does not wish to waste a digit—Ivan intends, as he shouts at his brother Andrei, that Ophelia turn all numbers into "useless flower[s]."¹⁵

Ophelia's all-powerful mechanicity faces an obstacle: Ivan forbids the machine to put its abilities to use, to express its potential. This prohibition alone is enough to change "the greatest creation of technology" into a "a liar, a vulgarian, a sentimental scoundrel!"¹⁶ The taboo imposed upon Ophelia corrupts her: "the most vulgar human feelings" begin to brew in her.¹⁷ It is Ophelia's loss that animates her, that makes the form *it* a *she*. Ivan's prohibition relates Ophelia's situation to the predicament of her Danish namesake. Shakespeare's Ophelia is compelled to encounter the rift between the possible and the allowed, between the desired and the taboo. Denied self-fulfillment, she is conscripted to constantly obey her father and brother, to think and act only on their orders. As such, Ophelia is an embodiment of insufficiency, of lack. Gabrielle Dane describes Shakespeare's Ophelia in precisely these terms:

Scoffed at, ignored, suspected, disbelieved, commanded to distrust her own feelings, thoughts and desires, Ophelia is fragmented by contradictory messages . . . Seeming to absorb the general absence of belief in her own intelligence, virtue, and autonomy, Ophelia is left with an identity osmotically open to external suggestion; that is, she appears to lack clear psychic boundaries . . . Ophelia appears never to have allowed to develop a discrete sense of self apart from those others (father and brother, then later, Hamlet) who fashioned her identity to suit their needs.¹⁸

When Ivan conceives of the machine Ophelia, he takes into account the incompleteness and unfulfillment of the tragic figure on whom she was modeled. Originally, Ivan aims to invent a complete being, a universal machine, only to realize that his calling is to create a fragmented, flawed one. Hence the fragmentary quality of descriptions of Ophelia's appearance; this incompleteness matches her (its?) status as a dysfunctional machine. A functional machine is designed to serve as prosthesis, camouflaging human deficiencies; instead, Ophelia, a dysfunctional machine, will expose these weaknesses by internalizing them. It is to that end that Ivan frustrated the potential of his machine. Similarly, Ivan's own death at the hand of his machine is

programmed in Ophelia's mode of operation. Only by embracing death can Ivan flaunt the longevity of the old world's ideals and mar the perfection of the New Order.

A PHILOSOPHY OF SUICIDE

Readings of Ophelia as a failed product of Ivan's engineering fail to notice the crucial role that suicide plays in his philosophy. Several scholars have noted that Olesha's narrative bestows upon Ivan the mantle of preacher or prophet; Christlike he must die so that his teachings and legend will live on.¹⁹ Indeed, Ivan himself voices this comparison by screaming that he is being taken to Golgotha, or when he recalls the questioning of Christ at his own interrogation by the GPU. There Ivan formulates the philosophy of suicide through an illuminating and memorable metaphor of the light bulb.

Olesha considered metaphor to be the essence of his art.²⁰ A metaphor (especially one whose complexity resembles a metaphysical conceit) points to an excess of imagination unpardonable in a strictly utilitarian and pragmatic schema, and it is precisely Kavalerov's and Ivan's propensity for metaphors that marks them as superfluous men in a new age. Likewise, the metaphor of the light bulb transforms the utilitarian object par excellence into an aesthetic object. Moreover, this aestheticization can only occur as soon as functionality is compromised, at the moment of the object's demise:

Tungsten filaments break off and through the contact of the fragments life returns to the bulb. A short, unnatural, undisguisedly doomed life—a fever, an overly bright incandescence, a brilliance. Then will come the darkness, life will not return, and in the darkness the dead scorched filaments will only rattle. Do you understand? But the brief brilliance is beautiful.²¹

Before drawing this correlation between beauty and death and affirming the aesthetic nature of uselessness, Ivan places these sentiments into a specific cultural context: "The man of the new world says: suicide is a decadent act. But the man of the old world says: he had to take his own life in order to save his honor. By this we see that the new man is schooling himself to despise the ancient feelings glorified by the poets and the very muse of history."²² Iurii Lotman in "The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth Century Russian Culture" discusses the romantic preoccupation with tragic death widespread at the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries. Lotman writes that, at a time when the life of a nobleman was perceived in theatrical terms, heroic death came to be viewed as the glorious climax of a life-drama; he cites, for example, Aleksandr Odoevsky crying out joyfully on the morning

of December 14, 1825: "We are going to die, brothers, oh how gloriously we are going to die."²³ In his discussion of the suicide of the antiservile critic Aleksandr Radishchev (1749–1802), Lotman points out the political significance of the willingness to die: "The right to commit suicide, to liberate oneself from the fear of death, places a limit on man's submissiveness and circumscribes the power of tyrants. Delivering himself from the obligation to live no matter what the circumstances, man becomes absolutely free and negates the powers of despotism."²⁴ Ivan's romanticist-like tendency to dramatize his own life (to view it in terms of a good story) is in keeping with this association of suicide with liberation: all the stories that he concocts, from his resistance to his father in his childhood to his resistance to his brother in adulthood, fit a narrative of struggle against tyranny that at last resolves with the attainment of personal freedom through self-destruction and the conquest of the tyrant.

Yet the ultimate goal of this fantasy is not the acquisition of power²⁵ but the assertion of individuality. Nikolai Kavalerov, who also envisages his life as the unfolding of a romantic plot, entertains the idea of suicide as the affirmation of his individual will:

Just imagine, while here everyone talks about purposefulness and utility, while from a man is expected a sober, realistic approach to things and events—suddenly to just pick up and create something obviously absurd, to perpetrate some sort of ingenious prank and then say: "So that's the way you are and this is the way I am." . . . If only to pick up and do it like this: to kill yourself. Suicide without any motive. Out of mischief. To show that everyone has the right to dispose of himself. Even now. To hang myself in your entrance way.²⁶

Here, Kavalerov revolts against the tyranny of common sense. Just as Ivan's going to his "Golgatha" signals the redemption not of humanity per se but—however fleetingly—of a passing age, so does the deliberate abnegation of one's life constitute not self-sacrifice for the greater good, but the affirmation of personal choice. In "Lives Out of Balance: The 'Possible World' of Soviet Suicide during the 1920s," Kenneth Pinnow discusses how during the early Soviet period, experts defined suicide as a symptom resulting from "an alien worldview." A conscious builder of Soviet life was expected to "recognize the larger social significance of one's personal thoughts and actions" and hence be responsible for personal health and well-being.²⁷ Suicide, then, is the most effective rebellion against the principles of communality and utility espoused by the new men of the socialist state.²⁸

In his conversation with the investigator, Ivan opposes romantic self-affirmation through heroic death to the philosophy of the new man, for whom suicide is a useless act that contradicts the impulse toward the building of the

future. In chapter 1, I discussed the extent to which Aleksei Gastev's vision of the man-machine was influenced by the teachings of Nikolai Fedorov and how the technological cultivation of one's body can be regarded as part of a search for immortality. Indeed, the protection of life and the abolishment of death are the most immediate preoccupations of Russian avant-garde artists from Mayakovsky to Meyerhold. There appears to be a continuity between the avant-garde's search for the achievement of immortality and the early Soviet cult of the body as well as the ideal of the body modeled upon a machine. As a counterpart to the functional, everlasting machine-like organism, Ophelia appears to be a mockery of these aspirations. And yet, just as this entity brings all these preoccupations into one constellation, it also disengages the Soviet cultivation of ideal physique from the avant-garde's interest in the achievement of immortality. If Ivan searches for immortality at all, this immortality is not physical, but abstract (perseverance of ideas and ideals rather than bodies). In "The Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha's *Envy*," Marina Kanevskaya interprets Ophelia as a constructivist avant-garde conception; in her reading, the machine is symbolic of the avant-garde's struggle for power, its desire to take control over human life. Thus, she believes that Olesha deconstructs the avant-garde's technical/artistic aspirations for a total takeover by showing their unfeasibility. I would suggest in response that by creating Ophelia, Ivan seeks an assertion not so much of control but of his individuality. He does not aspire to usurp Andrei's power in order to take over. On the contrary, Ophelia constitutes a romantic revolt and the affirmation of self through the expressed willingness to die. As such, this entity shares with the avant-garde technologies explored in this study their purposeful noninstrumentality. Furthermore, Ophelia as an explicitly and purely imaginary machine lays bare by association the fictions and concealments on which the new technological world of Soviet reality is based. Paradoxically, while being invisible itself, its main principle of operation is exposure.

THE NEW BODY AND ITS SCARS

In Olesha's *Envy*, the discourse of the cultivation of the body is quite explicit: all new men (and women) are seen to engage in physical exercise. However, the novella only hints in an offhand manner as to the possible reasons for the extravagant care which the new men take of their bodies. This partial disclosure reflects upon the concealment and suppression at the heart of the new state's ideology. The first clue appears on the first page of the novella: Kavalerov remarks that while walking down the stairs, Andrei Babichev noticed that his breasts bounced in cadence with his feet and decided to increase his daily morning exercise routine. Breasts are a secondary sexual

characteristic of a female; thus Andrei's exercises are tantamount to an attempt to purge the feminine element in favor of the masculine. Resisting hermaphroditism, Andrei seeks clear bodily definition and legibility; but his body does not always comply. For Kavalerov, Andrei's body *is* a text, but it does not articulate the message Andrei would like; rather, Kavalerov reads it as the "scroll of another fate." Scrolls bury the past, like imperfect memory. Kavalerov's act of observing Andrei's body uncovers the latter's past, which the builder of the future would like to forget.

The text that is Andrei's body emerges as a site of contradicting messages. The reader's attention is drawn to Andrei's perfect, joyful bowel movement, his model groin "of a production man," but then Kavalerov also observes signs that militate against the image of Andrei as buoyant and productive: his birthmark and his scar. Kavalerov sees the tender, "hereditary, aristocratic" birthmark in opposition to the commissar's scar.²⁹ But the class terms that Kavalerov applies do not matter in this context; what matters are the categories of the old and the new. The birthmark is extravagant in its uselessness; it performs no bodily function. But the scar is even worse; it is a sign of bodily fragility and weakness, of trauma and loss. When Kavalerov sees the scar on Andrei's body, Andrei's difficult past, so incongruous with his current joyfulness, resurfaces: "On his chest, under the right collarbone was a scar. As if a branch had grown in that spot and had been chopped off. Babichev was in a work camp. He was escaping and they shot him."³⁰ The chopped-off branch exacerbates the violence done to Babichev; it is a violence of the technological over the organic. When Kavalerov memorably calls Valia "a branch full of flowers and leaves," he associates her femininity with the organic world. And just as Andrei's desire to be rid of his breasts may be motivated by the fear that they signify feminine "weakness," so this broken branch recalls the fragility of the organic, a fragility of which Andrei would just as soon not be reminded.

In the new world, the tempering of one's body is a constituent part of the taming of nature. The vibrant, sunny world of the new state has seemingly banished pain, misfortune, and loss. And yet loss is inscribed on Andrei's body in the form of a scar. And it seems that loss permeates the new world. The past from which the new world has sprung was a violent one. The new man's psyche has been largely shaped by the bloody events he has survived. In "One-Way Street," written just a year after Olesha's *Envy*, Walter Benjamin states: "In the nights of annihilation of the last war the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic. And the revolts that followed it were the first attempt of mankind to bring the new body under its control. The power of the proletariat is the measure of its convalescence."³¹ When he was just a boy, Volodia, who wishes now to become a "remarkably indifferent, proud" machine, saved Andrei from ex-

ecution.³² Andrei graphically describes what lot awaited him, had it not been for Volodia: “They were supposed to put the back of my head down on an anvil and bash my face with a hammer.”³³ Such violence would have turned Andrei’s face into a formless mass of flesh and bone. Volodia, by turning his body into a machine, covers his flesh with an armor, thus reenacting again and again his salvation of Andrei, himself, and by extension, the whole of weak, fragile humanity. Andrei’s body is all flesh; it seems that the broken branch of a scar has marked, even contaminated his flesh, preventing him from tempering and protecting himself. Hence he needs the protection of Volodia, whose body, by contrast, is a perfect specimen of masculinity and mechanicity.

In his habitual routines of physical exercise and his suppression of sexual desire, Volodia embodies the ideal of masculine young manhood. Hal Foster in his essay “Armor Fou” discusses the proto-fascist ideal of a soldierly body of World War I, which “is steeled, its psychic and physical mutilation disavowed.”³⁴ In the Soviet context, the man-machine aesthetics cultivates the same ideal of an armored, perfect masculine body. Klaus Theweleit in *Male Fantasies* explains how the fascist ideal of the body as armor serves to protect the damaged ego from the threat of dissolution. Psychic stability is achieved by reconfiguring the body as a weapon against one’s own vulnerabilities—sexuality, the unconscious, that is, “threatening” aspects of the psyche that limit its strength and endurance—which are in the process embodied in the other against whom the fascist directs his aggression. Theweleit further notes that fascist discourse encodes these sexual drives and unconscious desires—the underpinnings both of vulnerability and the conception of the other—as feminine.³⁵ The most conspicuous loss in *Envy*, although never explicitly mentioned, is the absence of mothers. Weak mothers, among whom the most archetypal is nature herself, could not survive the technological age with its ferocious violence. The new steely state represses the loss and integrates it into a plot of its making. Andrei’s Quarter in a way attempts to fill the gap, not, as Ivan predicts, to divest of the mother, but to compensate for her loss.³⁶

In his letter to Andrei, Volodia describes his transformation into a machine in rather visceral, violent terms: “I’ve turned into a machine. The machines here are beasts. Thoroughbreds! Remarkably indifferent, proud machines . . . Envy toward the machine that’s taken hold—that’s what it is! How am I worse than it? We invented it, created it, but it turned out much more ferocious than we.”³⁷ The aspect of the machine Volodia most admires, aspiring to adopt it as his own, is its ferociousness, which will manifest itself in aggression; here Volodia implicitly means aggression toward those who do not fit into the new society: early in the letter he was proselytizing indiffer-

Olesha's Suicide Machine

ence and cruelty toward people such as Ivan and Kavalerov. The overt exhibition of aggression toward these representatives of the new epochal other masks the violence Volodia imposes on himself, and his own weakness. It is, after all, his own body that he wishes to temper, to change, to restrain. The letter reveals that the new man shares with Kavalerov a common flaw. Feelings of envy are not foreign to him; machines make him recognize his own inferiority. But this weakness would be impossible to notice in this steely athlete were it not for Kavalerov, who as an embodiment of envy, magnifies Volodia's flaw by association.

The presence of Kavalerov alone is enough to disturb Andrei's strong belief in the future idyll, to question the strength of his new man Volodia. On the night when Andrei rescues the drunk Kavalerov by picking him up off the street, the food trust director's *joie de vivre* is shaken and he has a nightmare in which his adopted son hangs himself on a large telescope. All of Andrei's repressed fears and Volodia's repressed desires find their home in Kavalerov. What Andrei and Volodia deny to themselves and conceal from the view of others, Kavalerov puts out on display.

Ivan recognizes the mechanism by which Kavalerov's sheer presence imperils Andrei's utopia. Valuing Kavalerov precisely for his ability to expose that which Andrei and Volodia would rather hide, Ivan urges his protégé to "make a scandal"; thus would Andrei's scar be metaphorically transferred from his covered body—the private sphere, where the scar is visible only to those attuned, like Kavalerov, to their own and others' weakness and duplicity—out into the open, onto this productive man's face. Rather than "reconcile" himself, Ivan tells Kavalerov, "You have to leave with a bang. Slam the door as they say. There is the main thing: to leave with a bang. So that a scar remains on the mug of history."³⁸ This traumatized face of history would stand as a reminder, we understand, of Andrei's would-be execution (by skull-smashing), of his fragile self, and of the blood and guts on which the new world has been founded.

GOING BEYOND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

This mechanism of exposing hidden vulnerability is at the heart of Ivan's dysfunctional machine. Animated, Ophelia enacts the return of the repressed. Ophelia, the emblem of loss and trauma, demonstrates that these signs of human weakness cannot be so easily purged from the new society. In an age that attempts to disown its psychic and physical wounds by embracing the ideal of the healthy mechanistic body, Ophelia is a mechanism gone wild, a mechanism deployed against the social order that produced it.

In Ivan's description, Ophelia injects the feminine element back into the masculine new world. Her chaotic and irrational feminine presence threatens and crushes Andrei. Ophelia does not need to have a concrete manifestation. Her invisibility and immateriality make her unconquerable. Invisible, her specter haunts the novella, disturbing Ivan, appearing in Kavalarov's nightmares, and worrying Andrei. Despite Andrei's attempts to laugh Ivan off, the trust director is profoundly disturbed by his brother, whom he declares "a harmful, infectious man."³⁹ Ivan is a reminder of Andrei's family, his biology, and their dead brother. Characteristically, the discord between the two brothers begins when Ivan brings up the subject of the third brother's execution. Ivan irreverently makes a joke of it, pointing out that martyrdom was a desirable quality in the old world. Andrei cannot come up with a retort. He has nothing to say on the subject of his brother's death. It is a subject that he would prefer to leave alone.

Ivan, as we know, is haunted by death, dwelling like Hamlet in constant thought of it, and ultimately thrust by it into final passivity in the end. To account for Ivan's psychological portrait, we might consult Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, written shortly after World War I and based on Freud's study of ex-soldiers who kept reliving the shock and trauma they experienced during their encounter with new war technologies. Freud explains how, under the onslaught of these new technologies, the shield that protects the body against excessive stimuli gets pierced; how by replaying the unpleasant experience, war victims attempt to "master the stimulus, retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis."⁴⁰ Freud goes on to compare war neurosis to the play of his grandchild, who attempts to master his mother's departure by throwing away his toys and screaming "gone." Freud calls such a psychic trauma "a narcissistic scar," a permanent injury to self-regard. The desire to get rid of the pain manifests itself as the desire to reexperience it.

Ivan Babichev constantly engages in various forms of masochism. As a child, he liked to tease his pragmatic father with his new inventions, knowing well that this would only lead to his whipping. One of the inventions is a machine that, young Ivan insists, can "evoke in anyone—by order—any dream."⁴¹ The dream his father chose to see was, tellingly, the battle of Pharsalus, a scene of violence. Despite the little boy's desire to win his father's respect, these particular games lead only to the replay of the trauma that the distance between him and his father caused Ivan.

As for the adult Ivan's masochism, the application of Freud's analysis of psychic war trauma is particularly fitting because it is precisely under the stimulus of war that Ivan has shifted from the profession of an engineer—a constructive, positively marked occupation—to that of an inventor of the

death machine Ophelia: "Ivan worked as an engineer in the town of Nikolaev near Odessa at the naval plant right until the beginning of the European war. Then . . ."⁴² The ellipsis here is key, suggesting the irreparable change, the unspeakable that has transformed Ivan into what he is now. The naval profession might have led Ivan to construct something like Andrei's Quarter, which appears to Kavalerov in a dream in the form of a sailing ship. Instead, Ivan chooses to occupy his days with such amusements as drawing portraits and memorizing lines. These pursuits, however, only seem trifling; in reality they cast Ivan in the role of steward of memory and revealer of knowledge: in his portraits his subjects can confront themselves. Ivan might have learned from his childhood that when he confronts others with his truth, it usually results in himself getting hurt. And yet Ivan thrives on this pain, constructing the entirety of his postwar life on the principle of confrontation. For Freud, sadism and masochism are two sides of one coin: both exemplify a desire to master the object, but while one is directed outward, the other is inward bound. Ultimately both exhibit the workings of the damaged narcissistic ego. When Ivan the child attacks a beautiful young girl, his horrible act of aggression reveals his damaged self:

I grabbed her by the back of the head and knocked her forehead against a column several times. At that moment I loved this girl more than life, worshipped her—and hated her with all my might. Tearing the beauty's curls I thought that I'd shame her, disperse her pinkness, her brilliance, and thought that I'd correct the mistake made by everyone. But nothing came of it. The shame fell on me. I was driven out.⁴³

Ivan must realize that in creating Ophelia, he has simply brought to life his memory of the disfigured, beaten young girl. And so, with his invention of the dysfunctional machine, he commits an act of violence primarily against himself rather than against his brother. Kavalerov's nightmare in which Ophelia pierces Ivan is in fact the realization of the death wish. In it, Ivan and Kavalerov both experience the reenactment of the original trauma. But their injury is a reflection of the damage sustained by humanity in the process of building the new world.

This process of revealing the mechanisms behind and the effects of creating a utilitarian, machinistic, indifferent world is as restorative as it is disruptive. Revealing this damage to public view, Ivan and Kavalerov in fact turn it into a scar on the mug of history, a wound that must not be forgotten. Their situation at the end of the novella points to the success of their mission. By becoming indifferent and succumbing to the allure of a cavernous landlady's bed, they achieve death. Their abject bodies irreparably damage the

Alternative Technologies

purity of the communal body of the new state. It is hard to imagine a more forceful rebellion against the enforced new world discourse of healthful life than the protagonists' self-annihilation at the end of the novella, and a more effective subversion of the ideals of the mechanistic physical and utilitarian social bodies than the one enacted by the imaginary, irrational Ophelia.

PART III

The Homeland of Technology

Convention, Play, and Technology in Russian Explorers' American Discoveries

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*

This was no time for play.
This was no time for fun.
This was no time for games.
There was work to be done.

—Dr. Seuss, *The Cat in the Hat Comes Back*

IN RUSSIAN, the idiomatic expression “to discover America” is typically ironic, uttered in response to an obvious statement. “Well, you have just discovered America” is thus not praise, but a rebuke. Rendering this idiom so effectively trenchant is precisely the inclusion of both the metaphorical and literal meanings of America; the interlocutor has failed to surprise with his or her “new” discovery, and is also pointedly reminded of a successful attempt to find something novel, that is, the real “New World.” The title of Vladimir Mayakovsky’s travelogue *Moe otkrytie Ameriki* (*My Discovery of America*) sounds, in this regard, at once self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating; the qualifier “my” literalizes the idiomatic metaphor, thus destabilizing its meaning. The tension between literal and metaphorical Americas will be the focus of this chapter.

Americanization as it appeared in the early Soviet politico-economic sphere was the discourse of pure utility. In the 1920s Americanization, or the technologization and industrialization of Russian culture, had very specific goals. In contrast to many other Soviet techno-dreams, the rapid transfer of technology from the United States to Soviet Russia in the 1920s, both

actual machines and know-how (specifically, Fordism and Taylorism), had an unbreakable rationale about it which had to do with a pragmatic short-term agenda of economic survival (rather than the long-term goals of an ideological buttress). As this chapter will demonstrate, however, America was not just an advanced country with the resources that Russia needed, but also a long-standing literary conceit whose array of meanings ranged from such ideas as freedom, an escape from stilted bourgeois Europe, outlandish adventures, and newly formed attitudes toward life to flexible identity, self-refashioning, fulfillment of dreams, and death and regeneration. This imaginary America, in contrast to the country itself, also had technologies, but they were conceived less as machines for manufacturing things with a use-value at work and home and more as vehicles of discovery, miraculous conduits through which all the previously stated ideas could be advanced. And so, when a former futurist and Soviet avant-gardist, Vladimir Mayakovsky, intent on serving the interests of the Soviet state which he aspired to represent, would embark on his trip to the actual country of America, he found himself in the aperture between America the real and America the imaginary, between official Soviet rhetoric and his own personal yearnings.

THE POETIC POTENTIAL OF AMERICAN TECHNOLOGY

It would be no discovery of America to note that at the beginning of the last century, European avant-gardists concentrated their search for the new amidst the cubist landscapes of the American metropolis. As early as 1912, Arthur Cravan could exclaim: “New-York! New-York! Je voudrais t’habiter!/J’y vois la science qui se marie./A l’industrie,/Dans une audacieuse modernité.”¹ Russian artists contributed to the cultivation of the image of America as a laboratory for testing desirable and undesirable futures. Technological prowess was always integral to the mythology of America, playing a major role in the country’s becoming synonymous with modeling the future. Well before Eccentrics, constructivists,² and Taylorists began promoting various aspects of Americanism, the poet Konstantin Bal’mont traveled to America, devoting a lyric to the breathless exaltation he experienced upon riding New York’s elevated train, which in this context stands for the metaphysical striving of humanity forward and upward:

I race along the aerial railroad
In mighty New York. The ocean is close by.
Hovels whizz past; palaces whizz past.

I race along the aerial railroad—
And the heart rejoices in the iron lie.

Machines, machines. A victory over height.
A twining of metal. Patterns of networks.
I glance in silence like a lurking lynx.
I am willingly surrounded by the free height.
And there, beneath me, is a panorama of people.

The road mounts higher and higher;
There, in the windows, I see an innumerable quantity of eyes.
The gaze surpasses the lofty rooftops.
The road mounts higher and higher.
Aspiration, where are you taking us?³

Around the same time, Maksim Gorky published his essay “Gorod zheltogo d’iavola” (“The City of the Yellow Devil,” 1906), wherein this same elevated train provokes quite a different reaction. So far from embodying the human spirit in its striving for freedom from the shackles of reality, in Gorky’s reading the train only oppresses its embittered rider: “Chased by the rabid run of the train cars, the air blows people’s clothes and hair about; hits them in the face with a hot, stifling wave; shoves them; pounds thousands of sounds into their ears; throws fine, acrid dust into their eyes, blinding them; deafens them with its long drawn-out, endless howling.”⁴ Nature here seems to be in cahoots with technology, conspiring with it against human beings to overwhelm their senses. Earlier in the piece, Gorky alludes to the deceptive nature of dazzling American technology, which in his view does not liberate humanity, but violates it; it does not, à la biomechanics, extend the physical capabilities of people, but assaults and incapacitates them. Bal’mont remarks upon technological deception as well, dubbing the elevated train and its effect of victory over space an “iron lie”—yet he finds this lie joyful and, figuratively and literally, sustaining.

In his essay “Tekhnicheskii progress kak kul’turologicheskaiia problema” (“Technical Progress as a Culturological Problem”), Iurii Lotman notes that technology’s amorality, its ability to serve morally good or ill ends alike, was a popular concern already in the time of the Renaissance. “The development of science, technology, and all the spheres of knowledge,” Lotman elaborates, “did not diminish the irrational unpredictability of life as a whole, but instead increased it.”⁵ This technological ambiguity seems to appeal to Bal’mont but infuriates Gorky, whose initial awe before seemingly miraculous machines quickly gives way to utter disillusionment with their perplexing inconstancy. And yet, despite technology’s inability to overcome the unpredictability of life,

or, more precisely, despite its reflection, or even exacerbation, of this unpredictability, it was commonly prophesied that technological America embodied Russia's bright future. Aleksandr Blok, for one, makes such a prediction in his lyric "Novaia Amerika" ("The New America," 1913), which begins with a descriptive survey of rural Russia, evoking images of stillness, emptiness, and death. The allusion to a holiday amidst a snowy landscape, however, presages resurrection, and Blok reincarnates Russia into a liberatingly youthful industrialized nation: "You are the same as before, and yet not,/You have turned to me with a new countenance,/A different dream rouses me." The new face Russia has revealed to the poet is that of industrialized America: "The coal moans, the salt gleams white,/And the iron ore wails . . . /The star of a new America/Has begun to shine unto me over the barren steppe!"⁶ The Russian steppe has its equivalent in the American Great Plains; to place a factory in the steppe is to underscore the kinship between these two nations, and to intimate the hope that the still-agrarian nation will follow the example of the industrialized one. Just like Russia, the United States is associated with vast expanses, and American technology intrigued Russians in large part because of its ability to transform, utilize, fill, and poeticize space. *Horror vacui* seems in this context to have a profound connection to technological optimism.

The yuletide overtones of Blok's lyric suggest that Russia's reincarnation into a new America should be read as a spiritual rebirth. The path toward Americanization is a path away from Russia's Asiatic past. The poet joyfully elaborates: "No, forelocks don't flutter in the wind there,/In the steppes, it is not the staffs of Cossack hetmans that catch the eye . . . /There the factory smokestacks show black,/There the factory whistles wail."⁷ The belief evinced here in industry's potential to rejuvenate culture was noted by a writer for the trade publication *Gorno-zavodskoe delo* (*Mining Business*), who, quoting Blok's final lines about the beckoning star of the new America, remarks: "It is imperative that this bright, life-giving idea of the great spiritual meaning of industry penetrate all layers of the Russian population."⁸ Readers, then, clearly understood Blok's message regarding the need to follow America's industrial lead, and yet later, in an introduction to "Vozmezdie" ("Retribution"), the poet takes pains to clarify that he meant to invoke America strictly as symbol: "Just as coal turns to diamond, Russia is turning into a new America—a new one, not the old one."⁹ Blok's qualification exposes the tension between the simplicity of "America" as a shorthand for the youthful promise of modernity and, on the other hand, the fraughtness of allusion to the actual United States, a country with which Russians have historically had a complicated relationship. How did America become the self-explanatory symbol Blok's usage in the poem cited above implies it is? And why did Blok nevertheless feel the need subsequently to differentiate

between the symbol and the country itself? To answer these questions, we turn to the ways in which America figured in Russian public and poetic discourses of the nineteenth century.

AMERICA EMERGES ON THE RUSSIAN LITERARY MAP

In *America in Modern European Literature*, Richard Ruland argues that America as a literary trope typically functions “as the indictment of the stale and artificial life of Europe.”¹⁰ This is precisely how America first appears in the Russian literary canon, in Radishchev’s ode “Vol’nost” (“Liberty”), inspired by the American colonies’ victorious struggle for independence from Britain, and later incorporated into the author’s protest against autocracy and serfdom, *Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu* (*A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, 1790).¹¹ It was relatively rare for Russians to travel to the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the closer abroad of Europe being preferred. Thus the perception of America that had solidified by the middle of the nineteenth century was based especially on borrowed knowledge, primarily from American literature, for example, the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Further, Alexis de Tocqueville’s detailed account of the American political system, *Democracy in America* (1835–40), based on the author’s observations during his travels through the United States, greatly influenced Russian intelligentsia attitudes toward that country. The first volume of Tocqueville’s explication of political ideology concludes with a paragraph comparing America to Russia:

There are at the present time two great nations in the world which started from different points, but seem to tend towards the same end. I allude to the Russians and the Americans. Both of them have grown up unnoticed; and while the attention of mankind was directed elsewhere, they have suddenly placed themselves in the front rank among the nations, and the world learned their existence and their greatness at almost the same time.¹²

The comparison is followed by a listing of the considerable differences between the two great nations: American promotion of individual opportunity is placed against Russia’s centralization of authority; American freedom against Russian servitude. Appearing at the time of debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers on the proper path of Russia’s development, the book suggested a third alternative: identification with neither the Slavic/Asiatic past nor western Europe, but with youthful, up-and-coming America. The Russian educated elite was captivated by Tocqueville’s words on the parallel destinies of these two ever-expanding nations, and wondered whether America

could provide a model for reforms in Russian governance. For his part, Alexander Pushkin hailed Tocqueville's book, but interpreted it in a peculiar way: in the poet's reading, American democracy comes across as cynical and tyrannical. Pushkin laments that in America, selfishness and love of comfort apparently stifle everything honorable and noble in the human soul.¹³

In the 1840s, a different lesson from Tocqueville was drawn by thinkers on the left, in whose writings on the subject, as David Hecht notes in his study *Russian Radicals Look to America*, predominated the idea of American exceptionalism. Aleksandr Herzen, for instance, a liberal and Westernizer, wrote copiously on America, portraying it as a singular land of opportunity, a vigorous society boasting flexible class borders and democratic self-government.¹⁴ Hecht notes the irony by which, "thirty years after de Tocqueville's classic study, American democracy, plunging rapidly into the pit of the 'Gilded Age,' was still a beacon of light and a source of optimism in the thought of this Russian radical."¹⁵

Nikolai Chernyshevsky was never able to travel to America, but studied it extensively and expressed detailed observations on its pluses and minuses. In the conclusion of *Chto delat?* (*What Is to Be Done?*, 1863), the mysterious American Charles Beaumont appears to provide a mouthpiece for Chernyshevsky's thoughts on the virtues of the United States. American practicality is favorably contrasted to the brooding passivity of Russian intellectuals, and that country's progress vis-à-vis the "woman question" is touched upon. However, when Beaumont's Russian fiancée, having learned that American women are freer to occupy themselves with meaningful tasks than their Russian counterparts, expresses the wish to emigrate to America, Beaumont reproves her, asserting that one can find something useful to do in Russia as well. It is subsequently revealed that Beaumont is none other than the heroine Vera Pavlovna's first husband Lopukhov, who under the guise of committing suicide had departed for America. Rejuvenated and empowered, he has returned to Russia to introduce the principles underlying American prosperity and democracy to his old country. Thus, Chernyshevsky advocates not an escape to America, but rather America's importation to Russia, resulting in a peculiar hybrid of the two nations.

Chernyshevsky's literary nemesis, Fyodor Dostoevsky, held a diametrically opposed view. For Chernyshevsky, escape to America is a temporary measure, with Americanization providing a viable alternative to suicide and extinction; for Dostoevsky, the move to America is final, and tantamount to self-annihilation. Thus in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (*Crime and Punishment*, 1867) does Svidrigailov reverse Lopukhov's move, threatening to emigrate to America but instead committing suicide. In *Besy* (*Demons*, 1871–72), Shatov and Kirilov both perish because of their travels in America; it is in that country that they conceive particular theories that, their differences notwithstanding,

standing, lead their adherents alike to the same fatal end. In his reminiscences, Shatov ironically mentions that “we Russians were like little children compared with the Americans”¹⁶—a reference, in this context, to American superiority in social and economic development, but also hinting at a Russian innocence that is lost in the United States. Insofar as Kirilov and Shatov, involved in socialist, progressive politics, pursue in their American travels an education in workers’ communal living, the lost innocence implied by Dostoevsky is part of the author’s program of polemicizing against socialism.

In *Brat’ia Karamazovy* (*The Brothers Karamazov*, 1879–80), Dostoevsky returns to the theme of America as a refuge of lost souls, criminals, and outcasts. Bearing little but antipathy for America, Dmitrii Karamazov hopes to escape thereto so as to expiate his sins through hard work, and eventually return home renewed. But in this fantasy of escape and return, Karamazov’s planned American sojourn, or purgatory, is not a happy prospect, and voyaging home undetected would require first officially reincarnating himself as an American, a transformation he finds detestable: “I already hate that America! Though they may be, every last one of them, brilliant engineers, the hell with them—they’re not my people, they are not of my soul.”¹⁷ To become an American means to become steeped in technology, hence, in Dostoevsky’s antimaterialist value system, to lose one’s soul and essence.¹⁸ Thus does Dostoevsky lament the technocratic impulse behind Russian interest in America; for Dmitrii, American technology means deception, even a violation of the self: “By that time I will have changed, and she [Grushen’ka] will as well. The doctors will make me some sort of fake wart; not for nothing are they all mechanics.”¹⁹ The connection between American mechanicity and falsehood is clear; in this rootless country, mechanization enhances a person’s uprootedness, altering him or her by way of irreparable divorce from one’s past and home. This uprootedness is not just spatial; it is, most crucially, spiritual. Dmitrii calls doctors “mechanics” to underscore their propensity to tinker with the body, treat it as a soulless machine, ignoring its connection with the spiritual. Facial mutilation bears demonic connotations, as Dostoevsky held the face/countenance (*litso, lik*) to be a reflection of the divine.²⁰ Technology, particularly its ambiguity and potentially amoral use, is thus integral to Dostoevsky’s understanding of America and his antipathy toward it.

CHANGE IS IN THE AIR

In the writings of the socialist reformer Chernyshevsky, America stands as an industrial and businesslike nation from which much can be learned: its telegraphs and railroads are better, faster, and more efficient than Russian

ones. Chernyshevsky's emphasis on American pragmatism, and the fact that his view of America is less romantic than that of his predecessors, can be explained by the general changes taking place in Russian attitudes toward and interaction with the United States. By the time of *What Is to Be Done?*,²¹ Russian engineers were engaged in the study of American railroading, and the first American agricultural machinery had appeared in Russian fields.²¹ Not that American technological proficiency was a new subject; already from the beginning of the nineteenth century, Russians read of the marvelous American innovation, the *stimbots*, in the ecstatic travel notes of the Russian diplomat Pavel Svinin, who further raves: "Mechanical devices have completely replaced human hands in the United States. There, everything is done by machines; they saw rocks, make bricks, hammer out nails, cobble shoes."²² Around 1849, Ivan Turgenev called Americans poets not of words, but of action, predicting such American technological achievements as the Panama Canal.²³ By the 1890s, when finance minister Count Sergei Witte sought to foster Russian-American trade, specifically in the interest of the industrialization and modernization of the empire, the trope of American technological progress, and the valorization thereof, had become a commonplace in discourses on Russian development. In an 1894 letter, for instance, Anton Chekhov praised two characteristically American achievements as more beneficial to mankind than homegrown Tolstoyanism: "There is more love for man in electricity and steam than there is in chastity and vegetarianism."²⁴ In 1899, upon visiting the United States, the famous chemist Dmitrii Mendeleyev urged Russians—well before Mayakovsky did the same—to catch up with America; the chase, he added, would be a boon to the Russian national spirit.²⁵ The Soviets, then, did not invent their Americanism, but rather continued nineteenth-century encomia of the moral and political value of the American model for Russian industrial development.

AMERICANISM AS SOVIET IDEOLOGY

In his study of "America in the Russian Mind," Hans Rogger analyzes the adoption of the image of America as a rallying point for Soviet industrialization, concluding that, unlike too-nebulous Marxism, Americanization met the need for (to use the phrase of Alexander Gerschenkron) an "industrializing ideology":

The use of America as slogan and watchword was . . . the deliberate employment of a device—in both senses of the word—which was thought to be more direct and effective in summoning forth the effort of the masses than the more abstract appeals of Marxist doctrine. The America of bread and rail-

roads, and now of Ford cars, radios, telephones, and all its other marvels and conveniences, was still a useful, perhaps a necessary, symbol for eliciting the enthusiasm and engaging the interest of the average citizen in the industrialization drive, even as American capitalism was said to be going to its doom.²⁶

The rhetoric of Americanization was sustained with a number of visual aids: Hollywood films filled the theaters, alluring audiences with screen fantasies of the success of the average man; tractors made Ford a household name, even among illiterate peasants, some of whom conceived of this maker of “iron horses” as a kind of divinity, in some cases naming their children after him;²⁷ and the Red Cross offered considerable food relief during the famine years 1921–22, filling Russians’ eyes with tears of gratitude toward the powerful and benevolent friend they had in America.²⁸

By the mid-1920s, with the new Soviet state’s ever-present valorization of modernity in all its forms, the image of America as a futuristic ideal spread beyond the exclusive domain of avant-garde artists, infiltrating mass culture. After the ravages of World War I and the Civil War, Russia strove to recover as quickly as possible, and so drew inspiration from a country whose relative youth was not a hindrance—far from it—to prosperity, whose “American dream” promised to reward the arduous present of Americanization, synonymous with modernization and industrialization. The United States even offered a specific ideology of industrial organization; Lenin, who throughout the 1910s had railed against Taylorism as the systematic exploitation of labor under capitalism, had by the early 1920s come to see the benefits it could offer in the socialist workplace.²⁹ Trotsky, too, accepted Taylorism “as a positive, creative force that could be applied to industry.”³⁰

Besides offering a solution to certain social and ideological problems (if industrialism is a form of ideology), the discourse of Americanization also served to supplement the actual technology, both machines and methods, at the time being imported from the United States. After World War I, Russia saw America as having taken over Germany’s former role as major supplier of technology; impelled by Lenin’s famous valorization of electrification, the Soviets had turned to General Electric for assistance as early as 1917. At the time, Americans furthermore took over the operation of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. In the 1920s, Americans became involved in the Soviet metallurgical, mining, and machine industries. A U.S. firm served as the sole foreign consultant on the construction of the Dnieper Dam, the equipment involved being exclusively American-supplied.³¹

America figured in the very essence of how the Soviet state conceived of technology. In 1918, on signing the Brest-Litovsk treaty with Germany, Lenin announced: “The war taught us much, not only that people suffered, but especially the fact that those who have the best technology, organiza-

tion, discipline and the best machines emerge on top. . . . It is essential to learn that without machines . . . it is impossible to live in modern society. It is necessary to master the highest technology or be crushed.”³² In this view, technology is not some marvel or means of exploring the world’s possibilities; it is the mastery of a hostile environment, helping human beings, who in their weakness suffer, to overcome their disadvantages. Significantly, the lesson Lenin draws from the war links technology intimately with coercive organization and discipline, with war and repression.

As early as 1920, Lenin perceived that Russians could benefit especially from American technology: “We will need American industrial goods—locomotives, automobiles, etc. more than those of any other country.”³³ But America’s status as the most technologically advanced nation was not the only reason to respect it. Kendall Bailes explains the particular Soviet interest in American as opposed to European technology: Lenin believed that by cultivating the United States as a trading partner, the fracture already existing between America and other capitalist countries could be widened; the geographic similarities between the two countries—their enormous size and resources, and their relative isolation—suggested that American industrial methods might be particularly well suited to Russia; Fordist and Taylorist techniques of mass production and standardization appealed to Soviet leaders, as did Ford’s ability to rely heavily on unskilled labor, which was in great supply in Russia; and finally, economic closeness to the United States could allow the Soviet Union to avoid debts to neighboring countries who might otherwise take advantage, and would also lessen dependence on the homegrown bourgeois technical intelligentsia, perceived as potentially unreliable.³⁴

Finally, the Soviet infatuation with American technological methods involved a certain, perhaps not so immediately obvious affinity of national ideologies. In “Americanism and Fordism” (1929–30), Antonio Gramsci compares “the American phenomenon” to Trotsky’s militarization of labor, and argues that Ford’s industrial techniques constitute “the biggest collective effort to date to create, with unprecedented speed, and with a consciousness of purpose unmatched in history, a new type of worker and man.” Referring to Ford’s prudish watch over his workers’ religious and moral propriety, Gramsci notes that “one should not be misled, any more than in the case of prohibition, by the ‘puritanical’ appearance assumed by this concern. The truth is that the new type of man demanded by the rationalization of production and work cannot be developed until the sexual instinct has been suitably regulated and until it too has been rationalized.”³⁵ No doubt this American emphasis on the labor-enabled creation of a new man, insofar as it was perceived as such, struck Soviet observers, preoccupied as they were with their

own fashioning of the new man, as an appropriate and applicable ideological by-product of productivity enhancement.

THEORIZING AMERICANIZATION

Distrusting Russian Americanization as a fad or even hysteria, Mikhail Levidov titles a 1923 *Lef* article “Amerikanizma tragifars” (“The Tragifarse of Americanism”), in which tragifarse, as Levidov here argues, lies in the American inability to forge a new man, despite all that country’s technical preconditions for such a metamorphosis. Levidov’s essay introduces an excerpt, published in this issue of *Lef*, from Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, in the process suggesting that the novel provides a true portrait of America and the failure of Americanization:

All external living conditions indeed have come together to create a human being of muscle, of sheer willpower and reason. Life is mechanized and standardized in order to minimize the waste of human energy, to avoid unproductive combustion, and to ensure maximum output. But where is this man of muscle, of willpower and reason? He is being treated not only for indigestion, but also for neurasthenia.³⁶

According to Levidov, neither those who espouse Americanization nor its opponents fully understand the tragifarse that marks this or any such developed capitalist form. The vague nineteenth-century anxiety of a Dostoevsky regarding the influence of the United States, the concern that American industrial technology might efface Russia’s largely rural national character, was now transformed into the pro-socialist denunciations of ruthless American capitalism. Dostoevsky from the right, and the socialist detractors from the left, mistrust America.

Despite Levidov’s desire in his piece to distinguish himself from previous commentators on Americanization, his position was not particularly new. Soviet theoreticians had typically argued that American technology and organizational methods could be separated from the capitalist system and put with great profit toward the construction of socialism. In 1918 Lenin wrote: “The possibility of building socialism depends exactly on our success in combining Soviet power and the Soviet organization of administration with the up-to-date achievements of capitalism. We must organize in Russia the study and teaching of the Taylor system, systematically testing it and adapting it to our ends.”³⁷ To Levidov’s credit, however, is the invocation of a dramatic concept, tragifarse, with regard to Russian Americanization, which

is fitting in light of the stereotypical predilection of Russians and Americans alike for the spectacular. To be sure, technology played a considerable role in imbuing Russian Americanization with visual grandeur. And yet, Levidov's position in another sense is unoriginal and unsurprising; despite criticizing the party's Americanism, his emphasis on the failure of capitalism to engender a technologically forged new man seems to stick close to the party line.

Constructivist theoretician and major *Lef* contributor Boris Arvatov provides a different view on Americanization in his essay “*Byt i kul’tura veshchi*” (“Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” 1925). Evidently in favor of Americanization, Arvatov diverges somewhat from the party line in his understanding of the goals this process should achieve. More interested than most in a serious study of the United States, Arvatov discerns in it what Levidov fails to see, namely, a technical intelligentsia. Arvatov's interest in the American technical intelligentsia is considerably less abstract than Levidov's focus on the new man (or lack thereof) who should be all muscles and no *poshlost'* (vulgarity). To Arvatov's thinking, the epitome of *poshlost'* is consumerism and the filtration of everything through the lens of instrumentality, whereas, Arvatov argues, the American technical intelligentsia practices a different and unique approach to the material environment, an approach Russians would be wise to adopt.

In this view, while bourgeois consumerism entails the passivity of objects, the American technical intelligentsia is characterized by a productivist attitude toward things, a creative contact by which objects interact with humans, ceasing to be mere commodities and standing, rather, as coworkers, co-creators, and friends. Objects boost human potential, and mediate between people and their environment. From the confines of the provincial mental hospital at which he was being treated for a “severe nervous breakdown,”³⁸ Arvatov imagines lustrous America and identifies with its technological intelligentsia, which in his view is indeed revolutionizing everyday life:

Thanks to the collectivization of its labor, the technical intelligentsia has now replaced its former everyday life with a new type, the everyday life of enormous offices, department stores, factory laboratories, research institutes, and so on. Its relation to the world is now formed not in a private apartment, but in the collective sphere, the sphere connected with material production. Furthermore, the collectivization of transport and of many of the material functions of city life (heating, lighting, plumbing, architectural building) led to the sphere of private everyday life being narrowed to the minimum and reformed under the influence of progressive technology.³⁹

Arvatov seems to suggest that mechanization necessarily leads to collectivization and the downfall of bourgeois values. The technological revolution

in America, he proposes, is an alternative to the political revolution having taken place in Russia; and although the results of the former are less rapid than those of the latter, they are nevertheless significant. Arvatov subsequently qualifies his argument, suggesting that these revolutionary tendencies have appeared in America only in embryo, whereas their true flourishing is possible only under socialism. But in light of Arvatov's admiration for the revolutionary lifestyle of the American technical intelligentsia, this gesture of deference to socialism seems perfunctory.

Arvatov conceives of American technologism as a particular form of imaginative production whereby all forms of material being (humans as well as raw and refined materials) self-realize not at the expense of one another, but only mutually, through interaction. According to Arvatov, this predisposition to harmony results not only in the formation of collective social identity, but in the “liquidation of the rupture between the material energies of society and nature,” already evident in electricity and the radio—phenomena in which human labor assists and organizes natural energy, while “nature in its pure form penetrates society and becomes *byt* [everyday life].”⁴⁰

Arvatov's Americanism evinces faith in “the imaginative potential of technology,” in the words of Christina Kiaer.⁴¹ This creative and exuberant interaction between technology, humans, and nature is a far cry from the conception of technology propagated by the state, which foregrounds exploitation and discipline. In Arvatov's worldview, the new man appears not as a result of the state's ideological impositions, but organically from the relationship between new things and nature. In this project, mythic America serves as a guidebook, with Arvatov exploring his own creative potential through his identification with the American technical intelligentsia. But some more mobile members of the Soviet intelligentsia were not satisfied with Arvatov's imaginary travels to the United States, wishing to see this legendary embodiment of the future for themselves.

TRAVELOGUES COMPOSE AMERICA

During the New Economic Policy (NEP), as advertisements for American products vied with propaganda posters for consumer attention, and as interest in the United States demanded ever-closer investigation of American phenomena, more and more Russians dared to undertake a pilgrimage to this mythic place, subsequently trying their hand at eyewitness accounts of the land others only dreamed about. The detailed inspection of the so-called new model for Russia, incited by the American craze, resulted in four travelogues of particular prominence: Esenin's *Zheleznyi Mirgorod* (*Iron Mirgorod*, 1923), Mayakovsky's *My Discovery of America* (1926), Pil'niak's *O'kei:*

Amerikanskii roman (*OK: An American Novel*, 1930), and Il'f and Petrov's *Odnoetazhnaiia Amerika* (*One-Storied America*, 1936). But these are only a few drops in the wave of American travelogues that hit the Russian press in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1928, the literary critic D. Tal'nikov lamented the proliferation of such travelogues, the “‘discoveries’ of Americas with which contemporary Nikolai Ivanoviches and Glafira Semenovnas are flooding the book market.”⁴² This allusion to Zoshchenko's uncultured protagonists is meant as a dig at Mayakovsky's style, which Tal'nikov criticizes as impressionistic. Tal'nikov expresses a preference for the unpretentious and informative accounts of literary nonprofessionals, praising, for instance, the travel notes of the engineer Dorfman (whom, however, the fact-loving Tal'nikov mistakenly calls Friedman), *V strane rekordnykh chisel: Ocherki Ameriki* (*In the Country of Record Numbers: Essays on America*), for the author's “serious and deeply felt, artistic impressions of what is happening in the West . . . in the technical sphere.”⁴³

In the 1920s, Russian travelogues about America focused especially on technology; while writers of travelogues about other countries described visits to natural and cultural points of interest, the gaze of the Russian traveler was drawn to American industrial landscapes. It is possible that elevated interest in technology determined the revival of the travelogue genre in the 1920s, as not only professional writers, but all who journeyed to the land of advanced technology in order to *nabirat'sia opyta* (gather experience) felt not only entitled but duty-bound to share their impressions. Many might earlier not have ventured to publicize their views of foreign people and cultures; but technology provided a subject fascinating to the reading public, regardless of a given traveler's writing experience or narrative skill. In 1925, Soviet Academy of Sciences vice-president V. A. Steklov gave his travel impressions in *Po Amerike i obratno* (*Through America and Back*), and in 1928 *Krasnaia nov'* published “Po shakhtam i zavodam Pensil'vanii” (“Through the Mines and Factories of Pennsylvania”).

For his part, Tal'nikov favors a sober, fact-heavy approach to travel writing, which, he considers, should not primarily entertain, but educate and edify. Mayakovsky fails, in his view, to provide an in-depth study of America, inserting too much of himself into his narrative; artistry stands in the way of clarity of presentation, and Mayakovsky's subjectivity obfuscates the view of America his notes might have unfolded before the reader. Ironically, Mayakovsky, rather than defending the use of subjectivity in this genre, agrees with the critic's emphasis on facticity and informativeness; produced in line with the general orientation toward factography among his associates at *Lef*, the poet's travelogue begins with the assertion: “I need to travel . . . Interaction with living things has almost completely replaced my reading of books.”⁴⁴

In his study of Mayakovsky's writings on America, Charles Rougle sug-

gests that the poet's shift of orientation from fantasy to reality, his desire to see America with his own eyes, was aroused by Esenin's open mockery of the inaccuracy of Mayakovsky's pretravel American themes. "How untalented Mayakovsky's poems about America are!" exclaims Esenin at the outset of his travel notes.⁴⁵ Capitalizing on his advantageous position, Esenin asserts that the miraculous reality of America must be seen with one's own eyes. Thus Mayakovsky may have made his own trip in part to "catch up and overtake" his challenger, hitherto a "mere" peasant poet, who had managed to visit the mythic homeland of industrialization ahead of the hymner of industrialization himself. Rougle traces the extent to which Mayakovsky's travelogue was influenced by Esenin's, how similar their choices are as to what should and should not be covered.⁴⁶ In his article "Migrant Selves and Stereotypes," Nigel Rapport uses a clever inversion ("I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't believed it")⁴⁷ to explain how much our perception of reality is formed by our preconceived notions of it; he then provides a list of his own ideas and beliefs about America which he readily concedes are stereotypical, indeed, which could not be otherwise. To what extent, then, do travelogues convey unadulterated firsthand impressions, as opposed to borrowing from received opinions on their subject? How fresh are impressions themselves, and how can we pinpoint the border between authentic and inauthentic experience? This distinction can be especially hard to make with regard to America, which, in Baudrillard's formulation, is hyperreality, a utopia that behaves as if it has already been achieved. "What you have to do," asserts Baudrillard, "is enter the fiction of America, enter America as fiction."⁴⁸ American technocracy is an integral part of its fictional status; travelogues about America, moreover, cannot but immerse themselves into an America cushioned by fictional composition, enveloped in a mythical haze.

GORKY'S AESTHETICIZATION OF AMERICA

Gorky's travelogue "The City of the Yellow Devil" (1906) not only follows a set of narrative rules and conventions associated with the image of America, but also molds these narrative strains into a single, subsequently influential image: a yellow monster devouring humanity. Gorky's descriptions of America in private letters diverge greatly from those given in his public essays. In one letter, he praises the United States as "a marvelous country for a man who can work and wants to work!" In another, he calls it "amazingly interesting. And *devilishly* [italics added] beautiful, which I didn't expect. About three days ago we took an automobile ride around New York—I tell you, what a sweet, powerful beauty there is on the banks of the Hudson!" In letters to Leonid Andreev, Gorky declares America "an amazing fantasy of stone, glass,

and iron” inhabited by “stormy souls full of wild energy.”⁴⁹ But in his travel notes, he creates a different picture entirely, a gothic, mystical realm oppressed by a horrific, dragon-like creature—the city of New York: “From the distance, the city seems like a huge jaw with uneven black teeth. It breathes clouds of smoke into the sky and wheezes like a glutton suffering from obesity. On entering it, you feel as if you have landed in a stomach made of stone and iron—a stomach that has swallowed several million people and is grinding and digesting them.”⁵⁰ In his memoirs, Andreev expresses surprise at this discrepancy. “The most remarkable thing is that while in his stories and articles about America Gorky wrote nothing but the very worst that could be said about the country he never told me anything but the very best about America.”⁵¹ And yet, what remains constant in Gorky’s conceptualizations of America, in pronouncements both public and private, is the country’s fantastic quality, its devilish powers of enticement.

Some critics have speculated that the author’s change of heart regarding America came about because the Hearst newspapers had publicized the fact that Gorky, having left his family back home, was traveling with his mistress, Mariia Andreeva. Others perceive a political imperative in Gorky’s public abhorrence of American capitalism. But despite being evicted from his hotel and assailed by the press, despite his status as defender of the down-trodden in the hell of capitalism, Gorky’s public statements on America seem to have less to do with personal or political considerations than with narrative convention. To portray America as a country of derelicts, outcasts, and exiles, who lead a miserable existence in soulless labor amidst inhuman conditions, is to continue a certain literary tradition. We have already noted Dostoevsky’s implication that the American lure is somehow fantastic and demonic. To portray electricity as false beauty, as “City of the Yellow Devil” does, is to agree with Dostoevsky’s perception of American technology as deceptive; to portray New Yorkers as “ground up” in the belly of a city-monster is to concur with Dostoevsky’s warnings about the techno-annihilation of Russian character in the United States, and to hark to Vladimir Korolenko’s 1896 portrayal of America as a “factory of death,”⁵² populated by living yet doomed animals and by deadly, automaton-like human beings.⁵³

Gorky’s travel notes, then, do not seem to foreground objectivity and facticity. The travelogue is a literary exercise that wraps Gorky’s ideas and impressions in a fairy-tale vocabulary and employs self-reflexive, indulgent language as a separator between America, Gorky, and his readers. The text is masterfully constructed such that everything in it serves the needs of a single theme—that of consumption: the skyline that resembles a jaw; the streets as “slippery, greedy throats”;⁵⁴ the elevated train, “wailing and roaring”⁵⁵ as if in hunger; and finally, the electricity, which at first seems beautiful, but is in

time revealed to be “a large lump of Gold, squealing voluptuously . . . [that] sucks people’s blood and marrow.” This visceral metaphor of bodily sacrifice to a sharp-toothed monster is at the core of this strange hymn to America: “The vile sorcery hypnotizes their souls; it makes people pliable tools in the hand of the Yellow Devil, the ore from which he tirelessly melts Gold, his flesh and blood.”⁵⁶

The essay ends with the image of a thief prowling the night city: “It is good to see a man who feels alive inside the black nets of the city.”⁵⁷ There is something forbidden, taboo about this nightmarish city, something Gorky’s text seems to yearn for. That is, contrary to the ostensible censure, the text’s indulgent, energetic descriptions and lavish, sensual metaphors perversely arouse deep desires, seemingly inviting the reader of this sadomasochistic fantasy of America to crave the status of that mysterious yellow deity’s next victim. Gorky’s text, then, perpetuates the myth of America and its representative city as a soulless, demonic force, yet at the same time, one whose pull cannot be resisted. Despite this mixed message, Gorky’s powerful descriptions and exuberant verbiage left an indelible mark on posterity’s perception of the city. Later, in Boris Pil’niak’s *OK* (1930), the author travels in Gorky’s footsteps to Coney Island, seeing it through the prism of Gorky’s memorable descriptions, and deplored it as vociferously as his famous predecessor—in this travelogue he subtitles amorously, *amerikanskii roman*.⁵⁸

ESENIN’S AMERICAN METAMORPHOSIS

The literariness with which Gorky approached America—its fantastic qualities, and its amenability to being thematized—allowed for his followers’ imaginative renditions of the same subject, and no doubt influenced Mayakovsky’s marvelous image of America in his epic poem “150,000,000,” and Esenin’s pinpointing of a defining metaphor with which to title his travelogue *Iron Mirgorod*. The latter title practically concedes that Esenin’s America is as much a literary creation as Gogol’s Mirgorod, although the qualification of “iron” suggests that, like Gogol’s city, this imaginary construct bears some resemblance to the actual place.⁵⁹ For Esenin, a rural poet trying to find his place in the new proletarian, steely Russia, the trip to America is akin to an initiation; hence, perhaps, the openness with which Esenin admits the personal nature of his reflections on America.

Just as Dmitrii Karamazov desired escape to America so as to change, because his beloved Russia did not want him the way he was, Esenin travels to the United States with his brand-new American wife, Isadora Duncan, so that he might be transformed into someone more acceptable to his home-

land. His travelogue begins: “Yes, I returned a different person.” Further, he echoes: “My vision was refracted particularly after America.” “The world I had lived in before,” he eventually confesses, “seemed terribly funny and absurd.” Already on the way to America, the poet tells us, aboard an enormous ship—an amazing example of technology he seems to compare ruefully to the living standard of Russia, with its villages of “dirt” and “lice”—“I stopped loving beggarly Russia . . . From that day on I fell even more deeply in love with the building of communism. I may not be close to the communists as a romantic in my poems, but I am close to them intellectually and I hope I will perhaps be close to them in my works as well.”⁶⁰ Esenin realized that to accept America is to participate in mass and state Americanism, hence to grow closer to the new reality at home.

The description of the famed New York skyline was already for Korolenko and Gorky a literary requirement that neither could forego. Being itself something of a literary creation, neither Esenin nor, in his own subsequent travelogue, Mayakovsky, can address their impressions of it without reference to its previous literary representations. Seemingly the first thought that comes to Esenin’s mind when the impressive skyline appears on the horizon is of Mayakovsky, specifically, the inferiority of the imaginary vision of America as seen in Mayakovsky’s poems. American technology arouses in Esenin pity for all those back home who dared to fantasize, but whose fantasy has proved wanting in comparison to American reality: “Your dear old dumb homegrown Russian urbanists and electrifiers in poetry! Your ‘smithies’ and your LEFs are like Tula compared to Berlin or Paris.”⁶¹ Esenin keeps returning to the notion of America as a defiant challenge to the Russian imagination: “In Russia our streets are too dark for us to understand what the electric light of Broadway is.”⁶² The picture of the United States that arises from Esenin’s description is of an anti- or otherworld, a world so distinct from Russian reality as to be inconceivable to anyone not witnessing it firsthand: “One must experience the actual life of industry in order to become its poet. Our Russian reality can’t yet ‘cut the mustard,’ as they say, and so I am amused by poets who base their poems on the pictures in bad American magazines.”⁶³ The American miracle is a mystery, at once ostentatious and clandestine, into which only a few fortunate ones have been initiated: “The smoke evokes a feeling of mystery; beyond these buildings something so great and enormous is taking place it takes your breath away.”⁶⁴

Why does Esenin harp upon the extent to which America outstrips Russian poets’ imaginings of it? Perhaps because for Esenin, American reality, with its outlandish, exotic, extravagant technology, is poetic. Technology is poetic in its ability to stir the imagination, but also in its very conception. When Esenin admires technology as evidence of human potential, it is precisely its creative capacity that he has in mind; thus his insistence on crediting

the individual most responsible for conceiving of such a miracle, rather than the masses who have implemented it:

The huge machine-culture that has created America's glory is exclusively the result of the labor of industrial masters and does not in the slightest resemble an organic manifestation of the genius of a people . . . If we speak of the culture of electricity, all vision in this sphere will stop at the person of Edison. He is the heart of this country. If this genius had not existed at this time, the culture of radio and electricity might have appeared much later and America wouldn't have been as great as it is now.⁶⁵

The romantic rhetoric of the lone genius who divines lofty mysteries and begets new realities has long been associated with poets. Applying this rhetoric to the engineer and inventor, Esenin seems to single out Edison's achievements (and the feats of a few others like him) so as to disconnect such an individual not only from Russians but also, even primarily, from Americans. Esenin's hymning of American technological might thus has an ingenious twist; he attempts to disassociate the miracle from America, rendering it both universal and autonomous, belonging to all and none, existing for all and above all, a completely free entity. This way he can claim Broadway as "ours"—"Moscow takes a while to be built. Meanwhile let's talk a little bit of Broadway from the point of view of large designs. After all, this street is ours too."⁶⁶—and at the same time bemoan American philistinism, as if technological mastery does not signify American cultural creativity or specificity, as if technological achievements do not connote any tangible presence. (Indeed, "in the specifically American milieu, there is the absence of any presence.")⁶⁷ With characteristically poetic illogicality, Esenin concludes paradoxically: the free, progressive phenomenon of technology confines Americans, causing their regression:

The strength of reinforced concrete and the mass of the buildings have limited the American's brain and narrowed his vision. The American's manners recall the manners of Ivan Ivanovich and Ivan Nikiforovich, of eternal Gogolian memory. As the latter knew no better town than Poltava, so the former know no better or more cultured country than America.⁶⁸

The oracles of technology, then, do not free the masses from their fetters, do not enlighten people as oracles of poetry have been thought to do in the past. In place of enlightenment, the oracles of technology bring lazy comfort, false joy, oblivious relief from difficult truths. The inconsistency that allows Esenin to begin with the enhancement of his own vision via American technology, and to end to the effect that the latter clouds the vision of others—

this paradox may reflect the ambiguity of the technological phenomenon; or the writer's bowing to two gods simultaneously: Russian literary tradition, with its stably suspicious conceptions of America and technological progress, and official Soviet discourse, with its praise of American industry.

American travelogues could thus measure their originality by the extent to which they resist America's familiarity. In the preceding pages, I examined the myth of America, the image of the United States as formed before and during the 1920s, and the manner in which this image was creatively transformed and utilized in various political and aesthetic discourses. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to examining how these discourses found reflection and resistance in Mayakovsky's writings on America.

BASE SUPERSTRUCTURES AND THE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES OF MAYAKOVSKY'S AMERICA

While America was colonizing the Soviets' conception of their own future, and American tractors were penetrating the Russian countryside, Vladimir Mayakovsky set out on his own mission to conquer America in turn. A futurist-urbanist and faithful servant of the new state, the poet found himself at the crossroads of various discourses surrounding America as an aesthetic, moral, and technological ideal. Analyzing the trajectory of Mayakovsky's relationship to America, I aim to shed light on the points of divergence between the revolutionary poet's and the revolutionary state's visions of the future. This discord, which neither side welcomed, manifests itself in incompatible conceptions and applications of the metaphor of technology.

Mayakovsky's 1925 journey to America was not the beginning of his relationship with that country; it was, in fact, its culmination. The trip was to serve either as a final refutation, or a final confirmation, of the potency of his artistic vision: "I did not go to America so that I could write about her, but because I had written about her."⁶⁹ The real America was supposed to present conclusive evidence of his victory over the imaginary America of his verse. The self-proclaimed "plenipotentiary of Soviet poetry"⁷⁰ had some rather personal reasons for this pilgrimage. Much of Mayakovsky's pre-trip poetry exploring the American terrain brings forth a narrative of epic proportions. Each poem tells of the poet's movement through the world, conquering everything in his path, and finally reaching America, his most-desired destination. In "Ei!" the poetic persona sails to America in a steamship; in "Potriasaiushchie faktы" ("Amazing Facts"), he makes his way aboard a literally floating Flying Dutchman; in "Letaiushchii proletarii" ("The Flying Proletarian"), in an underwater aero, a prototype of a submarine; and in

“150,000,000” he eschews any existing or mythical mode of transportation in favor of traveling to America on foot.

This seemingly compulsive repetition suggests some deep-rooted desire whose realization is the more fulfilling the further it is postponed. On several occasions, Mayakovsky called “150,000,000” an *Iliad* of the revolution, and superficially speaking, this epic is a political tract on the battle between two economic systems: the poem proposes solving the postwar hunger problem by invading the prosperous United States. But on a deeper level, this *Iliad* proves to have its own Helen of Troy; America appears in the role of an “electro-dynamo-mechanical” Helen. Before relating the cosmic battle between the Russian socialist man-god Ivan, a personified conglomeration of hungry workers, and Woodrow Wilson, champion of capitalism and composite of the sated bourgeoisie, Mayakovsky describes the booty at stake by cataloguing the beauties of Chicago:

The earth, assembling a quintet from the parts of the world,
endowed it [America] with magical powers.
In it a city stands on a single screw,
all electro-dynamo-mechanical.
In Chicago there are 14,000 streets—rays of the sun-squares.
700 lanes, each the length of a year-long train ride, branch out from
every street.⁷¹

The parenthetical interjections regarding the orgiastic nature of the American lifestyle that pop up throughout the description of the prebattle can only be construed as reminders of the campaign’s objective. In this perpetual orgy, Chicago is rendered effeminate by reference to its sensual plumpness and by the metonymic association with millionaires’ wives and other mercenary females who clutch their lap-dogs in agitated anticipation.

One American critic expressed bewilderment that Mayakovsky chose Chicago as the epitome of American desirability. After all, it is New York, not Chicago, that is located on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean from which Ivan the *bogatyr*’ emerges as an extinct and exotic animal.⁷² But Mayakovsky’s epic is not subject to verisimilitude, but the logic of poetics. The refrain “It is strange to be in Chicago! And marvelous!” that follows each new ecstatic recital of Chicago’s splendor makes an alliterative⁷³ connection between the strangeness of Chicago and the marvels it presents to humanity.

Tsvetan Todorov defines the marvelous as that genre in which any hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation of events has been foregone; the supernatural takes over, and the boundary between mind and matter or fantasy and reality falls away, as anything that mind can conceive of

materializes.⁷⁴ It is the suspension of all limitations that makes Mayakovsky yearn for and create the marvelous. Chicagoans exposed to the excess of potentialities released by technology grow, if not in stature, then in status: “In Chicago everyone has at least the rank of general.”⁷⁵ This miracle disconcerted critics: everyone’s promotion to the status of general would seem to obviate class struggle, and if no one needs to be saved from the decaying West, what is the purpose of this cosmic battle? The answer provided by Mayakovsky did not seem satisfactory: “In wild destruction having washed away the old, we will thunder a new myth over the world. We’ll kick through the fence of time. We’ll sound a thousand rainbow scales in the sky.”⁷⁶ This attainment of freedom through the extension of spatial and temporal limits relegated the immediate goal of combating hunger to the background. Possibly incensed by Mayakovsky’s insistence on supplanting an old myth with a new one, Lenin pronounced the work “flagrant stupidity and pretentiousness.”⁷⁷ Trotsky compared the poem to pacifying baby talk: “In the unjustifiably primitive images, despite the thunderous hyperbole, one detects even that same prattle that some adults use when talking to children.”⁷⁸ This comparison hints at the apparently transgressive nature of Mayakovsky’s playfulness; like children’s games, his epic battles are far removed from the real, and are purposeless. Mayakovsky’s theatricality is ground well-trodden by scholars; but here I would propose that his *play* is not so much the sort that relies on mask, stage, and audience, but is rather a solitary activity performed with all the earnestness of child’s play.

Sigmund Freud argued that repetition compulsion is central to the games of children; in this view, by repeatedly acting out an anxiety-causing situation, the child attempts to gain mastery over it.⁷⁹ The anxiety Mayakovsky experiences is existential and has little to do with class struggle. The desire to magnify the scale of his life (“And I feel ‘I’ is much too small for me”)⁸⁰ incites his imaginary world travels. His “futurism [having] seized Russia in a death grip,”⁸¹ it is time to expand its influence as far as the Americas. Mayakovsky’s poem “Khristofor Kolumb” (“Christopher Columbus”), written aboard the ship transporting the poet to New York, reveals this dynamic behind discoveries of America. The epigraph to the poem reads: “Christopher Columbus was Christopher Columbus [*sic*], a Spanish Jew (from magazines).”⁸² The poem hypothesizes a situation in which taunts about Columbus’s Jewishness become the impetus for his expedition; thus “discovering” the Indies was by way of compensating for a perceived weakness, a response to provocation: “What kind of nation are you? Zion and nothing more./Any little Portuguese could leave you in the dust.” . . . “Why are you pestering me? Europe this, Europe that!/I’ll go and discover a new country.”⁸³ Mayakovsky empathizes with the allegedly “outsider” adventurer/explorer who expanded the horizons of the world in order to assert his own position within it.

The editors of the Soviet Academy of Sciences edition of Mayakovsky's complete works (1958) felt it necessary to attach a footnote disproving the notion stated in the epigraph,⁸⁴ perhaps because the seeming identification with the "Jewish Columbus" underscores the poet's anxiety regarding his own frailty, which he perpetually sought to alleviate through conquests of American and other terrains.

Mayakovsky's conception of America is akin to Franz Kafka's technomiraculous view of that nation. The latter author's friends remarked that he never seemed more cheerful than when at work on his novel about the young Czech-German Karl's journey to, and adventures in, America.⁸⁵ *Amerika*, as the novel was entitled by Kafka's friend Max Brod, who published it after the author's death, presents technology as a concrete manifestation of the miraculous New World. Here, as with Mayakovsky, technology is central to the desire to discover a miracle, and to make oneself at home in it. Upon his arrival in the States, the protagonist first encounters the strange new contours of America in the form of a writing desk that amazes him with its "hundred compartments of different sizes" that appear and disappear at the turn of a handle, a desk far superior to its pathetic imitations his father had long coveted back in Prague. For Kafka, who never visited America, the country becomes, as for Mayakovsky, a kind of mythic space of promise; he envisions its technological gifts in very personal terms, that is, a special desk able to enhance the pleasure of his own primary activity of writing. Kafka meticulously describes the workings of the desk's complex apparatus, so that there remains no question that it metonymically stands for the great technological prowess of America:

There was also a regulator at one side and by turning a handle you could produce the most complicated combinations and permutations of the compartments to please yourself and suit your requirements. Thin panels sank slowly and formed the bottom of a new series or the top of existing drawers promoted from below; even after one turn of the handle the disposition of the whole was quite changed and the transformation took place slowly or at delirious speed according to the rate at which you wound the thing around. It was a very modern invention.⁸⁶

The writing desk, which exemplifies the magic of American technology, reminds the young man of a moving Christmas panorama in the marketplace back home, the scenes shifting at the crank of a handle. Karl remembers being mesmerized as a child by the panorama, but also painfully conscious of his mother's insufficient (in his view) awareness of it. He had strained to notice every minute detail of the display in order to bring it to his mother's attention; he had sought, in other words, to postpone realization of the rift between two

The Homeland of Technology

realms—the enchanted world of childhood and prosaic reality—by making the miracle enter reality, by making it matter to his mother. Kafka asserts that, although the desk existed for purposes other than to remind Karl of this scene from his childhood, still, “in the history of its invention there probably existed some vague connection similar to that in Karl’s memory.”⁸⁷ The writing desk hence not only parallels the Christmas panorama in its ability to enrapture a child, but also in its status as a site of tension: it re-creates the joy of being in the presence of a miracle, and the failure to master it, to make it stay. It is very telling that the wondrous object in question is a writing desk: it is through technology and writing that mankind attempts to author being and authorize itself in it. Indeed, this gadget, modeled on a child’s toy, uncannily unites all the threads, as I conceive them, of the technologically miraculous America of Mayakovsky’s poetry: technology’s capacity to serve as a mechanism for fulfilling the most deep-seated desires; the pleasure of imagining its dramatic impact; and the realization that the powers it provides are fleeting.

As was discussed in the introduction, it was Heidegger who reached into the etymology of “technology” to discover that the Greek “*techne*” is the name not only for the activities and skills of the craftsman, but also for the arts of the mind and the fine arts.⁸⁸ *Techne* then is not simply manufacturing, but exploring through making, contemplation via craftsmanship. For Mayakovsky, technology, like poetry, is a means of communicating with the world, reaching mutual understanding. In the poem “Bruklianskii most” (“Brooklyn Bridge”), Mayakovsky praises this famous span as a manifestation of the magnificence of human vision (in fact, of the poet’s own): “I am proud of this steel mile;/in it my visions come to life.”⁸⁹ Practical applications do not concern the poet here; in his vision, the bridge will serve as a document by which future generations might re-create the past:

If the end of the world befall—
and chaos smash our planet to bits,
and what remains will be this
bridge, rearing above the dust of destruction;
then, as huge ancient lizards are rebuilt
from bones finer than needles, to tower in museums,
so, from this bridge, a geologist of the centuries
will succeed in recreating our contemporary world.
(Trans. Reavey)⁹⁰

Mayakovsky himself seems to stand as a chapter in the book of past feats to be deciphered by the geologist of the future; similarly, in “Vo ves’ golos” (“At the Top of My Voice”), the poet compares his poetry to a Roman aqueduct,

able to withstand the destructive forces of time. What excites the poet, then, is not so much the function of the bridge itself as its status as product of, and inspiration for, human imagination. Insofar as, for Mayakovsky, technology is a sign rather than a tool, it is not surprising that he concentrates his gaze on two of the most tangible and ostentatious displays of technological virility: a skyscraper, marking the expansion of the human habitat along the vertical vector, and, along the horizontal, a bridge.

Lev Vygotsky traces the first signs of imagination in child's play; the distance between a child's wish and its fulfillment results in play, "an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealizable desires can be realized."⁹¹ As a sort of corollary to this, if we assume for the sake of argument that the trip to America afforded Mayakovsky the opportunity to see his visions come to life, then the realization of his desires should have stymied the workings of his imagination.⁹² In effect, the wonders of New York render the poet mute. The theme of muteness, the inability to communicate amidst the din of cars and trains, recurs throughout the American cycle and the travelogue; the wonders themselves reduce the poetic richness of expression to puerile interjections: "And when those lamps dig into the night, let me tell you, what a fire! You look to the left—gee whiz! Look to the right—holy moly!"⁹³

For Mayakovsky, witnessing the material embodiments of his theoretical projections did not produce some poetic epiphany; it only shook further his faith in the potency of his vision. By giving concrete form to Mayakovsky's abstract, cosmic imaginings, America congealed and reduced them. Having heard Mayakovsky read his "Brooklyn Bridge," one American communist reminded him that the bridge was not only a device for reaching the stars, but also a site from which the despondent unemployed jumped into the river. Reprimanded, Mayakovsky immediately included a line to this effect into his otherwise celebratory poem.⁹⁴ But the pinch of grim reality comes across as almost trivial and incongruous in the context of the surrounding beauty; the line about the despairing poor loses its political force, as the downward suicidal movement seems counteracted by the resurrecting movement *up* immediately following:

For some, life here had no worries;
for others, it was a prolonged and hungry howl.
From this spot, jobless men
leapt headlong into the Hudson.⁹⁵
Now my vision moves unobstructed
along the cable-strings to the very feet of the stars.⁹⁶

In Mayakovsky's vision, it almost seems that the unemployed jump into the river simply to refresh themselves before their swift ascent up the metal

cables to the stars. The bridge, however, marks the poet's transition from enchantment to disillusionment. His American comrade's comment must have touched a nerve, because in the next poem of the cycle, "Kemp 'Nit Gedage" ("Camp Nitgedaige"),⁹⁷ Mayakovsky complains about the discrepancy between imaginary bridges ("Across the abyss we erected a bridge straight to communism, spanning a hundred years")⁹⁸ and their material equivalents ("What is a bridge? A device for catching colds").⁹⁹ The poet seems to lament the impossibility of dwelling in his spectacular metaphorical constructions; a man-god does not seem so godly when worrying about respiratory infections.

Because Mayakovsky conceives of technological wonders as signs rather than objects—constituting potential, not finished, products—American skyscrapers and bridges lead him to question the stability of the relationship between signifier and signified. He explores this slippage of meaning in "Neboskreb v razreze" ("A Skyscraper in Cut-Away View"), the facade of which hides the same banality and drudgery one would find in "ancient burrows and cubbyholes" (*stareishie norki da kamorki*).¹⁰⁰ In the travelogue, describing his visit to one of Ford's plants in Detroit, Mayakovsky underscores the discrepancy between first impressions of Ford's famed assembly line, its harmony and faultless organization, and, on the other hand, stories of discontented workers. Writing his notes in the mid-1920s, when the Soviet government-appointed Central Institute of Labor was working on methods of introducing Ford's system into Russian factories in order to increase productivity, Mayakovsky complains that Ford's assembly line depletes workers' strength, summing up: "Detroit has the greatest number of divorces. The Ford system makes workers impotent."¹⁰¹

Mayakovsky admonishes that American technology gives the impression of impermanence and flimsiness. Construction sites transport but at the same time repulse him; although he cannot avert his eyes, he distrusts the spectacular ease with which Americans erect their buildings, comparing the drama of construction to the one-thousandth performance of the most interesting, well-rehearsed play. The reproducibility of the miracle somehow cheapens it, rendering it a mere trick. Mayakovsky mocks high society for preferring candles to electricity, theater to movies, and records to radio; the mass quality of technological spectacle, its immodesty, he suggests, embarrasses the well-heeled: "They are made uneasy by the magician who has summoned spirits but is unable to control them."¹⁰² But Mayakovsky unwittingly shares this highbrow distaste, as seen when he recoils from the magnificent New York, calling it "a giant accident stumbled upon by children."¹⁰³ What he holds against the city, it seems, is its contingent nature; its wondrous technology strikes him as a *deus ex machina*, a mere plot device that drives the American master narrative of progress, but lacks any deeper meaning or artistic truth.

As technology loses its force as signifier, so do words themselves. In “Baryshnia i Vul’vort” (“The Young Miss and Woolworth”), Mayakovsky attempts in vain to persuade a young woman sitting in a shop window, sharpening knives by way of advertising them, to join him in his battle against capital. The glass of the shop window separating them and muting the sound, she interprets his pleas as a confession of love. The poet imagines himself “handsome and fat” (*krasivyi i tolstyi*) in her fantasy.¹⁰⁴ Could it be that what Mayakovsky sees as the girl’s romantic dreams are in fact his *own* fantasies, reflected in the window of a skyscraper? The young woman symbolically turns her knife toward Mayakovsky rather than capitalists when she exposes the impotence of his words. The poet is standing disillusioned and alone outside the skyscraper, talking to himself.

Traveling to America opened the poet’s eyes in more ways than one, knocking his playfully fantastic projections of America, and his place therein, against the wall of reality. Another barrier the poet came up against hard was that of language; Mayakovsky’s recurrent theme of muteness and communication breakdown should be seen in the context of his lack of English. Upon his arrival home, the poet composed an essay, “Kak ia ee rassmeshil” (“How I Made Her Laugh”), relating how, at a party in New York, compelled by the unquenchable urge to make conversation, he had to resort to repeating over and over (albeit with various intonations) the one phrase he could say in English: “Give me please some tea.” At last, exasperated by his own inadequacy and the mocking glances it provoked, he entreated his friend David Burliuk to translate the following sentiment: that if those present could understand Russian, he “could nail them with his tongue to the cross of their own suspenders.” Which Burliuk translated, rather, as: “My eminent friend Vladimir Vladimirovich asks for another cup of tea.”¹⁰⁵ In his earlier poetry, Mayakovsky had waged sustained battle against the tea ritual as the epitome of his implacable enemy *byt*; clearly, America was no help to the futurist in this fight. Inability to communicate ensured his isolation from the overwhelming majority of his intended audience. Mayakovsky, who in the poem “100%” pronounced himself more American than any American, was not understood by the country whose ear he so fervently desired. It is through language that Mayakovsky found his freedom and purpose in general, and to be unable to use it must have been intolerably decentering and humbling for him.

According to Roman Jakobson, the core of Mayakovskian mythology is the antinomy of “I” versus “not-I.”¹⁰⁶ For Mayakovsky, technology and poetry are two modes of mediation between his I and the world, of subsuming the not-I into I. The impracticality of Mayakovsky’s technophilic dreams exposes the ultimate separation between reality and his world of play. When he reaches America, his epic flights of fancy give way to lyrical poems in which the poet attempts to reformulate his relationship to the United States on more

intimate terms. The separation, which in his pretrip poetry had been conditioned by unavoidable, epic distance, paradoxically becomes even greater after physical distance has been overcome. Even in his paean to the Brooklyn Bridge, what is most palpable in the metaphors through which Mayakovsky conveys his attitude toward the structure is a feeling of separation:

As a crazed believer enters a church,
retreats into a monastery cell, austere and plain;
so I, in graying evening haze,
humbly set foot on Brooklyn Bridge.
As a conqueror presses into a city all shattered,
on cannon with muzzles craning high as a giraffe –
so, drunk with glory, eager to live,
I clamber, in pride, upon Brooklyn Bridge.
As a foolish painter plunges his eye,
sharp and loving, into a museum madonna,
so I, from the near skies bestrewn with stars,
gaze at New York through the Brooklyn Bridge.

(Trans. Reavey)¹⁰⁷

That is, the poetic persona is as far from his ideal as a “crazed believer” from the object of that faith; as alienated from it as a “conqueror” entering a ruined city; and as emasculated as a “foolish painter” in love with a madonna that belongs to a museum. Revealing the impossibility of bringing the technological wonders of Mayakovsky’s imagination into reality without their being reduced to insipid articles of everyday life, America deflates Mayakovskiy himself.

An ethical imperative suddenly emerges in the conclusion of the travelogue, one that is unsurprising in a genre in which the “god-man” is supplanted by a mere man. This composition had opened with a justification for the poet’s choice of genre: the travelogue results from his realization that the reader needs to hear, instead of fantasies, things that are interesting in themselves. The author will thus restrain his fantasy in the interest of the common good, and produce a travelogue. In his statement that traveling “almost takes the place of reading,” it is the word “almost” that stands out. Reading books results in such epics as “150,000,000,” which, as Charles Rougle notes, portrays America as an inflated composite of imagery borrowed from the books of Mayakovsky’s predecessors.¹⁰⁸ In this poem, the author plays the part of a seer of great deeds, his agile vision encompassing the whole world, mastering the universe. By contrast, *actually traveling* results in a composition in which Mayakovsky must confess to his own smallness: ‘I have lived much too little to describe the particulars correctly and in detail; I have lived

little enough to give a faithful picture of the general.”¹⁰⁹ In fact, the travelogue breaks with the prior artistic conventions established by Korolenko and Gorky when it boldly describes the New York skyline not as a view but as its obstruction.¹¹⁰ Mayakovsky is unable to set his own pace; he is constantly on the move, but not in control of direction or speed. His moving glance cannot encompass the width or penetrate the depth of America, driving him to desperation: “Baffled, you plop down on a bench—it is hopeless, your eyes are not used to seeing such things.”¹¹¹ “Flabbergasted,” “dumbstruck,” “stunned,” and “crazed,” Mayakovsky seems like an old man unable to withstand the shocks with which the new reality besieges him. In contrast to the Benjaminian flaneur, Mayakovsky cannot keep his composure; the desire to identify with the crowd makes him lose himself within it. The lack of distance necessary for reflection precludes his ability to draw energy from it; instead it saps the energy out of him.

When Mayakovsky had hymned the melding of man with machine, he was anthropomorphizing the machine, not automating the human being. But American technology resists his attempt to anthropomorphize it, stubbornly remaining inanimate and unmoved. Its meaningless violence is an affront to the poet: “Dust is spat from under the wheels of elevated trains flying past, and it feels as if the trains were running over your ears. The task is not to sing praises of the rumbling but to install mufflers: we poets need to be able to talk on a train.”¹¹² The racket suddenly becomes too loud for the futurist poet, who even “at the top of his voice” is unable to overcome it. He has become an old man who cannot stand the pace of modern life.

In her article on utopian visions of the Russian avant-garde, Krystyna Pomorska analyzes Mayakovsky’s interest in Einstein’s theory of relativity; she argues persuasively that the poet was hopeful the theory would help to immortalize the human being, and that in his struggle to overcome *byt* (everyday routine), he sought, through poetry, to achieve total transfiguration into some new form of being. She uses “150,000,000” as an example of this metamorphosis, which she sees as impelled by the poet’s metaphysical dread of mortality and, on a smaller scale, the parallel dread of personally getting old: “for Mayakovsky the most horrifying property of human existential limits was the inevitable process of aging.”¹¹³ Thus, paradoxically the futurist feared precisely what comes next, the future. The trajectory of Mayakovsky’s writings about America can be understood as a process of aging: while his pretrip poetry is infused with a child’s free spirit, in which he animates and rules over a toy world, his travelogue—with its fumbling search for one’s place within actual reality—signals maturation. As a child, Mayakovsky towers over the universe; as an old man, his shoulders are stooped under its weight.

Thus the conclusion of *My Discovery of America* finds Mayakovsky turning against the “futurism of bare technology, a superficial impression-

ism of smoke and wires” conceived by him, and incarnate in America. Instead, the poet urges fellow artists “not to sing the praises of technology but to harness technology in the name of the interests of humankind.”¹¹⁴ Is this humanism the result of the recognition of his own limitations? Mayakovsky calls for an artistic plan, for a direction, without which technology will not produce the future, but simply recycle the past. A strange conception of culture now appears in Mayakovsky’s vocabulary; Rougle argues that when the poet accuses American technology of lacking culture, he means the marked discrepancy in it between technique and consciousness. Rougle suggests that Mayakovsky had come to believe that Americans’ technique “has outstripped their consciousness.”¹¹⁵ This would seem an odd retreat on the part of a futurist who had formerly asserted that advanced technology would *change* consciousness. Perhaps Mayakovsky has decided that the superior technology he’d always dreamt of cannot but reside solely in the mind. With his concept of “culture,” is he defending the necessity of reflection, the need to contemplate, to continue striving, which the seeming finality of American perfections precludes? Mayakovsky claims, for instance, that America’s unsurpassed propensity for organization results in “the ignorance of the workers sucked dry by labor, who, after a well-organized workday, don’t have left even the strength needed for thought.”¹¹⁶ He concludes his travelogue by contrasting the sensational technical advances of modern America to the centuries of deliberation that in Europe informed even the pettiest materialistic desires: “Even this detestable clinging to the little house, to the bit of land, to their own property—a clinging contemplated for centuries—now appeared to me as unbelievable culture in comparison to the bivouac structure and the opportunistic character of American life.”¹¹⁷ The writer seems to be offering this contrast as a matter of choice; between America, with all its polished facades and exalted accomplishments, and Europe, where every inch of land bespeaks an “age-long struggle”¹¹⁸ and where so much remains to be achieved, Mayakovsky ultimately embraces the latter.

The unbreachable gulf between America the place and America the sign results in the permanent displacement of Mayakovsky as a traveling subject; he is forever unable to reach his desired destination. The poet arrives at a dead end in his travelogue, as the future only offers salvation when it remains a promise. Distance is essential for the experience of the sublime; yet his long-standing desire to master the universe has led him to attempt to traverse this distance. After returning from the United States, Mayakovsky writes two plays about the future: *Klop (The Bedbug)*, in which the future is no more appealing than the past, and *Bania (The Bathhouse)*, which ends just as the protagonists leap into the future aboard a time machine. The reader and author are left behind with those the time machine did not take.

CONCLUSION

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism*, travel narratives have often been seen as affirming one's position of power, conquering the other through observation. But traveling also means uprooting oneself, extracting oneself from the familiar, becoming, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari put it, "minor." These French philosophers argue that "minority is . . . one's potential becoming to the extent that one deviates from the model."¹¹⁹ The majority is constant, the minority is mobile. To leave home is to cease to be an element of a homogenous environment. Creativity, the act of becoming, also lies in movement away from home. In Esenin's case, this formulation needs to be amended: his travel to America was a departure from self and initiation into the new majority, into the Soviet state. Esenin welcomed this shift, because in his case, paradoxically, the change of scene led him straight to the center. The adherence to literary convention and cultural stereotypes helps to anchor the migrant subject to his home no matter how far he ventures from it. Allusion to and evocation of stereotypes allow one to remain in the majority, which is why Russian travelogues about America seem suffused with a peculiar feeling of *déjà vu*.¹²⁰

And yet, as we have seen, literary tradition facilitates and inspires a creative vision of America, while firsthand acquaintance with the actual, historical United States often leads to the repetition rather than revitalization of literary models. Perhaps the first acquaintance with actual America and its tremendous achievements is so stupefying and shocking that, in their fear of being subsumed by this phenomenon, disappearing into America, writers resort to distancing tactics: bewailing American problems, underscoring the impossibility of existence in this strange land, and employing the study of America as critique. By criticizing America, writers avoid having to interrogate their own mechanisms of survival in this model country of the future, and in, by association, their own rapidly changing homeland. Proximity to America leads Mayakovsky to abandon his earlier playful visions of it. His episodic form, which some mistook for a nod to literary fashion, bespeaks ambivalence, uncertainty, loss; his travelogue is redolent with the looming suspicion that somehow, in the process of discovering America, he has lost it. For its part, Pil'niak's *OK* never abandons its somber, wistful tone. The writer covers the United States extensively, going deep into the American heartland, grasps fleeting details, and yet never allows himself to step over the borders he has set for himself. He says that he has gone to America to suture the scar of the Pacific and muses on the interconnectedness of all humanity; and yet America with its exploitative technology and industry fills him with an abhorrence reminiscent of that experienced by Gorky.

The Homeland of Technology

To glimpse the future, which should remain a mystery, is to become privy to some ominous secret. Baudrillard mentions the obscenity of America, that is, its total visibility and availability, a state which precludes any keeping of mysteries. A similar impression may explain why America's decidedly open materialization of the future fills Gorky, Mayakovsky, and Pil'niak with disgust. Imagination dissipates in the face of American reality, and literary playfulness, as is evident in Mayakovsky's case, cannot be sustained without imagination.

Only in 1936, when life in the Soviet Union did not allow for much playfulness, did Russian authors manage to subvert literary tradition on America and produce a truly original outlook on this stereotyped place. The writers in question, Il'f and Petrov, took the road less traveled: bypassing the grandiose and ostentatious, they concentrated on the smaller and more intimate aspects of America and the American dream. To be sure, they dedicate not a few pages to American technology, but on these pages, electricity, cars, and gadgets are steeped in the fairy-tale atmosphere of their "one-storied America." The place is not a lofty and unapproachable setting out of science fiction, but a *topos* befitting the adventure genre, merry and colorful. The modern U.S.S.R., and Europe in general, were beginning to feel distant and unfamiliar, and Il'f and Petrov's trip to America was almost a return to childhood. Throughout the book, even while managing to provide descriptions many have found truthful, they retain their certain playfulness; it is as if they have set out on their journey determined to regard this land as a magical place, and they stay true to this project. They record sorcery: elevators in the midst of deserts; dynamic drugstores concocting strange and exciting elixirs ("malted milk"); brightly colored, toy-like gas stations; the thousand and one days and nights of assembly lines; and mechanical, genie-like household appliances.

Peculiarly, Il'f and Petrov avoid any conversations about class struggle, capitalism, or Russia's American future. The authors seem content to view America as a place utterly separate from their home, an exotic realm having no hypothetical bearing on the destiny of Russia. In their writing, America is less a laboratory for their own coming utopia, and more an enchanted land out of their adolescence, inhabited by favorite childhood characters. The authors even create an American character, a playmate, who, infinitely protective, wise, but guilelessly childlike, remains their guide through the amazing land of America. *One-Storied America* is an exotic playground that induces awe and fascination, and offers entertainment and respite from the reality at home.

In 1920s Russia, Americanism was becoming a genuinely public discourse connected to such aspects of everyday life as entertainment and industrialization, commercialism and politics. American technology was the force that managed to draw these areas together; the luster of American

technology was universally irresistible. In this rapidly changing, unpredictable environment, it was paradoxically the most paradigmatically capitalist of all countries, the United States, that offered a glimpse into the Soviet future. Belief in the importance of America and American technology as models for the Russian future was so deep-seated, and in a way indispensable,¹²¹ that to visit the United States seemed like a way to travel in time, to the glorious future of the homeland. American technology induced desire for America, and offered methods of breaching the divide between these two contentious lover-countries. American technology was the currency, the means to self-improvement which Russia desperately needed, and Soviet officials regarded their courtship of America in practical terms. But artists desired American technology for itself—for its aesthetic potential, its marvelous quality, its enrichment of life.

Red Pinkertons: Adventures in Artificial Reality

The poet should prefer probable impossibilities
to improbable possibilities.

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

ECCENTRIC TECHNOLOGIZATION

In their 1922 manifesto, the group of young film directors self-described as Eccentrics explained their emergence thus: “Yesterday—the culture of Europe. Today—the technology of America. Industry, production under the Stars and Stripes. Either Americanization or the undertaker . . . The pace today: the rhythm of the machine, concentrated by America, realized on the street.”¹ Due to its intrinsic relationship to technology, America has been designated the emblem of a new culture. The founding members of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor, F. Kozintsev, L. Trauberg, et al., declare that Eccentrism stands for the Americanization of film (and Russian culture generally), christening the offspring of this phenomenon “Music-Hall Cinematographovich Pinkertonov.” Such a verbal collage offers a glimpse into the form the Americanization, or technologization, of culture will take. It is not that the Eccentrics mean that Fordson tractors per se should plow their way into Russian film; it is the *rhythm* of the machine age that finds its cultural expression in popular music, Hollywood films, and detective novels (*pinkertony*)—three cultural staples attesting to American influence on Russia, and Europe in general.²

The Russian artistic scene had typically been attuned to the high culture of Europe; but their embrace of Americanization dislocates the Eccentrics spatially, freeing them from the confines of one nation, one continent, one culture:

Our rails rush past: Paris, Berlin, London
romanticism,
stylization,
eroticism,

archaism,
reconstruction,
restoration,
the pulpit,
the temple,
the museum!³

From this point of view, Russian culture has its place within the larger European one, whose values—reflecting a decided orientation toward the past—are enumerated, left behind as the Eccentrics whizz past them on the way to something radically different. In contrast to Europe, America incarnates such radical departure, embodying an imaginary place featuring everything different, exuberant, desirable, exciting, and representative of the modern age; and according to this manifesto, to profess Americanization is to expand one's horizons, open oneself to values distinct from those of one's origin. This is the way to the future, and cultural survival.

This chapter examines how the discourse of Americanization characteristic of 1920s Soviet culture arose from the need to escape the parameters of national imperative, to embrace the rapidly expanding world and find more effective means of communication with it. The discussion will focus in particular on one manifestation of 1920s Americanization, the emergence of the genre of the Red Pinkerton, an ideologically savvy hybrid of the detective and adventure genres with elements of science fiction. Here it will be emphasized that Americanization is an entirely unique approach to otherness, antagonistic to colonization; instead of affirming one's position of power through conquering the other, Americanization foregrounds departure from one's cultural conventions, openness to “alien” values and experiences, and the quest for communication with one's “others.” Technology, which is inherently invested in difference, in the hopeful search for the unknown,⁴ initiates such an outlook toward otherness, demonstrates its necessity, and assists in the advancement of this new relationship with the other.

In Red Pinkertons, technology determines both content and form. This chapter will illustrate the extent to which the image of America was conditioned by the specifics of media, especially the camera, which framed and shaped America and Americans for the cinema, the most modern and technological of art forms. The influence of cinema on other art forms ensured that this image of America would enter the verbal arts in turn. And perhaps because America's image was technologically determined, fabricated by the camera and its demands, America's desirability was strongly bound up with its techno-poetics. As a marker of modernity, technology is that element perceived as most glaringly lacking and desired in Soviet Russia, the nascent

state whose *raison d'être* is strongly connected with modernization; it is also the element that renders America so singularly alluring. Every aspect of American culture became symbolic of the technological prowess Russia desperately craved. Technology, then, does not ultimately refer to specific objects and instruments, but rather to a gap in Soviet Russia's self-perception, which it attempts to fill by staging recognition⁵ (in every possible sense) from, and reciprocity with, its technologically advanced other.

PLOTTING AMERICA, OR THE TECHNO-POETICS OF FLIGHT

The Mass Scale of the American Phenomenon

The Eccentrics did not merely succumb to the American allure, but went over to it defiantly: "We prefer Charlie's arse to Eleonora Duse's hands! . . . We prefer the double soles of an American dancer to the five hundred instruments of the Marinsky Theatre."⁶ Such a declaration was intended to be scandalous, but in fact merely echoed broad public tastes. At a time when the advantages and drawbacks of Fordism, Taylorism, and American concessions were hotly debated at the highest echelons of the Soviet government, the public was preoccupied with the more playful aspects of American life. Audiences flocked to American movies, which enjoyed greater popularity than any other films. Meanwhile, the adventures of American detective Nat Pinkerton had already, since the turn of the century, been a smash hit, as Kornei Chukovsky lamented in an essay on this phenomenon. To his dismay, 622,300 copies of this detective series had been sold in St. Petersburg in a single year.⁷

Accepting the new mass audience of proletarian Russia, artists aimed for this public's reciprocal acceptance in turn. In 1922, Lev Lunts, one of the Serapion Brothers, called upon his literary colleagues to stop boring the reader with psychology, and turn instead to the West, for it was there where *plot*, the main ingredient of suspense, could be found.⁸ At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Bolshevik ideologist Nikolai Bukharin urged Russian writers to create "Red Pinkertons," thus pinpointing exactly where in the West plots could and should be found.⁹ Here was an ingenious ploy: to adapt a popular genre to serve ideologically correct aims, to not only win an audience, but educate it politically. A profusion of detective novels of varying degrees of ideological subtlety came out in response to Bukharin's directive. Aleksei Tolstoy, Marietta Shaginyan, Il'ia Ehrenburg, Valentin Kataev, Viktor Shklovsky, and Vsevolod Ivanov tried their hand at Red Pinkertonism, with most of the works produced constituting parodic enactments of various

detective-genre conventions, spiced with formal innovations adopted from American cinema.

Russian writers concealed neither their importation of formal techniques from American film nor their borrowing of plot devices from American popular fiction; to make these sources explicit, each work featured an American character. These fictional Americans tended to fall into two general categories: either that of the all-powerful, uncomplicatedly evil tycoon, against whom Soviet Russia, aided by its American working-class brethren, fights over a sphere of influence; or, alternatively, that of the visitor to the new Russia who, having witnessed its wondrous potential firsthand, is transformed into a staunch defender of Soviet power.¹⁰ Border crossings and travels/travails are a necessary staple of Red Pinkertons. Sending their heroes to foreign realms serves as a pretext for the authors of Red Pinkertons to venture into the unknown: to experiment with new narrative techniques and establish a connection with their new audience.

In order for the Pinkerton genre to take on a red hue, the conflict at its core had to swell into that of class struggle; its featured crime had to threaten whole nations, to assume the proportions of world catastrophe.¹¹ Red Pinkerton novels, comedic in their orientation, thus project disaster as the end to be averted. Broad conspiracy on the thematic level allows for intricate plotting, and travels provide material for extensive narrative detours. Typically, two sizable warring camps employ, to spectacular effect, a stimulating combination of theatrical masquerade and anticipated (but as yet nonexistent) technology, causing subterfuge and wreaking havoc. A touch of melodrama, centering upon a beautiful woman, often with qualities of the femme fatale, bespeaks a debt to cinematic conventions. The beautiful woman serves to show that at the core of these adventures lies the mechanics of seduction and attraction.

Il'ia Ehrenburg, who specialized in large-scale novelistic brawls, makes spurned love the incentive for the anti-European conspiracy that is the focus of his second catastrophe novel, *Trest D. E. (D. E. Trust)*. The eponymous American entity, organized for the sole purpose of destroying Europe, is headed by Ernst Boot, a European expatriate who associates his continent of origin with the woman who rejected him (gave him the boot). Reminding the reader of the American settlers who left a Europe that did not want them, Ehrenburg taps into the roots of the American-European relationship, here recast as Boot's love/hate relationship with Lucy Flamingo. Interestingly, Ehrenburg blames Boot's crazed schemes on both the popularity of inventions and the proliferation of adventure stories; the reader is given to understand that danger lurks in the enticement of mystery on which adventure tales are based.

The mysterious abbreviated name of the trust, D. E., becomes the

cause of misunderstanding and serves as a major strategic weapon in Boot's campaign. Is Ehrenburg suggesting that it is language, in all its ambiguity, that contains the seeds of peril? The sign D. E. in fact stands for nothing in particular, and is thus able to assume any meaning one cares to attach to it. Chameleon-like, it reflects any desire. In the course of the novel, it is interpreted variously as *Destruction of Europe*, *Liga demokraticheskoi emansipatsii Evropy* (The League for the Democratic Emancipation of Europe), *Druz'ia evangelia* (Friends of the Gospel), *Destruksion et Ekspansion*, *Daesh' Evropu* (Show Us Europe), *Divuar ekstsel'zior* (fantastic missiles foreseen by Ehrenburg), and *Dekapitatsione del'i ebrei* (an Italian conspiratorial group dedicated to decapitating Jews). For Ehrenburg, technological invention and the craze for adventure go hand in hand. Paradoxically, through the prism of Ehrenburg's ironic gaze, inventiveness leads to destruction.

Ehrenburg's hyperbolic rendition of the perilous state of world affairs prefigures Walter Benjamin's explanation of the fascist aesthetization of war as brought about by "the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology."¹² For Benjamin, however, it is not just technological development, but also "the increasing formation of the masses" that leads to the aesthetization of destruction and, conversely, to the destruction of traditional aesthetic values.¹³ The decline of such art as provokes contemplation is the result of the new mass consumption, contemplation being a solitary activity. Instead of inviting contemplation, the new art aims to shock. Further, the "masses" do not favor the distance that typically provides the best vantage point for contemplation. The aura of an object has decayed, Benjamin explains, as the "masses" greatly prefer accessibility to uniqueness, evincing a

desire . . . to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as [contemporary masses'] bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of everyday reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.¹⁴

One can surmise that this mass desire for closeness stems from the alienation of the modern subject, discussed by the Marxist Benjamin elsewhere.¹⁵ Similarly, the emergence of the genre of the Red Pinkerton reflects the desire to surmount alienation, to bring the world "closer"; it represents the creative search for escape from isolation, for a bridge over communication gaps. Thus did Aleksei Tolstoy make his first contribution to the Red Pinkerton genre with *Aelita*, a novel driven by the imperative to break through loneliness and form connections necessary for physical and psychological survival.

Alien Allure, or the American Presence in Aleksei Tolstoy's *Aelita*

While Soviet artists were preoccupied with the search for a common language with their new mass audience, the émigré Aleksei Tolstoy was pining for his country in Berlin. He would not return empty-handed, having conceived, as sort of a homecoming gift, his first adventure novel, *Aelita* (1922). In writing it, Tolstoy became one of the initiators of a soon-to-be-popular genre. A shrewd observer of contemporary cultural trends, Tolstoy ventured into this unfamiliar terrain as a sign of his acceptance of the new mass reader of proletarian Russia, and an expression of his desire to be reciprocally accepted by this reader. To my knowledge, *Aelita* introduces the first American visitor to the Soviet adventure novel and, as the American theme had not yet become a matter of convention, Tolstoy's Archibald Skyles stands as a most interesting and ambiguous presence. In the author's subsequent *Engineer Garin's Death-Ray* (1925–26), a Red Pinkerton par excellence (on which more below), the demands of genre convention and ideological correctness deplete the American theme's originality and poignancy.

In *Aelita*, the presence of an American reflects the newly formed image of America as a model and potential ally of Russia. In the rhetoric of Americanization that emerged in the 1920s, the United States figures as a futuristic ideal, a technological utopia, a country whose youth did not hinder prosperity, a country of mass culture. American culture holds mass appeal as it displays potentialities, fulfills fantasies, and caters to the most primal desires. The importation of Archibald Skyles represents an attempt to cash in on the attraction of American popular fiction; it is an exercise in the art of American seduction. At the same time, I read Skyles's interest in Engineer Los's flight to Mars as wish fulfillment, a projection of the fantasy in which America recognizes (again, in every possible sense) Russia and becomes an ally to its revolutionary experiment. On the level of content, technology serves as a vehicle of fantasy; it is fueled by it and enables its fulfillment.

The launch of two Russian cosmonauts' departure for Mars in 1921 becomes a celebration of the free-flowing proliferation of narratives.

“What’s the crowd—was someone killed?”

“They’ll be leaving for Mars in a moment.”

“Who thought we would live to see this? That’s the one last thing we need!”

“What are you talking about? Who’s going?”

“They took a couple of convicts out of jail. They’ll seal them in a zinc can and send them off to Mars for experiments.”

“Stop lying, seriously.”

“You’re calling me a liar!?”

“Yeah, they’ll start giving out chintz any minute now.”

“What chintz? For how much?”

“Dear God, people are stupid!”

“What do you mean people are stupid? What makes you think that?”

“I don’t need to think. I see.”

“They should really send you places for saying this kind of stuff.”

“Break it up, comrades. This is a historic moment and you’re blathering all kinds of nonsense.”

“Why are they sending them to Mars?”

“Excuse me, but someone was saying that they loaded nine hundred pounds of agitational literature and seventy-two pounds of cocaine on board.”

“No reason to drag in cocaine!”¹⁶

Amidst all these scenarios, reflecting their authors’ fantasies and fears, and turning spectators into participants, one point of view—that of American journalist Archibald Skyles—occupies a privileged, if precarious, position. Skyles might have blended into the crowd, had not Engineer Los, the leader of the mission, singled the American out as the sole recipient of his final words before takeoff. “Addressing only Skyles for some reason,”¹⁷ Engineer Los offers the last, hence definitive interpretation of the flight to Mars; the locals’ scenario-orgy comes to an abrupt end, and the outsider’s point of view is given precedence. The American journalist is a minor character, yet he functions in the novel as an indispensable narrative glue. (Which is why Tolstoy, seeking to reduce the character’s prominence in subsequent editions, could nevertheless not get rid of him altogether.)

Skyles is the first character to appear in the novel, and his relationship with Los frames the story of the journey to Mars: he is on the scene when Los launches from St. Petersburg, and when Los lands on the shore of Lake Michigan. But what of Mars itself—does Skyles appear there as well?

In the novel’s opening episode, Skyles encounters a mysterious notice in the middle of a deserted landscape—a beginning already reflecting the influence of popular detective fiction. Without informing the reader as to the content of the notice, the text provides Skyles’s reaction to it. The first utterance of the book is in English: “‘Twenty-three,’ he finally muttered, which probably meant: ‘Damn me to hell and back.’”¹⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines “twenty-three” as an abbreviation of the American slang expression “twenty-three skidoo,” that is, “get out of here.” It is noteworthy, however, that the aspect of spatial dislocation, of a launching-outward gesture, is present in both the original English and the Russian gloss of “twenty-three” provided in the novel. The *OED* definition is accompanied by the following notation, made in 1930: “One suspects that the queer slang use of twenty-three for ‘get out (of here)’ arose in a chance situation

of sportsmanship, gambling, crime, or some other rakish environment.”¹⁹ It seems likely that Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoy, a Russian count, picked up this North American slang expression from his reading of American pulp fiction. The utterance, moreover, promotes the illusion of situating the reader in an American adventure novel. Skyles serves as bait for the Russian mass reader, whose taste has been Americanized by translations of Nat Pinkerton, by Buster Keaton and Douglas Fairbanks films. But there is more to Skyles than just this.

The novel begins on Red Dawn Street, which contrasts nicely with the book’s subtitle, *The Decline [or Sunset] of Mars*. Mars’s decline has clear reminiscences with Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*, translated into Russian as *Zakat Evropy (The Decline [or Sunset] of Europe)*. By contrast, the notice that Skyles spots on Red Dawn Street represents the promise of a new beginning. It is peculiar that an outsider, an American, should be the one to recognize the promising nature of this sign. In the midst of the shabby landscape of post–Civil War Petrograd, the grandeur of the aspiration of spaceflight affects Skyles like a stimulant. Petrograd is presented through the estranged point of view of a foreigner, in whose vision the city appears deserted, alienating, unreal. Skyles suspects the invitation is nothing more than the ravings of a madman, but he cannot help being infected by the prospect it implies. In his articles, Skyles describes Russians as marked by some inherent instability, an indefiniteness. The journalist sees this intriguing quality in the sparkle in Russians’ eyes, and he is clearly attracted to it, as if to some narcotic. According to Skyles, all Russians are possessed of a kind of flightiness, so the otherwise insane invitation to go to Mars constitutes an organic part of the phantasmagoric reality of Petrograd; thus it is fitting that, encountering the sign, Skyles hears a “voice,” as if someone is calling him—or as if he is experiencing delirium. The end of the first chapter introduces the possibility that everything that is to follow is simply Skyles’s dream, the workings of his excited imagination:

Suddenly—just for a split second, a cloud seemed to glide over [Skyles’s] consciousness. He felt strange and his head started to spin: was this all a dream? . . . The boy, [his tame] crow [on a string] [seemingly random elements of a desolate landscape], the empty houses, the deserted streets, the strange glances from passersby, and the nailed-up notice—an invitation to fly away from this city and into the starry desert.²⁰

The voice that beckons Skyles turns out to belong to Los. With his snow-white hair, Los seems to materialize out of the smoke of Skyles’s pipe. In one sentence Skyles is described inhaling strong tobacco, and in the next, Los sits before the American, smoking a pipe of his own like a doppelganger.

"His head [was] drowned in the shadows, the smoke—only his open chest and hairy arms were illuminated."²¹ Los's naked flesh and sparkling eyes lend an almost sexual intensity to the process by which Skyles is initiated into the mystery of spaceflight. Like lovemaking, moreover, the episode involves a crucial reciprocity: the American's satisfaction upon seeing Los ("Skyles was pleased by what he saw") is paralleled by Los's happily gazing upon Skyles.²² Introducing Los through Skyles's eyes, the eyes of a foreigner, the text emphasizes the sense of alienation and loneliness that has compelled Los to create his spaceship. While previously, Skyles had the sensation of being watched, now it is Los's turn to be the center of attention. In the grand tradition of the Petersburg text, Skyles's double Los seems to compensate for Skyles's own feeling of inadequacy. Being a spectacle on display is an outsider's prerogative; yet in Skyles's metaphorical creation of Los, his summoning of this doppelganger, the mark of alienation becomes a display of strength. Los is capable of doing what Skyles can only dream about: escaping the deathly atmosphere of the city. The image of the boy with a crow on a string externalizes Skyles's feeling of confinement; the fantasy of flight to Mars with its birdlike queen Aelita releases the American.

Numerous hints point to Los as a figment of Skyles's imagination, as the journalist's upwardly mobile double. Los embodies an inflation of Skyles's two most pronounced characteristics, evident from his very name, which can be read as a mixture of "sky" and "scales." "Sky" indicates the journalist's affinity with Los and Gusev, whom Martians call the Sons of the Sky; and his thirst for adventure and interest in the unknown link him with the Russian travelers. The word "scales" hints at Skyles's preoccupation with numbers, his quantitative orientation. He even expresses his disbelief in the form of a number: twenty-three. His first reaction upon reading Los's invitation is to check his pulse, in order to calculate the degree of his delirium. Soon thereafter, Skyles checks his chronometer, which on the one hand indicates his partiality to exactitude, and on the other, being a timepiece used especially in navigation, again ties him to the long-distance voyager Los. The questions Skyles poses concern numbers as well: the temporal and spatial length of the trip, and the financial means at Los's disposal. But Los welcomes Skyles's inquiries: the American's eager ear allows Los to explain the construction of the vehicle, the theory and practice of the envisioned flight. Skyles is a citizen of the world's most technologically advanced country, and his interest in Los's invention and inventiveness give credit to the Russian. The American's practicality and numerate precision validate Los's approach to spaceflight, supplying his fantasy with truth-value.

Just as Skyles has the sensation, moreover, that "someone is calling him from this city to fly into a starry desert,"²³ Los is preoccupied with strange signals emanating from somewhere in the cosmos: "Someone persistently

wishes to speak to us.”²⁴ Skyles explains that he seeks Los’s acquaintance in order to inform his readers about the sensational project of “interplanetary communication” (*mezhplanetnoe soobshchenie*). In his capacity as journalist, Skyles has a natural interest in communication. But there is more to the American’s excitement in this instance: Skyles, surrounded by strangers in a ravaged country, is uniquely positioned to enthusiastically hail Los’s undertaking to establish communication with aliens in a quest to solve the problem of isolation. This desire to be addressed, the desire for an interlocutor, drives Los’s fantasy. Los and Skyles, outsiders alike, form a bond, each receptive to the other’s otherness. Even Los’s name derives its significance from interpretation in the journalist’s language of English: his defining characteristic is the loss of his wife. Los’s wife, Kat’ia, died in the years of the Russian Revolution and Civil War, and Los’s loneliness metonymically represents the loneliness of postwar Russia, virtually cut off from the outside world.

Building his rocket, Los is determined to establish extraterrestrial communication as a means of overcoming isolation. The inventor sees loneliness as a manifestation of hell, the watching of one’s own death; his plunge into the unknown, and his need to communicate, stem from a desire to forget, envisioned as the only means of survival. Los travels thus not *toward* but *away from*, his voyage to Mars representing flight in both senses of the word: “I am not a new conquistador, or a dare-devil, or a dreamer . . . I am a coward, a fugitive.”²⁵ But this terrifying isolation does not stem from external reality, but from the self. Revealing the complex motivation behind his flight, Los seeks Skyles’s attention: the inventor’s attempt to escape himself can only be accomplished by making contact with the other.

The trip to Mars exercises two alternative attitudes to otherness, Gusev’s domination and Los’s love.²⁶ Clearly Los’s path yields better results. Gusev is a warrior to his core; he can only relate to the unknown by attempting to conquer it. His life-asserting will to power, however, is fruitless, his revolution suffering defeat; Gusev’s power is replaced by doubt and the fear of death, which bring him closer to Los. Critics hailed Gusev as a realistic portrayal of a strong, active Russian common man, in contrast to Los, whose sensitivity and tendency to melancholy earned him the diagnosis of “neurasthenic.”²⁷

But closer examination reveals that it is Gusev whom Tolstoy makes the bearer of a “politically incorrect” message. Committed solely to conquest, the soldier does not trouble over the reasons behind conflict; in the Civil War, he fought for both the Reds and Whites. Gusev brings destruction, and is incapable of creation, as is hinted by the fact of his childlessness. On the eve of the flight, pointing to a ceiling fresco depicting a full-bodied woman flying through the clouds amidst cupids, he tells his wife: “Beyond the clouds, Masha, I’m flying up, sort of like that dame.”²⁸ Gusev

reads cupids as the flying woman's children, often taunting Masha, "Now that's a woman!"²⁹ (*Vot eto baba!*). Masha is left to think that, had she been like the ostensibly fertile woman on the ceiling, her husband would not have abandoned her for Mars. Gusev's desire for domination, then, can be seen as stemming from his experience of this lack of progeny, a compensatory solution to the problem of mortality. But his solution proves inadequate. No wonder that, upon returning to Earth, his unproductive energy is channeled into seemingly empty pursuits: he becomes (in the original edition published in *Krasnaia nov'*, though this fate was stricken from later editions) a Nepman, "dresses up his wife like a doll,"³⁰ and opens an investment company.

Los's alternative offers a somewhat better outcome. Awash in blood and enmity, Earth is a locus of alienation; abandoning it for Mars, Los means to leave behind domination as the guiding principle of existence. In place of this principle, Tolstoy offers love, in the process polemicizing with the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer (as voiced by Aelita's mentor), particularly with the claim that evil is rooted in the individual will to live. Schopenhauer held that the will to live overrides the life-interest of other individuals, and hence is the cause of all suffering; in this view, the will to live must be opposed via the intellect, which points to the salvation of annihilation.³¹ Reversing this equation, Tolstoy proposes that the intellect only isolates the individual, while the will to live does not cause suffering in others, but rather their enlivenment.

To counteract the regnant logic of conquest, Los explains that love, in his view the aim of life, constitutes a fall: "One has to fall and blossom, awaken to unbearable suffering—to live, awakened to desire—to love, merge, sink into oblivion, to stop being a lonely seed."³² Los's affirmation of *falling* directly contradicts the teaching of Aelita's Schopenhauerian mentor, who instructs the Martian queen: "Only the coldness of wisdom, only calm contemplation of the inexorable death of every living thing—that is happiness. It is easy to fall . . . whereas ascent is slow and hard. Be wise."³³ But Aelita, for her part, answers that there is something more powerful than wisdom: "People who have known love don't die."³⁴ In Tolstoy's revision of Schopenhauer, happiness stands not merely as the negation of suffering, but as a state of "forgetting one's self" (*zabyt' samogo sebia*); yet this "forgetting" is not oblivion, the Schopenhauerian goal of annihilation, but an affirmation of life: "He is happy who is complete and willing and thirsting to live for those who make him complete, and willing, and happy."³⁵ Bluish, pixyish Aelita, with her big bright eyes and sharp chin, recalls the goddess of love in Botticelli's *Venus and Mars*—the goddess who is awake, while Mars, the exhausted god of war, sleeps.

The *falling* Los connects with love, moreover, has, fittingly enough,

associations with the Newtonian physics behind spaceflight. As the scientist describes his projected journey to Skyles: “True flight is falling, when a body is moved by propulsion from a force that is pushing it.”³⁶ The described encounter between the body of the rocket and the planet that draws it to itself contains strong sexual connotations. The atmosphere presented as a shield is penetrated and the rocket sinks into the body of the planet. The spaceship, which in a coital twist on the typically chaste ideal of androgyny in Russian symbolism³⁷ unites female and male reproductive systems (ovum, phallus) into one potent image, becomes a seed implanted into the soil of Mars.

Aelita’s subtitle, as mentioned, is *The Decline of Mars*; in the novel, Martian civilization is in its final stage. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler pronounces civilization to be the last stage of culture, predicting moreover that if Russia could free itself from the shackles of Petrine Westernization and Leninist “Caesarism,” it would emerge as the savior of the world.³⁸ Tolstoy’s novel refracts this notion through the Martians’ faith that the Russians, whom they call the Sons of the Sky, have arrived to save their civilization. Tolstoy allows Los to fulfill this expectation (and to be fulfilled, in turn) by making love to Aelita; in the stories she tells Los about the history of Atlantis, whose last inhabitants were the ancestors of the Martians, the conquerors need to conjoin with the conquered in order to survive. Merging with the alien, abandoning the individual self to become part of a whole, one with the cosmos—“life-bearing dust, the seeds of life”³⁹—such is the trajectory of Los’s flight from fruitless solitude.

The idea of erotic love as creative energy is at the center of Vladimir Solov’ev’s “Smysl liubvi” (“The Meaning of Love”). This tract, so influential among Russian symbolists and cosmists, suggests a direction toward which this powerful energy source can be channeled, when not expended on animal reproduction. According to Solov’ev, the ethical task of ideal love is the affirmation of the creative human personality and the advancement of all-unity (*vseedinstvo*). Tolstoy’s *Aelita*, which evinces symbolist influences, espouses the creative, life-affirming, ethical force of eros, but not, it should be emphasized, in the disembodied, ideal form foregrounded by Solov’ev. The potency of Tolstoy’s version of eros lies precisely in its ability to be consummated, physical; erotic connection enables a relationship to the world in which a creative personality is both free and contingent.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Herbert Marcuse attempts to analyze the potential of eros to break the chain of coercion and compulsion characteristic of civilization. Marcuse underscores the affinity between sexuality and fantasy; examining Freud’s theory that civilization is the product of control over and sublimation of primal drives, insofar as unbridled sexuality leads to the fulfillment of both the life instinct and the death instinct, Marcuse

emphasizes that fantasy is the only realm in which sexuality can remain unrepressed. Fantasy can surmount antagonistic human reality and unleash hidden potentialities.

The boundless potential of fantasy is also emphasized by the father of rocket science, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky. As he recounts in the 1911 edition of *Issledovanie mirovykh prostranstv reaktivnymi priborami* (*The Investigation of Outer Space by Means of Reactive Devices*), the seed for his idea of a rocket came from the fantastic world of Jules Verne. Moreover, Tsiolkovsky's most ambitious desire, the achievement of immortality, is motivated, in the language of Freud, by the life instinct. At the end of the essay, the scientist speculates that spaceflight will ensure the immortality of humankind: "The best part of humanity will most likely never die out, but will instead migrate from one Sun to another as these burn out. Thus, there is no end to life, no end to reason and the perfecting of humanity. Its progress is eternal."⁴⁰

Of course, it remains to be asked: exactly what *is* progress? The Austrian psychoanalyst and philosopher Otto Rank, for example, suggests that scientific progress constitutes a form of regression, that by building more and more technological "protective shells," humanity reproduces the safety and timelessness of intrauterine space.⁴¹ Los designs his spaceship in the form of an egg, and this form makes clear its function.⁴² The egg symbolizes burgeoning life; by getting inside one, Los become an embryo full of future potential.

Their fantastic trip in an egg-like spaceship frees the protagonists from the repressive laws of chronological time, of human history, the destructiveness of which is symbolized by the death of Los's wife in a great upheaval. Leaving the deathly atmosphere of postwar Petrograd, the cosmonauts in effect jump out of the inhumane forward march of history. Mars is a place of timelessness; it combines the prehistoric past (Atlantis) with the future, the technologically mature stage of history. In Aelita's world, stasis triumphs. The egg thus enables Los to arrest the flow of time: twenty days on Mars equal four years on Earth. In an article on the craft of writing, Tolstoy remarks:

Every writer is a condenser of time. . . . We, the inhabitants of Earth, want to extend the instant as far as possible, to unfold it in the perspective of our past. Art stops time . . . It selects from the torrent of time the brightest, most stirring, most significant, and imprints it into the crystals of books.⁴³

The fantastic flight in the egg-like spaceship functions in the same way as a work of art: it freezes time and postpones death. But it is Skyles who makes the connection between writing and Los's trip explicit by soliciting the cosmonaut's travel notes. Los's immortality is ensured by Skyles's readers, who

become Los's long-sought fellow travelers. Skyles thus fulfills Los's desire to nurture "the seeds of life." The narrative of Los's flight of fancy breaks through his isolation, effecting his extension beyond his own person, his own biological time. Able to eternally return to Aelita, Skyles's readers save Los from oblivion. "Write this down in your notebook,"⁴⁴ Los asks the American journalist, rendering him a mediator, not unlike the radio tower that transmits Aelita's voice to Los at the end of the novel. Skyles is a medium personified—specifically, the adventure genre—supplying Los's fantasy with form. A narrative is created because Skyles solicits it, the American journalist providing definition to the indefiniteness of Russians.

As a product of Skyles's imagination, Los's trip becomes a story of the promise of Russia as seen by outsiders. In the novel's finale, Los races across the snowy terrain toward Aelita's voice emanating from a radio tower on the Field of Mars in the heart of Petrograd, and we understand that in a sense Los's red planet itself lies in the depths of the Field of Mars. In deathly Petrograd, Skyles dreams of pleasure, love, and communion. By dreaming so, he recognizes and releases the potentialities of Russia. Los's desire to escape isolation and merge with an alien is deeply personal, but it is also a reflection of Skyles's desire; Los's longing for Aelita refracts Skyles's longing for Los. By arranging things such that a Russian and an American constitute a covert community of like-minded, communion-seeking outsiders, Tolstoy finds Russia an ally. In the context of Russia's postrevolutionary isolation, *Aelita* articulates a fantasy of unification.

By the end of the novel, the dream of union has in fact been accomplished. "Our native/home, native/home, native/home" world (*Rodnaia, rodnaia, rodnaia*), Gusev murmurs upon catching sight of the approaching Earth from the returning spaceship—when in fact what he sees is not Russia, but America.⁴⁵ The spacecraft's landing on the shore of Lake Michigan (hence near Chicago, a glaring symbol of American technological might) suggests the end result of the journey. While in America, Los meets with Skyles, who informs him of two major developments that took place in the cosmonauts' absence: Petersburg has become one of the fanciest cities in Europe, and America's prohibition law has been lifted.⁴⁶ Russia becomes more like America, while newly drunken America becomes more like Russia. Russia's exclusion, her isolation in the world, is solved through Los's vision of the Earth as a whole, as his home. It is no surprise, in this unified world, to find Skyles back in the United States. But likewise, his creator and counterpart Tolstoy, by the time the novel is finished, has found his way home to Russia. To escape his own artistic demise—Europe, Tolstoy writes in one of his letters, is a "cemetery"—the author creates *Aelita*, an offering of love to his new Americanized audience. Skyles and the adventure genre that he embodies lend a new vitality to Tolstoy's writing.

Space Travel and Love's Travails in Sequels to *Aelita*

In 1924 Iakov Protazanov, recently returned from emigration, directed the film *Aelita*. Very loosely based on Tolstoy's novel, the film bears a pronounced ideological message. Unsurprisingly, Skyles is stricken from the film; his function is transposed to an inanimate object: a poster advertising American tires. In Protazanov's version, everything begins with a mysterious radio transmission: the words *Anta Odeli Uta*. Having received this message (such as it is), the engineer Los begins to dream of a trip to Mars. In his fantasy, the Martian queen Aelita longs for him, and Los, having fallen desperately in love with her in turn, undertakes a trip to the red planet.

The mysterious radio transmission, however, turns out to have a far more prosaic origin: it is part of an American tire manufacturer's advertising campaign, a fact consistent with the film's satirical targeting of the NEP mentality. As Los's wife is courted by a Nepman-speculator, who entices her with fancy chocolates, unhappy Los channels his sexual frustration into his fantasy of Aelita. Los's proprietary desire is of a private nature, but by relating it to the American advertisement, the film exposes Los's fantasy as undergirded by consumerist ideology: an American publicity campaign can lead otherwise useful members of the technical intelligentsia away from socially useful tasks and toward wasteful, impulse-indulging, even murderous daydreaming. Advertising subliminally acts upon individual dissatisfactions. The words *Anta Odeli Uta* have such power that, having heard them, Los imagines Aelita bedecked in a headpiece and tunic recalling the Statue of Liberty, which later appears on the above-mentioned tire poster; the skyline of a Martian city as imagined by Los looks uncannily like the Manhattan skyline shown on the same poster (figs. 21–23).⁴⁷ The tires, then, belong to a vehicle taking Los away from the goal of the building of Soviet power.

Los's Mars is a vision of America that seduces with false promises; the freedom gained from the fantasy provoked by the American ad proves hollow. In a gesture evoking the Statue of Liberty, Aelita raises her arm to summon her people to revolt in defense of their rights. But the queen ends up betraying the bright ideals of revolution, and Los as well. Recognizing the futility of his search for ideal love, Los's mental departure from Earth comes to an end. The movie thus aligns consumerist interests with all-consuming love. Mercantile culture incites uncontrollable desires that distract and harm those who harbor them.

Remarkably, however, the seductive techniques associated with American advertising—condemned by Protazanov's plot—were used to promote the film itself, its premiere preceded by an extensive publicity campaign. First the cryptic message *Anta Odeli Uta* appeared in *Pravda*. Then *Kinogazeta* published the following notice: "The signals that are being received constantly



Fig. 21. *Aelita, the Queen of Mars*, costume design by Alexandra Exter, 1924

by radio stations around the world—Anta . . . Odeli . . . Uta—have at last been deciphered! What do they mean? You will find out on 30 September at the Ars Cinema.”⁴⁸ But this promise is only fulfilled (sort of)⁴⁹ at the very end of the film; and at this climactic moment, when the mysterious signal is at last revealed to be a tire ad, the viewer, for all intents and purposes, winds up in America. The end point of the narrative voyage, both in film and book, is America. The film is more “patriotic” regarding Russia’s promise; but the more faithful it is to the idea of Soviet progress, the more America looms as the futuristic ideal, the unattainable goal, the ever-alluring object of desire.

Reportedly, Tolstoy was not favorably disposed toward Protazanov’s interpretation of his Martian adventure. And no wonder: Tolstoy’s philosophy of self-preserving love for the other is travestied in the relationship between Los and Aelita in the film. Here any sort of otherness—whether domestic (the Nepman’s Jewishness, or Los’s status as an intellectual with Georgian features) or foreign (American or Martian)—becomes a parasitical aberration on the collective body of Russian workers and peasants. In Tolstoy’s novel, an alien, foreign sign (the American’s utterance “twenty-three”) launches the Martian adventure, uncovering the fantastic potential of a world full of the unknown and unfamiliar. Protazanov’s film begins with

The Homeland of Technology

an unfamiliar sign as well, one that, albeit also of American origin, does not belong to any human tongue. It obfuscates, impedes communication. The nonsensical *Anta Odeli Uta* cannot even properly be called a sign, lacking as it does a key element: a signified.

Tolstoy might have resented Protazanov's attempt to parody his Martian quest while capitalizing on its mass appeal, but his own writing was now tending in a similar direction as that of Protazanov's *Aelita*. The author was parting ways with the idea, perhaps now understood as maudlin, of valorizing love as a motivation behind travel and invention. In August 1924 he produced a novella, *Soiuz piati* (*The Union of Five*), in which a very different use for Los's egg-like spacecraft is found. In this work, set in the future (1933), five anonymous, but most likely American magnates under the leadership of one Ignatius Ruth acquire 200 of Los's spaceships. The compartments that Los had designed to carry people for the purpose of interplanetary communication are now packed by the five conspirators with the most powerful explosives known to mankind, and the ships are sent surreptitiously on a course to destroy the moon. The purpose of the conspiracy is to infuse mankind with horror at the apocalyptic sight of the moon's destruction, and to exploit this moment of panic in the stock market to seize control of the world's capital.

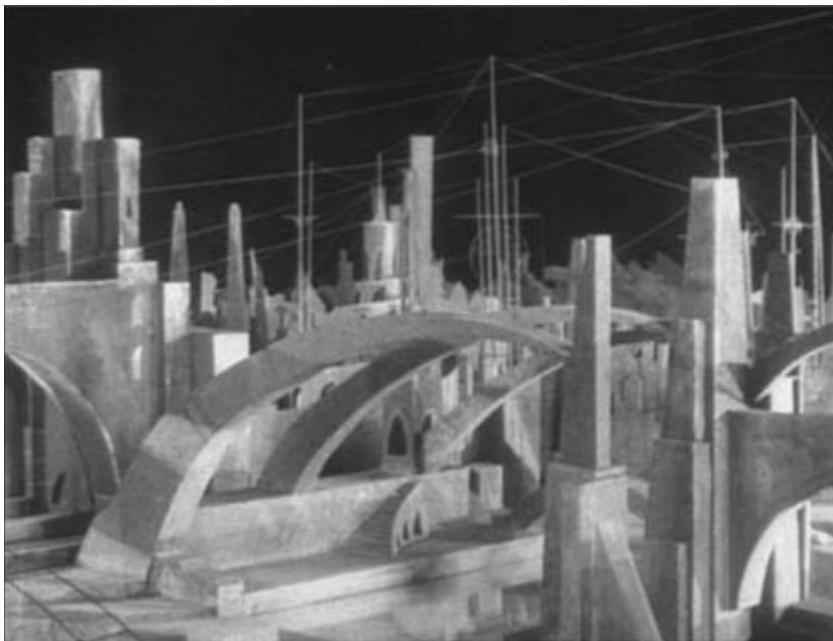


Fig. 22. Futuristic skyline of the Martian city, *Aelita, the Queen of Mars*, 1924



Fig. 23. “American” poster for tires manufactured by Anta
Odeli Uta, *Aelita, the Queen of Mars*, 1924

The plot is prepared by the magnates’ feeding sensation-craving American newspapers a story about the moon’s imminent demise via comet impact; the papers are also given faulty scientific research to the effect that the moon’s pieces will collide with the Earth, destroying everything living on it. The conspirators intend, after blowing up the moon, to announce a revised calculation: the moon-pieces in fact will cause no damage to the Earth, and so humanity will be invited to go on living, except now under the all-powerful dominion of the five.

According to the typical 1920s Red Pinkerton formula, any convoluted scheme hatched by power-mad and technologically super-advanced titans of finance was bound to fail. The villains are foiled when anarchy breaks out, and people riot and engage in all manner of debauchery. Having experienced the fear of extinction, and confronted by the extinction of a phenomenon whose permanence they had never doubted, humanity loses its faith in the cosmic arrangement of the universe. When both the transient and the transcendent lose meaning, humanity’s reaction is to embrace chaos, to stop fetishizing material objects and worshipping power and instead to dedicate themselves to pure enjoyment of the fleeting moment.

The palpable shift here is that the sense of wonder at the core of the relationship between Los and Skyles in *Aelita*, and at the core of Los's creation, is supplanted by the utilitarian application of Los's spacecraft. Unlike *Aelita*, this is not a tale of the appeal of the journey, of discovery. There is nothing wondrous in Ruth's treatment of the unknown and alien, nor any sense of awe before the universe. Indeed, the attitude toward the cosmos is strictly proprietary. In *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*, Gary Wolfe remarks: "The sense of wonder in science fiction may be the sense of the tension set up between the familiar and unfamiliar, the known and the unknown. In experiencing the sense of wonder, we experience a feeling of endless possibilities, like standing at the edge of a vast abyss that is close enough to us to be real, and yet great enough to be unfathomable."⁵⁰ While such a tension between the unfamiliar and familiar informs the previous book's journey to Mars, the Union of Five is punished for believing that life on earth can be predicted and controlled. They did not account for the power of the moon's mysteriousness; their conspiracy literalized the metaphor of the moon's waning and waxing, reducing it to mere pieces, and neglecting its nonliteral meanings. Ruth dismisses the moon as "the ancient patroness of lovebirds," hailed by "young day-dreaming girls"⁵¹—an aesthetic (hence useless) object that can only be made useful by his destroying it. The moon, which wields a mysterious influence over tides, women, poets, and madmen, apparently also holds the power to order the world generally.

The world Ruth attempts to create is monolithic: governed by monopoly, it would eliminate difference. It would, moreover, be a masculine world, intolerant of the feminine with which the moon, after all, is associated; when inciting his fellow conspirators to unite against the world, Ruth appeals to their masculine strength.⁵² In *Aelita*, the invention of the spacecraft was motivated by the urge to break through isolation and loneliness, whereas in *The Union of Five*, the same spacecraft is tasked with depriving earth of its satellite, its companion and fellow traveler.

Also noteworthy is that, while in *Aelita* the dislocation experienced by Skyles and craved by Los is portrayed as enriching, and rather safely enclosed within spatial and temporal borders, in the second novella the dislocation depicted is all-encompassing and permanent. No one moves beyond their own familiar habitat, yet this (moonless) habitat is permanently altered. *The Union of Five* is populated by characters who do not evoke a reader's empathy, and not because of their anonymity, but because their thirst for power is so impersonal and dehumanizing in comparison with, for instance, Los's yearning for love. The collaboration of Skyles and Los renders their situation somehow universally poignant, but the collaboration between Ignatius Ruth and Korvin, the Russian engineer he employs, is fraught with mutual distrust and revulsion.

Tolstoy's narrator disapproves of Ruth's intentions; but the novella exhibits a certain intolerance toward otherness not inconsistent with the evil magnate's outlook. Just as in *Aelita* Skyles serves to mediate between the traveler-inventor and his audience, in *The Union of Five*, American journalists function to interpret the Union of Five's monstrous mission for the people of earth. But here this mediating role is quite ominous; the American newspapers are the vehicle by which the Union of Five reaches its audience—its prey, really—and seeks to capture it. Skyles is sensitive and circumspect, but in *The Union of Five*, American journalists are portrayed as callous and concerned only with sensationalism; ready to oblige the conspirators, they fill humanity with terror, the contradictory fragments of information they serve matching the pieces of the broken moon. It is, indeed, unclear which causes greater damage: the destroyed moon, or the Americans' flawed reportage. Why, we might ask, does Tolstoy in this novella reshuffle the pieces of *Aelita*, why does he find such an unsavory application for Los's vehicle of love and union, and give such a perilous spin to the function of the American journalist?

In the last episode of the novella, a blond, rosy-cheeked man, dressed in a manner reminiscent of Russian folksiness, enters the White House and asks the masters of the world to vacate the premises.⁵³ The American president's mansion is to be converted into a club for Russian workers. Tolstoy added this ending, which he must have conceived of as optimistic, to a subsequent edition of the novella, although, we might note, it is ideologically clumsy. Generically speaking, an apocalypse foregrounds punishment and judgment, and to present the Russian workers' siege of the White House as *punishment* of the American capital/capitalists is not particularly consistent with the Marxist-Leninist notion of proletarian revolution as the result of historical forces.

The novella seems to constitute a reconsideration of earlier themes, something of an apology for daring to imagine that the world hinges on exploration and cooperation, rather than conquest and strife. The hostility of Ruth and the Union of Five is a destructive force; and the novella's tonal hostility toward outsiders ultimately damages it as well. The narrative practices an aggressive mode of behavior similar to the one its plot ostensibly punishes. To make the destruction of the moon bring positive results for the cause of world revolution is to espouse a view akin to Ruth's: that the end justifies the means. The moon in the story is described at one point as an egg, and it seems Tolstoy has come to believe that you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs.

The Union of Five was a warm-up exercise for Tolstoy's *Engineer Garin's Death-Ray* (1925–26). Probably the least parodic of Red Pinkertons, this work incorporates every cliché of the genre: degenerate American mil-

lionaires; a conspiracy of the old world against the new; brilliant Russian working-class detectives; multiple locations; and wondrous technology applicable toward both sublime creation and the deadliest destruction. Here Tolstoy continues the theme of collaboration between Russian science and American capital. The former is represented by the supremely ambitious Russian engineer Garin, and the latter by Rollings, an American billionaire involved in a shady chemical business. In the project of world domination, Garin and Rollings need each other, knowledge plus capital equaling power.

Beyond their mutual thirst for conquest, these two share a love interest: Russian actress and femme fatale Zoia, who personifies the desirability of the old Russia in all its beauty and corruption. But the conspirators' love triangle with Zoia is adulterated by an additional side. It seems that while the American is deeply in love, in Zoia, with the old Russia, Garin is equally taken with the Russian worker-detective Shel'ga, who seems to reciprocate the engineer's interest. Meanwhile, Shel'ga notes a strangely recursive relationship between Garin and Rollings: "The chemical king *begets from his womb* this man inflamed with criminal ideas, who, in turn, *impregnates* Rollings's desert with a monstrous fantasy" (emphasis added).⁵⁴ The collaboration between Russia and America is presented thus as a familial symbiosis, but a dangerous, incestuous one. Shel'ga's imagery creates a grotesque natal scene, with Rollings giving birth to Garin so as to be impregnated by him. It is unclear why Shel'ga envisions the relationship between Garin and Rollings in these terms—perhaps because of Rollings's involvement with nefarious-seeming chemicals. In this view, America's scientific prowess, the melting pot's spirit of experimentation, is contaminated by money-lust—a criminal, destructive concoction producing an explosive chemical reaction.

Although the eponymous death-ray foreshadows the advent of the laser, it seems akin to the more contemporaneous X-ray and film technologies, foregrounding as it does the elements of spectacle and exposure. In his notebooks, Tolstoy wrote: "Concentration of light, of chemical rays. A ray as thin as a hair. The ultraviolet ray instead of an electric wire. Cliff-drilling. Ground-drilling. A laboratory on an island in the Pacific Ocean. World domination."⁵⁵ The death-ray is capable of penetrating any depth, reaching the very core of the earth. More importantly in a thematic sense, it seems to unearth the connections between the new Russia, the old Russia, and America, illuminating deep-set economies of gravitational attraction and repulsion. The death-ray is based on the idea of the explosive cumulative effect of concentrated energy. In Tolstoy's fantasy, such gatherings of energy, accumulations of power, signal destructiveness. *Engineer Garin's Death-Ray* reconsiders the notion of union with the other in these terms.

In a review published in *Lef*, Nikolai Aseev mocks Tolstoy for the alleged disparity between the author's aspirations and the interests of his audi-

ence. The critic remarks that Tolstoy's texts confront their worker/peasant reader with a puzzle involving three unknown quantities (tradition, aesthetics, and ideology).⁵⁶ Above I suggested that Skyles's wanderings in Petrograd parallel those of Tolstoy in emigration, and that Los's/Skyles's return enacts a fantasy of Tolstoy's acceptance by his audience. We can continue the character-parallel with *Engineer Garin's Death-Ray*: with his hypertrophied imagination and his aspiration to organize the world around him according to his tastes, Garin seems akin to a writer, possibly even the author of the novel. Tolstoy, having heard of the invention of a powerful double-hyperboloid ray device,⁵⁷ immediately attempted to make it the basis of an engaging story. Like Garin, he sought a means to utilize the death-ray in the most spectacular manner possible. Tolstoy notes that Garin's plan was not devoid of aestheticism: the inventor felt an almost aesthetic sensation in his desire to bend reality to the dictates of his imagination.

In the end, Tolstoy leaves Garin and Zoia on a desert island. While such an outcome ostensibly signifies the undoing of Garin's grand scheme, it might, however, connote quite the opposite: his longevity. In the last sentence of the novel, Garin is dreaming up new adventures. Could Garin's fate ultimately mirror the fate of the author, who, having aspired to win over his mass audience, is ultimately left unsatisfied—in a sense, alone? Bereft of everything, Garin is at least left his imagination, the main prerequisite for future dreams. Garin's island seclusion appears acceptable, even somewhat idyllic. How has Tolstoy gone from his yearning for union with the other in *Aelita* to a recognition of the fraught nature of such union? And how does such an ideological trajectory relate to Tolstoy's stricter adherence to the conventions of the Red Pinkerton genre? Was it Tolstoy's change of outlook, the shift that saw his introduction of less complicated, more "politically correct" characters, that led to a more rigorous observance of Pinkerton conventions, or was it the other way around: did participation in the community of the Red Pinkertons precipitate his departure from his earlier ideas? Let us turn to the genre itself.

AMERICA AS A CINEMATIC CONSTRUCTION

The Cinematic Preconditions of the Red Pinkerton Craze

The Red Pinkerton might seem a strange phenomenon for several reasons, first and foremost the dubious political background of Nat Pinkerton himself. His creators—Allan Pinkerton and sons—headed the famed private law-enforcement agency that specialized in antiunion activity and strikebreaking, and conceived of the detective series as a self-advertisement. Did Bukharin

and other advocates of Red Pinkertons miss the strong antiproletarian overtones? Several conjectures are possible. As the popularity of Nat Pinkerton reached Europe, local forgeries of the detective stories began to proliferate; many of the tales read by the Russian public, for instance, were not of American origin. Retaining the acrobatic style and brisk pace of crime fiction, the inauthentic Pinkertons did not feature the same antiunion tendencies that motivated the originators of the series.⁵⁸ The Soviet attitude toward literary Pinkertonism, moreover, was similar to that toward Taylorism, Fordism, and other 1920s American imports: it was believed possible to distill from capitalism what was useful—in the case of Taylorism, industrial efficiency; in the case of Pinkertons, suspenseful plots—and implant these gains in a socialist context. With respect to industrial development, this theory did not produce the hoped-for results, but the Red Pinkertons were a more successful endeavor.

Another incongruent aspect of the Red Pinkerton is its apparent anachronism. Interest in American (or American-style) Pinkertons in Russia peaked by the beginning of the 1910s, and had dwindled considerably by the 1920s. The red-hued renaissance of Pinkertonism in the 1920s can be attributed to the influence of American cinema. American movies, including detective films, overwhelmed the Russian market. A public in love with Harold Lloyd, Mary Pickford, and Buster Keaton craved everything American, and what “American” was, the public learned from movies. This is why, upon the introduction of Jim Dollar, the fictive author of one of the most popular Red Pinkertons, Marietta Shaginyan’s *Mess-Mend, or a Yankee in Petrograd* (1924–25), the reader is informed that Dollar has no literary training, and that his storytelling is constructed on cinematic principles.⁵⁹ Red Pinkertons were, indeed, often subtitled *kinoromany*, cinema-novels. The interpolation of cinematic devices into Russian literature is a major manifestation of Americanization.

A brief glance back at *Aelita* reveals the influence of cinematographic narrative techniques on the novel’s structure, its building of surprise and suspense. For example, much space in the book is given over to the flight to Mars itself, which is described in painstakingly visual terms. As Los looks upon the approaching red planet through periscopic portholes, the descent to Mars is conveyed through a series of verbal zoom shots, observations that begin with the “silvery disk of Mars, swathed here and there in clouds . . . growing noticeably larger,” and end thus: “The last seconds were frightening: a dizzying fall. Mars covered the entire sky.”⁶⁰ In a shot/reverse shot analogue, Tolstoy intersperses terse, one- or two-sentence descriptions of the onrushing planet with sentences describing Los’s reactions, so that the reader has the sensation of seeing Mars from Los’s point of view: “Los was eagerly examining this network of lines . . . Los could make out beneath this clear

picture a second, barely visible, network of lines . . . Los lay on the floor observing how the silver disk grew larger and became more three-dimensional. It seemed to be flying at them from the black abyss.”⁶¹

Indeed, much of what Tolstoy describes is seen through the eyes of one or other of his characters. Exactly whose point of view the author asks the reader to share, too, is significant: first we see the world from the point of view of Skyles, who becomes our guide through Petrograd, while later, on Mars, we are aligned with the estranged point of view of Los. Tolstoy furthermore creates suspense via the extreme close-up: “Suddenly Los stopped . . . Three steps away, close to the ground, large equine eyes, half-shut with reddish lids, were staring at him through the thick leaves. They were staring intently, with vicious hostility.”⁶² Only subsequently, upon backing up as it were, do we discover that the eyes belong to a giant spider.

Spaceflight naturally allows for destabilizing (and defamiliarizing) angles and dives; and life on Mars, as filmed through the camera of Los’s vision, comes across as a negative print of life on Earth. Tolstoy’s preoccupation with cinematic imagery is evident from the novel’s content itself. On Mars, all learning takes place through visualization. Communication and familiarization with the alien is achieved through images. Aelita learns of Los’s and Gusev’s origins and life before coming to Mars from reflections of their memories shown in a shadowy ball she holds in her palm. Los’s recollections, from which Aelita learns of life in Russia, are constructed like a filmic establishing shot, smoothly panning over the landscape of Petrograd from above, then diving down to the human scale, then providing long shots of an individual, and finally, of course, a close-up:

The cupola of St. Isaac’s came into view only to be replaced by the granite steps by the water, a curved bench, a red-haired girl sitting sadly on it—her face trembled and disappeared, and above it—two sphinxes in tiaras. Columns of figures floated by, blueprints, a flaming furnace, grim Khokhlov fanning the coals.⁶³

Slowly, montage becomes choppier, enabling expressive angles: “But now the images were becoming confused; completely different pictures were breaking in—smoke, sunsets, galloping horses, running, falling people. Here was a face, bearded and covered with blood, blocking out everything else.”⁶⁴ More eloquently and succinctly than words, these moving (in every sense) images form an expressive picture of a distant world.

In turn, Aelita uses a large glassy screen in her royal library to teach Los and Gusev the Martian language and Martian realities. With this device, the voyagers quickly become accustomed to what would otherwise be supremely foreign/alien, internalizing the local language and culture in a mat-

ter of days. During this technology-enhanced acceleration of learning, Los and Gusev are practically hypnotized by the miraculous apparatus speaking to them in images. These amazing screens are commonplace on Mars, allowing their users to penetrate walls and doors, spy on secret meetings, and be everywhere at once. The screen, further, possesses its own intelligence; it knows just what to show to whom, and when. Visibility seems to be the defining characteristic of Mars, which is fitting thematically, as the planet is ultimately a reflection of Los's and Gusev's desires and fears.

Tolstoy's *Aelita* is one of the earliest attempts to create a new type of Russian novel, one influenced by cinema and popular foreign genres, one that would appeal to a new mass audience. Many more Russian works similarly oriented toward Western, popular, cinematic aesthetics soon began to appear. Adventure and detective moments in twentieth-century Russian literature have their origin in the cinema.

The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. Kuleshov in the Land of American Cinema

Already in the early 1920s, Lev Kuleshov, the first theoretician of montage, began to study American films—which he considered “the most perfect examples of cinema culture extant in the world at the time”⁶⁵—seeking the formula for their broad popularity. Admirers of Hollywood sang the praises of the cosmopolitanism of its products.⁶⁶ Celebrating the fantastic reach of American film, Leonid Andreev exclaimed: “The miraculous cinema! Having no language, being equally intelligible to the savages of St. Petersburg and the savages of Calcutta, it truly becomes the genius of international contact, brings the ends of the earth and the spheres of the soul nearer and gathers the whole of quivering humanity into a single stream.”⁶⁷ Today, an art house movie theater in Boston has chosen as its motto the tenet that “the language of cinema is universal,” a notion dating back to the soundless origins of film, where gestures broke through the obstacle of spoken language.

Kuleshov, however, believed that film’s universal appeal lay not in its visual nature per se, but in the technological aspect of its organization and movement, which, he felt, implies a certain intercommunicative and international orientation. From his point of view, the secret of American films’ popularity was their effective utilization of the technical capabilities of cinematography. In particular, Kuleshov observed that American films comprised a great number of swiftly alternating shots taken from different angles, whereas Russian films typically consisted of a smaller number of long shots photographed from a single position. The American tendency resulted in

greater appeal to the mass viewer, who was getting the maximum of impressions for the price of admission.⁶⁸

Technology had traditionally been associated with knowledge and instrumentality. But, nothing, until the computer age, showed more palpably the intimate connection between technology and *pleasure* than cinema (and later, television). Highlighting the miraculous (and ephemeral) effects of the mechanical play of light they housed, early twentieth-century Russian movie theaters were typically called “Fantasy,” “Enchantment” (*Chary*), “Wonderland” (*Mir chudes*), “Mirage,” and “Illusion.” Cinema is the technological construction of illusion, as Lotman and Tsivian emphasize:

Shadows, patches of light and darkness flicker on the white square of the screen and seem to be people and objects; the projector is loaded with film consisting of individual still photographs that, changing over at great speed, seem to us to be moving . . . Everything we see on the screen only seems to be; it is not by accident that, in its early days, the cinematograph was for a long time referred to as an “illusion.”⁶⁹

Kuleshov’s theory of montage, which he sees as the basis of cinematographic art, indeed foregrounds the creation of illusion. The technique hinges on the ability of the human mind to connect two unconnected images appearing in succession on-screen. Studying American films, Kuleshov was the first to note this fundamental principle of montage: the opportunity it affords to create a kind of imagistic hybrid, with two unconnected shots producing a third, nonexistent space or setting—a principle later termed “the Kuleshov effect.” What inspired the director, then, was the construction of illusion, sights of unreal things:

Through montage it was possible to create a new earthly terrain that did not exist anywhere . . . [W]e shot a complete scene . . . Khokhlova is walking along Petrov Street in Moscow near the “Mostorg” store. Obolensky is walking along the embankment of the Moscow River—at a distance of about two miles away. They see each other, smile, and begin to walk toward one another. Their meeting is filmed at the Boulevard Prechistensk. This boulevard is in an entirely different section of the city. They clasp hands, with Gogol’s monument as a background, and look—at the White House!—for at this point, we cut in a segment from an American film, *The White House in Washington*. In the next shot they are once again on the Boulevard Prechistensk. Deciding to go farther, they leave and climb up the enormous staircase of The Cathedral of Christ the Savior. We film them, edit them, and the result is that they are seen walking up the steps of the White House.⁷⁰

Particularly telling in this description is the example used—that of spatial dislocation, in which the world is manipulated in such a way as to be made smaller, more manageable. In this cinematic, edited world, the actors and viewers can take a short walk from the Moscow River to Washington. Montage enables foreign elements to commingle, producing a world of complete accessibility. In this context, what is exciting is not the exoticism of famed places per se, but their proximity. Stairs typically signify a transition from one realm into another, and this ascension into the White House is a kind of transcendence, symbolically performing not just a kind of attempt on American power,⁷¹ but especially the initiation of Russian filmmakers into the world of American cinema, and by the same token, Russia's entry into modernity.

In “Mr. Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists,” Vance Kepley Jr. argues that Kuleshov was influenced by the constructivist ethos, the belief in construction as the ultimate modern aesthetic technique: “Cinema epitomized in its technical base a machine efficiency, and in its aesthetic a modern dynamic.”⁷² Kepley suggests that Kuleshov’s emphasis on American films’ use of montage “harkens up the industrial analogy since machine parts operate only in engagement with other parts.”⁷³ And indeed, Kuleshov is preoccupied not only with montage as a principle of organization, but also with finding elements to make such organization work most effectively. Having studied American examples, Kuleshov comes to believe that technology and modern architecture are more amenable subjects for the film camera than, say, a country landscape. If viewers are to take in every shot in a fast-paced montage, each should contain only the most essential information. Technological artifacts, such as railroad tracks, skyscrapers, and radio stations, are typically marked by a clarity and straightforwardness of lines; they are better organized than a village or forest and hence, being more photogenic, they “created the film aesthetic of that time.”⁷⁴

Jeffrey Brooks has noted that the early twentieth-century Russian public was enamored of Pinkertons especially because they were set abroad, and hence included episodes with technology unseen at the time in Russia. Foreign locales logically simplified the inclusion of modern technology, which in turn significantly enhanced plot development.⁷⁵ In this way, pulp detective fiction and technology shared a connection even before the rise of the cinema. But film especially gravitates toward detective content because of the latter’s exciting settings, reliance on a buildup of suspense culminating in action (especially fast-paced chases), and generally simplified linear plot development—not to mention the visual fascination of crime itself.

Put another way: what makes detective fiction especially responsive to the demands of cinematic construction is its own functioning as a well-coordinated system of plot operations and techniques. Indeed, the critic Helmut Heissenbüttel argues that the narrative in a crime novel “is trapped

in an abstractly functioning schematism with its own rigorous regularity,”⁷⁶ while Umberto Eco, analyzing the effectiveness of Ian Fleming’s novels, describes their narrative as “a machine that functions basically on a set of precise units governed by rigorous combination rules.”⁷⁷ No other narrative genre, perhaps, relies so much on a rule-based arrangement of devices to keep the narrative moving, to sustain suspense and interest.⁷⁸

As Kuleshov explains: “In detective literature, and to an even greater extent in the American detective script, the basic element of the plot is an intensity in the build-up of the action—the dynamism of the construction—and for cinema there is no more damaging manifestation of literariness than psychologising, i.e. the external inertia of the plot.”⁷⁹ In the director’s view, American detective films’ superiority stems from their prioritizing the development of plot over that of character. In order to utilize montage smoothly, one needs a fast-paced plot. Lunts, however, in the article mentioned above, asserts that plot has become a foreign entity in Russian culture.⁸⁰ The critic’s was one of several pieces appearing at the time that bemoaned the lack of *fabula* in Russian literature. As first distinguished by Russian formalists, *fabula*, the raw material of the story, contrasts with *siuzhet*, its organization into literary form; thus to claim that *fabula* is lacking is to underscore not the absence of an effective principle to organize plot material, but the absence of the material itself.

Perhaps sharing this view, Kuleshov came to borrow from American films not only montage devices, but their very material as well, appropriating a range of character types and actions that American cinema culture had proven to be cinematogenic, capable of satisfying universal scopophilia. In his *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of Bolsheviks*, Kuleshov casts replicas of American film heroes right along with American montage techniques. For the role of Mr. West, a curiosity-driven, globe-trotting American, Kuleshov finds a Russian actor, Porfirii Podobed, bearing an uncanny likeness to Harold Lloyd; the traveler’s assistant and bodyguard is Cowboy Jetty, whose costumes and antics inject a dose of the Western into this experiment in American-style film art. Importing thus the archetypal comic lead and cowboy, the director includes their associated behavioral conventions and stylistic devices: Mr. West’s face features exaggerated, Harold Lloydian expressions of delight and horror (fig. 24), while Cowboy Jetty performs all manner of acrobatic stunts, jumping from windows, brawling, and falling down stairs (figs. 25–26).

Iuri Tynianov once declared that in a Russian novel, a foreigner can never be the hero—even if he is born in Moscow and his last name is Fedorov.⁸¹ In this same spirit, Viktor Shklovsky wrote a critical review of Kuleshov’s film, expressing his puzzlement as to “Why, in God’s name, Mr. West? And what is he doing in Russia anyway?”⁸² The director defended his choice

The Homeland of Technology

of material: “We were trying to show that the regular organization of acting and montage work will give us the opportunity to get the better of every style and character of production, and in particular the American and German examples.”⁸³ The film, then, represents both an homage and a challenge.

Boris Eikhenbaum describes a similarly dualistic, uneasy relationship with source material thus: “The attempts to revive various forms of adventure and detective novels . . . mostly have a certain overly theoretical nature and are prompted by the desire or hope to conquer the reader, who is disappointed by Russian literature, and to thus defeat the West.”⁸⁴ Plot is in this sense a weapon in the battle with the West—but it is a weapon borrowed from the West itself. The creators of *Red Pinkertons* were well aware that they were attempting to conquer their “adversary” (the West; or the domestic reader nurtured on the sensibilities thereof) with the “adversary’s” own weapons. This self-consciousness regarding the medium and its uses produced fascinating results, especially, on the one hand, a tendency to stuff works with every possible staple of the genre, in order to flaunt one’s mastery of it; but on the other, a sideways glance or wink, a hyperbole that provides its own commentary, its own hint at the nonseriousness of the enterprise.



Fig. 24. Porfirii Podobed as Mr. West, *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924



Fig. 25. Cowboy Jetty (Boris Barnet) riding on car, *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924

Despite the parodic nature of the works in question, however, Russian artists' apprehension regarding their subordinate status as successors in the art of mass appeal led to the creation of a master plot in which Russians gain rightful dominance over America. And I would propose that such a master plot stemmed not only from ideological dictates, but from the artists' anxiety regarding their status as epigones.

In Kuleshov's film, Mr. West arrives in Bolshevik Russia with a head full of false, harmful ideas about its alleged backwardness and barbarity. He falls prey to a gang consisting of remnants of bourgeois society, who, exploiting his prejudices, pose as "Bolsheviks" and put him on "trial" to swindle him out of his money. In search of his master taken thus into "custody," Cowboy Jetty plays the role of detective. The film enacts the three stages of the Pinkerton novel—calamity/crime, pursuit/chase, and rescue—imbuing each with additional meaning. Here the calamity involves not just falling into the clutches of adventuresses, thieves, and other supposed relics of a bygone epoch, but also the metaphorical thrall of false interpretations of Soviet Russia. Escape from this point of view is as cathartic for Mr. West as his release from the gang's literal imprisonment.



Fig. 26. Cowboy Jetty crossing high wire between two buildings, *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924

At the end of the film, a Chekist takes Mr. West on a drive around the real Soviet Moscow. What Mr. West sees now is documentary footage. In contrast to the staged shots presented earlier, this footage is possessed of an objective tint, and is meant to open Mr. West's eyes, as well as the eyes of the average Soviet viewer. One thing, however, taints the transparency of this message: Cowboy Jetty turns out to be not a cowboy at all, but an American worker. His dress-up in cowboy costume thus panders to the stereotypes of Russian audiences regarding Americans just as surely as the criminal gang's donning of muzhik garb and bushy mustaches manipulates the expectations of Mr. West. Prior to the finale, in which West comes to recognize the beauty of Russia, Cowboy Jetty's plot line concludes with the following sequence. First, a Russian boy is shown reading a book. Then, the inserted subtitle: "Russian kids continue to be fascinated by American cowboys." In the next shot, the boy puts on Cowboy Jetty's hat. The scene cuts to Cowboy Jetty, who appears on the doorstep of his love interest and placates her fears about his indifference by presenting her with a bunch of newborn kittens nestled comfortably in his hat.

The sequence reveals the complex mechanism of impulses motivating

Cowboy Jetty's peculiar presence in Moscow. He is a sham character, neither real nor representational, but generated solely by the demands of the public and the medium. Quoted from American film, he is attractive in a camera-fabricated manner. Initially, the camera emphasizes his colorful persona and dynamic antics; and then the audience, who, as Walter Benjamin argues, always identifies with the camera, falls in love with him. The fabrication of this character underscores that our likes and dislikes are shaped by the technology surrounding us, and, more importantly, that much of what we perceive as reality hinges on the nature of the medium through which this "reality" is presented. Is not the (anti-)Soviet "reality" staged by the gang similar in its stagedness to the (pro-)Soviet "reality" served up at the end of the film? How much of the film's conclusion, in which Mr. West sends a radiogram to his wife praising the achievements of the Soviet experiment, is motivated by nondiegetic reality outside the movie house? By political/ideological demands? By the camera's attraction, as described earlier, to the perfect symmetry of the radio tower that is the subject of the film's penultimate shot (fig. 27)? Could the radiogram itself be a pretext to show, on the way to the radio station, cinematic material par excellence: factories,

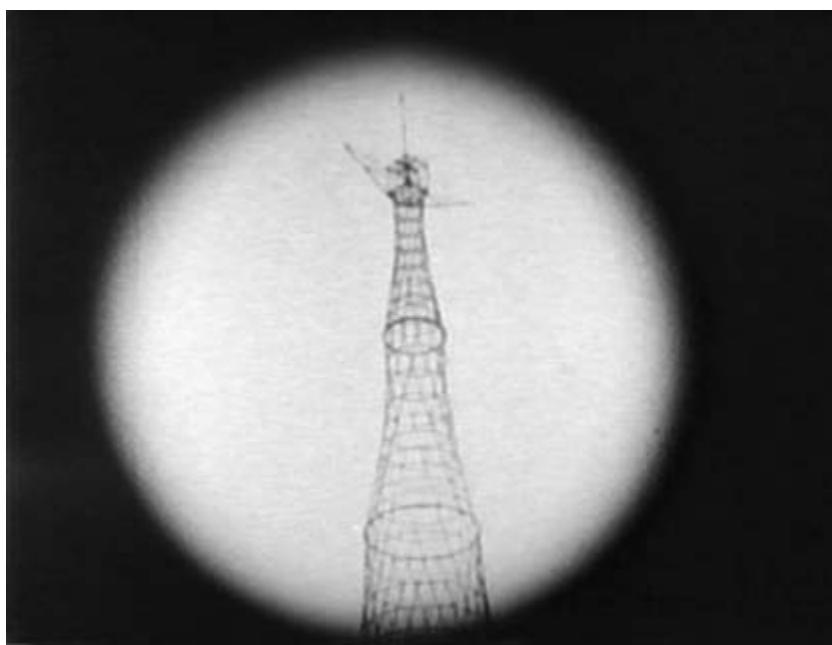


Fig. 27. Shukhov radio tower, in penultimate shot, *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924

electrical stations, men at work? And do these items appear in the film to represent Soviet might, according to the ostensible “point” of the film, or simply by way of fulfilling their cinematic potential?

Early critics of film held that the acrobatic, psychologically unsubtle aspects of cinema, its “broadness,” were a consequence of its limited technical capacities. Adrian Piotrovskii, writing in 1927, attributes the prevalence of comic and adventure genres to the notion that these are the easiest in which to overcome the technical obstacles of filmmaking. While in literature, the subjectivity of the author can be transmitted through particular points of view and narrative voices, in film (at the time, it should be emphasized, silent) the theoretical objectivity of the camera made it necessary to come up with creative means to impart subjectivity; Piotrovskii cites in particular the example of the “systematic tinting of nature and things of a film into the colors of the leading character: thus, the eccentric world of American comedy is transmitted through the persona of Chaplin or Harold Lloyd, or cinematic material is idyllically refracted through the image of Lillian Gish.”⁸⁵

The Russian public, however, took these cinematic devices, dictated by the medium, for American specificity. Even the perspicacious Eisenstein himself declares of America’s best-known export: “The peculiarity of Chaplin consists in the fact that, despite his gray hairs, he has preserved a ‘child’s outlook’ and a spontaneous perception of events . . . Through this trait of infantile humor, he becomes the most American of all American humorists.”⁸⁶ Eisenstein goes on to explain that this infantilism in which Chaplin is 100 percent American constitutes an attempt at an emotional and intellectual escape from the typically mechanistic, utilitarian/pragmatic American cultural tradition.

For Eisenstein, “infantilism” is a form of freedom from the constraints of conventional, socialized existence, the life of “grown-ups.” This is the same creative release, the ecstatic unfolding of infinite potential, that Eisenstein perceived in the work of another global American phenomenon, Walt Disney, specifically his early animations: “To what depth of untouched nature is it necessary to dive with bubbles and bubblelike children in order to reach such absolute freedom from all categories, all conventions.”⁸⁷ In either case (Chaplin and Disney), this infantile freedom is explained as an inversion of pragmatism, with both sides of the opposition characterized as peculiarly American. Yuri Tsivian notes that chance was a significant component in the making of the various “versions” of Chaplin in the early Soviet imagination. He explains further, however, that the emphasis on technique as expressive of modernity (modern art, acting, culture) served to crystallize these Chaplins into the perfect symbol of a new creative idea.⁸⁸ Were the proponents of economical gesture mistaken in seeing intimations of Taylorism in Chaplin’s

abrupt, expressive movements, playful yet mechanical? Or was the mechanical quality of Chaplin's movements specifically a form of *camera-readiness*?

Comic clumsiness could, of course, be perceived as the opposite of the rationalized Taylorist gesture; on the other hand, it could be imagined, à la Henri Bergson, as the very essence of the mechanical—bodily movement devoid of thought or intent. If we follow the latter, Bergsonian line of thought, then these comic antics could foreground the body's mechanicity, suggesting that the human being is a machine that can be tweaked, worked on, perfected. Clumsiness and grace in Chaplin go hand in hand; he falls and then corrects himself, repositions his body, almost dancing. This potential of the body to become a better-functioning mechanism is illuminated by the movement of the camera, which seems supremely intent on capturing the rhythm of human movement. And the camera's fondness for movement, hence for potential and metamorphosis, became associated with America. American specificity, in its cinematic representation, was to represent the potential to be reworked, forged, and revolutionized, a potential with special appeal for a revolutionary culture in search of ideological adherents.

It is thus likely not a coincidence that in Protazanov's 1931 film *Tommi (Tommy)*, set during the Civil War, Russian partisans mistake a captured Englishman for an American. Describing this detail, Graffy interprets it as the revolutionaries' indifference to national distinctions ("for them all foreigners are the same").⁸⁹ And yet, it seems significant to me that "American" in the movie should stand for "foreigner," and not just any foreigner, but the one with potential to become *svoi* (one's own), to be transformed and forged anew. (*Tommy* eventually comes around to the Leninist viewpoint as explained by the partisans.) The human potential for metamorphosis is central to the idea of American specificity as fabricated by the camera.

Eisenstein's Dystopia

For thirty years, Sergei Eisenstein nursed an idea for a dystopian film, to be entitled *Stekliannyi Dom* (*The Glass House*), and set and shot in the United States, offering "a look at America through walls."⁹⁰ Julia Bekman Chadaga proposes that the projected critique, especially of an American atmosphere of surveillance and control, was to give Eisenstein an opportunity to comment on what was taking place in the Soviet Union of the same period.⁹¹ According to Oksana Bulgakowa, *The Glass House* represents Eisenstein's vision of the United States and Germany, melded into a single collective image of a super-industrialized society with a rigid social hierarchy.⁹² Perhaps most boldly of all, N. Kleiman argues that the America of *The Glass House*

stands for “human existence in general,” a “crystallization of already existing tendencies.”⁹³ Exposing America through techno-parody reveals something about the human condition.

As conceived in script drafts, the Glass House was invented to expose social relations in all their sordidness, the assumption being that people are unmindful, blind to the order of things and how they fit therein. The Glass House is to reveal people to themselves; this revelation does not improve them—in fact, the new transparency leads to even greater interpersonal cruelty and viciousness—but it does strip them of their illusions and grant them a modicum of self-knowledge. The divide between their beautiful potential and its corruption in practice becomes glaring. Eisenstein continually imagined possible plot lines featuring transparency and its consequences, but in his view, it led invariably to the trampling of all high ideals.

On the level of form, this ideal/reality rupture would be rendered through the superimposition of Hollywood film formulas and cinematic clichés onto images of what Eisenstein perceives as the “real” America. In this sense, the “wall” through which Eisenstein wants to peer at America metaphorically is American cinematic convention. American technology becomes the generative image and medium that brings the central conflict home. Technology, both cinematic technique and, more broadly, all technical capabilities, becomes a metaphor for the instrumental, unimaginative use of precious resources for corrupt ends. *The Glass House* would highlight a stark visible gap between the creative use of technology by the film itself (with the all-seeing camera work matching the eponymous transparency) and, on the diegetic level, the sometimes banal, sometimes vicious use of the same fantastic technology, the very same glass house, by the characters: “Here [we should] advance the idea of the self-interested use of neutrally wonderful technology.”⁹⁴

This gap between the way technology is utilized diegetically and non-diegetically is the gap between life and art. Eisenstein’s notes on the Glass House reveal a reconciliation with the unavoidability of conventions and formulas; the director holds that it is the task of the artist to reimagine them: “the comedy of ‘situations’ [*polozhenii*] will replace the comedy of situations [*komedii polozhenii*] . . . We should film G. H. like a group of Marxist positions [*polozhenii*], a montage of formulas. [This calls for] an eccentric treatment of the material.”⁹⁵ A central idea of the film is that in life everything is mediated through the prism of formulaic thinking and conditioned viewing. The essence of creativity is the play with these formulas, contrasting the un-freedom of crystallized life with its unlimited ab ovo potential. In a sense, in keeping with the film’s conclusion that realized visions can never live up to their original conception—the heaven of technology necessarily becoming a hell—the film itself seems doomed to have never been made.

The quotation marks that appear around *komediiia “polozhenii”* (a comedy of “situations”) above are symptomatic of the difficulties Eisenstein experienced in attempting to formulate exactly what the Glass House was supposed to reveal. He could picture the Glass House itself, and envision how the camera would show it, but beyond this were just reflections and refractions. The desire to explicate the difference between the way things are and the way things appear seems to involve resignation to the idea that the play of appearances is all there is. The focus of Eisenstein’s transparent dwelling thus proves to be not America itself, but perceptions of it. What was visible through the glass—reality, or yet another refraction of some imaginary idea? Eisenstein admits that the artistic force of the Glass House is not in its exposure of actual social ills, but in its creative play with ideological formulas and cinematic commonplaces.

To me, Eisenstein’s struggle with *The Glass House*, which is bound up with the anxious self-referentiality of the technological artifact, represents the same dilemma faced by any producer of Americanized art forms, including the Red Pinkerton. And the potential solution Eisenstein stumbles upon, the parodic metanarrative, echoes the solutions found in the adventure genre of the 1920s. America as technological ideal was viewed through technologically advanced media; media become self-reflective; and so, while Chaplin is supposed to authentically represent the ideal American Other, to be adulated and imitated, there arises, at the same time, an anxious doubt: isn’t this American infantilism too contingent, this spontaneity, in fact, contrived? Doesn’t the real thing remain inscrutable and unknowable? Indeed, it is perhaps the fear that all representation is abolished, leaving only the medium itself, that leads Eisenstein, in that effusively Chaplin-praising article cited above, to finally and quite unabashedly resort to a ready-made formula, namely, the cliché of calling on art to abandon fiction, and face life. In contrast to Americans, Eisenstein concludes, “at our end of the world we do not flee from reality into fairy-tales; we make fairy-tales real.”⁹⁶

Such a declaration is all well and good politically; but the Russian moviegoing public would probably have disagreed, as surveys of audiences at American film screenings showed that they flocked to see Lloyd and Chaplin precisely for the happy escape from reality that these movies offered.⁹⁷ The public was enamored of the fairy tale. It is this infantile attitude to the world, so refreshing to the “masses,” that the Eccentrics exalted as that radically new, American outlook needed by Russian culture; and it is precisely this infantilism, this nonutilitarian play, that Russian creators of Red Pinkertons sought to imitate. Indeed, the Pinkerton renaissance involved a return to childhood in the most direct sense: reminiscing of their youth, Kataev as well as Il’f and Petrov mention their infatuation with the adventures of Nat Pinkerton.

This tension between, on the one hand, the desire to believe in the idealized other of childlike anticipation, amenable to participation in the perfect relationship with oneself, and, on the other hand, “grown-up” skepticism, the realization of the self-reflexiveness of desire and the other’s true inscrutability, leads to the Red Pinkertons’ particular combination of generic techniques, their hybrid of fairy tale and parody. The self-referential parodic play cannot but attenuate the straightforward pursuit of fairy tale. In this context, pleasure is both pursued and analyzed, illusion nurtured and denied. Ultimately this strategy seems the only way creativity could be sustained in an atmosphere where formulas were expected and endorsed.

PLAY, PARODY, TECHNIQUE

The Subversive Potential of Play in *Mess-Mend* and *Erendorf Island*

Marietta Shaginyan subtitled her *Mess-Mend* “a novel-fairy tale” (*romanskazka*). In a separate article, Shaginyan remarks that the language of the fairy tale is conventional and universal⁹⁸—like the language of cinema, in which her fake American author Jim Dollar is proficient, an Esperanto of sorts. Shaginyan’s novel performs a Red Pinkerton plot formula: a year before Kuleshov’s Mr. West visits Russia, Shaginyan sends to that country Arthur Morlender, a naive young American engineer in whom a clique of international capitalists has instilled a hatred for the Soviet state. In keeping with the rules of the Red Pinkerton, Morlender’s eyes are opened in Russia, while his father, a famous scientist, takes on the role of detective to uncover the evil machinations of the capitalists. The text describes young Morlender as a type who, had he been an actor, would always be cast as the male lead. In Russia, he not only becomes a loyal defender of the Bolsheviks, but also gives up his woman-hating ways: like Kuleshov’s Cowboy Jetty, the engineer winds up falling in love—significantly, with a pro-Soviet American woman disguised as a Russian named Kat’ia. This romance parallels the master plot of the necessary pro-Sovietizing of American characters; in the context of postrevolutionary isolation, Red Pinkertons embodied a fantasy of unification with an understanding, approving ally—one, who, as noted earlier, *recognizes* Soviet Russia. But even as these works offered a parallel reality, foregrounding communication and union with a much-desired American other, they constantly underscored, through self-referential and parodic play, the unreality of such a world, its mediated, almost optical-illusory nature.⁹⁹

In this context, America represents an apex of human existence; whatever the twentieth century portended, it seemed to lie in the United States.

The modernity which America metonymizes must also desire Soviet Russia as a member; in effect, America must yearn for Soviet Russia. And each Red Pinkerton both emplots this yearning, and at the same time, through metaliterary play, confesses its unfeasibility; America is exposed as nothing but the reflection of one's own desire for recognition. The film *Miss Mend* (1926), based on Shaginyan's novel, renders this mechanism apparent by having Vladimir Fogel' and Boris Barnet play, essentially, themselves. Their alter egos in the film, American journalists named Fogel' and Barnet, are, like actors, in search of a good story to tell, which eventually brings them to Soviet Russia. Russia is mediated for them through their love interest, Miss Mend, who, with her keen sense of justice and zeal to fight for it, supplants quite sufficiently the novel's Mess-Mend, an international conspiratorial organization of highly skilled agents. The film is quite conscious of its status as a wishful mirror reflecting an idealized image. Fogel' and Barnet (the latter also served as co-director) appear here in a sort of enhanced form: as the film progresses, the distinction between Fogel' and Barnet, Russian actors/filmmakers, and Fogel' and Barnet, clever, heroic American adventurer-journalists, is gradually erased.

In his seminal study of the role of play in human life, *Homo Ludens*, Huizinga advances the idea that play affords a person the pleasure of being someone he or she is not. Metamorphosis and movement are two foundational devices of Pinkerton novels in general, and Shaginyan's novel-fairy tale in particular. At the beginning of the book, Shaginyan's protagonist Mick Thingsmaster (Mik Tingsmaster) implicitly defends the author's turn to the fairy-tale genre, alluding thus to Upton Sinclair, the American socialist writer popular in Russia at the time: "Guys, Upton Sinclair is a great writer, but he's not for us! Let him torment factory-owners' livers and serve as a handbook to agitators! Give us the kind of literature that will make us feel the masters of our life!"¹⁰⁰ According to Shaginyan, in contrast to Sinclair's depressing realism, her fairy tale, which she later calls "the happiest book" she has ever written, reflects a human being's active participation in the world.¹⁰¹ In her article on the fairy tale as a phenomenon, Shaginyan remarks that such stories appeared at a time when,

having ensouled the cosmos and the inhuman beast around him, man enters the world he has created not as a passive observer, but an active participant . . . He becomes one with the cosmic and animal elements; that is, he develops his essence. As a result, a new, not quite human entity appears—a ghoul, witch, wood-goblin, mermaid, or house-sprite.¹⁰²

In *Mess-Mend*, nothing is static, and everything changes: characters constantly don masks and makeup, as if actors in a film; and objects possess

double functions (doors hear, mirrors remember, walls conceal secret passages). One protagonist labels this fantastic versatility of things the “magic of resistance.”¹⁰³ Such characters in the novel as are unable to adapt to the demands of the changing environment die out or de-evolve: Shaginyan’s capitalists gradually degenerate into animals.

In this cavalcade of perpetual motion and change, cinematic techniques serve as a formal model; technology, moreover, contributes to the “magic of resistance” on the level of content. Imaginary contraptions frequently serve as *dei ex machina* supplying characters with powers to control and modify their environment, and themselves. Workers, owing to their intrinsic relationship to technology, become magicians: early on, Thomas Alva Edison is evoked as a worker, hence (the “Wizard of Menlo Park,” after all) the grandfather of technological wonder-working. Technology provides a wondrous means of binding separate elements into one exuberant melting pot: Americans fly on telegraph wire-like contraptions from the Midwest to New York in seven minutes, and use tunnels under the Atlantic to pass thence to Europe unnoticed; in Russia, all humanity lives and works hummily along under protective force fields and climate-controlling electromagnetism.¹⁰⁴

The principle of metamorphosis extends to the structure of the work itself. A hybrid of fairy tale and novel, *Mess-Mend* thrives on mimicry.¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, the book constitutes an ideological novel; but on the other, a literary parody. Reality is approximated through trickery and play. Shaginyan believes that play with plot devices produces groundbreaking content: “Content arises from the inexhaustible possibilities of a formal trick.”¹⁰⁶ Working on the novel, Shaginyan wrote in her journal that it struck her as “a truly ingenious thing, in its architectonics, its skillful use of stock figures, of the experience of all the novels of past decades.”¹⁰⁷ And indeed, Shaginyan includes every possible Pinkerton and cinematographic device, and in an especially hyperbolic manner. With regard to masks and doubles, for instance, in one episode, all six characters appear in disguise; in another, four characters are disguised as one and the same person. And of course, behind the pseudonym of Jim Dollar hides the author herself. Such buffoonery annoyed some critics. “The novel is a mirror of life, but writers of Red Pinkertons have turned it into a mere literary amusement.”¹⁰⁸

As part of the amusement, authors of Red Pinkertons often parodied one another.¹⁰⁹ One entry in this category included the following synopsis: “Three things are necessary in order to accomplish a proletarian revolution: a bus, a leader—a handsome youth with revolutionary features—and idiotic capitalists.”¹¹⁰ Critics did not always receive these playful literary interactions favorably—“It is unclear who is parodying whom”¹¹¹—but it is precisely through such parodic games that a literary community sought to hold its own

at a time when aesthetic values were being crowded out in favor of ideological ones.

For that matter, reviewers' dissatisfaction with Red Pinkertons stemmed also from what critics perceived as the genre's ideological flightiness. The Soviet critic Ershov complained: "All varieties of novels of this type had one severe shortcoming: they all explained the downfall of capitalism as the confluence of chance occurrences."¹¹² Ershov holds up Valentin Kataev's *Erendorf Island* as an example: in this novel, the capitalist world perishes not as a consequence of historically necessitated revolution, but due to a faulty adding machine.¹¹³ This most ideologically harmful novel was also the most ostentatiously parodic.

Specifically, Kataev's novel parodies Il'ia Ehrenburg and his catastrophic imaginings in *Khulio Khurenito* and *D. E. Trust*. Substituting the suffix *-dorf* for *-burg* on the basis of their similar geographic connotations, Kataev seems to suggest that a writer is a creator of new spaces, of wonderlands. In the novel, the sensationalist author Erendorf is hired by an American industrialist to use his imagination to create an island refuge for survivors of the catastrophe predicted by a certain world-renowned scientist. While the island he creates perishes, Erendorf himself survives in a floating suitcase, prepared to turn harrowing experiences into good stories, in effect keeping afloat on his own readability.

Kataev begins the novel by laying bare his devices, openly admitting that the book constitutes an attempt at mastering the adventure formula. The tale concludes even more metaliterarily, when a new interpretation of Ehrenburg's mysterious D. E. is revealed: *Da zdavstvuet Erendorf!* (Long live Erendorf).¹¹⁴ Kataev thus highlights the extent to which the Red Pinkertons codify their authors' intertextual aspirations. However, whether by intention or not, D. E. also stands for the first letters of the novel's main characters, the lovers Jimmy (in Russian spelled Dzhimi) and Elena, a fact that complicates Kataev's attempt at play and betrays the mechanisms of attraction at the core of the book. The reader can vicariously experience these characters' love for one another, and hence act out their feelings for the glamorous heroes adopted from American cinema. However, such an open stress on form at the expense of content violated reigning political norms. Red Pinkerton authors were too concerned with the flawless operation of their plot machines to bother with ideological defects. At the time, the critic Gornfel'd argued that preoccupation with form directly correlated with negligence of content:

The young people engaged in the new poetics in their studios would, of course, explain away these unnecessary elements as "delaying of plot." In our opinion what we have here is not so much delaying [*zaderzhanie*] as inconti-

nence [*nederžhanie*]; an orgy of verbal fantasy which is scarcely justified by the general purpose of the work.¹¹⁵

Mess-Mend and *Erendorf Island* flaunt the hypertrophy of their invention: their technology is unreal, their authors inauthentic; neither their America nor their Russia exist; their Pinkertons are fake detectives; their texts are laden with subtext. But it is this aesthetic deceit itself, derived from a combination of unrelated items, an interplay of the familiar and the foreign, that endows the genre with its particular creative expression.¹¹⁶ As Mikhail Gershenson puts it: “In portraying events, actions, and conflict, the Red Pinkerton exclusively used farce and vaudeville devices.”¹¹⁷ In medieval France, farce, improvisational buffoonery interpolated into religious dramas, served as an intermission of pure entertainment, affording the audience a break from the seriousness of the performance. Much the same way, a modern ideological equivalent—the ritualistic plot of an American’s conversion to a pro-Soviet outlook—is spiced with parody, which allows for an escape beyond the limits of utilitarian content. Farce parades and mimes the ritualistic agenda, intercepting the propaganda transmission to imbue it with one’s own style, aesthetics, and literariness. Describing the role of games in Rabelais, Mikhail Bakhtin states:

The images of games were seen as a condensed formula of life and of the historic process: fortune, misfortune, gain and loss, crowning and uncrowning. Life was presented as a miniature play . . . At the same time games drew the players out of the bounds of everyday life, liberated them from usual laws and regulations, and replaced established conventions by other lighter conventionalities.¹¹⁸

By resorting to the genre of the Red Pinkerton, a writer could combine ideological obedience with aesthetic play, especially by employing the devices of American cinematography. The combination implies a dual reception: on the one hand, creators of Red Pinkertons enticed the broadest public with plots of Soviet power’s glorious victory over capitalism; on the other, the hyperbolic imitation of filmic tricks turned propaganda into literary play, enjoyable by the discerning reader.

Awareness of the world beyond Russia and a yearning for communication with it is what especially distinguishes Red Pinkertons from works that followed. Gradually, as such Red Pinkerton authors as Shaginyan, Kataev, and Ehrenburg moved into socialist realism, they brought their master plot with them.¹¹⁹ The tale of the outsider getting onto the right ideological track became the main *fabula* of socialist realism. What would be missing, though, was the metaliterary orientation, the ludic trickery that might relieve utili-

Red Pinkertons

tarian heaviness. Perhaps it had to be this way. Parody is always subversive; it undermines established ideologies by questioning the formal constructs through which these ideologies are expressed. Thus parody itself had to become a foreign element, purged from the literary enterprise.

This chapter has focused on the aesthetic rather than utilitarian aspects of Americanization and technologization in the Soviet 1920s. In this period, as a counterbalance to the systems of Taylor and the tractors of Ford, American elements of liberating play, buffoonery, and farce—engendered, paradoxically, by technological preconditions—enter Russian culture. Playing their American games, creators of Red Pinkertons, and their viewers and readers, hoped to satisfy their thirst for communication with the outside world and the other, their desire to travel beyond the borders of Soviet reality.

Conclusion

Poetics of the Unconscriptable

FROM THE AGE OF the Industrial Revolution, technology was tethered to instrumentality, that is, viewed solely as an instrument in the acquisition of power, control, and mastery over the environment. Concomitantly, any technological undertaking was inevitably theorized as possessing a centripetal force that subjected the surrounding world to the exigencies of power. Nowhere is this idea of instrumentality more pronounced than in the recent reception of the Russian avant-garde. By reconstructing an alternative aesthetic path stemming from the Greek *techne*, this book has attempted to unbind the ties that bound technology with control, demonstrating them not to be conterminous after all. Technologies linked to the classical aesthetic notion of *techne* by more than mere etymology sprouted in Soviet Russia in the 1920s and defined some of the more exciting and idiosyncratic projects of the country's avant-garde artists. This book argues therefore for the presence of an opposite force, the force of *techne*'s exploratory impulses that pushed out of the overdetermined political imaginary of Soviet culture, allowing for certain depoliticized, de-ideologized spaces and phenomena even among those who wished to take part in the ongoing sociopolitical transformation. It was a centrifugal force that brought into being the wonderlands of the Russian avant-garde.

The chapters you have encountered in this book were structured to mimic this center-fleeing trajectory of *techne*. Starting at the self and its transformation into a machine, we move outward, eventually engaging not only with Soviet Russia's ultimate other, industrialized America, but also opening a window for intercommunicative possibilities with the universe at large. In the process, the book moves from the articulation and exposition of less consciously dissenting technological practices to those that are more consciously subversive.

The starting point was the seemingly incongruous example of Alexei Gastev whose poetry celebrated technical rationality, efficiency, and will to effect control over the self, and then via the transformed self over its environment. Gastev's work came closest to the principles of technical ratio-

nality that were both practiced and advanced by the state ideological apparatus. Yet, attempting to negotiate its attachment to competing sources of influence, from Soviet reflexology and Taylor's scientific management of labor to the Western avant-garde and Nikolai Fedorov's cosmism, Gastev's poetic work veers off its predetermined path and comes dangerously close to unabashed avant-garde experimentation. Vsevolod Meyerhold aspired to exercise a comparable control over the self and its environment, within the circumscribed realm of the theater. Despite the declarative instrumentality of these aspirations, Meyerhold ended up creating a biomechanical experiment that not only failed to support the authoritarian position of the artist as an engineer and director of life, but in fact questioned the very viability of such control. As analyzed here, Meyerhold's position is located in the gaps of signification between the stated directorial intentions, the biomechanical form of the play, and the play's content that resists what its form attempts to confirm. Meyerhold's archly avant-gardist *The Magnanimous Cuckold* uncovered and examined more or less everything that can go wrong in the process of searching for and acquiring absolute power, staging both a statement and its disavowal.

The subject of the third chapter is the antiutopian novel *We*, whose author Yevgeny Zamyatin never declared his attachment to any avant-garde movement. Unaffiliated though he might have been, Zamyatin nevertheless created a portrait of the perfect avant-garde artist in the character of D-503. In my reading, D-503's internal conflict, stemming out of his questioning of certain dogmatic truths that he wishes to uphold, does not reveal him as a parody of avant-garde artists (although he may have been conceived as such), but on the contrary ensures that he fits quite well into their revolutionary milieu. The manifest gap between the intent behind D-503's techno-poetic undertakings, whether his writing or his rocket Integral, and their execution echoes, then, the ambivalence to be found in Meyerhold's staging of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*. The simultaneous pull in opposite directions in both Meyerhold's theater and D-503's constructions constitutes, in fact, the fundamental principle of the aesthetic avant-gardism for both artists, where radical unselement and a perpetual search override any desire either for order or authorial control. Like *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, D-503's diary ends up underscoring the unsustainability of hopes either for harmony in life or for an assumption of control over self and others. It is precisely technology that functions as a conduit to this realization; technology exposes and explores the absence of harmony rather than remedies it.

This mechanism of exposure behind avant-garde technologies is especially apparent in the triumphantly unrealizable (at least in any near future) technological projects of Vladimir Tatlin and Velimir Khlebnikov. The turn taken by these artists to organic life as a model for their aesthetic technolo-

Conclusion

projects constitutes a clear escape from the rhetoric of conquest over nature and progress with which technology is often associated. The combination of a keen interest in natural patterns with the flaunting of imaginative excess renders these technological creations openly useless for willful transformation of the praxis of life. Contemplation is not simply a by-product of these technologies and a means to their transformative goals; rather, the speculative process of their creation is its own ultimate desired end. Tatlin and Khlebnikov's technologies, I suggest, are designed to exist in an imaginary space that is parallel to physical reality. This imaginary space is not supposed to merge with, or act as a substitute for, physical reality. In their artfulness, and in their obvious constructedness, these artists' technologies lay bare not only their own devices, but also the devices of simulation, fabrication, concealment, and substitution utilized in the ideological fictions of the socialist state apparatus.

Iurii Olesha's *Ophelia*, a machine similar to Tatlin's and Khlebnikov's in its obvious lack of instrumentality, its ability to take form only in the imagination, its flexible and protean form, and its function as a mechanism for self-expression and self-exposure, shows the full extent of damage that such a machine can inflict on the smooth, harmonious, unison-like functioning of Soviet citizenry. Tatlin and Khlebnikov did not intend their technologies to be ideologically damaging, they were simply carried away by the outpouring of their creativity. As a fundamentally contemplative process, this creative exercise resulted in the creation of aesthetic technologies that were imaginative, feasible in accordance with the laws of physical reality, and yet completely unattainable in their creators' lifetimes. In this way, their creations, in contrast to any associations of techno-art with the will to power, were rather humbling ventures, in that they exhibited the limits of their creators' powers. Olesha, however, understood that an artist can conceive of a machine that will not serve as armor, a prosthesis, or a decoy, but will instead put on view her creator's weaknesses. He also understood how such a display mechanism would be quite dangerous precisely in a society that thrives on concealment.

Meyerhold's playful biomechanics, Khebnikov's *Khodnyrlet*, Tatlin's *Letatlin*, and Olesha's *Ophelia* all offered alternative visions to existing, instrumental technologies. In form if not in substance, they were clearly imaginative departures from such well-known technologies as Taylor's robot-like workers, Fordson tractors, airplanes made by Junkers, and weapons of destruction used in World War I. As a concept with a central place in discussions of the technologization and industrialization of Soviet Russia in the 1920s, America appears to belong to the latter category, that of existing phenomena with a definable instrumentality, a quantifiable use-value for Soviet Russia. In the officially adopted discourse of Americanization, America acted both as a supplier for much-needed machines and as a model of the mindset

necessary for successful industrialization. However, despite having a specific referent with discernable characteristics and borders, America in the Russian literature of the 1920s, whether in travelogues boastful of their own facticity or works of pure fantasy such as Red Pinkertons, is clothed in such a degree of imaginative excess as to warrant a place among Meyerhold's, Khlebnikov's, Tatlin's, and Olesha's outlandish creations.

After penning numerous hyperbolic tributes to America, Vladimir Mayakovsky, a futurist poet and self-appointed plenipotentiary of the Soviet state, embarked on his first trip to the country in 1925, only to realize that the real place could not live up to the America of his imagination and that his sublime poetic visions were in principle not realizable. The technological marvels of America were supposed to bolster its inflated image in the literary tradition as a place that offered myriad opportunities for radical innovation and personal reinvention, for a life devoid of banality and full of adventures, for flights of fancy and the attainment of freedom. Ultimately, then, this imaginative techno-wonderland is a place of exploration and expansion of vision. Inevitably, America the country and its technologies end up depleting America the vision and its techno-toys, and this disappointment registers the extent to which techno-fantasies have their own poetics, far removed from concepts of utility and conquest and unfit for employment in the praxis of life.

In fact, the discourse of Americanization and its adoption into the world of avant-garde creation complicated the idea of aesthetic dictatorship as the avant-garde's ultimate pursuit. Americanization seemed to be a certain departure from self, even if this departure could lead to empowerment. This departure, however, signals acceptance of a point of view radically different from one's own, and such a consideration of a viable point of view different from one's own is the beginning of dialogue. In the discourse of Americanization, technology functions as a symptom of the gap in Soviet self-perception. Technology is that something which Russia is missing, and so the central plot formula of the popular 1920s genre of Red Pinkertons always culminates with the symbolic filling of this gap by the staging of an American recognition of Soviet worth (as well as by imaginatively transforming Soviet Russia into the space infused with miraculous techno-powers). On the level of plot, all Red Pinkertons articulate a fantasy of communication with this technologically more advanced Other, while technology itself appears to be a conduit, a channel through which a common language can at last be found. On the level of form, the parodying of cinematic and pulp fiction techniques similarly acts as an enabler: parodic play allows for the creation of a community of like-minded artists whose literary interactions are not fully subject to ideological demands.

We have begun with an artist's self-internment into a machine-like shell in chapter 1, and ended on chapter 7 with an escape, via technological

Conclusion

means, from the confinement of ideologies and dogmas. Scholarship tends to explain the early Soviet infatuation with technology by the ease with which it lends itself as a tool for the advancement of various goals, specifically the political goal of acquiring and centralizing power and its correlative, the engineering goal of transforming one's environment according to one's will and design. Various technologies were in fact quite useful in the advancement of these goals; every technological marvel from electricity to radio to advances in transportation and weaponry was utilized in the service of various political goals. Moreover, even technologies that were not among the most expedient or rational or that were even completely unrealizable, "utopian," so to speak, could also be instrumental, have their own rationale and might have been designed with the fulfillment of certain ideological and political goals in mind. In my introduction, I refer to such technologies, that are devoid of any visible markers of value, as having their own technical rationality.

My goal was to show that along with these instrumental technologies a myriad of noninstrumental aesthetic technologies were imagined by artists. Artists expressed their intent to blend the borders between art and life, turning life into an artistically harmonious whole and their art into a tool of this transformation. However, by infusing technologies with aesthetics, they stumbled upon, and were carried away by, the exploratory delights of *techne* and thus deviated from their professed goal. As a result, their aesthetic technologies were truly speculative; their primary end was a cognitive exercise afforded to their creators in the process of creation/construction. The contemplative aspect of avant-garde technologies discussed in this book took various forms: self-questioning, play, self-expression, and communication. But whichever form it assumed, this contemplative aspect of the avant-garde technologies was a surplus element that precluded their subjugation to instrumental purposes. Not even the most exhaustive search for such an instrumental purpose behind their design can sufficiently explain the wondrous excess of their artfulness.

Perhaps the best place to observe how this artful, imaginative excess of *techne*, against all odds, resists the fierce pull of the centripetal forces of the Soviet state is paradoxically in the late Soviet novel *Omon Ra* (1992) by Viktor Pelevin. Pelevin dedicated *Omon Ra* to the heroes of the Soviet conquest of outer space, the cosmos. In this work, a young boy with the strange name of Omon conceptualizes freedom as weightlessness and entertains the hopeful idea of spaceflight as liberation from a mundane, nauseating, and stagnant Soviet reality. Raised by an uncaring aunt, Omon is a lonely boy. In stark contrast to his depressing life, flight in a spaceship seems to him a lofty and beautiful endeavor. Omon's search for beauty goes hand in hand with an aspiration to make the world less indifferent to him, to make himself more meaningful. These yearnings lead Omon to sign up for the Soviet

space program, only to discover that it is an elaborate sham, a senseless ruse; the only way to make this sham at least somewhat meaningful is to accept fraud as truth, and to sanctify this truth by sacrificing oneself to it. Omon finds that the technological means by which he has hoped to gain personal freedom and acquire spiritual and intellectual knowledge lead to the very opposite, to his imprisonment in the absurd and domineering apparatus of Soviet ideology.

With his intellectual questing and poetic sensibility, Omon is the ultimate artist. Drawing on the mythology of Amon-Ra, the sun god of the ancient Egyptians, and captivated by the wondrous poetics of yore, Omon chooses “Ra” as a name to supplement and counteract the ideologically correct and utilitarian moniker “Omon.”¹ His choice of Ra as his self-given name points not only to a dissatisfaction with the communal Soviet mythology but also offers tangible proof of his search for an individual voice, as well as a capacity for metaphoric imagination: Ra had a falcon’s head, and Soviet pilots were often referred to as falcons. Ra gives a personal dimension to his adventures and differentiates Omon from other nameless men participating in the creation of Soviet might. The novel, however, demonstrates that even the most private dreams can be co-opted by the system from which they ostensibly provide escape, and that any search for cosmos inevitably leads to chaos. Cosmos itself is nothing but a stage set, behind which chaos lurks. It is technology that holds the key to the discovery of this unhappy predicament—technology, the crucible of the Soviet condition.

To Omon the boy, spaceships seemed to hold the promise of something unfamiliar, fermenting questions that would pop up in his mind, and enriching his life by allowing his imagination to soar. Only rarely did spaceships disappoint, their imaginary existence, the eventual impossibility of the actual fulfillment of their promise leading him to momentary melancholy. This sadness dawns on Omon along with a realization that his imaginary pursuits echo the collective dwelling in an illusory socialist haven, a false construct of Soviet ideology: “The only space in which the starships of the Communist future had flown . . . was the Soviet psyche.”² He realizes that inhabitants of this imaginary realm find themselves in a situation similar to that of the wooden pilot in the model spaceship he had as a child—a spaceship with no door. This illusory existence offers no exit to those who find themselves trapped inside it.

Looking back from his post-Soviet vantage point, Pelevin chooses to portray the Soviet space program, which had been hailed by Soviet ideologues as the greatest accomplishment of the Soviet system, as a fiction, and hence a metonymy of the Soviet state as a whole. Technology, which initially impels Omon to metaphysical questions, also functions as an index of the Soviet state’s progress on its way to communism, a metric of its power and

Conclusion

success. The state's progress toward these goals remains imaginary, and technology, as a faithful qualitative index, betrays this fact. The Soviet Union simply did not have the technical resources to compete with the West; it chose to pour its resources into the cultivation of technology that would serve as evidence of its power, in the process leading its citizens to the brink of complete impoverishment, disregarding the humanistic values it ostensibly championed.

Pelevin proposes a characteristically postmodern revision of the Soviet state's solution of its technology problem. In Pelevin's rendition, nothing exists outside of simulacra; the Soviet Union simply feigned technology just as it feigned the fulfillment of its socialist ideals. *Omon Ra* presents this technological absence at the heart of the Soviet enterprise as ominous and destructive. The very technological fictionality that I propose as the avant-garde's playful and poetic, yet powerful, response against the instrumentalist rationality of the state becomes, in the hands of the state, one more instrument ensuring its own duplicitous survival. The state manages to absorb the aesthetic quests of its unwilling populace into its own ideology, exploiting these aspirations for its own gain.

However, Pelevin's novel depicts this absorption not as a fulfillment of Omon's individual aesthetic vision, but rather as its corruption and violation. Pelevin takes care to reflect the disappointment that seeps into Omon's artistic philosophy and to pinpoint the moment at which Omon's vision undergoes dramatic change.³ The historic avant-garde, of course, did not enjoy the advantage of hindsight afforded to Pelevin by time.

It is noteworthy, however, that Omon's personal choice of Ra as his mythic persona just might be what saves him from dying as a sacrificial hero and standard-bearer for Soviet ideology, in which he does not believe. Like Ra, the Egyptian sun god who rises every morning after fighting the forces of darkness, Omon manages to escape the KGB operatives behind the space-fraud conspiracy. At the end of the novel, he rises from the dark recesses of the abandoned metro tracks shamming the lunar surface where his feat of heroism was to take place, and reenters the life of his fellow citizens. And although a true escape from Soviet reality does not occur at the end of the novel—we leave Omon in a metro car on the circle line of the Moscow subway⁴—it may be that Ra will continue to be that element of Omon's self that resists complete absorption into the Soviet underworld, that element of liberating resistance that allows him to reconfigure his self along personal rather than communal parameters.

Pelevin's novel provides a valuable postscript to our journey through avant-garde technological creations. While avant-garde artists hoped to divine true reality, to form it and will it into meaningful patterns, they succeeded in creating nothing more than elaborate and formally arresting sys-

tems of signs. Like Omon's persona of Ra, these idiosyncratic and deeply personal systems ultimately resisted becoming subsumed into the totalizing ideology of the state, unconscriptable even under high Stalinism. As a result, they provided a surplus system of signification, an escape from the Stalinist "total work of art," thereby rendering it not quite total enough. The work of avant-garde artists undermined the totalitarian nature of Stalinism by offering aesthetic alternatives; this is why their visions had to be suppressed.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not About Love*, 94.
2. In “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), Benjamin discusses industrial technology as a desensitizing condition of modernity; in this view, humanity develops sensory paralysis as a protective shield against the shocks of the new accelerated reality. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 175–77.
3. Murphie and Potts, *Culture and Technology*, 3.
4. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 152.
5. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 13.
6. *Ibid.*, 34–35.
7. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 24.
8. It could also be argued that while science belongs to the realm of theory and abstraction, technology has to do with sensory and hence sensual experience, one more aspect that underscores its closeness to the fine arts.
9. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 17.
10. See Sutton, *Western Technology and Soviet Economic Development, 1917–1930*; and Bailes, “The American Connection: Ideology and the Transfer of American Technology to the Soviet Union, 1917–1941.”
11. Fleron, *Technology and Communist Culture: The Socio-Cultural Impact of Technology Under Socialism*, 3–4.
12. Cited in Leiss, “Technology and Instrumental Rationality in Capitalism and Socialism,” 124.
13. *Ibid.*, 124–25. For his part, Marcuse warns: “The highest productivity of labor can be used for the perpetuation of labor, and the most efficient industrialization can serve the restriction and manipulation of needs. When this point is reached, domination—in the guise of affluence and liberty—extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent

nent mobilization for the defense of the universe.” Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 17.

14. In this regard, it is telling that in order to pay for Western technology and the implementation of the First and Second Five-Year Plans (late 1920s/early 1930s), the Soviet state was selling, by the ton, nationalized works of Western art expropriated from the Russian aristocracy to private American businessmen. (See Robert C. Williams, *Russian Art and American Money, 1900–1940*.) Works of Van Dyck, Raphael, Titian, Rembrandt, and Rubens were prized only insofar as they could be bartered for technology. Both sides engaged in these transactions, the Soviet state and the American purchasers of Russian art (some of which works eventually found a home at Washington’s National Gallery), preferred to conduct the massive sale of these masterpieces surreptitiously, in the Soviet case, clearly because of the incompatibility of this action with the stated values of socialism. Williams (41) concludes: “Tractors were needed more than Titians, Fords more than Fabergé.”

15. Bogdanov’s unwillingness to separate means and ends vis-à-vis technology transfer was consistent with the science of organization he was developing. This science, called tektology, was based on the concept of the interdependence of every part of a system; in this view, all aspects of a system are not only interrelated, but equally valuable. Zenobia Sochor argues that this position is inimical to Marxism, according to which economic forces are the predominant factor in society’s structure and functioning: “Marxists underscore the dominating role of the economy whereas functionalists tend to stress either the role of values or an interdependence of parts.” Sochor, *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*, 50.

16. Cited in Cooper, “The Scientific and Technical Revolution in Soviet Theory,” 149.

17. Laszlo Mero argues that bluffing is endemic to competition: “In a game-theoretical context . . . [we] may simply consider every move a bluff to the extent that it is made with a higher probability than the optimal mixed strategy would dictate . . . Bluffs must appear in every kind of competition . . .” Mero, *Moral Calculations: Game Theory, Logic, and Human Frailty*, 78.

18. Even Hannah Arendt, likely the most influential proponent of the idea that totalitarian ideology is inherently marked by irrationality and arbitrariness, concedes that this arbitrariness has its own profoundly significant function (rationale): “The uselessness of the camps, their cynically admitted antiutility, is only too apparent. In reality, they are more essential to the preservation of the regime’s power than any of its institutions. Without concentration camps, without the undefined fear they inspire and the very well-defined training they offer in totalitarian domination, which can nowhere else be fully tested with all of its most radical possibilities, a totalitarian state can neither inspire its nuclear troops

with fanaticism nor maintain a whole people in complete apathy.” Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 456.

19. Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 134–35.

20. Allyn, “Fact, Value, and Science,” 231.

21. Contemplating the fate of “humanitarian engineering” in the early Soviet period, Loren Graham argues against the rationality of Soviet, and especially Stalinist, industrial programs, by reference to the enormous waste of human life involved. Petr Palchinsky, the hero of Graham’s *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer*, held the separation of efficiency and justice evident in the Soviet approach to techno-industrial projects to be irrational from an engineering standpoint, and ultimately destructive. Graham seems to support Palchinsky’s point of view, reiterating: “The gross neglect of human beings by the Soviet regime was a primary reason that it collapsed so strikingly easily.” Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer: Technology and the Fall of the Soviet Union*, 102.

22. Josephson, *Totalitarian Science and Technology*, 121.

23. “It could be argued that the orientation toward the military ‘saved’ production at Magnitogorsk and elsewhere from becoming production chiefly for production’s sake: making steel to make machines to make more steel to make more machines, regardless of whether anyone was in a position to use them or use them effectively.” Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization*, 66.

24. Josephson, *Totalitarian Science and Technology*, 121.

25. Here we might cite, for instance, the “space societies” of the 1920s, which Asif Siddiqi describes as having sprouted completely independently of the state’s initiative or material support, but whose members wholly absorbed official discourse on the role of technology as a panacea for all social ills. Siddiqi, *The Red Rockets’ Glare: Spaceflight and the Soviet Imagination, 1857–1957*, 83.

26. See for instance, Graham, *The Ghost of the Executed Engineer* and *What Have We Learned About Science and Technology from the Russian Experience?*; and Josephson, *Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth?: Technological Utopianism Under Socialism, 1917–1989*.

27. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, 14.

28. Groys recognizes that such artists as Khlebnikov and Malevich, despite their yearning to redefine the role of the artist, never really abnegated the contemplative aspect of art; he concedes, moreover, that the modernist principle of defamiliarization, articulated by Shklovsky, demanded (a) perpetual revolution, incompatible with the finality of the total work of art, and (b) the search for such individual vision and original style as would destroy the complacency of routinized perception. The latter requirement is, of course, incompatible with collective goals. (Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, 39–43). These are, in my view, not minor discrepancies, but, in the

case of the avant-garde, an uncompromising artistic stance stemming from a third, most significant disparity between its creative practice and that of the socialist government: the noninstrumentality of the avant-garde's technological thinking.

29. Alternatively, in *History in a Grotesque Key: Russian Literature and the Idea of Revolution*, Kevin Platt intriguingly argues that a revolutionary rhetoric along with an iconoclastic impulse behind it is a staple of the Russian cultural tradition from Peter the Great to post-Soviet social reorganizations. If we ascribe to this view, then certain affinities between Russian political and artistic revolutions of the early twentieth century could be explained not by constituting a response to the common condition of modernity but by virtue of their belonging to Russian culture.

30. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

31. On the vicissitudes of the avant-garde's participation in the political life of 1920s Russia, read Paul Wood's informative essay "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932*, 1–24.

32. Various scholars have noted the endurance of the bond between art and contemplation and the reabsorption of this association, under various guises, into the new artistic discourse of production. Maria Gough, for instance, argues (in *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, 101–19) that constructivist Karl Ioganson understood "production" to mean "invention without determinate end." Similarly, in her discussion of cinematic representations, or (re)productions, of Soviet space, Emma Widdis disputes the commonly held belief that film technologies were consistently deployed for the purpose of conquering, organizing, and controlling the vast territory of the Soviet Union; Widdis proposes that the ethnographic and geographic study of the Soviet Union in cinematic culture of the late 1920s amounted to exploration rather than conquest: "If *ostvoenie* [conquest] is understood as an assimilative attitude toward the periphery, in which the periphery is subject to a structure of control from the center, then exploration describes a more decentered, nonassimilative investigation of space in which difference is emphasized over sameness and the quest for information is differentiated from control." Widdis, "To Explore or Conquer? Mobile Perspectives on the Soviet Cultural Revolution," 221.

33. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, 64.

34. My understanding of the noninstrumentality of the avant-garde's creations differs substantially from R. L. Rutsky's view that the noninstrumentality of avant-garde technologies is founded on "the deferment of technological form from technological function." Analyzing Russian constructivism, Rutsky argues that "formal rationality or economy is no longer subordinated to function: the rationalized form, the lack of 'artistic' ornament, becomes an end in itself" (Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman*,

90, 89). Rutsky interprets the technical aspirations of the avant-garde as a kind of simulation of technological function via technically allusive forms. This view—which in a way recapitulates the judgment of these artists’ 1920s/early 1930s ideological opponents, who accused them of subscribing to the bourgeois notion of art for art’s sake, of pure formalism—strikes me as problematic insofar as it foregrounds the purely decorative, ornamental aspect of avant-garde creative practice; against this, I would note that while artists indeed often divorced form from a specific technical function, they never disassociated it from aesthetic value.

35. Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 754. I have long considered Shklovsky’s theory of defamiliarization a statement of artistic innovation as an ethical imperative; I would like to thank my friend Julia Bekman Chadaga for pinpointing the sentence from his essay (quoted) which best supports this view.

36. Dissimulation as an artistic practice should not be confused with, for instance, the dissimulation described by Oleg Kharkhordin in *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices*, which the latter term denotes “play-acting,” the forced behavior of a Soviet citizen in avoidance of political persecution. Such dissimulation was a response to the communal practice of infidel-exposure: “The ultimate judge of what is normal is not some doctrinal ideal, but the community that imposes standard norms of behavior, the saintly congregation that covertly admonishes its members to dissimulate to fit into these norms” (Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 277). The artistic practice I call dissimulation is in a way the opposite of such concealment-through-play-acting; it is a self-exposure, a laying bare of one’s own devices in contrast to the concealments inherent in the state’s simulation of reality. Anna Wexler Katsnelson to an extent reconciles dissimulation with dissimilation; describing the 1930s work of Malevich and Aleksandrov in terms of Aesopian language (dissimulation), she argues that conformity to certain official and communal cultural norms allowed these artists to encode minimal strategies of subversion. See Katsnelson, “Aesopian Tales: The Visual Culture of the Late Russian Avant-Garde.”

37. The term “utopia,” widely used to describe both Soviet official culture and avant-garde artistic experimentation, erases this fundamental distinction; hence my avoidance of this term in this study.

38. Jakobson, “Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances,” 115–33.

39. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, Benjamin undertakes a reevaluation of the conceptions of symbol and allegory. Reversing the romanticist valorization of symbol and denigration of allegory, Benjamin posits that the notion of symbol as an abstract idea rendered in particular, finite form presupposes belief in the unity between the finite and the infinite, the phenomenal and transcendent: “As a symbolic construct, the beautiful is supposed to merge with the divine in an unbroken whole.” Benjamin, however, considers that such belief can

no longer be sustained, and so he regards symbol as an inauthentic expression of wholeness, its claim to transcendence, illusory: “The conflict between the infinite and the finite is therefore resolved by the former becoming limited and so human.” In Benjamin’s view, it is the role of allegory to formulate, lay bare, and perform the experience of this chasm between being and appearance, the disjunction that symbolic representation attempts in vain to erase. So in describing the distinction between symbol, which is totalizing, self-sufficient, clear, and transcendent, and allegory, which expresses rupture, tension, and fragmentation, Benjamin renders them ultimately interdependent, as allegory undoes symbol: “The false appearance of totality is extinguished.” Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 160, 164, 176.

40. Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, 14.
41. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 112.
42. See Brooks, “The Press and Its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s.”
43. Beaune, “The Classical Age of Automata: An Impressionistic Survey from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Century,” 410.
44. Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 15.
45. *Websters Online Dictionary*, <http://www.websters-online-dictionary.org/> definition/wonderland.
46. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2.

CHAPTER ONE

1. “Kogo predosteregaet Lef?” *Lef* 1 (March 1923): 10.
2. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 258.
3. For a discussion of the latter trend and its influence on the avant-garde, see John Bowlth, “Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for the Perfect Physique.”
4. Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity*, 61.
5. Ibid., 78.
6. Ibid., 90.
7. Cited in “The History of the Study of Locomotion,” <http://www.univie.ac.at/cga/history/enlightenment.html>.
8. Ibid.
9. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, 146. In *We*, Zamyatin pokes fun at this moral imperative in the ironic statement of the clueless D: “It didn’t enter the heads of all [the old world’s] Kants to build a system of scientific ethics, that is, ethics based on adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing.” Zamyatin, *We*, 34.
10. The apt formulation of Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fa-*

tigue, and the Origins of Modernity, 272. In his article “Marx and Ford,” Gastev defends his potentially suspect reliance on capitalist methods of production by attempting to prove that despite their cardinal disagreements regarding political and economic systems, these eponymous figures held harmonious views on the organization and management of production. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 315.

11. For his part, Frederic J. Fleron, Jr. theorizes that “as an artifact of human experience, technology must be viewed as an element of culture.” Accordingly, since Soviet Russia was building its economy on the transfer of Western technology, it could not have avoided the simultaneous borrowing of capitalist techniques and concomitant ideology of work. See Fleron’s introduction to *Technology and Communist Culture: The Socio-Cultural Impact of Technology Under Socialism*, 3.

12. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*, 146.

13. Ibid., 147.

14. Masing-Delic, “The Transfiguration of Cannibals: Fedorov and the Avant-Garde,” 17–19.

15. Ibid., 20–22.

16. On Krutikov, see chapter 2. Fedorov described the body’s potential thus: “The organs of this organism will be the very instruments by means of which the human being will act under the circumstances on which the vegetal and the animal life will depend. By means of these organs will be created the aero- and ethero-nautic methods making him/her able to move and extract from space the universal materials for the construction of his/her organism.” Cited in V. Todorov, *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination*, 61.

17. In Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics, Alma Law adduces parallels (36–37) between Bekhterev’s homegrown reflexology and the work of the American pragmatist William James.

18. Bekhterev, *Collective Reflexology*, 275.

19. Ibid., 287.

20. Clynes and Kline, “Cyborgs and Space,” 29.

21. Gray, “An Interview with Manfred Clynes,” 47.

22. Cited in Bailes, “Alexei Gastev and the Soviet Controversy over Taylorism,” 375.

23. Tatlin, “The Work Ahead of Us,” 206.

24. Vertov, “The Cine-Eyes: A Revolution,” 93.

25. Ibid., 92–93.

26. Mauss, “Techniques of the Body,” 93.

27. One of the staples of European fin-de-siècle decadence, with its characteristic anxiety regarding waning, diseased culture, was the frank exploration of anarchic and destructive sexual impulses. In Russia, the erotic stories and poetry

of decadents Valerii Briusov, Zinaida Gippius, and Fedor Sologub, and perhaps most famously, Lev Tolstoy’s “The Kreutzer Sonata” and “D’iavol” (“The Devil,” 1889) and Leonid Andreev’s “Bezdna” (“The Abyss,” 1902), assert the correlation between sexual desire and danger, destruction, and death.

28. Cited in Johansson, *Aleksej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*, 15.

29. Ibid., 14.

30. Gastev later chose a pseudonym lacking the glum connotation of “Odi-nokii,” but marked by a similarly exclusive character: “Popovich,” after the heroes of Russian *bylinas*. Ibid., 26.

31. Cited ibid., 50. Here, incidentally, Gastev posits a relationship between art and bioengineering; elsewhere, he confesses that his aim is “to infect modern man with the methodology of constant biological perfection, biological repairs and alterations” (*Gastev, Poeziia rabochego udara*, 16). The passage cited in the text demonstrates, moreover, that Gastev sees this bioengineering creativity, much as Tolstoy viewed art, as erogenous; Gastev applies himself to artistic pursuits to give rise to a desire for this new man he wishes to design.

32. Cited in Johansson, *Aleksej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*, 49.

33. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 1:160.

34. Cited in Johansson, *Aleksej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*, 27.

35. Ibid., 47.

36. Cited ibid., 48.

37. In *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, Evgeny Dobrenko argues (155) that Gastev was less interested in labor in support of ideology than in labor as such. His aesthetic interest in production would be unacceptable under high Stalinism, which obviated modes of creation beyond the creation of ideology itself: “Repudiating Gastev’s technologicalism, Socialist Realism replaced his ‘aesthetics of production’ . . . with an aesthetic of ‘production relations.’”

38. “И тяжело так, так грузно, вяло подавался он по притихшему заводу, что, казалось, будто данью, жертвой, выкупом живым проходилось в мире для чудес, для бывающей роскоши, для варварски жестокой красоты неведомых ему богов . . .

И пыльные, серые, как сумерки, печальные, как полночь давящие, как тучи, каменные своды крыли, накрывали, этот крестный ход горбатых и замученных людей могильным, холодным, неразрушимым, тугу вбитым склепом, крыли.” *Gastev, Poeziia rabochego udara*, 45.

39. “. . . проходилось в мире чудес, пронзался он стрелой, поражался он раной . . .” Ibid.

40. Nikolai Berdiaev claims (in “Chelovek i mashina,” 159) that “technology is humanity’s last love”—an imposed, he specifies, romance—and it is prepared

to change its form under the influence of the object of its love.” Similarly, the neoprimitivist Aleksandr Shevchenko suggests that humanity’s infatuation with mechanicity is a compulsion inculcated by the mechanistic universe itself: “The world has been transformed into a single monstrous, fantastic, perpetually moving machine, into a single huge nonanimal, automatic organism, into a single gigantic whole constructed with a strict correspondence and balance of parts. We and the whole world are the parts of this whole. We, like some kind of ideally manufactured mechanical man, have grown used to living—getting up, going to bed, eating and working according to the clock—and the sense of rhythm and mechanical harmony, reflected in the whole of our life, cannot but be reflected in our thinking, and in our spiritual life: in Art.” Shevchenko, “Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements,” 45.

41. “Ты, укрой машины свежими цветами/Лаской, нежной грезой
отумань, обвей . . .” Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 113.

42. “Мы знаем заколет в груди. Но великое с болью дается.” Ibid., 116.

43. “Мы идем! Нам нельзя не идти; встали мрачные тени недавно
разбитых бойцов; поднялися живые преданья былого—сраженные раной
отцы. Мы за ними: совсем впереди, и сильней, и отважней, чем мы, зашагали
пришедшие в жизнь молодые бойцы.” Ibid.

44. Cited in Johansson, *Aleksej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*, 52.

45. Cited in Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution*, 54.

46. Ibid., 50.

47. “Нам когда-то дали вместо хлеба молот и заставили работать.
Нас мучили . . . Но, сжимая молот, мы назвали его другом, каждый удар
прибавляя нам в мускулы железо, энергия стали проникла в душу, и
мы, когда-то рабы, теперь посягнули на мир.” Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 139.

48. “Ну, проклясть бы, пронзить тебя словом несказанным, жгучим,
расплавленным, проданный золоту мир!” Ibid., 73.

49. “Я бросался на отточенные резцы машин, крошил их, но и сам бился
в тисках металла. Это я сто лет назад залил улицы мировых городов своей
кровью.” Ibid., 170.

50. “We have created new plasticity. We have created new workers who love
the cutting tool and the metronome.” Ibid., 173.

51. “Это я же бился потом и терзал свое собственное тело по ту и по
эту сторону границ. И теперь опять я, и уже как-будто вновь рожденный,
иду в строю. Все проходит через мои руки и орудия. Создаю виадуки,
дороги, машины, микроскопы. Через пульс моего станка и штрих моей
пилы я ощущаю самые сокровенные мысли. Я—носитель беспощадного
резца познания. Всюду иду со своим молотом, зубилом, сверлом. По всему

миру . . . Шагаю через границы, материки, океаны. Весь земной шар я делаю родиной.” Ibid., 170.

52. This poem made a great impression upon Zamyatin, in whose *We* it stands as one of the classics of OneState’s literary canon.

53. Gastev here continues the valorization by nineteenth-century Russian progressives of the United States as a kind of homeland of modernity; on Chernyshevsky in this regard, see chapter 6.

54. It is also possible that the railroad presented Gastev with a symbol of enlightened, calculated destruction—technology’s redemptive sacrifice. Countless lives were lost during the thirty years of construction, and Gastev must have seen these deaths as a justifiable payment toward the transformation the railroad represented. The poem concludes: “[The train] is covered in wounds, it is full of sorrow, but, iron-stern, it has concealed, buried in its flaming heart all the pain of the unprecedented road . . . and, rebellious, it sings, sings not at all of the past, not at all of the harsh hours of strain, but of the joyous ascents to come, the audacious and risky slopes” (Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 169). In miraculous fashion, then, the train absorbs all the blood and suffering of its construction, transforming it into song. The express, in essence a mass grave, in Gastev’s poem symbolizes a future in which spatial limitations are done away with.

55. “Сибирь спит, одетая белой парчой снегов.” Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 158.

56. In his 1913 poem “Novaia Amerika” (“The New America”), Aleksandr Blok employs the same trope of the snowy landscape to suggest the potential for a resuscitative transformation of the old, rural Russia into a youthful, industrialized America.

57. Organic technology, and related aspirations of utilizing the technological potential of nature, will be discussed in chapter 2.

58. “Вырвался необъятный прожектор, весь готовый разлиться и затопить лучами и небо и землю. Он ринулся! Ударил своими пламенными брызгами вверх, в холодных высотах зажег мираж облаков.” Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 158.

59. “На воздушных платформах устроены станции радиотелеграфа и телефона; отсюда говорят и с материками и с океанами, отсюда по незримым волнам капитал правит уже не только Сибирью, но через Владивосток целит в Америку . . .” Ibid., 163.

60. “Город Беринга. Он знает только два лозунга: ‘К полюсу’ и ‘В Америку.’” Ibid., 167.

61. “Он несется к закруглению высокой насыпи, как развернутое верхнее знамя, рокочет по рельсам, с бушующей стальной песней влетает на мост, с моста в морской туннель—от Беринга в Аляску. Постройка туннеля стоила двух тысяч жизней: полтысячи погибло от полярных холодов и полторы пожрал океан в подводных работах . . . Но теперь уже нет границ

между Старым и Новым светом. Туннель стал символом рабочего единения.” Ibid., 168.

62. “Бурно и гулко дышат моторы, накачивающие воздух, и туннель дрожит, как стальной пульс, в спящих океанских водах. Полчаса—и Америка.” Ibid.

63. “Невольная дрожь охватила пассажиров. Что будет?” Ibid.

64. “Прения [Интернационала] ведутся на международном языке, который состоялся из комбинаций русского с американо-английским.” Ibid., 165.

65. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 33.

66. Ibid.

67. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 226. This article goes on to enumerate debilitating aspects of Russian culture, including “skepticism” and “passive contemplativeness.” In the article “B’et chas” (“The Hour Has Come”), Gastev adds to the list of cultural/institutionalized ills: “everyday slovenliness,” “a panicked rhythm,” “faithlessness, the rust of the psyche, confused walkabouts, heedlessness.” Ibid., 248–49.

68. Gastev hereby argues that the modernist technique of montage, associated with the speedy pace of modern life, should be taken out of the realm of pure art and applied to national realities; the poet’s biomechanics and his interest in reconstructing the human can thus be characterized as constructivist.

69. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 57.

70. Ibid., 252.

71. Gastev here draws on Bekhterev, who expanded the biological law of adaptation to inorganic elements, and furthermore applied reflexivity theory to the self-preservation of the collective. In this view, the collective learns to adapt to certain external stimuli; it subsequently becomes dependent on the new habits (reflexes) while continuing to reproduce external stimuli to satisfy its habitual behavior. See Vladimir Bekhterev, *Collective Reflexology*.

72. See Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*, 80.

73. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 41.

74. Ibid., 52.

75. Gastev compares biomechanics, the training of the body for work, to the development of musicianship: just as a violinist learns to use his wrists through a series of mechanical exercises, workers must learn the art of labor. Practice and mechanical exercise might have struck the youthful Gastev as monotonous, but the mature Gastev has come to see monotony as peculiarly artful, to posit that the seemingly miraculous phenomenon of creativity springs not from divine inspiration, but from physiological training, succumbing to life-giving rhythm, embracing the principle of mechanicity. Invoking the figure of the violinist, Gastev intends to show that not only labor, but every human activity is governed by

the mechanical and monotonous acquisition of skills, “miracles” being attainable only through the tedium of training. *Ibid.*

76. *Ibid.*, 55

77. *Ibid.*, 57.

78. *Ibid.*, 58.

79. In this vein, Zamyatin in *We* has his protagonist hymn the aesthetic pleasure to be derived from the perception of order. D formulates the concept of “aesthetic nonfreedom”: “Why is the dance beautiful? Answer: precisely because it is nonfree movement, because all the fundamental significance of the dance lies precisely in its aesthetic subjection, its ideal nonfreedom.” Zamyatin, *We*, 6.

80. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 51.

81. *Ibid.*, 51.

82. *Ibid.*, 56.

83. *Ibid.*, 51. Significantly, as this text demonstrates, in Russian, human nourishment and the supplying of power or energy to a machine are denoted by the same word (*pitanie*; compare the English “power feed.”)

84. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 235.

85. *Ibid.*, 18.

86. Kittler, *Discourse Networks, 1800/1900*, 206.

87. *Ibid.*, 219.

88. “Человечество насторожилось. Оно ждет тудка. Мгновение,—и сквозь смутный хаос этих дней вырвется торжественная догадка о грядущем реве событий.” Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 215.

89. “‘Пачка ордеров’ читается ровными отрезками, как бы сдаваемыми на аппарат. В читке не должно быть экспрессии, пафоса, ложно-классической приподнятости и ударных патетических мест. Слова и фразы следуют друг за другом одной скоростью.” *Ibid.*

90. “Идет грузное действие, и пачка дается слушателю как либретто вещевых событий.” *Ibid.*

91. “Не рассказ, не речь, а только одно мое железное я прокричу: мы победим!” *Ibid.*, 19.

92. “Железо, железо, железо,/Вагранки, винты не плохи,/О, Гастев, куешь ты поезу,/Принявші желе за стихи./Железо, железо, железо,/Железом опутал ты нас,/Железом ревет Марсельеза,/Железом рыдает Парнас.” Parody of Gastev published in the Proletcult’s *Gudki*, no. 1 (1919), cited in Lartsev, “Tema nauki i tekhniki v sovetskoi poezii 20-kh godov,” 94.

93. Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 248.

94. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 50.

95. This orientation away from verbal expression and toward bodily language was characteristic also of the modern theater, not only in Meyerhold’s biomechanical system of actor training, but also in Nikolai Foregger’s dance studio

and Boris Ferdinandov's Experimental-Heroic Theater. The ostensibly paradoxical mistrust of words on the part of a poet, moreover, has its counterpart in the suspicion of traditional verbal expression evident in the futurists' quest for a "trans-sense" language.

96. Devin Fore notes that Gastev almost presciently perceived the openness of the body to augmentation via connectivity to various social and technological apparatuses, "a revolutionary body of the future that was not enclosed within an armored carapace but was instead distinguished by its very permeability and capacity of interchange." The malleability of the body allows for the process of human evolution to be not catalyzed by biological chance, but rather, socially and technically determined: "For it is through the organs, languages, bodies of knowledge, and technological prostheses of its own fashioning that the human being evolves." Fore, "The Operative Word on Soviet Factography," 110.

97. "У меня самого вырастают стальные плечи и безмерно сильные руки. Я слился с железом постройки. Поднялся." Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 19. In "The Rape of the Intelligentsia: A Proletarian Foundation Myth," Igal Halfin reads (103) the imagery of the poem as "a mighty proletarian erection," its conclusion, in which the persona at last makes its essential pronouncement, instantiating the proletarian's orgasm, which stands metaphorically for "the acquisition of the ability to articulate his thoughts."

98. Fedorov, *Filosofia obshchago dela*, 241.

99. Ibid., 242.

100. Without suggesting any direct borrowing, Gastev's biographer Kurt Johansson mentions that Gastev's use of infinitives and compound neologisms conforms to the prescriptions of the famous Italian futurist.

101. Marinetti, *Selected Writings*, 84–85.

102. Vladimir Mayakovsky was similarly fond of expressing dynamism by way of imperatives and compound neologisms; Gastev's extremely short lines recall Mayakovsky's "stepladder" verse.

103. "Мозго-машины—погрузка, киноглаза—установка, электронервы— работа, артерионасосы качайте." Gastev, *Poeziia rabochego udara*, 218.

104. "Азия—вся на ноте ре. Америка—аккордом выше. Африка—си-бемоль. Радиокапельмейстер. Циклоновиолончель—соло." Ibid.

105. "Выстрелить площадь черного. Кубы желтого швырнуть электрокранам. На плоскости и кубы разбросать события. Дать круговое движение. Пересечь все по оси. Двадцать веков в лестницу." Ibid., 219.

106. "Хронометр на дежурство./К станкам./Встать./Пауза./Заряд вин-мания./Подача./Включить./Самоход./Стоп." Ibid., 216.

107. "There is a fascinating correspondence between form and content which has no counterpart in either Russian or Italian futurism." Johansson, *Aleksiej Gastev: Proletarian Bard of the Machine Age*, 96.

CHAPTER TWO

1. In its original, the title was *The Magnificent Cuckold* (*Le cocu magnifique*), but Ivan Aksenov took some liberties with his translation of the play (more on this later in the chapter).
2. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 124.
3. In his 1923 treatise *Cheshskii kukol'nyi i russkii narodnyi teatr*, the philologist Petr Bogatyrev sought to disprove the belief, popular among theater practitioners at the time (Meyerhold, Tairov, Radlov, et al.) but in Bogatyrev's view mistaken, that the theater of movement and spectacle must of necessity negate the effectiveness of the word. Taking up this task, Bogatyrev analyzed the extent to which the Czech and Russian puppet theater, which deeply interested Meyerhold himself, relied on verbal play.
4. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 138.
5. Ibid., 130.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 129.
9. Ibid., 128.
10. Paska, "The Inanimate Incarnate," 411.
11. Ibid., 412.
12. In *The Secret Life of Puppets*, Victoria Nelson surveys the abiding fascination with puppets and automata shared by Goethe, Hoffman, and Kleist, and reflected in their art. Heinrich von Kleist's essay "On the Marionette Theater" (1810), for instance, elucidates the metaphysical aspect of puppets' transcendent grace and elevates the puppet theater from children's diversion to supreme art.
13. It is after all while staging Aleksandr Blok's *Balaganchik* (*The Puppet Theater*), read by many as Blok's self-reflexive commentary on and even profanation of his symbolist preoccupations, that Meyerhold develops his ideas on puppet movement and its expressive and metaphoric power. Rudnitskii (*Rezhisser Meierkhol'd*, 88) argues that *The Puppet Theater* was decisive in Meyerhold's artistic career, determining its future course.
14. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 142.
15. Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, 26.
16. Ibid., 25–26.
17. Ibid., 26.
18. Ibid., 31.
19. Ibid., 35–36.
20. Ibid., 41.
21. A. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses*, 72.
22. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 197–98.

23. Ibid., 198–99.
24. Ibid., 201.
25. Ibid., 199.
26. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierkholt: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 56.
27. Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 4.
28. A. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses*, 155.
29. Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, 164.
30. A. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks, Meyerhold Rehearses*, 120.
31. Bogdanov, “Dve poezii,” 52.
32. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 198. Braun (*Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 202) and Law and Gordon (*Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*, 131) alike suggest that Meyerhold adopted this formula from Constant-Benoit Coquelin’s *L’art et le comedien*.
33. The first three Meyerholdian formulations listed are recorded in Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 198; the fourth in Eisenstein’s notes of Meyerhold’s lectures (Pesochinskii, *Meierkholt*, 29); and the fifth is cited in Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 53.
34. Iampol’skii, *Demon i labirint: Diagrammy, deformatsii, mimesis*, 275.
35. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierkholt: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 23.
36. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 130.
37. Erast Garin, one of Meyerhold’s most capable actor pupils, explains: “Coordination demanded great precision, an absolute feeling of time, and precise calculation—to count in fractions of seconds.” Cited in Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 114.
38. Zagorskii, “Velikodusnyi rogonosets,” 32. In his review of the play in Berlin’s *Nakanune (On the Eve)*, Mikhail Bulgakov expressed his antipathy toward the production, but agreed that Meyerhold’s theater is (for better or worse) of the future: “If Meyerhold dies and is resurrected in the twenty-first century, so be it. This will benefit everyone involved and first and foremost Meyerhold himself. He will be understood. The public will be pleased with his wheels, he will feel the satisfaction of genius, and I will be lying in my grave not dreaming of wooden whirligigs.” Bulgakov, “Stolitsa v bloknote: Biomekhanicheskaiia glava,” 49–50.
39. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierkholt: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 29.
40. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 158.
41. Cited in Rudnitskii, *Rezhisser Meierkholt*, 173.
42. Sutton-Smith, *The Ambiguity of Play*, 54.
43. Law, “Meyerhold’s ‘Magnanimous Cuckold,’” 69.
44. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 141.
45. Ibid., 138.
46. Viktor Shklovsky conceptualized the transformations of postrevolutionary Russia as rampant acting: “All Russia is acting, some kind of elemental pro-

cess is taking place where the living fabric of life is being transformed into the theatrical.” Cited in Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, 41.

47. Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 139.

48. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 309.

49. In his personal impressions of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Bulgakov notes the prominent role played in the performance by buttocks: “Action: a woman, holding the hem of her blue skirt, slides down along the inclined plane on that part of the body which is commonly used both by women and men for sitting. A woman cleans a man’s behind with a clothes-brush. A revolving door is pounding somebody yet again on that same certain part of the body cheerlessly and persistently.” Bulgakov, “Stolitsa v bloknote: Biomekhanicheskai glava,” 49.

50. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 317.

51. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat'*, 47.

52. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 365.

53. Ibid., 367.

54. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierhold: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 38.

55. Popova furthermore designed “work uniforms” (*prozodezhda*) for cast members, bringing the activity of acting even closer to factory work or production. However, the little details added to the industrial overalls for the purpose of distinguishing the characters introduced a strong element of playfulness, and only underscored how far removed in their purpose and effect these costumes with red pom-poms or sexy button-up boots were from actual workers’ uniforms.

56. Titova, *Tvorcheskii teatr i teatral'nyi konstruktivizm*, 194–95.

57. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 179.

58. Leach, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, 97.

59. Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 179.

60. Cited in Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, 146–147.

61. Ibid., 147.

62. Ibid., 148.

63. Tret'iakov, “Velikodusnyi rogonosets,” 43.

64. Zagorskii, “Velikodusnyi rogonosets,” 33.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid., 34–35. The discourse of Popova’s machine, simultaneously at work and at play, seems to move even those one would think impervious to Meyerhold’s biomechanics; describing his irritation with an usher at the performance of *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Bulgakov coins a terse neologism that exposes his initiation, against his will, into the art of the expressive, effective gesture: “His smile was so insolent that I felt an excruciating urge to bio-whack [*biomakhnut*] him over the ear.” Bulgakov, “Stolitsa v bloknote: Biomekhanicheskai glava,” 49.

67. Nick Worrall remarks (in “Meyerhold’s Production of *The Magnificent*

Cuckold,” 24) that the wheels of the structure spin in accordance with Bruno’s emotive fits.

68. Ibid., 23.

69. Bobrov, “V teatre Meierkhola,” 40.

70. “This powerful circus movement, this whirlwind of acrobatic gestures which seethe throughout the performance of the whole cast—in a word, the whole dynamic of the play, based on biomechanics and ingeniously distributed across its construction, keeps the viewer in its grip till the end, at the same time erasing from his/her perception all elements of savoring or passively contemplating what is seen.” Gvozdev, *Teatral’naia kritika*, 32.

71. In his memoir, Il’insky notes that the play was stylized to such an extent as to erase its prurient elements: “The external design of the production rendered it most chaste, free of farce and vulgarity.” The stylized acting, minimalist stage décor, and uniform costumes, he remarks, enabled the creation of “an abstract portrayal of jealousy” (*abstragirovannaia tema revnosti*) without the distraction of tasteless details. Il’inskii, *Sam o sebe*, 176.

72. Lanina, ed., *Meierkhola v russkoi teatral’noi kritike, 1920–1938*, 524.

73. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 14–15.

74. Ibid., 32.

75. Ibid., 131.

76. Indeed, the very biomechanicity of the performance is comedic. The lewd theme and satiric elements recalling medieval marketplace performances allowed for the utilization of various slapstick exercises and antics Meyerhold taught in his biomechanics program. To quote Law and Gordon’s description of one episode: “Bruno, a village scribe, learns that the Cooper wants him to write a love letter to Stella, Bruno’s own wife. He reacts by giving the Cooper a ‘Slap on the Face’ [one of the biomechanical exercises]” (Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics*, 44). Evidencing a close relationship between the comedic or satiric impulse and Meyerhold’s biomechanics, the director’s second biomechanical production was also a satire, Sukhovo-Kobylin’s *Smert’ Tarelkina* (*The Death of Tarelkin*).

77. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierkhola: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 58.

78. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 23.

79. “Не вполне ли натурально, что истинно ужасное принимает для наблюдателя внешне смешную форму?” Cited in Zolotnickii, *Meierkhola: Roman s sovetskoi vlast’iu*, 101.

80. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, 174.

81. Golub, “Clockwise-Counterclockwise (The Vowelless Revolution),” 189.

82. Ibid., 197.

83. This is as if to fulfill Bruno’s prediction: “Her body will guide her mind!”

84. In Crommelynck’s original, Estrugo says: “Ils sont déjà cent qui précédent l’avoir tenue à discrétion! Et toi, te voici dépoillé, séché, cassé, comme

si tu étais le héros de toutes leurs prouesses!” Crommelynck, *Théâtre*: 1, *Le cocu magnifique*, 86. In the Russian translation: “Эстрюго! Их уже набралась сотня, которые хващаются, что имели ее в полном своем распоряжении! Ну, а ты, теперь облез, высох, проломан, как будто ты то и есть автор всех этих подвигов.” RGALI, f. 963, op. 1, d. 299, l. 73.

85. Gladkov, *Meyerhold Speaks*, *Meyerhold Rehearses*, 96. Gladkov does not date this sentiment, but from other statements accompanying it, it seems clear that Meyerhold voiced it at some point in the 1930s. Two lines below in the same note by Gladkov, Meyerhold is quoted: “I am sure if tomorrow I announced that the Volga flows into the Caspian Sea, then the day after tomorrow they’d start demanding an admission from me of the errors contained in this statement.” The call for the admission of errors was an integral part of the ideological purging and public trials of the 1930s.

86. Law and Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics: Actor Training in Revolutionary Russia*, 57–58.

87. Pel’she, “Mekhanizm i formalizm v TIME,” 17.

88. Cited in Pesochinskii, *Meierkholt: K istorii tvorcheskogo metoda*, 16.

89. When, after seeing Meyerhold’s production of *Uchitel’ Bubus* (*The Teacher Bubus*) in 1925, Lunacharsky decided to register his new appreciation for the director’s theater, he remarked that this latest Meyerhold production had replaced “faulty biomechanics” with “sociomechanics.” Lunacharsky became convinced that “the expressivity of the human body . . . is a social phenomenon.” Lunacharskii, “Puti Meierkhola,” 165.

90. Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 16–17.

CHAPTER THREE

1. On early Soviet culture’s ideal of the man-machine, see Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution*; on the omnipresent motif therein of bodily metallization, see Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution*.

2. Rational self-interest was the central point of contention in the 1860s polemic on human motivation waged by the Russian radical Nikolai Chernyshevsky, author of the influential novel *Chto delat?* (What Is to Be Done?), and Dostoevsky, who foregrounded this debate especially in *Zapiski iz podpol’ia* (Notes from Underground). Chernyshevsky held that if people were only taught what is in their best interest, they would necessarily act in accordance therewith, that is, they would behave rationally; the best interest of the individual, moreover, harmoniously coincides with that of the community as a whole. Dostoevsky countered that such a view renders the individual little more than a “piano key or a sprig in an organ” (*Notes from Underground*, 24)—the equivalent of the modern automaton—and that human beings are, to the contrary, willful, hence irrational.

3. Thus did H. G. Wells (*Russia in the Shadows*, 145) dub Lenin upon visiting Soviet Russia (October 1920) and meeting with its leader.

4. John Huntington characterizes H. G. Wells's earlier works as antiutopian, defining the term thus: "Though opposites on the surface, utopia and dystopia share a common structure: both are exercises in imagining coherent wholes . . . By antiutopia I propose to refer to a type of skeptical imagining that is opposed to the consistencies of utopia-dystopia. If the utopian-dystopian form tends to construct single, fool-proof structures which solve social dilemmas, the antiutopian form discovers problems, raises questions, and doubts" (Huntington, *The Logic of Fantasy: H. G. Wells and Science Fiction*, 142). Huntington suggests that the last Wells text belonging to the antiutopian category is *When the Sleeper Wakes*, which, as numerous scholars have noted, had a great influence on Zamyatin's *We*.

5. A term borrowed from Andrew Feenberg's essay "Heidegger, Habermas, and the Essence of Technology."

6. See Carden, "Utopia and Anti-Utopia: Aleksei Gastev and Evgeny Zamyatin"; Lewis and Weber, "Zamyatin's *We*, the Proletarian Poets, and Bogdanov's Red Star."

7. Carden attempts to humanize Gastev's vision, recommending its ethical integrity. She detects in Zamyatin a shortsighted antipathy toward technology that renders him unable to achieve the necessary compromise between modern technologization and life's inherent poetry and individual freedom. Carden's interpretation would seem to miss the ambiguity of Zamyatin's point of view; as will be argued here, Zamyatin, himself an engineer, is far from condemning the machine in his novel.

8. Zamyatin, "Auto-Interview," 297.

9. Cooke, *Human Nature in Utopia: Zamyatin's We*, 62–69.

10. The Integral itself, OneState's first interplanetary rocket, belies One-State's would-be status as a paragon of technological advancement. After all, when *We* was written, the science of rocketry was already in development, and there was good reason to believe that launches to outer space were in the not-too-distant future. Moreover, as Cooke mentions (*Human Nature in Utopia*, 68), D seems to be constantly running up and down stairs, with elevators apparently absent. In fact, there are elevators in D's building, but Cooke's oversight is excusable: D and other characters repeatedly disregard these devices, as if their use has still not quite taken hold; or is losing its former prevalence. All these signs of technological stagnation in OneState lead Cooke to conclude that "the Single State is progressively losing its hold on what was once a substantial technical culture." Cooke, *Human Nature in Utopia: Zamyatin's We*, 68.

11. If so, Zamyatin was prescient, hereby prefiguring Lysenkoism, the Stalin-era rejection of "bourgeois" Mendelian genetics in favor of Lamarck's theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics—a politicization disastrous to Soviet scientific advancement.

12. Zamyatin, *We*, 22.
13. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, 68–69.
14. The ruling party's ideology, Ekwilism predicates the achievement of universal happiness not only upon the enforcement of equal social and economic conditions but, more importantly, upon uniformity in human intellectual and physical capabilities. *Ibid.*, 69–70.
15. *Ibid.*, 70.
16. Cited in Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 200.
17. Cited *ibid.*, 198–99.
18. Having been schooled in the Soviet Union, I remember not only the torturous yet mandatory process by which all children learned to imitate the perfect hand of the teacher, but also the unfathomable suffering of left-handed children mocked and otherwise forced into switching hands.
19. Zamyatin, *We*, 130.
20. *Ibid.*, 126.
21. *Ibid.*, 124.
22. Parrot, “The Eye in *We*,” 107.
23. Zamyatin, *We*, 4.
24. *Ibid.*, 4. I have altered the translation slightly for the sake of faithfulness to the original.
25. On the masculinization of the body in the Soviet 1920s and the cultural project of the eradication of femininity as a locus of disorganized nature, see Eric Naiman’s “NEP as Female Complaint (II): Revolutionary Anorexia” and Eliot Borenstein’s *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*.
26. Cited in Cooke, *Human Nature in Utopia: Zamyatin’s We*, 183.
27. It is possible, on the other hand—there being no frame of reference outside of D’s subjective rendering of events—that he has imagined his amorous encounter with I in order to produce the manuscript. Writing, then, becomes an autoerotic, narcissistic activity, with the manuscript its product—a metaphorical child of self-love. The author writes elsewhere: “My children are my books, plays; other children I don’t need.” Zamyatin, “Auto-Interview,” 296.
28. On the cult of masculinity in early Soviet culture, see note 25. Zamyatin’s text repeatedly plays with and destabilizes the binary opposition of masculinity/femininity, as well as its correlatives control/disorder and efficiency/wastefulness, foregrounded in this cult.
29. Earlier in the chapter I used Clarence Brown’s translation of this line, but the sensation of novelty that Zamyatin’s text expresses is better transmitted by Samuel Cioran’s translation, which I provide here in a slightly altered form; his rendering of *We* appears in Proffer, ed., *Russian Literature of the Twenties*, 1–139.
30. Zamyatin, *We*, 11.

31. Ibid., 39.
32. In “A Note upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad’” Freud explicitly connects the process of writing with the functioning of memory. In this view memories, both those of which we are aware and latent ones, are semiotized, encoded into a system of signs; the unconscious is therefore accessible through language.
33. Zamyatin, *We*, 60.
34. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 203.
35. Zamyatin, *We*, 23.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid., 22.
38. Ibid., 28.
39. From the eponymous essay by Edgar Allan Poe (1836) on the famous “Turk,” a fake chess-playing automaton (controlled in fact by a hidden person) invented by Wolfgang von Kempelen.
40. Zamyatin, *We*, 39.
41. Ibid., 217.
42. Ibid., 39. The symbolism of the imaginary number $\sqrt{-1}$ is very rich in Russian culture of the time. In *Mnimosti v geometrii* (*Imaginary Quantities in Geometry*, 1922), the mathematician and religious philosopher Father Pavel Florensky posits the imaginary number as the key to infinite, trans-rational space, a fourth dimension unavailable to the mundane senses but accessible through the creative power of the spirit. The visionary avant-garde poet Velimir Khlebnikov was likewise fond of this number, associating it with the realm of the possible, the expansion of vision, and liberation from petty preoccupation with everyday material existence. For his part, the painter and theoretician of suprematism El Lissitsky likened the curved line of the logarithmic spiral to $\sqrt{-1}$ and utilized curvature in his art to penetrate into the imaginary space of the fourth dimension. In *We* this curved line, derived from Lobachevsky’s geometry, finds its reflection in the curved hidden pathway of the Ancient House, which I and D use to exit the confines of OneState. More on the imaginary number $\sqrt{-1}$ and the creative potential of curvature in chapter 4.
43. Collins, “Zamyatin’s *We* as Myth,” 75.
44. Ibid.
45. Zamyatin, *We*, 104.
46. Ibid., 174.
47. Zamiatin, *My*, 122.
48. “Heretical literature . . . challenges dogma; this literature is harmful. But harmful literature is more useful than useful literature, for it is antientropic, it is a means of combating calcification, sclerosis, crust, moss, quiescence . . . Heretics are necessary to health; if there are no heretics, they should be invented. A literature that is alive does not live by yesterday’s clock, nor by today’s but by tomorrow’s. It is a sailor sent aloft: from the masthead he can see foun-

dering ships, icebergs, and maelstroms still invisible from the deck.” Zamyatin, *A Soviet Heretic*, 109.

CHAPTER FOUR

1. Hutchings, “Structure and Design in a Soviet Dystopia: H. G. Wells, Constructivism, and Yevgeny Zamyatin’s *We*,” 99.

2. However, Zamyatin wrote the novel in 1920, and the mock-up of Tatlin’s *Monument* was available for public view only at the end of that year. Therefore, it is unlikely that the writer had enough time to familiarize himself with the *Monument* to such an extent as to be able to model his Integral on it.

3. “The basic pattern of movement anticipated in the project is not the centrifugal dash out, the smashing of bounds, but rather the movement in to an enclosed space (no matter how transparent), and its rhythms (revolutions in the original sense) are to be absolutely regular.” Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 142.

4. Tatlin, “Art into Technology,” 310–11.

5. Khlebnikov established an international society of the Presidents of the Terrestrial Globe for himself and like-minded creative individuals in 1916. Robin Milner-Gulland cites such Soviet critics as D. Danin and A. Strigailov among those who suggest that Khlebnikov influenced Tatlin. Milner-Gulland, “Khlebnikov, Tatlin, and Khlebnikov’s Poem to Tatlin,” 96. Christina Lodder in the chapter “Organic Construction: Harnessing an Alternative Technology” defines “organic tendency” as a common denominator that aligns Tatlin’s and Khlebnikov’s artistic visions. According to Lodder, organicity is also that very element which distinguished Tatlin and several others from the mainstream mechanistically oriented constructivism. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 205–23.

6. Ibid. “тайновидец лопастей/и винта певец суровый,/из отряда солнцеловов.” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 461.

7. *Zaum'*, in which *um* means “mind” or “intellect” and *za* is a prefix that usually indicates “beyond” or “behind,” could stand for beyond mind, or beyond meaning. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Julia Kristeva discusses the power of poetic language “to question the very principle of the ideological.” According to Kristeva, poetic language challenges the breach between the semiotic (the sum of presocial drives) and the symbolic (the signs of social organization, given to the subject through language). The breach occurs at the subject’s “enunciation,” when identity is established (socially constructed) and the self is separated from the selfless unity with the mother’s body. Any mimesis problematizes this breach, since it refers not to the real object, “the truth,” but to a fictional one. However, mimesis is based on verisimilitude that preserves the socially constructed meaning through syntactical, grammatical meaning. Only the agrammaticality of

poetic language, especially modern poetic language, Kristeva states, is capable of reaching back to the transcendental ego stage and of leaving the socially constructed self, since it declaims itself as a possessor of symbolic meaning. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 109.

8. Other contemporaries of Tatlin, too, saw in his work this impulse to respectfully study the material world in the hope of acquainting oneself better with its possibilities. Sergei Isakov in 1915 wrote: “He discovers the laws of the energy slumbering in the depth of material, and transfers this energy into the sphere of the beautiful.” Cited in Jean-Claude Marcadé, “O novom otnoshenii k materialu u Tatlina,” 288 (trans. mine).

9. Gassner, “V poiskakh sootvetstviia materialu: O neponimanii i o krivykh,” 295.

10. Zelinsky, “Letatlin,” 78–79.

11. Ibid., 78.

12. Cited in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, 310. The Junkers here refers to a model of German aircraft developed in the early 1920s by Hugo Junkers. After his death in 1934, the factory that produced his aircraft, the Junkers Flugzeugwerke AG, became the chief Nazi military aircraft factory. Tatlin is very clear about the malevolence of nonorganic, nonaesthetic technology: “The engineers made hard forms. Evil. With angles. They are easily broken. The world is round and soft.” Cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 214.

13. Tatlin, “The Problem of the Relationship Between Man and Object,” 268.

14. Cited in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, 310.

15. Gassner, “V poiskakh sootvetstviia materialu: O neponimanii i o krivykh,” 296.

16. Zelinsky, “Letatlin,” 78.

17. Senosian, *Bio-Architecture*, 132.

18. Tatlin, “The Work Ahead of Us,” 239.

19. Zamyatin, *We*, 4.

20. Ibid.

21. Fletcher, “Sozdanie modeli tatinskoi ‘Bashni’ v Muzeе Khirshkhorna i Sadu skulptury,” 328.

22. Shklovsky, Excerpt of 1921 review, 59.

23. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 201.

24. Cited in Nisbet, “Tatlin Lisitskogo,” 418.

25. Gassner, “V poiskakh sootvetstviia materialu: O neponimanii i o krivykh,” 295.

26. Ibid.

27. Babkov, “Konteksty ‘Dosok sud’by,’” 167.

28. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:164.

29. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 2:331, 344.

30. Ibid., 345.
31. “Я всматриваюсь в вас, о числа,/И вы мне видитесь одетыми в звери,
в их шкурах . . .” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 49.
32. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 13.
33. Khlebnikov, *Doski sud'by*, 108.
34. Following the Russian philosopher Petr Uspensky, Khlebnikov saw time
as the fourth dimension.
35. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:127.
36. In a letter to Petnikov and Aseev, Khlebnikov defines the summit he
seeks as “all knowledge in one equation with the value of $\sqrt{-1}$. Our glorious
goal is to find the living (animal) number.” Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 3:113.
Khlebnikov also feels the number as part of his self: “I knew that $\sqrt{-1}$ is no less
material than 1. Now I, surrounded by phantoms, was $1 = \sqrt{-1}$ – man.” Ibid., 2:84.
37. In a letter to Vasilii Kamensky, Khlebnikov asks the poet-pilot to plot
(as it were) his subjective experiences, so that a formula of his inner life can be
calculated. This formula will offer a glimpse into the workings of the universe:
“Work out the exact curve of feelings in waves, rings, spirals, rotations, circles,
declinations. I guarantee when it is all worked out MES will explain it—Moon,
Earth, Sun.” Ibid., 1:369.
38. Ibid., 1:232. Like D, who reads the presence of the irrational number
in his writing, Khlebnikov discerns the contours of the beloved number in lan-
guage, in its material reality; particularly, in his beloved letter L. In “Azbuka
uma” (“Alphabet of Mind”), Khlebnikov declares L to be “a conversion of mo-
tion from motion along a line to motion over an area transverse to it that inter-
sects the path of the motion. $L = \sqrt{-1}$ ” (Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:314).
In “Razlozhenie slova” (“Analyzing the Word”), Khlebnikov elaborates on this
statement: “Would it not therefore be better to define Π [l] as the point of con-
version, the point of contact between a one-dimensional and a two-dimensional
world? Isn’t this where the word *liubit’* [to love] comes from?” (ibid., 1:308).
Khlebnikov further connects this L-shaped dimensional portal to the word *liudi*
(people): “the path of one human being must be directed at a right angle to the
largest possible area of another human being, and once it penetrates, like a spear
through a suit of armor, must communicate the force of its blow to the entire
progress of the second being” (ibid.). The impression that people leave behind
them on their environment and others is a condition of human life; the projec-
tion of impact embodies the principle of metabiosis, the laws of time, the fourth
dimension.
39. Khlebnikov’s definition of the fourth dimension as nonlinear time also
finds echoes in Florensky’s conception of an imaginary space in which time
moves backward, from consequences to causes. In Khlebnikov’s “Uchitel’ i uche-
niik” (“Teacher and Pupil”), the pupil expresses a similar thought: “You see, I
keep thinking about the action of the future on the past.” To seek this peculiar

effect, the pupil turns to language, because, as Khlebnikov writes in “!Futurian”: “Now hear this: the future casts its shadow over language.” Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:280, 260.

40. Florenskii, *Mnimosci v geometrii*, 53.
41. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:379.
42. Florensky, “Organoproektsiia,” 402.
43. Ibid., 420.
44. Ibid., 421. Insofar as he sees man as the microcosm in which the macrocosm of the universe resides, Florensky believes that technology as a conscious organ projection will initiate man into the secrets of the universe. Moreover, consciously imitating nature, the human being can avoid randomness in his or her endeavors, since in nature, asserts Florensky—citing the German psychologist and philosopher Carl du Prel, a contemporary of Kapp, who drew an analogy between Darwinian biological evolution and the development of the cosmos—there is no such thing as chance: “Since nature, as du Prel states, solves its own organic problems according to the principle of the least expenditure of energy and since nature is a prototype of technology, only when technology gets onto the course of imitating nature can we begin to hope that technical progress will not be subject to chance.”

The proponents of the organic trend in Russian avant-garde culture saw nature in precisely such terms. Nature was aesthetic in the economy and efficiency of its means, in the perfect harmony between its form and its function. John Bowlth writes of Pavel Mansurov, an artist who tried to integrate the industrial and the vegetative in his art:

Mansurov was trying to prove that a work of art was like an efficient machine which, in turn, was like a bird, a dog, or a tree. He argued, as the Constructivists did, that function determined form and that a machine was free and beautiful in the same way that utilitarian phenomena such as a butterfly’s wings, the bark of a tree or a bird’s plumage are also beautiful. (Bowlth, “Pavel Mansurov and Organic Culture,” 84)

In “Plan, Method, and Goals of the Work of the Experimental Department for 1924–25 of the Institute of Art Culture, 1 December 1924,” Mansurov (87) sets out his goals: “Through analogy and comparison we will determine the differences and similarities of primitive construction of nature itself in comparison with modern principles of construction. On the basis of the research we will reach the thesis that expedience is the definition of so-called Beauty.” Seeing nature as artful and making analogies between machines, art, and nature, Mansurov problematizes the distinction between organic and inorganic matter.

Mikhail Matiushin, who credited himself with being the first artist to turn to nature, shared Florensky’s views about the untapped latent potential in human bodies—abilities and organs with which humanity is not yet familiar (cited in

Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 205). Preoccupied with attaining transcendent knowledge through the acute observation of natural forms, Matiushin was developing his own system of body-engineering, which, combining the roots of words signifying vision and knowledge, he called *zor-ved*. His hope was that through a series of eye exercises of his own devising, human beings would be able to expand their field of vision to a full 360 degrees. When no space will remain outside of the sphere of human vision, the totality of life will present itself and the inherent connections between things will become apparent. On Matiushin's experiments with vision, see Margarita Til'berg, *Tsvetnaia Vselennaia: Mikhail Matiushin ob iskusstve i zrenii* (Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008).

45. Cited in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 215. Further: “Birds learn to fly from infancy, and people should learn it too. When they make as many Lettatlins as they now make Viennese (bentwood) chairs, then children will have to learn to fly from about the age of eight. In all the schools there will be flying lessons, because then it will be as necessary for a person to fly as it is to walk now.” Cited in Zhadova, *Tatlin*, 310.

46. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 2:82. “Мы взяли √−1 и сели в нем за стол. Наш Ходнырлет был глыбой стекла, мысли, и железа—летавшей, бегавшей, нырявшей. Колеса, плоскости, винты. То, что было видно в окно Нырлетсяка, печаталось светописью очень удачно и скоро. Мы занимались тем, что изучали снимки. Вот лица провожающих. Вот ласточек стая. А чайки, пена, вода, рыбы. Мы в море под водой и слушали хихиканья недруга на другой стороне земного шара. Я переделывал статью в далекий город и медленно выбирал слова. Я задумался. Военные столетия проходили передо мной.” Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:145.

47. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:356.

48. Ibid., 359.

49. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2:279.

50. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:350–51.

51. Ibid., 347.

52. Ibid., 348–49.

53. “Читать черты людской жизни,/Поставив их на корешок,/Чтоб ветер гулял/И шевелил стеклянные листы,/Полные жажды солнца/…/Город стеклянных страниц,/Открывающий их широким цветком днем/и закрывающий на ночь.” Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:89.

54. Khlebnikov, *Collected Poems*, 3:75. “Дворцы-страницы, дворцы-книги,/Стеклянные развернутые книги,/Весь город—лист зеркальных окон,/Свирель в руке суповой рока.” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 110.

55. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 3:75. I altered the translation slightly. “А здесь на вал окутал вал прозрачного холста,/Над полом громоздил устало пол,/Здесь речи лил сквозь львиные уста/И рос как множество зеркального излома.” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 110.

56. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 3:169. “И пусть пространство Лобачевского/Летит с знамен ночного Невского./ . . /Пусть Лобачевского кривые/Украсят города/Дугою над рабочей вые/Всемирного труда.” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 310.

57. “Ourselves and Our Buildings” belongs to an indeterminate genre. It begins as a manifesto, a challenge-proclamation, then becomes a polemical essay, and finally takes on the shape of a fantastic tale. The first part sets the task, the second part describes the details of its realization, and the third part envisions the time and space of its fulfillment.

58. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:356.

59. *Ibid.*, 264.

60. See note 44 in this chapter.

61. In contrast to the vision discussed here of technology as a subject of contemplation or mystic inquiry—the tech view of Khlebnikov’s later writings—his earlier work is more ambivalent. Technology appears in his poetry both as benevolent mediator between humanity and the universe and as an uncontrollable force that violates, devours, and destroys humans. Such poems as “Zhuravl’” (“The Crane,” 1909) and “Zmei poezda” (“Snake Train,” 1910) realize poetic metaphors, turning a mechanized crane into an out-of-control gigantic bird of the same name and a train into a dragon that devours sleepy passengers. Imagination transforms these mechanisms into living organisms, organic monstrosities hostile to humanity. Technology rebels against being used by humans and establishes its rights by turning into a force of nature. But these transformations occur under the rule of the mundane laws of everyday life (*zakony byta, zakony veshchei*) rather than the laws of fate (*zakony roka, zakony vremeni*). In the first poem, the lyrical persona bemoans people’s excessive attention to the world of things (“why do we pamper things?” Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:361). In “Snake Train,” the passengers thoughtlessly, automatically succumb to the movement of the train, placated by the belief that technology is under their control. The passengers erroneously imagine that they are using the train and hence fail to see how it uses and consumes them.

62. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:399.

63. In this regard, Khlebnikov’s view is akin to the contemporaneous ideas of many Russian cosmists, who associated liberation from physical constraints with ontological freedom. On the hopes invested in the idea of space exploration by K. Tsiolkovsky, see my article “The Anatomy of Space Flight: Rockets and Other Mechanical Eggs in Russian Modernism.”

64. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:398.

65. *Ibid.*

66. “А я снял рубаху,/И каждый зеркальный небоскреб моего волоса,/ Каждая скважина/Города тела/Вывесила ковры и кумачовые ткани.” Khlebnikov, *Izbrannoe*, 147.

67. Khlebnikov, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 2:314.
68. From the initials for “Russian Telegraph Agency.”
69. Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, 1:392.
70. Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” 31.
71. *Ibid.*, 33.
72. *Ibid.*, 41.
73. Khlebnikov’s definition of freedom might not have been bound up with individuality or distinct identity, but his proposals of the future, discussed earlier, sought an escape, via imagination and creativity, from societal conformity and passive submission to the rule of those in power.
74. Groys, “Proizvedenie iskusstva kak nefunktional’naia mashina,” 472.
75. *Ibid.*, 474.
76. Poggioli categorizes these self-destructive tendencies of avant-garde artists as “agonism.”
77. Tertz, *The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism*, 150.
78. For the socialist state, its own sustenance and survival was its ultimate measure; it did not recognize anything more powerful than itself, and it used both its social machinery and its technology to assert its power.
79. Vysskie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tehnicheskie masterskie (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops).
80. Khan-Magomedov, “Proekt ‘letaiushchego goroda,’” 36.
81. Odoevsky, *Russian Nights*, 68.
82. *Ibid.*, 68–69.
83. *Ibid.*, 69. The antirationalist Odoevsky would probably be pleased to learn that in the twenty-first century our American trains are too slow and inefficient to lead to totalitarian ennui.

CHAPTER FIVE

1. There was a third brother, Roman, who was the eldest and was executed for terrorism sometime before the revolution. Olesha, *Envy*, 58.
2. *Ibid.*, 47.
3. In his book *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929*, Eliot Borenstein offers an excellent discussion of the strange family dynamics in Olesha’s *Envy*.
4. Olesha, *Envy*, 75.
5. Ivan’s mention of the feminine principle recalls the Russian symbolists’ worship of the Eternal Feminine, Divine Sophia.
6. Olesha, *Envy*, 67.
7. *Ibid.*, 88.

8. Vanchu, “Desire and the Machine: The Literary Origins of Yuri Olesha’s ‘Ofeliya,’” 260.

9. Dane, “Reading Ophelia’s Madness,” 412, 423.

10. Vanchu, “Desire and the Machine: The Literary Origins of Yuri Olesha’s ‘Ofeliya,’” 261.

11. Ibid.

12. Kenneth Reinhard and Julia Lupton in their article “Shapes of Grief: Freud, Hamlet, and Mourning” read Ophelia as “an exemplary object, and subject, of mourning in the play” and “as a figure of death.” Reinhard and Lupton, “Shapes of Grief: Freud, Hamlet, and Mourning,” 61.

13. Fedor Gladkov’s production novel *Tsement* (*Cement*, 1925), which in the 1930s would become a model for socialist realist writing, is built on this discourse of the affirmation of life. This novel about the restoration of a destroyed and abandoned plant tells the story of the Chumalovs, who, having experienced almost unimaginable loss and suffering, learn in the end to choose life. Dasha Chumalova, who is more politically conversant than her husband, tells him at the end of the novel: “The old life has perished and will not return. We must build up a new life. The time will come when we will build ourselves new homes . . . Everything will come through and attain new forms, and then we shall know how to forge new links.” Gladkov, *Cement*, 308.

14. Olesha, *Envoy*, 87.

15. Ibid., 94.

16. Ibid., 87.

17. Ibid.

18. Dane, “Reading Ophelia’s Madness,” 406–7.

19. See, for example, Kazimiera Ingdał, *The Artist and the Creative Act: A Study of Jurij Olesha’s Novel Zavist’*, 90.

20. On several occasions, Olesha remarked about the enduring power of metaphor and his predilection for this particular figure of speech: “Somebody once said that metaphor is all that will remain of art for eternity. It’s pleasant in that regard for me to think I’m making something that might last an eternity . . . One thing I know for certain about myself is that I have a gift for naming things differently.” Cited in Salys, ed., *Olesha’s Envoy: A Critical Companion*, 153.

21. Olesha, *Envoy*, 71. This beautiful moment-of-death incandescence is in keeping with romantic notions of death especially insofar as it matches the romantic conception of “consumption” (before it was realized that this disease is contagious). Thomas Dormandy discusses this in *The White Death: A History of Tuberculosis*, citing a passage from Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* on how the disease “refines [its victim] of grosser aspects.” Further, Dormandy discusses perhaps the ultimate hymner of consumptive beauty, Poe.

22. Olesha, *Envoy*, 71.

23. Lotman, “The Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth Century Russian Culture,” 87.

24. Ibid., 88. While Lotman writes specifically about the culture of the eighteenth-century gentleman, this association of suicide with the affirmation of personal freedom did not disappear by the twentieth century. In her analysis of the epidemic of suicides and the “resonance of suicide as a public act” in the early twentieth century, Susan Morrissey cites Leonid Andreev’s statement on the right to choose death as the only “true guarantor of freedom.” Morrissey, *Suicide and the Body Politic in Imperial Russia*, 335.

25. I disagree with those critics who see Ivan’s or Kavalerov’s aspirations in terms of a power struggle (for example, see Ronald LeBlanc’s “Gluttony and Power in Iurii Olesha’s *Envy*”). Leadership could not be further from Kavalerov’s dreams. Ivan has accepted followers and has embraced his title of “the king of vulgarians.” But ultimately he is a preacher and an inventor, not a ruler. The “king of the vulgarians” is in parallel with “King of the Jews,” and as such is one more Christological appurtenance that sets Ivan up for a glorious redemptive death.

26. Olesha, *Envy*, 18. I have altered this translation slightly to conform more closely to the original.

27. Pinnow, “Lives Out of Balance: The ‘Possible World’ of Soviet Suicide During the 1920s,” 145. In 1928, shortly after Olesha finished his *Envy*, Nikolai Erdman wrote a play entitled *Samoubiitsa* (*The Suicide*), which Meyerhold unsuccessfully attempted to gain permission to stage, and which was subsequently banned altogether. When a character who cannot find a job is rumored to contemplate suicide, various people attempt to use his potential act to obtain certain privileges. Many elements of the play were politically daring, if not outright dangerous: despair that would compel a person to consider such a drastic way out and the presence of unsavory individuals who attempt to benefit from it do not harmonize with the self-satisfied portrayal of a well-adjusted citizenry the Soviet Union was to project. And yet, it seems to me, the most damaging aspect of the play is the fact that in it, suicide stands as the only act in which a human being can be fully outspoken in the new society.

28. One example that illustrates the discourse rebelled against here is found in *Cement*, when Chumalov, instead of killing Kleist, as the latter seems to fear, “sternly and firmly attach[es] him to life,” because the engineer is needed for the “new world.” Gladkov, *Cement*, 89.

29. Olesha, *Envy*, 10.

30. Ibid.

31. Benjamin, *Reflections*, 94.

32. Olesha, *Envy*, 46.

33. Ibid., 15.

34. Foster, “Armor Fou,” 66.

35. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 1:300–362, 2:159–62.

36. One of Ivan’s monologues is directed at mothers and wives: “The stallions of revolution, thundering along the back stairs, crushing our children and cats, breaking the tiles and bricks chosen by us, will burst into our kitchens. Women, under threat is your pride and glory—the home. They want to crush your kitchen with the elephants of revolution, mothers and wives! . . . He was scoffing at your pans, at little pots, at your quiet, at your right to stick a pacifier into your child’s lips.” Olesha, *Envy*, 92.

37. Olesha, *Envy*, 46.

38. Ibid., 77.

39. Ibid., 16.

40. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 609.

41. Olesha, *Envy*, 58.

42. Ibid., 63.

43. Ibid., 77.

CHAPTER SIX

1. Cited in Rougle, *Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gor’kij, Aleksander Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij*, 122.

2. The program of the Factory of the Eccentric Actor, founded in 1922 by G. M. Kozintsev, L. Z. Trauberg, G. K. Kryzhitsky, and S. I. Iutkevich (more on these in the next chapter), borrowed heavily from American popular culture. Photomontages by such constructivists as A. Rodchenko and G. Klutsis often featured American skyscrapers as recognizable symbols of modernity.

3. “Я мчусь по воздушной железной дороге/ В могучем Нью-Йорке.
Вблизи—оcean./Мелькают лачуги, мелькают чертоги./ Я мчусь по воздушной
железной дороге—/ И радостен сердцу железный обман./ Машины,
машины. Победа над высью./ Сплетенье металла. Узоры сетей./ Я молча
гляджу притаившейся рысью./ Я вольно овеян свободною высью,/ А там—
подо мной—панорама людей./ Дорога восходит все выше и выше./ Я вижу
там в окнах, бесчисленность глаз./ Превзойдены взором высокие крыши./
Дорога восходит все выше и выше./ Стремленье, куда же уводишь ты нас?”
Bal’mont, *Izbrannoe*, 445.

4. Gor’kii, “Gorod zheltogo d’iavola,” 243.

5. Lotman, “Tekhnicheskii progress kak kul’turologicheskaiia problema,” 627.

6. “Ты все та, что была и не та,/Новым ты обернулась мне лицом/И
другая волнует мечта . . .” “Уголь стонет и соль забелась,/И железная воет
руда . . ./То над степью пустой загорелась/Мне Америки новой звезда!”
Blok, “Novaia Amerika,” 268–70.

7. “Нет, не выются там по ветру чубы,/Не пестреют в степях бунчуки . . ./
Там чернеют фабричные трубы,/Там заводские стонут гудки.” Ibid., 270.

8. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, 3:597.
9. Blok, Introduction to “Vozmezdie,” *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh*, 3:298. This distinction of Russia as the new America versus the United States as the old, actual America prefigures Mayakovsky’s threat (in “Amerikantsy udiliatutsia” [1929]) “to catch up and overtake America,” later popularized by Khrushchev.
10. Ruland, *America in Modern European Literature: From Image to Metaphor*, 22.
11. See Hasty and Fusso, *America Through Russian Eyes*, 7.
12. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 452.
13. Pushkin, “Dzhon Tenner,” 104–5.
14. Hecht, *Russian Radicals Look to America*, 30–31.
15. *Ibid.*, 40.
16. Dostoevsky, *Demons*, 139.
17. Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazov*, 2:488.
18. For their part, some nineteenth-century American writers themselves expressed similar concern that the eruption of machine technology into American life might constitute an assault on the cherished ideals and aspirations, the very essence, of America. In his study *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964), Leo Marx argues (34) that Twain, Melville, and Hawthorne, in exposing the conflict between the American pastoral ideal of harmony on the one hand and the valorization of power and wealth affirmed by the embrace of machine technology on the other, interrogated the very sustainability of constitutive American principles: “The power of these fables to move us derives from the magnitude of the protean conflict figured by the machine’s increasing domination of the visible world. This recurrent metaphor of contradiction makes vivid, as no other figure does, the bearing of public events upon private lives. It discloses that our inherited symbols of order and beauty have been divested of meaning. It compels us to recognize that the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied in our traditional institutions.”
19. Dostoevskii, *Brat'ia Karamazov*, 2:488.
20. On Dostoevsky’s treatment of the human face and its relationship to the divine *obraz*, the icon, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, see Murav, *Holy Foolishness*, 130–50.
21. Rogger, “America in the Russian Mind—or Russian Discoveries of America,” 42.
22. Cited in Rogger, “Amerikanizm and the Economic Development of Russia,” 392.
23. *Ibid.*, 394.
24. *Ibid.*, 410.
25. *Ibid.*, 406.

26. Rogger, “America in the Russian Mind—or Russian Discoveries of America,” 43–48.
27. A traveler to Russia in the 1920s remarks that “more people in Russia have heard of Henry Ford than of Stalin . . . I visited villages far from railroads, where I talked to illiterate peasants who did not know who Stalin was or Rykov or Bukharin, but who had heard of the man who makes ‘the iron horses.’” Cited in Bailes, “The American Connection: Ideology and the Transfer of American Technology to the Soviet Union,” 435.
28. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment*, 76–82.
29. In his review of O. A. Ermansky’s *The Taylor System and the Scientific Organization of Labor*, published by Gosizdat in 1922, Lenin hailed the effort to popularize the system among the Russian masses, recommending the study as a textbook for trade union schools and secondary schools generally: “To learn how to work is now the main, the truly national task of the Soviet Republic.” Lenin, “A Fly in the Ointment,” 513.
30. Josephson, *Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth?: Technological Utopianism Under Socialism*, 35.
31. Bailes, “The American Connection: Ideology and the Transfer of American Technology to the Soviet Union,” 425–26.
32. Ibid., 426.
33. Ibid., 427.
34. Ibid., 430–38. The last consideration cited accounts for the increasingly frequent appearance, quite reflective of reality, of the American engineer in the Soviet production novel. While in Gladkov’s *Cement*, written in 1925, the text’s most prominent engineer is an old bourgeois of German origin, in such later production novels as Valentin Kataev’s *Vremia, vpered!* (*Time, Forward!*), the technological intelligentsia is often represented by a friendly American.
35. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 296–97.
36. Levidov, “Amerikanizma tragifars,” 46.
37. Lenin, “The Immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government,” 259.
38. Letter of A. Zalkind, *Lef*, no. 3 (June–July 1923): 40.
39. Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing,” 125.
40. Ibid., 128.
41. Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects,” 114.
42. Tal’nikov, “Literaturnye zametki,” 268.
43. Ibid., 266.
44. Maiakovskii, *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 265.
45. Esenin, “An Iron Mirgorod,” 149.
46. Rougle, *Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gor’kij, Aleksander Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij*, 122–29.
47. Rapport, “Migrant Selves and Stereotypes,” 271.
48. Baudrillard, *America*, 28–29.

49. Cited in Ruland, *America in Modern European Literature: From Image to Metaphor*, 68. No less exalted is Gorky in conversations with American journalists. The *New York Times* reported the visitor as dubbing the United States “the country of liberty” and expressing the hope that “Russia will go the way America went—Federation! If the Russian revolution goes through we will have a Government framed along the lines of your own, with a federation of nations—such as Finland and Poland—instead of a federation of states” (“Riot of Enthusiasm Greets Maxim Gorky,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1906, p. 6). Regarding those marvels of American technology, skyscrapers, Gorky was quoted as remarking: “Wonderful! wonderful! . . . I mean to know how it is possible to erect such structures before I leave this country.” (“Gorky and Mark Twain Plead for Revolution,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1906, 4.)

50. Gorky, “City of the Yellow Devil,” 133.

51. Cited in Ruland, *America in Modern European Literature: From Image to Metaphor*, 69.

52. See Hasty and Fusso, *America Through Russian Eyes*, 83–94.

53. Ironically, Gorky would twenty years later write quite positive assessments of an actual “factory of death,” the construction of the Belomor Canal, a technological project indeed notorious for its use of the slave labor of political prisoners. See Josephson, *Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth?: Technological Utopianism Under Socialism*, 168.

54. Gorky, “City of the Yellow Devil,” 133.

55. *Ibid.*, 135.

56. *Ibid.*, 140.

57. *Ibid.*, 142.

58. That is, either “an American novel” or “an American love affair.”

59. The title’s implication that America is as provincial as Mirgorod will be discussed below.

60. Esenin, “An Iron Mirgorod,” 148–49.

61. *Ibid.*, 149.

62. *Ibid.*, 151.

63. *Ibid.*, 152.

64. *Ibid.*, 149.

65. *Ibid.*, 153–54.

66. *Ibid.*, 152.

67. *Ibid.*

68. *Ibid.*, 154–55.

69. Cited in Pertsov, *Maiakovskii: Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo*, 7.

70. Cited in Hasty and Fusso, *America Through Russian Eyes*, 161. Mayakovsky toured America not as a private tourist but as a public persona, a representative of Soviet power; while in America, he gave a great number of lectures

about the Soviet state and several interviews to various newspapers, including the *New York Times*.

71. “Мир из света частей собирая квинтет,/одарил ее мощью магической./
Город в ней стоит на одном винте,/весь электро-динамо-механический./В
Чикаго 14,000 улиц—солнц площадей лучи./От каждой—700 переулков,
длиною поезду на год.” Maiakovskii, “150,000,000,” 101.

72. The *bogatyr* is a hero of Russian folk epics known for his great strength. It is curious that in this particular poem, Mayakovsky chooses to reach America via non-technological means; furthermore, Ivan succeeds in winning his battle with heavily armed Wilson without the use of any weapons, planes, or other technological aids—only his bare hands. In this feat, poetry becomes a valuable substitute for the technology that Russians do not yet possess. As Russians cannot reach America by boat (*Russkikh v gorod tot ne vezet parokhod*—“Russians are not taken to this city by steamship”), they get to visit America with the help of the “seven-league boots” of Mayakovsky’s poetry (*v skorokhodakh-stikhakh, v stikhakh-sapogakh*). Ibid., 126.

73. “Чудно человеку в Чикаго! И чудно!” Ibid., 101–2.

74. Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, 46–47.

75. “В Чикаго у каждого жителя не менее генеральского чин.” Maiakovskii, “150,000,000,” 101.

76. “В диком разгроме/старое смыв,/новый разгромим/по миру миф./
Время-ограду/взломим ногами./Тысячу радуг/в небе нагаммим.” Ibid., 98.

77. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 52:179.

78. Cited in Rougle, *Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gor'kij, Aleksander Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij*, 114.

79. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 17–23.

80. “И чувствую—я для меня мало.” Maiakovskii, “Oblako v shtanakh,” 233.

81. Mayakovsky, “A Drop of Tar,” 100.

82. “Христофор Колумб был Христофор Коломб—испанский еврей (из журналов).” Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 31.

83. “Что вы за нация? Один Сион!/Любой португалишка даст тебе фору!” . . . “Что вы лезете—Европа да Европа?/Возьму и открою другую страну.” Ibid., 31–32.

84. Notes to Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 475.

85. Klaus Mann’s preface to Kafka, *Amerika*, vii.

86. Kafka, *Amerika*, 36.

87. Ibid., 37.

88. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology*, 13. Here Heidegger’s reassessment of technology arises as a protest against what he sees as modernity’s too-utilitarian attitude toward it. Humanity, he argues, no longer directs its pur-

suits at discovering the real, does not attempt to understand reality and its place in it, but instead, believing itself the subject of knowledge and bearer of control, concerns itself with finding ways to apply technology as a means toward the end of securing and tightening this control. Unaware of its own subjective existence, mankind does not see that its mastery, and the scientific framework on which this rests, are only constructs. Such lack of awareness of its own place leads to humanity's increasing loss of control over technology, which people consider their own creation, but which in fact is present in Being. Heidegger proposes that mankind must realize that it is under the dominion of Being; must see technology as a way to gain "insight into that which is." Although the futurist Mayakovsky considered himself to be in the vanguard of modernity, his relationship with technology strikes me as closer to the ancient Greek outlook described by Heidegger than the modern one the philosopher presents as erroneous.

89. "Я горд вот этой стальной милей,/живьем в ней мои видения
встали . . ." Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 85.

90. Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, 177–79. "Если придет
окончание света/—планету хаос разделяет влоск,/и только один останется
этот/над пылью гибели вздыбленный мост,/то, как из косточек, тоньше иголок,/—
тучеют в музеях стоящие ящеры,/так с этим мостом столетий геолог/сумел
воссоздать бы дни настоящие." Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 85.

91. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 93.

92. The sublime, as Mayakovsky comes to realize, lies in the play of the imagination: "The ocean is a matter of imagination. When you are at sea, you also don't see the shore, and the waves are bigger than needed for household use, and you don't know what's underneath you. But it is only imagining that to the right and to the left there is no land all the way to the pole, that there is an altogether new, second world up ahead, and that beneath you, perhaps, is Atlantis—it is only this imagining that is the Atlantic Ocean." (*Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 265.) But how does one sustain imagination in such close proximity to the phenomenon subject to it? What can save Mayakovsky from the boredom of nothingness that the ocean becomes over the multiple days of the trip? Closeness ruins the illusion, and the ocean's inevitable presence habitualizes his perception of it.

93. "А лампы как станут ночь копать,/ну, я доложу вам—/пламечко!/
Налево посмотришь—/мамочка мать!/Направо—/мать моя мамочка!"
Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 57.

94. This incident is described in Pertsov, *Maiakovskii: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*, 32–33.

95. The bridge in fact spans the East River; again, this technological marvel is for the poet a symbol rather than a device for reaching a specific destination.

96. Translation by Reavey (Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, 181), slightly revised. "Здесь жизнь была одним—беззаботная,/другим—

голодный протяжный вой./Отсюда безработные в Гудзон кидались вниз головой./И дальше картина моя без загвоздки/по струнам канатам, аж звездам к ногам.” Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 86.

97. A summer camp run by the communist Yiddish-language newspaper *Morgen Freiheit* (New York), which along with the Russian-language newspapers *Russkii golos* and *Novyi mir* sponsored many of Mayakovsky’s U.S. lectures. Moser, “Mayakovsky and America,” 243–44.

98. “Нами через пропасть прямо к коммунизму/перекинут мост, длинною—во сто лет.” Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 89.

99. “Что такое мост? Приспособление для простуд.” Ibid.

100. Maiakovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, 3:225.

101. Maiakovskii, *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 341.

102. Translation by Hasty and Fusso. Mayakovsky, “My Discovery of America,” 179.

103. From an interview (1925) published in the New York newspaper *The World*. Cited in Moser, “Mayakovsky and America,” 253.

104. Maiakovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v dvenadtsati tomakh*, 3:224.

105. Maiakovskii, “Kak ia ee rassmeshil,” 360.

106. Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 278.

107. Mayakovsky, *The Bedbug and Selected Poetry*, 173–75. “Как в церковь идет помешавшийся верующий,/как в скит удаляется, строг и прост,/—так я в вечерней сереющей мерещи,/вхожу, смиренный на Бруклинский мост./Как в город сломанный прет победитель/на пушках—жерлом жирафу под рост—/так, пьяный славой, так жить в аппетите,/влезаю, гордый, на Бруклинский мост./Как глупый художник в мадонну музея/вонзает глаз свой, влюблен и остр,/так я, с поднебесья, в звезды усеян,/смотрю на Нью-Йорк сквозь Бруклинский мост.” Maiakovskii, *Stikhi ob Amerike*, 83.

108. Rougle, *Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gor'kij, Aleksander Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij*, 108.

109. Maiakovskii, *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 265.

110. Mayakovsky writes: “Thirty years ago V. G. Korolenko looked upon New York and recorded: ‘Through the haze on shore there appeared enormous six- and seven-story buildings.’ Some fifteen years ago Maxim Gorky visited New York and informed us: ‘Through the slanting rain on shore could be seen fifteen- and twenty-story buildings.’ So as not to depart from the framework of propriety apparently adopted by these writers, I should have narrated thus: ‘Through the slanting smoke could be seen some pretty decent forty- and fifty-story buildings . . .’ But a poet of the future will record after such a trip: ‘Through the straight buildings of an incalculable number of stories rising on the New York shore, neither clouds of smoke, nor slanting rains, to say nothing of any haze, could be seen.’” Translation by Hasty and Fusso (slightly revised). Mayakovsky, “My Discovery of America,” 191–92.

111. Maiakovskii, *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 298.
112. Translation by Hasty and Fusso. Mayakovsky, “My Discovery of America,” 207.
113. Pomorska, “The Utopian Future of the Russian Avant-Garde,” 376.
114. Translation by Hasty and Fusso. Mayakovsky, “My Discovery of America,” 343.
115. Rougle, *Three Russians Consider America: America in the Works of Maksim Gorkij, Aleksander Blok, and Vladimir Majakovskij*, 136.
116. Translation by Hasty and Fusso. Mayakovsky, “My Discovery of America,” 207.
117. Translation by Hasty and Fusso (slightly revised). *Ibid.*, 209.
118. Maiakovskii, *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, 346.
119. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 105.
120. A phenomenon eventually parodied by Nabokov in *The Gift* in the person of the author Shirin, who (in his novel *Sedina*) is seemingly incapable of perceiving the West other than through the biblical-apocalyptic prism inherited from Dostoevsky.
121. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West*, Susan Buck-Morss controversially argues that the Soviet experiment failed because it was too reliant on Western, especially American, models of social and economic development.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1. Kozintsev, Trauberg, et al., “Eccentrism,” 58.
2. On the omnipresence of the concept of speed and its aesthetic and ideological implications in the culture of the avant-garde, see Tim Harte’s *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930*. Harte argues, for instance (171), that Chaplin appealed to Russian filmmakers precisely due to his dynamism, his nonstop movement, so symptomatic of Hollywood and the modern principles of continuity, motion, tempo.
3. Kozintsev, Trauberg, et al., “Eccentrism,” 59.
4. Since its inception, science fiction has associated technology with radical alterity and the bridging thereof, bringing the alien closer to humanity and vice versa.
5. It is worth emphasizing that the United States did not recognize the Soviet Union diplomatically until 1933.
6. Kozintsev, Trauberg, et al., “Eccentrism,” 59.
7. Chukovskii, “Nat Pinkerton,” 131.
8. Lunts, “Na Zapad!” 304.

9. Cited in Britikov, “Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchenceskikh zhanrov,” 424.

10. Julian Graffy argues that the plot formula by which the visiting foreigner is won over to the Soviet side recapitulates the coming to consciousness central to Lenin’s formulation of the trajectory of the historical process, as discussed in Katerina Clark’s *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Graffy, “The Foreigner’s Journey to Consciousness”). This requisite assimilation, however, in the context of such films and novels as foreground American acculturation, strikes me as especially motivated by a desire for reciprocity.

11. The genre of the Red Pinkerton formed at a time when Trotsky’s dream of world revolution had not yet been squelched by Stalin’s pragmatic argument for the victory of socialism in one country.

12. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 242.

13. Ibid., 241.

14. Ibid., 223.

15. See Benjamin’s description of urban masses in “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.”

16. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 22–23. Writing this chapter, I used the original 1922 edition of the novel, published in installments in *Krasnaia nov'*. In later versions, Tolstoy incorporated a number of significant revisions for political reasons. Throughout this discussion, I generally cite Antonia Bouis’s translation (here referred to as Tolstoy, *Aelita*) of a later edition, but alter quotes as needed to reflect the original text as it appeared in *Krasnaia nov'*.

17. Tolstoi, *Aelita*, *Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 119. This line was removed from later editions.

18. “‘Twenty-three’ —проговорил он наконец, что должно было означать: ‘Чорт возьми меня с моими костями.’” Tolstoi, *Aelita*, *Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 1.

19. *The Compact Oxford English Dictionary* (Clarendon, 1991), 747.

20. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 3.

21. Ibid., 6.

22. Ibid., 5.

23. Tolstoi, *Aelita*, *Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 106.

24. Ibid., 111.

25. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 24.

26. Ehrenburg’s *D. E. Trust* also reveals an affinity between love and the seeking of adventure. But unlike Tolstoy, Ehrenburg does not see eros in ethical terms. In *D. E. Trust*, love does not mean opening oneself up to the unknown, but to the contrary, self-affirmation through colonization and appropriation of the other.

27. See notes in Tolstoi, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:711, 709.
28. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 21.
29. *Ibid.*, 18.
30. Tolstoi, *Aelita, Krasnaia nov'*, no. 4 (1923): 119.
31. Schopenhauer, “On Affirmation and Denial of the Will to Live,” 61–65.
32. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 17. (I have altered the translation slightly.)
33. *Ibid.*, 88. (I have altered the translation slightly.)
34. *Ibid.*
35. Tolstoi, *Aelita, Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 149.
36. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 6.
37. On which, see Matich, “Androgyny and the Russian Religious Renaissance.”
38. Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, 2:504.
39. Tolstoi, *Aelita, Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 111.
40. Tsiolkovskii, “Issledovanie mirovykh prostranstv reaktivnymi pri-borami,” 139.
41. Rank, *The Trauma of Birth*, 101.
42. Tolstoy must have been familiar with Tsiolkovsky’s rocket designs. He follows in Tsiolkovsky’s footsteps in giving an egg-like shape to his own spaceship in *Aelita*. On the significance of the shape both for Tsiolkovsky and Tolstoy, see my article “The Anatomy of Spaceflight: Rockets and Other Mechanical Eggs in Russian Modernism,” *Russian Literature* 69, no. 2–4 (2011): 291–308.
43. Tolstoi, *Aelita. Giperboloid inzhenera Garina*, 345.
44. Tolstoi, *Aelita, Krasnaia nov'*, no. 6 (1922): 119.
45. Tolstoi, *Aelita, Krasnaia nov'*, no. 3 (1923): 53.
46. *Ibid.*, 55.
47. Constructivist Aleksandra Ekster designed extravagant costumes and imaginative set decorations, whose futuristic, forward-looking forms seem indebted to, or at least inspired by, some existing American models.
48. Cited in Christie, “Down to Earth: *Aelita* Relocated,” 82.
49. The meaning of the words themselves is never revealed—only what they advertise.
50. Wolfe, *The Known and the Unknown: The Iconography of Science Fiction*, 173.
51. Tolstoi, *Soiuz piati*, 18.
52. *Ibid.*, 9.
53. *Ibid.*, 45.
54. Tolstoi, *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina*, 700.
55. *Ibid.*, 827.
56. Aseev, “Daesh’ Mariiu Antuanetu!” 150.
57. Tolstoy, *O literature*, 107. It is perhaps also significant that the Shukhov Radio Tower, completed in 1922, has a hyperboloid shape.

58. See Reithblat, *Nat Pinkerton: Korol' Syshchikov*.
59. "In order to understand Dollar as a novelist, one must remember that his traditions stem from cinema, not literature. He never learned book technique. He studied only in the movie theater. His entire romantic baggage is conventional. An American himself, a native New Yorker, he does not show us anything close to the real New York. The names of streets, places, factories, and features of everyday life are completely fictional; an entirely conventional 'screen' world passes before our eyes in Dollar's novels. He once said that cinema is the Esperanto of humankind. It is in this common conventional language that Dollar's novels are written." Shaginian, *Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde*, 240–41.
60. Tolstoy, *Aelita*, 29–30.
61. Ibid., 30.
62. Ibid., 36.
63. Ibid., 67.
64. Ibid.
65. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 77.
66. Miriam Bratu Hansen argues that Hollywood met the widely felt need for a new language, new forms of expression capable of describing the universality and heterogeneity of modernity. "Whether we like it or not, American movies of the classical period offered something like the first global vernacular. If this vernacular had a transnational and translatable resonance, it was not just because of its optimal mobilization of biologically hardwired structures and universal narrative templates but, more important, because it played a key role in mediating competing cultural discourses on modernity and modernization, because it articulated, multiplied, and globalized a particular historical experience." Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," 68.
67. Cited in Taylor, "Ideology and Popular Culture in Soviet Cinema: The Kiss of Mary Pickford," 46.
68. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 46.
69. Lotman and Tsivian, *Dialog s ekranom*, 14.
70. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 52.
71. The scene recalls the conclusion of Tolstoy's *The Union of Five*, when Russian workers storm the White House. The dream of freely entering the White House, or any seat of power, is probably universal; compare Matthias Rust's landing of a small plane on Red Square in 1987.
72. Kepley, "Mr. Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists," 133.
73. Ibid., 136.
74. Kuleshov, *Kuleshov on Film*, 62. In "Problemy kino-stilistiki," Boris Eikhbaum quotes Louis Delluc: "The locomotive, the ocean liner, the glider, the railroad are photogenic by the very nature of their structure. The audience gasps with delight every time shots of 'cine-truth' pass on the screen showing the

movement of a fleet or a ship” (Eikhenbaum, “Problemy kino-stilistiki,” 17). The camera gravitates toward and aestheticizes technology.

75. Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature*, 142.

76. Heissenbüttel, “The Rules of the Game of the Crime Novel,” 85.

77. Eco, “Narrative Structures in Fleming,” 96.

78. Discussing the narrative codes of which every narrative is comprised, Roland Barthes in *S/Z* suggests that actions serve as a kind of dynamo, propelling a narrative onward. He calls this phenomenon the “armature of the readerly,” since, due to their rigid organization, such narrative codes serve as the most useful material for structural analysis. Barthes, *S/Z*, 204.

79. Kuleshov, “Americanism,” 72–73.

80. Lunts, “Na Zapad!” 298.

81. Tynianov, “Sokrashchenie shtatov,” 145.

82. Shklovsky, “Mister West ne na svoem meste” (“Mister West Is Out of Place,” 1924), 3.

83. Kuleshov, “Mr. West,” 108.

84. Eikhenbaum, “Leskov i sovremennaia proza,” 224.

85. Piotrovskii, “K teorii kino-zhanrov,” 11.

86. Eisenstein, “Charlie the Kid,” 110.

87. Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, 2.

88. Tsivian, “O Chapline v russkom avangarde i o zakonakh sluchainogo v iskusstve.”

89. Graffy, “The Foreigner’s Journey to Consciousness,” 14.

90. Cited in Kleiman, “Stekliannyi Dom S. M. Eizenshtaina: K istorii zamysla,” 94.

91. Chadaga, “Eisenstein’s *Glass House*: Ambivalence About the Glass Enemy.”

92. Bulgakowa, “Eisenstein, the Glass House and the Spherical Book: From the Comedy of the Eye to a Drama of Enlightenment.”

93. Kleiman, “Stekliannyi Dom S. M. Eizenshtaina: K istorii zamysla,” 111.

94. Ibid., 97.

95. Ibid., 103.

96. Eisenstein, “Charlie the Kid,” 121.

97. See on this Brooks, “The Press and Its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s,” 236.

98. Shaginian, “Skazka,” 717.

99. A particularly explicit example of this optical illusion by which an American love leads to all-encompassing recognition of Russia is found in Kuleshov’s pupil Sergei Komarov’s film *Potselui Meri Pikford* (*The Kiss of Mary Pickford*). Here documentary footage of the visit of Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks to Russia was edited so as to create a completely fictional story.

The plot hinges on a kiss bestowed by Mary Pickford that makes an insignificant cashier-turned-stuntman (played by the famous actor Il'insky) an object of nationwide female adoration. This magic American touch did not only work miracles for the fictional cashier, but also proved useful in real life, when Fairbanks and Pickford's favorable comments on *Bronenosets Potemkin* (*The Battleship Potemkin*) were used to advertise the film to Russian audiences (Taylor, "Ideology and Popular Culture in Soviet Cinema: The Kiss of Mary Pickford," 46). American recognition would affirm Russia's vanguard status, satisfy its desperate need for an identity in the world. This yearning for acceptance by and communication with the other is at the core of the playfulness of Red Pinkertons.

100. Shaginian, *Mess-Mend*, 242–43.

101. Shaginyan's assertion that fantasy, or what she calls the "happy fairy tale element" (*schastlivaya skazochnost'*—*Mess-Mend*, 233), harbors subversive and agitational potential is of course not unique. Coleridge saw the fantastic as the domain of will and choice, and Caillois held it to be "a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible" (cited in Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*, 20–21). It remains, however, to establish what this iconoclastic impulse is directed against in Shaginyan's novel.

102. Shaginian, "Skazka," 712–13.

103. Shaginian, *Mess-Mend*, 243.

104. Suspense here hinges, moreover, on who (heroes or villains) will gain access to miraculous technology first, and whether it will be used for good or ill. In *Miss Mend*, symbolically enacting techno-poetic justice, the villain, whose evil plan had been to stand atop the world in conquest, is in the end caught and chopped up by a rapidly ascending elevator.

105. Writing under the pseudonym Jim Dollar proved a successful trick on several levels. First, the resulting anonymity surrounded the novel with mystery and increased publicity: critics' guesses as to the author's true identity ranged from Tolstoy to Ehrenburg to Bukharin himself. Meanwhile, the more gullible reader was happy to believe in the existence of Jim Dollar. Jeffrey Brooks argues that the pleasure of working-class readers increased when they could believe that the adventures they read had actually taken place; authors obliged by presenting their characters as if from news accounts (Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature*, 147). Shaginyan dove into this verisimilitude boom head-first (the novel, after all, purporting to be a translation of an English-language original). The introductory statement that Dollar had never set foot in Russia made his extravagant imaginings of the country excusable. Shaginyan was aware that the mass reader often did not care to distinguish fact from fiction, as evident in the statement of one of her characters: "I will tell you everything in the right order—like in the papers, like in a novel with a sequel" (Shaginian, *Mess-Mend*, 296). But supplying Dollar with an introductory biography is also a playful comment on the new literary convention of the day, which de-

manded adventure and detective plots and, at the same time, facticity. The editorial board of *Lef* endorsed an emphasis on fact; such pioneers of the new cinematic style as Dziga Vertov propagated it; Tolstoy in *The Union of Five* included a note claiming the moon-exploding plan he depicted was grounded in physics; and even Viktor Shklovsky and Vsevolod Ivanov in the introduction to their detective/adventure novel *Iprit (Mustard Gas)* assert that the difference between their creation and the works of others (including Shaginyan) was their employment of facts.

106. Cited in Britikov, “Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchchencheskikh zhanrov,” 432.

107. Shaginian, *Dnevniky, 1917–1931*, 71–72.

108. Cited in Britikov, “Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchchencheskikh zhanrov,” 428.

109. The metaliterary targets of the Red Pinkertons included not only the formulas of contemporaneous popular genres, but previous literary models as well. Specifically, since many of the writers entered literature during the ascendancy of symbolism, the novels are greatly indebted to that tradition. Some symbolist traces in Tolstoy’s *Aelita* have already been mentioned in the text. With regard to *Mess-Mend*, Nikolai Bogomolov unearths a much more covert, but thematically crucial, presence of symbolism in “Avantiurnyi roman kak zerkalo russkogo simvolizma.”

110. Cited in Britikov, “Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchchencheskikh zhanrov,” 430.

111. Ibid., 429.

112. Ershov, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaiia proza 20-kh godov*, 208.

113. Such plot turns seemed to obviate ideology, and by implication, Soviet power; thus does Kataev’s novella *The Sovereign of Iron* hinge on the refusal of war machines to fight. Similarly, in Shaginyan’s *Mess-Mend*, the biological regression of the leisure classes into animals renders world revolution superfluous.

114. Kataev, *Ostrov Erendorf*, 240.

115. Cited in Russell, “Red Pinkertonism: An Aspect of Soviet Literature of the 1920s,” 410.

116. The inauthenticity that was the foundational principle of Red Pinkertons can be seen as a function of their authors’ learning through experimentation. The emphasis on technique meant that ingenious imitation was prized more highly than originality. Similarly, Tsivian (“O Chapline v russkom avangarde”) notes that during the early Soviet reception of Chaplin, the actor was seen as the initiator of new artistic formulas to be studied, mastered, and expanded on; hence the faux-Chaplins appearing all through Europe, including Russia, were not to be derided as cheap epigones, but admired as diligent pupils working on new techniques.

117. Cited in Britikov, “Detektivnaia povest’ v kontekste prikliuchenceskikh zhanrov,” 430.

118. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 235.

119. For more on this carry-over, see Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 198–99.

CONCLUSION

1. OMON stands for *Otriad militsii osobogo naznacheniiia* (Special Police Unit); the boy has been given this name by his father, who had hoped thus to make it easier for Omon to join the police force, and in general to survive in Soviet reality.

2. Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, 13.

3. Omon’s realization of the futility of his striving is poetic and wistful: “All my life I’ve been journeying toward the moment when I would soar up over the crowds of what the slogans called the workers and the peasants, the soldiers and intelligentsia, and now here I am hanging in brilliant blackness on the invisible threads of fate and trajectory—and now I see that becoming a heavenly body is not much different from serving a life sentence in a prison carriage that travels round and round a circular railway line without ever stopping.” Pelevin, *Omon Ra*, 112.

4. See previous note.

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Index

Page numbers in italics refer to figures.

- “Abyss, The” [“Bez dna”] (Andreev), 240n27
“Accursed Question, The” [“Proklyatiy vo-pros”] (Gastev), 36, 38
“Actor of the Future and Biomechanics, The” [“Akter budushchego i biomekhanika”] (Meyerhold), 62
Adorno, Theodor, 8, 125
adventure genre, 180, 183, 187, 195, 210, 214
Aelita (A. Tolstoy), 21, 186–95, 200–201, 271n16, 272n42; cinematographic narrative techniques and, 204–6; symbolism and, 193, 276n109
Aelita, the Queen of Mars (Protazanov film), 196–98, 197–99
aesthetics, 6, 46, 227; cinematic, 206; constructivist, 72; mass consumption and, 186; of metamorphosis, 118–19; as purpose in itself, 126–27; techniques and aesthetic values, 13–14; utilitarianism and, 111
airplanes, 4, 108, 123, 226, 255n12
Aksenov, Ivan, 80, 246n1
Alighieri, Dante. *See* Dante Alighieri
allegory, 15, 237n39
Allyn, Bruce J., 9
“Alphabet of Mind” [“Azbuka uma”] (Khlebnikov), 256n38
Amar, Jules, 28
“Amazing Facts” [“Potriasaiushchie fakty”] (Mayakovsky), 168
America/Americans, visions of, 14, 43–44, 163, 179–81, 227; America as Russia’s future, 152, 180, 181, 264n9; America as technological other, 17, 224; changes in nineteenth-century Russia and, 155–56; “discover America” expression in Russian, 149; in Eisenstein’s *The Glass House*, 215–17; emergence on Russian literary map, 153–55; in *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 209–15; as imaginary space, 18; mass scale of Red Pinkerton phenomenon, 184–86; in *Mess-Mend*, 218–20; poetic potential of American technology, 150–53; in Protazanov’s *Aelita* film, 196, 197; speed and technology, 131–32, 260n83; in Tolstoy’s *Aelita*, 187–90, 195. *See also* travel/travelogues; United States
America in Modern European Literature (Ruland), 153
“America in the Russian Mind” (Rogger), 156–57
Americanism, 26, 156–59, 166
“Americanism and Fordism” (Gramsci), 158
Americanization, 17–18, 21, 182, 204, 223; as break with Russian past, 152; discourse of utility and, 149; industrialization and, 226–27; Lenin’s support for, 7, 8; theorization of, 158–161
Amerika (Kafka), 171–72
“Analyzing the Word” [“Razlozhenie slova”] (Khlebnikov), 256n38
Andreev, Leonid, 163, 164, 206, 240n27
animals, 29, 81–82, 115, 124, 164, 220, 276n13
Anna Karenina (L. Tolstoy), 29
Apollinaire, Guillaume, 25

Index

- architecture: mobile, 127–29, 128–30; narrative as, 115; organic technology in American architecture, 132; transparent, 91; unbuildable, 112
- Arendt, Hannah, 234n18
- Aristotle, 182
- “Armor Fou” (Foster), 142
- art: abandonment of, 70; autonomy of, 12; contemplative aspect of, 13, 186, 228, 235n28, 236n32; fiction and reality in relation to, 217; fragility of human body and, 32–36; mimesis abandoned, 50; as separate sphere from social life, 12
- “Art as Technique” [“Iskusstvo kak priem”] (Shklovsky), 3, 4, 59, 237n35
- “Art into Technology” [“Iskusstvo v tekhniku”] (Tatlin), 103
- Artist as Producer, The* (Gough), 236n32
- art-technology relationship, 5, 16, 18, 181, 233n8; as hybridization, 4, 6; Tatlin and, 103
- Arvatov, Boris, 160–61
- asceticism, 36, 38, 39
- Aseev, Nikolai, 202–3, 256n36, 272n56
- Astaire and Rogers Building (Prague), 132
- “At the Top of My Voice” [“Vo ves’golos”] (Mayakovsky), 172–73
- authorship, 80, 92, 94
- automatism, 38, 46, 47, 77, 78
- automaton/automata, 19, 64, 98, 100, 246n12
- automobiles, 157, 158, 180
- avant-garde: America as imaginary space, 18; artist-engineer, 11, 20; flight as fascination of, 30; immortality as goal of, 140; integration of life and art, 5; metaphors and, 15–16; mysticism of, 12; noninstrumentality of, 13–14, 236n34; playful response to instrumental rationality, 230; technology as centrifugal force and, 224; utilitarianism and, 14; utopian project of revolutionary state and, 11; Western, 225
- aviation, 25
- Babanova, Mariia, 67
- Babbitt (Lewis), 159
- Bailes, Kendall, 158, 233n10, 239n22, 265n27, 265n31
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, 68–69, 222
- Bal’mont, Konstantin, 150–51
- Barnet, Boris, 211, 219
- Barthes, Roland, 274n78
- Bathhouse, The [Bania]* (Mayakovsky), 178
- Baudrillard, Jean, 163, 180
- Beaune, Jean-Claude, 19
- Bedbug, The [Klop]* (Mayakovsky), 178
- Bekhterev, Vladimir, 17, 30–31, 61, 239n17, 243n71
- Bely, Andrei, 81
- Bend Sinister* (Nabokov), 91
- Benjamin, Walter, 4, 141, 213, 233n2; on allegory and symbol, 15, 237n39; on technology, 101, 186
- Benois, Aleksandr, 56
- Berdiaev, Nikolai, 240n40
- Berg, A. I., 32
- Bergson, Henri, 27, 77, 78, 215
- Bert, Paul, 28
- Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud), 144
- biology, 36, 82, 117, 132
- biomechanics, 13, 17, 18, 20, 226; Americanism and, 26; children’s play and, 67; Gastev as popularizer of, 25; grotesque image of body and, 68–69; language and, 52; in *The Magnificent Cuckold*, 66, 70, 71–72, 76, 77–80, 82, 248n66, 249n76; moral benefits ascribed to, 28; puppets and, 57; Russian nationality versus, 44–47; Stalinist denunciation of, 81–82; theater and, 19, 56, 60–61, 63, 64–66; writing as technology and, 89; Zamyatin’s skepticism about, 97
- bionics, 117
- Blok, Aleksandr, 152–53, 242n56, 246n13
- body, human: artistic responses to limitations of, 32–36; body-machine, 47, 55, 68 (*see also* man-machine); comic acting and mechanicity, 214–15; fascist ideal of body as armor, 142; flight and, 108, 110, 117–18, 258n45; fourth dimension and, 117; grotesque image of, 68, 248n49; as motor, 27; pain and the romance of suffering, 37–40; scientific responses to limitations of, 30–32; of Soviet “new man,” 140–43; technology and limitations of, 18, 30, 140, 245n96; theater and language of movements, 55–57; as thermodynamic machine, 26
- Bogatyrev, Petr, 246n3

Index

- bogatyr'* (hero in Russian folk epics), 169, 267n72
Bogdanov, Aleksandr, 8, 19, 64, 234n15
Bogomolov, Nikolai, 276n109
Bolsheviks, 5, 7, 9–10, 125, 184, 218. *See also* communism; socialism
Borenstein, Eliot, 252n25, 260n3
Bowlt, John, 257n44
Braun, Edward, 70, 71
Brave New World (Huxley), 87
Breton, André, 133
Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass) (Duchamp), 72, 73, 77
Briusov, Valerii, 240n27
Brod, Max, 171
“Brooklyn Bridge” [“Bruklinskii most”] (Mayakovsky), 172–74, 176
Brooks, Jeffrey, 208, 275n105
Brothers Karamazov, The [Brat'ia Karamazovy] (Dostoevsky), 56, 155
Brown, Clarence, 36
Buck-Morss, Susan, 13, 270n121
Bukharin, Nikolai, 184, 203–4, 275n105
Bulgakov, Mikhail, 247n38, 248n49, 248n66
Bulgakowa, Oksana, 215
Bürger, Peter, 12
Burliuk, David, 175
- Calinescu, Matei, 16
“Camp Nitgedaige” [“Kemp ‘Nit Ge-daige””] (Mayakovsky), 174
Capek, Karel, 19, 88
capitalism, 28, 38, 64, 180, 239n10; proletarian socialist denunciations of, 159, 160, 164; in Red Pinkerton genre, 218; Taylorism and, 157; technical rationality as value of, 7; United States as paradigmatic country of, 181; useful aspects imported into socialist context, 204; Western technology transfer and, 239n11
Carden, Patricia, 89, 251n7
Cat in the Hat Comes Back, The (Seuss), 149
Cement [Tsement] (F. Gladkov), 261n13, 262n28, 265n34
Central Institute of Labor, 8, 17, 18, 44, 45; biomechanics and, 61; cybernetics and, 32; Fordism and, 174; Taylorism promoted by, 28
- Certeau, Michel de, 31
Chadaga, Julia Bekman, 215
Chaplin, Charlie, 21, 214–15, 217, 270n2, 276n116
Chekhov, Anton, 156
Chekhov, Mikhail, 81
Chernyshevsky, Nikolai, 154, 155–56, 250n2
Chevalier, Michel, 131
“Christopher Columbus” [“Khristofor Kolumb”] (Mayakovsky), 170–71
Chukovsky, Kornei, 184
“Cine-Eyes, The. A Revolution” (Vertov), 33–35
cinema, 4, 21, 42, 185; camera’s attraction, 213; cinematic devices and American specificity, 214; exploration of Soviet space and, 236n32; Hollywood films, 157, 182, 216, 273n66; language and, 47; Red Pinkerton craze and, 203–6. *See also* montage
Cité Scolaire Internationale (Lyon), 132
“City of the Future, The” [“Gorod budushchego”] (Khlebnikov), 121–22
“City of the Future, The” [“Gorod budushchego”] (Krutikov), 127–29, 128–30
“City of the Yellow Devil, The” [“Gorod zheltogo d’iavola”] (Gorky), 151, 163–65
Civil War, Russian, 18, 25, 157, 191, 215
Clark, Katerina, 82, 101, 271n10
class struggle, 170, 180, 185
“Cliff out of the Future, A” [“Utes iz budushchego”] (Khlebnikov), 124
Clynes, Manfred, 32
collages, 4
Collective and the Individual in Russia, The (Kharkhordin), 237n36
Collective Reflexology (Bekhterev), 31
Collins, Christopher, 99
commedia dell’arte, 54
communism, 5, 28, 82, 112, 174; Americanism and, 166; science of work and, 26; symbolic substitution for advancement toward, 15
constructivism, 4, 31, 140, 236n34, 254n5; Americanism and, 150, 263n2; mechanical body and, 65; Meyerhold’s theater and, 62, 64, 69–70, 72, 76; Tatlin’s criticism of, 103
content and form, 55, 68, 245n107

Index

- Cooke, Brett, 90, 251n10
Cooper, James Fenimore, 153
cosmists, 193, 225, 259n63
“Crane, The” [“Zhuravl’] (Khlebnikov), 259n61
Cravan, Arthur, 150
Creative Evolution (Bergson), 27
Crime and Punishment [*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*] (Dostoevsky), 154
“Crisis of the Russian Avant-Garde in Iurii Olesha’s *Envy*, The” (Kanevskaia), 140
Crommelynck, Fernand, 54, 55, 66, 71, 79; original script of *The Magnificent Cuckold*, 249n84; stage directions of, 77
cubism, 46
cubo-futurism, 103
culture, 45–46, 178
Culture and Technology (Murphie and Potts), 5
“Culture Industry, The” (Adorno and Horkheimer), 125
curves: in Khlebnikov’s poetry, 122; in Tatlin’s work, 108, 111, 114
cybernetics, 31–32
cyborgs, 32, 108, 114
“Cyborgs and Space” (Clynes and Kline), 32
Dane, Gabrielle, 136, 137
Dante Alighieri, 116
da Vinci, Leonardo. *See* Leonardo da Vinci
death (abolishment of), 140
Death of Tarelkin [*Smert’ Tarelkina*] (Sukhovo-Kobylin), 249n76
Decline of the West, The (Spengler), 189, 193
defamiliarization, 3–4, 14; film camera and, 34, 205; incompatibility with collective goals, 235n28; instrumental rationality at odds with, 13–14; metaphors and, 15–16; theatrical, 59
Deleuze, Gilles, 179
Delluc, Louis, 273n74
Democracy in America (Tocqueville), 153–54
Demons [*Besy*] (Dostoevsky), 154–55
detective fiction, 21, 182, 183; cinematic techniques and, 208–9; forgeries of, 204; uneasy relationship with source material of, 210
D. E. Trust [*Trest D. E.*] (Ehrenburg), 185–86, 221, 271n26
“Devil, The” [“Diavol”] (L. Tolstoy), 240n27
dialectical materialism, 101, 114
Discourse Networks, 1800/1900 (Kittler), 47
Disney, Walt, 214
dissimulation, 14, 237n36
Dobrenko, Evgeny, 15, 240n37
Dollar, Jim (fictive author), 204, 218, 220, 273n59, 275n105. *See also* Shaginyan, Marietta
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 87, 154–55, 159, 164, 250n2, 270n120
Dreamworld and Catastrophe (Buck-Morss), 270n121
Duchamp, Marcel, 27, 72, 73, 76, 77
Duncan, Isadora, 165
du Prel, Carl, 257n44
Eccentrics, 150, 182–83, 184, 217
Eco, Umberto, 209
Edison, Thomas A., 17, 71, 167, 220
efficiency (as technical value), 8, 11, 46, 204; Americanization and, 17–18; avant-garde and, 13; language compressed for, 47; Meyerhold’s theater and, 55, 56, 58, 62; Taylorism and craze of, 28
Ehrenburg, Il’ia, 112, 184, 185–86, 222, 275n105
“El!” (Mayakovsky), 168
Eikhbaum, Boris, 210, 273n74
Einstein, Albert, 177
Eisenstein, Sergei, 63, 66–67, 68, 214, 215–17
Ekster, Aleksandra, 272n47
electricity, 4, 25, 174, 228; American, 21, 156, 167, 174, 180; as collaboration of nature and technology, 161; as false beauty, 164; in poetry, 47
electrification campaign, 5, 9, 10, 17; Lenin’s slogan, 5, 157; poets and, 166; theater and, 66
emotion (biomechanics and), 63
Engineer Garin’s Death Ray [*Giperboloid inzhenera Garina*] (A. Tolstoy), 21, 187, 201–3
English language, 44, 188–89, 191
entropy, 99, 111
Envy [*Zavist’*] (Olesha): 20, 140–43; mech-

Index

- anistic, utilitarian social body subverted, 143–46; mothers absent from, 134–35, 142, 263n36; philosophy of suicide in, 138–140, 262n25. *See also* Ophelia (fictional machine)
- Erdman, Nikolai, 262n27
- Erendorf Island [Ostrov Erendorf]* (Kataev), 21, 221–22
- Erikson, Eric, 67
- Eros and Civilization* (Marcuse), 193–94
- Ershev, L. F., 221
- Esenin, Sergei, 161, 163, 165–68
- Essay on Liberation, An* (Marcuse), 6
- eugenics, 96
- “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing” [“Byt i kul’tura veshchi”] (Aravtov), 160–61
- Experimental-Heroic Theater, 245n95
- “Express, The” [“Ekspres”] (Gastev), 42–43, 242n54
- Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (Kuleshov), 21, 209–15, 210–13
- Factory of the Eccentric Actor, 182, 263n2
- Fairbanks, Douglas, 189, 274–75n99
- “Fairground Booth, The” [“Balagan”] (Meyerhold), 56, 59, 66, 68
- fairy tales, 25, 123, 180, 217, 218
- Fallingwater house, 132
- fascism, 142, 186
- “Father Sergius” [“Otets Sergii”] (L. Tolstoy), 29
- Fedorov, Nikolai, 17, 29–30, 49–50, 140, 225, 239n16
- Feenberg, Andrew, 251n4
- femininity/feminine principle, 94, 135, 141, 252n28; feminine machine, 136, 144; human-machine liberated from, 33
- Ferdinandov, Boris, 245n95
- Fitzpatrick, Sheila, 9
- five-year plans, 7, 9, 127, 234n14
- Fleming, Ian, 209
- Fleron, Frederic, Jr., 7, 239n11
- Fletcher, Valerie, 111
- flight, human potential of, 30, 108, 110
- Florensky, Pavel, 17, 116, 117, 118, 253n42, 257n44
- Flying City, 127
- “Flying Proletarian, The” [“Letaiushchii proletarii”] (Mayakovsky), 168
- Fogel, Vladimir, 219
- food as fuel, 46–47, 244n83
- Ford, Henry, 17, 158, 174, 223, 265n27
- Fordism, 150, 158, 184, 204
- Fore, Devin, 245n96
- Foregger, Nikolai, 244n95
- form and content, 55, 68, 245n107
- formalism, 4, 59, 209
- Foster, Hal, 142
- fourth dimension, 14, 114, 124, 253n42; imaginary numbers and, 116; organ projection and, 117; simulation of reality and, 126; time as, 115, 133, 256n34, 256n39
- Frankfurt School, 6
- Freikorps, German, 37
- Freud, Sigmund, 96, 170, 253n32; on life and death instincts, 193, 194; on slips of speech and writing, 95; on trauma of narcissistic ego, 144, 145
- Frisch, Max, 54
- “From the Diary of a Streetcar-Driver” [“Iz dnevnika tramvaishchika”] (Gastev), 38
- futurism, 18, 50–51, 177, 245n107
- Garin, Erast, 247n37
- Gassner, Hubertus, 13, 107, 114
- Gastev, Aleksei, 18–19, 29, 32, 140, 240n37; on bioengineering, 240n31; biomechanics and, 25, 26, 35–36, 53, 54, 89, 118, 243n75; body in pain in writings of, 38–40; on control of language, 47–49; cybernetic metamorphosis and, 49–50; “high-speed man” of, 66; on language as product of man-machine, 89; Marinetti and, 50–51, 245n100; Meyerhold and, 61–62; Proletcult movement and, 18, 25; pseudonyms used by, 36, 240n30; Russian language and, 53; on sexuality as weakness, 36–37, 68; as Taylorist, 8, 17, 28, 30, 49, 64; technical rationality and, 224–25; transgression of borders as theme of, 40–44; Zamyatin and, 88–91, 94, 97, 100
- Gehry, Frank, 132
- Gerschenkron, Alexander, 156
- Gershenson, Mikhail, 222

Index

- “Get Ready, Fitters!” [“Snariazhaite, mon-
tary!”] (Gastev), 44–45
- Ghost of the Executed Engineer, The*
(Graham), 235n21
- gigantomania, 9, 10
- Gilbreth, Frank, 27
- Gippius, Zinaida, 240n27
- Gish, Lillian, 214
- Gladkov, Aleksandr, 61, 63, 250n85
- Gladkov, Fedor, 261n13
- Glass House, The* [*Stekliannyi Dom*]
(Eisenstein film), 215–18
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, 41, 246n12
- Gogol, Nikolai, 165
- Golub, Spencer, 79
- Gordon, Mel, 60, 61, 249n76
- Gorky, Maksim, 151, 163–65, 177, 179–80,
266n49, 266n53, 269n110
- Gough, Maria, 236n32
- Gozzi, Carlo, 60
- Graffy, Julian, 215, 271n10
- Graham, Loren, 235n21
- Gramsci, Antonio, 158
- Grasso (Sicilian tragedian), 63
- Groys, Boris, 11–12, 126, 235n28
- Grundlinien einer Philosophie der Technik*
(Kapp), 117
- Guattari, Félix, 179
- Gvozdev, Aleksei, 76
- Halfin, Igal, 245n97
- Hansen, Miriam Bratu, 273n66
- Hecht, David, 154
- Heidegger, Martin, 6, 7, 92, 172, 267–
68n88
- Heissenbüttel, Helmut, 208–9
- Hellebst, Rolf, 40
- Helmholtz, Hermann von, 26–27, 31
- heretics (writers as), 100, 253n48
- Herzen, Aleksandr, 154
- history, 194
- History in a Grotesque Key* (Platt), 236n29
- Hoffman, E.T.A., 60, 246n12
- Homo Ludens* (Huizinga), 219
- Horkheimer, Max, 8, 125
- “Hour Has Come, The” [“B’et chas”] (Gas-
tev), 243n67
- “How I Made Her Laugh” [“Kak ia ee rass-
meshil”] (Mayakovsky), 175
- Huizinga, Johan, 219
- humanism, 8, 14, 178
- Human Motor, The* (Rabinbach), 26,
238n10
- Huntington, John, 251n4
- Hutchings, William, 101
- Huxley, Aldous, 87
- Iampol’skii, Mikhail, 65
- “I and Russia” [“Ja i Rossia”] (Khlebnikov),
124
- identity, erasure of, 125, 126
- “I Have Fallen in Love” [“Ja poliubil”]
(Gastev), 39
- Il’f, Il’ia, 162, 180, 217
- Il’insky, Igor’, 67, 72, 75, 77, 275n99; bio-
mechanics in performance of, 77; on
stylization of *The Magnificent Cuckold*,
249n71
- imaginary (irrational) numbers, 90, 98–99,
114, 116, 253n42, 256nn36–38
- Imaginary Quantities in Geometry* [*Mni-
mosti v geometrii*] (Florensky), 116,
253n42
- imaginary space, 14, 114, 123, 126;
America as, 18; laws of time and, 133;
urban future in, 122
- immortality, 50, 140, 194–95
- individualism/individuality, 36, 139
- industrialization, 4, 89, 131; Americaniza-
tion identified with, 17, 149, 157; Lenin’s
support for, 7; robots and, 19; Soviet pro-
gram of, 87, 156; Stalinist, 9, 235n21
- Inhuman, The* (Lyotard), 25
- instrumental rationality, 6, 10, 11, 230
- In the Country of Record Numbers* [V
strane rekordnykh chisel] (Dorfman),
162
- Investigation of Outer Space by Means of
Reactive Devices* [Issledovanie mirovykh
prostranstv reaktivnymi priborami] (Tsii-
olkovsky), 194
- Iron Mirgorod* [Zheleznyi Mirgorod] (Es-
enin), 161, 165–68
- Isakov, Sergei, 255n8
- Ivanov, Vsevolod, 184, 276n105
- Jakobson, Roman, 15, 118, 175
- James, William, 63, 239n17
- Johansson, Kurt, 36, 38, 245n100
- Josephson, Paul, 9, 10

Index

- Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow, A*
[*Puteshestvie iz Peterburga v Moskvu*] (Radishchev), 153
- “Ka” (Khlebnikov), 116
- Kafka, Franz, 171–72
- Kanevskaia, Marina, 140
- Kapp, Ernst, 117, 257n44
- Kataev, Valentin, 21, 88, 184, 217, 221–22, 265n34
- Katsnelson, Anna Wexler, 237n36
- Keaton, Buster, 189, 204
- Kepley, Vance, Jr., 208
- Khan-Magomedov, Selim, 127
- Kharkhordin, Oleg, 237n36
- Khlebnikov, Velimir, 225–26, 227, 235n28; imaginary (irrational) numbers and, 116, 253n42, 256nn36–38; *Monument to the Third International* and, 106; “nature-inspired” cityscapes, 14, 20; nonfunctionality of fantastic machines, 126, 127; opposition to World War I, 16; organic utopian cityscapes of, 118–24, 126, 132; power relations as preoccupation of, 124–25, 260n73; radio of the future, 4, 125; on time as fourth dimension, 115, 133, 245n34, 256n39; “trans-sense” language experiments, 52–53; worldview of, 114–17
- Khulio Khurenito* (Ehrenburg), 221
- Kiae, Christina, 161
- Kiebzinska, Christine Olga, 54
- kinoromany* (cinema-novels), 204
- Kiss of Mary Pickford, The* [Potselui Meri Pikford] (Komarov film), 274–75n99
- Kittler, Friedrich, 47, 92, 96
- Kleiman, N., 215–16
- Kleist, Heinrich von, 246n12
- Kline, Nathan, 32
- Klutsis, G., 263n2
- Knife-Grinder, The* [Tochil’schik] (Malevich), 32, 33
- Known and the Unknown, The* (Wolfe), 200
- Kollontai, Aleksandra, 76
- Komarov, Sergei, 274n99
- Korolenko, Vladimir, 164, 177, 269n110
- Kozintsev, F., 182
- “Kreutzer Sonata, The” [“Kreitserova sonata”] (L. Tolstoy), 29, 240n27
- Kristeva, Julia, 254n7
- Krutikov, Grigorii, 29–30, 127–30, 239n16
- Kuleshov, Lev, 21, 65, 206–9, 211, 218
- labor, studies of, 26
- language, 20, 123, 135, 253n32; as construction material, 115; control of, 47–49; gender and, 94; poetic, 254n7; technologizing of, 40
- laughter, 77, 78
- Law, Alma, 60, 61, 67, 249n76
- Leach, Robert, 70–71
- Lef* (journal), 25, 72, 159, 160, 162, 202
- Leiss, William, 7–8
- Lenin, Vladimir, 81, 88, 271n10; Americanization endorsed by, 17, 157–58; on Mayakovsky’s poetry, 170; *Monument to the Third International* and, 101; Taylorism supported by, 28, 157, 159; technical rationality and, 8; on technology, 5
- Leonardo da Vinci, flying machine of, 20, 108
- Letatlin* (Tatlin), 3, 20, 107–8, 132, 226; drawings for, 110; model of, 109; organic, natural form and, 106; organ projection in, 117–18; purposeful antiutilitarianism of, 126
- Levidov, Mikhail, 159–60
- Lewis, Kathleen, 89
- Lewis, Sinclair, 159
- “Liberty” [“Vol’nost”] (Radishchev), 153
- “Lightland” [“Ladomir”] (Khlebnikov), 122
- Lissitzky, El, 32, 112, 114, 253n42
- Literary Center of Constructivists, 108
- Literature and Revolution* [Literatura i revoliutsiia] (Trotsky), 111–12
- “Lives Out of Balance” (Pinnow), 139
- Lloyd, Harold, 204, 209, 214, 217
- Lobachevsky, Nikolai, 17, 114, 122, 253n42
- Lodder, Christina, 254n5
- Lotman, Iurii, 133, 138–39, 151, 207, 262n24
- Lumièrè brothers, 42
- Lunacharsky, Anatoly, 250n89
- Lunts, Lev, 184–85
- Lyotard, Jean-François, 25
- Lysenkoism, 251n11
- machine aesthetics, 5, 20, 36–37, 88, 99
- Machine in the Garden, The* (Marx), 264n18

Index

- machines, 13, 235n23; aestheticized and nonfunctional, 126–27; biomechanics and, 18; human machine, 19, 26–30, 89–90 (*see also* man-machine); in *The Magnificent Cuckold*, 72; malfunctioning, 21–22, 89–90; puppets as, 57; universal identity of, 26
- “Machines” (Gastev), 40–41
- Magnanimous Cuckold*, The (Cromme-lynck, staged by Meyerhold), 54–55, 82, 225; biomechanics and, 66, 70, 71–72, 76, 77–80, 248n66, 249n76; critical reviews, 71–72, 76, 78, 247n38, 248n66, 249n70; grotesque element of, 67–69; playfulness in, 67, 70–71, 248n55; in Russian translation, 246n1; scandalous content of, 55, 76–81; set design of, 69–72, 70, 73–75, 76, 248n55
- Male Fantasies* (Theweleit), 37, 142
- Malevich, Kazimir, 32, 33, 235n28, 237n36
- Manifestoes of Surrealism* (Breton), 133
- man-machine: Gastev and, 48, 52, 64, 140; as grotesque vision, 68; Mayakovsky and, 177; as perfect masculine body, 142; as Soviet ideal, 87, 133
- Mansurov, Pavel, 257n44
- Marcuse, Herbert, 6, 193–94, 233n13
- Marey, Etienne-Jules, 27–28, 31, 32
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, 25, 50–51
- Marx, Karl, 27
- Marx, Leo, 264n18
- “Marx and Ford” (Gastev), 239n10
- Marxism, 156, 216, 234n15
- masculinity, 252n28
- Masing-Delic, Irene, 28
- masks, 65
- mass culture, 125, 157
- Materialism and Empiriocriticism* [Materializm i empiriokrititsizm] (Lenin), 81
- mathematics, 90, 98–99
- Matiushin, Mikhail, 123, 257–58n44
- Mauss, Marcel, 35, 45
- Mayakovsky, Vladimir, 3, 140, 156; America in vision of, 14, 149, 162–63, 165, 166, 180; neologisms of, 245n102; trip to America, 150, 161, 168–78, 227, 266n70
- “Meaning of Love, The” [“Smysl liubvi”] (Solov’ev), 193
- “Mechanism and Formalism at the Meyerhold Theater” [“Mekhanizm i formalizm v TIME”] (Pel’she), 81–82
- mechanization, 7, 45, 90–91, 135, 155, 160
- Mendeleyev, Dmitrii, 156
- Mero, Laszlo, 234n15
- Mess-Mend, or A Yankee in Petrograd* [Mess-Mend, ili Ianki v Petrograde] (Shaginyan), 21, 204, 218–20, 222, 276n109, 276n113
- “metabiosis,” 116
- metamorphosis, 118–19, 159, 215, 219, 220
- metaphor, 14–16, 121, 138, 261n20
- metonymy, 15, 219, 229
- Meyerhold, Eisenstein, and Biomechanics* (Law and Gordon), 60
- Meyerhold, Vsevolod, 18, 80, 140, 225, 244n95; “Actor of the Future” lecture, 61–64; actors’ training program of, 59–60, 61; bifurcated actor concept, 64–66; biomechanics and, 19, 20, 26, 54–55, 56, 63, 64–66, 81–83, 226; on the grotesque, 68–69; language of body movements and, 55–57; playfulness and, 66–67; puppetry and, 57–61, 65, 118, 246n3, 246n13; Stalinist denunciation of, 81–82, 250n85. See also *Magnanimous Cuckold*, The
- “Migrant Selves and Stereotypes” (Report), 163
- Milner-Gulland, Robin, 106
- Milunic, Vlado, 132
- mimesis, 18, 50, 59, 60, 254n7
- “Misreadings and Slips of the Pen” (Freud), 89
- Miss Mend* (film), 219, 275n104
- “Mr. Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists” (Kepley), 208
- modernism, 4, 77
- modernity, 12, 183, 233n2, 267n88; cultural and social, 27; Hollywood films and, 273n66; technique and, 214
- montage, 44, 68, 205, 206–8, 243n68
- Monument to the Third International* [Tatlin’s Tower] (Tatlin), 126; art-technology hybridization and, 4; centripetal structure of, 101, 254n3; as constructivist emblem, 20; drawings for, 104–5; first model of, 102, 111; Khlebnikov’s influence on, 106; spiral structure of, 106–7, 111; Tatlin at work with assistants on

Index

- model of, 113; Zamyatin's *We* and, 101, 103, 254n2
- Morrissey, Susan, 262n24
- Moscow Art Theater, 56
- Murphie, Andrew, 5
- Mustard Gas [Iprit]* (Shklovsky and Ivanov), 276n105
- My Discovery of America [Moe otkrytie Ameriki]* (Mayakovsky), 21, 149, 161, 177–78, 268n92
- Nabokov, Vladimir, 21, 91, 270n120
- Naiman, Eric, 252n25
- nature, 13, 101, 114, 151; beauty and health associated with, 120; cities and, 121; conquest over, 226; feminine weakness associated with, 142; imitation of, 50, 257n44; organic technology and, 20, 123–24; rebellion against, 49–50; rejection of, 18; spiral forms in, 106–7; technology as part of, 128
- Nazism, 26, 255n12
- Nelson, Victoria, 246n12
- Neobychainye prikliucheniia mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevиков.* See *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (Kuleshov)
- neologisms, 51, 245n102, 248n66
- “New America, The” [“Novaia Amerika”] (Blok), 152, 242n56
- New Economic Policy (NEP), 79, 161, 196
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 92, 149
- 1984 (Orwell), 87
- NOT [Nauchnaia organizatsiia truda] (Scientific Organization of Labor), 28, 36, 44
- Notes from the Underground* (Dostoevsky), 87
- “Notes on Biomechanics” (Eisenstein), 63
- Nude Descending a Staircase* (Duchamp), 27
- October Revolution, 61
- Odoevsky, Aleksandr, 138–39
- Odoevsky, Prince Vladimir, 129, 131–32, 260n83
- OK: An American Novel [O'kei: Amerikanskii roman]* (Pil'niak), 161–62, 165, 179
- Olesha, Iurii, 20, 133, 134, 138, 226, 227, 261n20
- Omon Ra* (Pelevin), 228–31, 277n1, 277n3
- “150,000,000” (Mayakovsky), 3, 165, 169, 176, 177, 267n72
- One-Storied America [Odnoetazhnaiia Amerika]* (Il'f and Petrov), 162, 180
- “One-Way Street” (Benjamin), 141
- “On Synthetism” (Zamyatin), 101
- “On the Marionette Theater” (Kleist), 246n12
- “On the Usefulness of Studying Fairy Tales” [“O pol'ze izucheniiia skazok”] (Khlebnikov), 123
- “Opere del Cavaliere Giambattista Piranesi” (Odoevsky), 129, 131
- Ophelia (fictional machine), 20, 133–34, 140, 226; as death machine, 135–38, 145; philosophy of suicide and, 138; as return of the repressed, 143–46. See also *Envy* (Olesha)
- organicity, 106, 254n5
- organ projection, 117–18
- “Organ Projection” [“Organoproektsiia”] (Florensky), 117
- Orientalism (Said), 179
- Origin of German Tragic Drama, The* (Benjamin), 237n39
- Orwell, George, 87
- other/otherness, 17, 65, 183, 197, 224; biomechanics and, 17; idealized other, 217, 218; love and domination in relation to, 191, 271n26; of puppets, 58; radical alterity of, 55; recognition by other, 275n99; self versus other, 79
- “Ourselves and Our Buildings” [“My i doma”] (Khlebnikov), 119–20, 122, 259n57
- Packet of Orders, A [Pachka orderov]* (Gastev), 47–48, 51–52
- pantomime, 56
- parody, 21, 211, 223; film version of *Aelita* as, 198; of Gastev, 48; of Proletcult, 89; in Red Pinkertons, 218, 220, 227
- Parrot, Ray, 94
- Paska, Roman, 58, 59
- Pavlov, Ivan, 17, 30
- Pelevin, Viktor, 228–31
- Pel'she, R., 81–82
- Peter the Great, 236n29
- Petrov, Evgenii, 162, 180, 217

Index

- Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks* (Nietzsche), 149
- Philosophy of the Common Cause, The [Filosofia obshchego dela]* (Fedorov), 239n11
- phonograph, 47
- Pickford, Mary, 204, 274–75n99
- Pil'niak, Boris, 161–62, 165, 179, 180
- Pinkerton, Allan, 203
- Pinnow, Kenneth, 139
- Piotrovskii, Adrian, 214
- Piranesi, Giambattista, 131
- Platonov, Andrei, 4
- Platt, Kevin, 236n29
- play/playfulness, 59, 66–67, 173, 180, 215, 248n55; in *Erendorf Island*, 221–22; ideology and, 227; infantilism and, 217; in *Mess-Mend*, 218–20
- Podobed, Porfirii, 209, 210
- Poetics* (Aristotle), 182
- “Poetics of Everyday Behavior in Eighteenth Century Russian Culture, The” (Lotman), 138
- poetry, 18, 47, 48, 100; biomechanics and, 26; as communication, 172; Khlebnikov's cityscapes in, 121; noun-heavy, 51; of the useless, 131
- Poetry of the Worker's Blow [Poeziia rabochego udara]* (Gastev), 18
- Pomorska, Krystyna, 177
- Popova, Liubov', 69–72, 76, 248n55
- Potts, John, 5
- Practice of Everyday Life, The* (Certeau), 31
- Presidents of the Terrestrial Globe, 16, 106, 115, 119, 254n5
- productivism, 28, 36, 46, 64, 160
- productivity, 8, 62, 134, 233n13
- progress, 31, 100, 197, 226; aesthetics and, 126; America associated with, 43; amorality of technology and, 151; dystopia and, 87, 90; historical, 82; human flight and, 108; play in opposition to, 47; scientific, 194; technological, 15, 45, 68, 156
- Proletarian Culture (Proletcult) movement, 8, 18, 25, 48; man-machine ideal and, 97; utopian rhetoric and, 88
- Proletarian Culture [Proletarskaia kul'tura]* (Bogdanov), 64
- Protazanov, Iakov, 196, 197
- puppetry, 19, 57–61, 65, 118, 246n3, 246n12–13
- Puppet Theater, The [Balaganchik]* (Blok), 246n13
- Pushkin, Alexander, 154
- Question Concerning Technology, The* (Heidegger), 6, 267–68n88
- Rabelais, François, 222
- Rabelais and His World* (Bakhtin), 68
- Rabinbach, Anson, 26–27
- radio, 47, 125–26, 157, 161, 167, 208; Shukhov Radio Tower, 213, 272n57; technical rationality and, 228
- “Radio of the Future, The” [“Radio buduschego”] (Khlebnikov), 125–26
- Radishchev, Aleksandr, 133, 139, 153
- railroads, 155–57, 208
- Rank, Otto, 194
- “Rape of the Intelligentsia, The” (Halfin), 245n97
- Rapport, Nigel, 163
- realism, 15
- Red Pinkerton genre, 21, 183, 199, 210, 227, 276n116; cinematic preconditions of, 203–6; clichés of, 201–2; Eisenstein and, 215–18; mass scale of, 184–86; playfulness in, 218–223, 275n99; three stages of, 211
- Reflections* (Benjamin), 101
- reflexology, 30–31, 45, 225; Meyerhold and, 61, 62, 64; political denunciation of, 81
- relativity, theory of, 177
- religion, 29, 50
- “Retribution” [“Vozmezdie”] (Blok), 152
- Revolutionaries in the Theater* (Kiebuzinska), 54
- Revolutionary Dreams* (Stites), 28
- Revolution in Poetic Language* (Kristeva), 254n7
- robots, 19, 88, 98–99
- rocketry, 90, 91, 99, 194, 251n10
- Rodchenko, A., 263n2
- Rogger, Hans, 156–57
- romanticism, 15, 139
- Romanticism [Romantika]* (Gastev), 38
- Rougle, Charles, 162–63, 176, 178
- Ruland, Richard, 153

Index

- R.U.R. (Capek), 19, 88
Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), 81
Russian language, 44, 52–53, 188, 189
Russianness (abandonment of), 42, 44–47, 243n67
Russian Radicals Look to America (Hecht), 154
Rutsky, R. L., 236n34
- Said, Edward, 179
Schmidt, Paul, 115, 119
Schopenhauer, Arthur, 192
science, 5, 50, 98; as contemplation of the universe, 114; fragility of human body and, 30–32; technology in relation to, 6, 233n8
science fiction, 21, 180, 270n4
scientific management of labor, 26, 28, 32, 61, 225. *See also* Taylorism
Secret Life of Puppets, The (Nelson), 246n12
Senosiaín, Javier, 108
Serapion Brothers, 184
Seuss, Dr. (Theodor Geisel), 149
sexuality, 29, 36–37, 80, 239n27, 245n97; fantasy and, 193–94; fascist ideal of armored body and, 142; grotesque image of body and, 68–69; mechanistic, 77; in Olesha's *Envy*, 134–35; rationalization of production and, 158; rockets and, 99, 193; sublimation of, 68, 193; in Zamiatin's *We*, 94–95
Shaginyan, Marietta, 21, 184, 204, 220, 275n105; America in vision of, 14; on fairy tales, 218, 219, 275n101; socialist realism and, 222. *See also* Dollar, Jim
Shakespeare, William, 60, 136, 137
Shevchenko, Aleksandr, 241n40
Shklovsky, Viktor, 3–4, 184, 235n28, 237n35, 276n105; on defamiliarization, 59; on *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 209; on habitualization, 14; on *Monument to the Third International*, 111; on post-revolutionary transformation as acting, 247n46
Short Course of Economic Science [Kratkii kurs ekonomicheskoi nauki] (Bogdanov), 8
- Siberia, 42, 43–44
Siddiqi, Asif, 235n25
simile, 16
Sinclair, Upton, 219
“Skyscraper in Cut-Away View, A” [“Neboskreb v razreze”] (Mayakovsky), 174
skyscrapers, 20–21, 174, 175, 208, 266n49, 269n10
Smirnov, Aleksandr, 78
Snail house (New Jersey), 132
“Snake Train” [“Zmei poezda”] (Khlebnikov), 259n61
Sochor, Zenovia, 234n15
socialism, 5, 64, 161, 230, 260n78; nature and, 108; simulation of, 9, 10; socialist state as nonfunctioning machine, 126; Taylorism and, 28; technical rationality and, 7
socialist realism, 14, 82, 132, 240n37; compromised purpose of, 126–27; life-affirming discourse of, 136, 261n13; Red Pinkerton authors and, 222; symbols as foundation of, 15
Soft and Hairy house (Japan), 132
Sokolov, Ippolit, 71–72
solar energy, 132
Sologub, Fedor, 240n27
Solov'ev, Vladimir, 28, 193
Sovereign of Iron, The [Povelitel' zheleza] (Kataev), 88, 276n113
Soviet Novel, The (Clark), 271n10
Soviet Russia, 7, 17, 211, 224; Americanism as ideology of, 156–59, 180–81, 270n121; American recognition of, 187, 219, 220, 270n5, 274–75n99; blood as building material of, 25; bluffing in display of building socialism, 9; cinematic representation of Soviet space, 236n32; industrialization of, 226–27; modernization of, 53, 183–84; “new men” in, 88, 118, 139–40, 158–59; self-perception of, 184, 227; socialist realism as official artistic practice, 126–27; suicide in, 139, 262n27; Taylorism in, 28; techno-scientific instrumentality in, 87; unsuccessful competition with the West, 230; utopian view of technology, 88; Western (American) technology transfer and, 7, 8, 149–50, 239n11

Index

- spaceflight: cybernetics and, 32; in *Omon Ra*, 228–29; space program (1950s), 10; “space societies” (1920s), 235n25; in Tolstoy’s *Aelita*, 187–88, 189, 190, 193, 194–95, 200, 205
- Spengler, Oswald, 189, 193
- Spinoza, Baruch, 114
- spiral, 101, 106–8, 107, 109–10, 111–12, 114
- Stalin, Joseph, 7, 9, 10, 12, 265n27; as “great leader and teacher,” 16; program of socialism in one country, 271n11
- Stalinism, 9, 12, 14, 231, 240n37
- Stanislavsky, Konstantin, 63
- State Higher Directors’ Workshops, 61
- Steklov, V. A., 162
- Stites, Richard, 28
- “Story of the Lost Reflection, The” (Hoffman), 60
- Stowe, Harriet Beecher, 153
- “Structure and Design in a Soviet Dystopia” (Hutchings), 101
- suicide, 133, 136, 138–40, 173, 262n24
- Suicide, The [Samoubiitsa]* (Erdman), 262n27
- suprematism, 14
- surrealism, 15
- Sutton, Anthony, 233n10
- Sutton-Smith, Brian, 67
- Svinin, Pavel, 156
- “Swanland in the Future” [“Lebediia budushchego”] (Khlebnikov), 123
- symbolism, 15, 58, 76, 193
- symmetry, 111
- synecdoche, 39, 79
- Tables of Fate, The [Doski sudby]* (Khlebnikov), 115
- Tal’nikov, D., 162
- Tarabukin, Nikolai, 71
- “Tatlin!” (Khlebnikov), 103, 106
- Tatlin, Vladimir, 20, 103, 115, 118, 225–26, 227; counter-reliefs of, 107, 114; on distrust of sensuality, 33; on *Letatlin*, 3; nonfunctionality of fantastic machines, 126, 127; on nonorganic technology, 108, 255n12; romantic worldview of, 120; spiral structures in work of, 106–8, 107, 109–10, 111–12, 114; at work with assistants, 113. See also *Monument to the Third International*
- Tatlin at Work on the Monument for the Third International* (El Lissitzky), 32–33, 34, 112, 114
- Taylor, Frederick Winslow, 17, 26, 27, 30, 45, 50, 223; on moral benefits of biomechanics, 28, 29; scientific management of labor and, 28, 225
- Taylorism, 21, 49, 54, 184; Americanization and, 150; cinema and, 214–15; in cultural context, 61; Red Pinkerton genre and, 204; theater and, 62, 64, 71. *See also* scientific management of labor
- “Teacher and Pupil” [“Uchitel’i uchenik”] (Khlebnikov), 256n39
- Teacher Bubus, The [Uchitel’ Bubus]* (Meyerhold production), 250n89
- techne* (Greek concept of), 5–6, 7, 172, 228; avant-garde technologies and, 12–13, 224; biomechanics and, 35
- “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature” (Marinetti), 50
- “Technical Progress as a Culturological Problem” [“Tekhnicheskii progress kak kul’turologicheskaiia problema”] (Lotman), 151
- technical rationality, 7–10, 11, 13, 19, 228
- techniques, 13–14
- “Techniques of the body” (Mauss), 35
- technology, 22, 68, 123–24, 180–81; aestheticization of war and, 186; Americanization and, 149–50, 160–61, 182–84; art bartered for, 234n14; cinema and, 207, 216; communism and, 229; defamiliarization of, 3–4; definitions of, 4–7; deicide and, 11; as element of culture, 7; instrumentality and, 224; in Khlebnikov’s poetry, 123–26, 259n61; machine aesthetics and, 20; magical, 124–26, 220; as marker of modernity, 183–84; in Mayakovsky’s poetry, 170, 171, 172–75, 177–78; organic, 20, 124, 126, 132; as organ projection, 117–18; poetic potential of, 100, 150–53; progress associated with, 226; technical rationality and, 7–10, 228; travelogues and American technology, 166–68, 171–73; as utopia or dystopia, 88–89; Western, 7, 8, 10; in Zamyatin’s *We*, 90–91. *See also* art-technology relationship
- Technology and Communist Culture* (Fleron), 7

Index

- tektoLOGY, 234n15
telephones, 157
television, 132
Tertz, Abram, 127
theater, 19, 225, 244n95; bifurcated actor concept, 64–66, 77; biomechanical actor training, 54, 61–64; constructivist set design, 69–70, 70; movement and gesture in, 56
theosophy, 81, 82
Theweleit, Klaus, 37, 142
“Thoughts of a Woman-Worker” [“Dumy rabotnitsy”] (Gastev), 39
Through America and Back [Po Amerika i obratno] (Steklov), 162
“Through the Mines and Factories of Pennsylvania” [“Po shakhtam i zavodam Pensil’vani”] (Steklov), 162
Time, Forward! [Vremia, vpered!] (Kataev), 265n34
time, laws of, 106, 114, 117, 125; art and condensation of time, 194; fourth dimension and, 115, 133, 256n34, 256n39; time travel, 178, 181
time-motion studies, 27
Tocqueville, Alexis de, 153–54
Todorov, Tsvetan, 169
Tolstoy, Aleksei, 21, 184, 186–87, 202–3, 271n16, 276n105; American pulp fiction and, 189; on art and time, 194; film version of *Aelita* and, 197, 198; Jim Dollar pseudonym and, 275n105; opposition to Schopenhauer’s philosophy, 192
Tolstoy, Lev, 29, 240n27
Tommy [Tommi] (Protazanov film), 215
Total Art of Stalinism, *The* (Groys), 11, 12
totalitarianism, 8, 111, 231, 233n13; irrationality and function in, 9, 10, 234n18; media technology associated with, 91; in Zamyatin’s *We*, 90
Tower of Babel, 103, 106
“Tragifarse of Americanism, The” [“Amerikanizma tragifars”] (Levidov), 159
“Transfiguration of Cannibals, The” (Masing-Delic), 28
Trans-Siberian railroad, 42, 157
Trauberg, L., 182
travel/travelogues, 21, 161–63, 179, 227; of Esenin, 165–68; of Gorky, 163–65, 266n49; of Mayakovsky, 168–78
Tret’iakov, Sergei, 72
Trotsky, Leon, 17–18, 158, 271n11; on Mayakovsky’s poetry, 170; on *Monument to the Third International*, 111–12; Taylorism supported by, 28, 157
Tsiolkovsky, Konstantin, 29, 194, 272n42
Tsivian, Yuri, 207, 214, 276n116
Tsui, Eugene, 132
Turgenev, Ivan, 156
Tynianov, Iurii, 209
typewriter, 47
Union of Five, The [Soiuz piati] (A. Tolstoy), 198–201, 273n71, 276n105
United States, 17, 152, 153; American writers and technology, 264n18; anxiety over influence of, 159; diplomatic recognition of Soviet Union, 270n5; as homeland of modernity, 242n53; industrial prowess of, 20–21; as paradigmatically capitalist country, 181; Russian avant-gardists’ travels in, 150–51, 161–78, 179; as technological utopia, 187. *See also* America/Americans, visions of
Uspensky, Petr, 245n34
utilitarianism, 4, 12, 28, 127; aesthetic value in reverse proportion to, 131; playfulness in subversion of, 222–23; Popova’s set design and, 76; revolt against, 136
utopia, 5, 180, 187, 237n37, 251n4; artists as instigators of, 11; technology and, 88; United States as technological utopia, 187; utopian surplus, 13
Vanchu, Anthony, 136
Verne, Jules, 194
Vertov, Dziga, 20, 33–35, 276n105
vision, sense of, 32–35, 94, 258n44
vitalism, 62
“Vitrion” (Ehrenburg), 112
Vkhutemas, 127
Vygotsky, Lev, 172
War Communism, 18
warfare, 27, 30, 31, 119, 133, 186
We [My] (Zamyatin), 19–20, 87, 133, 225, 238n9; “aesthetic nonfreedom” concept, 244n79; faulty technologies in, 98–100; Gastev’s man-machine ideal and, 88–89; humans as machines in, 89–90; imper-

Index

- fections of man-machine in, 92–98; passionate love absent from world of, 36; totalitarian perfect state in, 90–91; translations of, 252n29; writing as bodily technology in, 91–92
- Weber, Harry, 89
- Weber, Max, 7–8, 11
- “We Grow from Iron” [“My rastem iz zhe-leza”] (Gastev), 40, 48
- “We Have Dared to Take On!” [“My posia-gnuli!”] (Gastev), 41
- Wells, H. G., 251nn3–4
- What Is to Be Done?* [Что делать?] (Chernyshevsky), 154, 156, 250n2
- Widdis, Emma, 236n32
- Wilson, Woodrow, 169, 267n72
- Witte, Count Sergei, 156
- Wood, Paul, 236n31
- Word Under a Press, The* [Слово под прес-сом] (Gastev), 47, 89
- “Work Ahead of Us, The” [“Nasha pred-stoashchaia rabota”] (Tatlin), 111
- “Work of Art as a Nonfunctional Ma-chine, The” [“Proizvedenie iskusstva kak nefunktional’naia mashina”] (Groys), 126
- World War I, 16, 18, 25, 133, 157; mili-tary technologies utilized in, 30, 226; proto-fascist ideal of soldierly body in, 142; relieved trauma from, 144
- Worral, Nick, 72
- Wright, Frank Lloyd, 132
- writing: as bodily technology, 89, 91–92; body as imperfect machine and, 92–98; as culturally transmitted technique, 35; memory and, 253n32; as organic tech-nology, 19–20; time and, 194
- “Young Miss and Woolworth, The” [“Барышня и Вульворт”] (Mayakovsky), 175
- Zagorskii, M., 66, 72
- Zamyatin, Evgeny, 19–20, 111, 225, 238n9; attitude toward technology, 251n7; “Auto-Interview,” 89, 252n27; biome-chanics and, 97; Gastev and, 36, 48; imaginary (irrational) numbers and, 116; man-machine ideal critiqued by, 87
- “Zangezi” (Khlebnikov), 115
- zaum'*, 103, 115, 254n7; as trans-rational language, 114–17, 125; as trans-sense, 52, 245n95; as universal language, 52, 106
- Zelinsky, Kornelii, 108
- Zoo, Letters Not About Love* [Зоо, иль Пис’ма не о любви] (Shklovsky), 3, 4
- zorved* (vision and knowledge), 123, 258n44
- Zoshchenko, Mikhail, 162

About the Author

Julia Vaingurt is an associate professor in the Department of Slavic and Baltic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois–Chicago.