THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

# ART

# TECHNOLOGY

# AND MODERNITY

IN RUSSIA AND EASTERN EUROPE

# THE HARRIMAN REVIEW

*Volume 12, Number 4* *November 2000*

## Art, Technology and Modernity in Russia and Eastern Europe

*Selected Papers from the Conference Held at Columbia University on March 31-April 1, 2000*

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# INTRODUCTION


## Nadia Michoustina


On November 8th, 1920, when Vladimir Tatlin exhibited his *Monument to the Third International* a banner on the wall of the Mosaics Studio at the former Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg proclaimed, "Engineers-Bridge Builders! Make Calculations for the Creation of New Forms." In June of that same year, artists gathered in Germany for the Berlin Dada Fair and paid homage to the work of the Russian Constructivist and to the new revolutionary aesthetic. A well-known photograph shows Georges Grosz and John Heartfield holding up the slogan: "Art is Dead! Long Live the Machine Art of Tatlin!" The work of these avant-garde artists employed different methods, yet at that moment in the 1920s it was driven and sustained by a common belief: technology suggested a new way of creating artistic form, a new way of seeing and perceiving culture. More than a rejection or dissolution of the tradition-laden past, these artists conceived technology as a literal origin, a new beginning, a beginning from ground zero, a birth. "We grow out of iron," writes Aleksei Gastev. This parable of absolute self-creation functions as a model for what is meant by technology among the early twentieth-century avant-garde. For technology becomes a metaphor of origin and radical change, referring both to formal invention and to sources of life. It functions to declare the modernity of modern art.

Now, from the perspective of technologically advanced cultures of the West, it seems increasingly difficult to avoid the sense that somehow the whole world has changed, has become new again. Thus, for example, Jean Baudrillard can speak of "the mutation of a properly industrial society into what could be called our techno-culture." Technology comes increasingly to be seen as a matter of cultural data and a sense that a change has taken place often seems directly related to a sense of being immersed in a sort of technological complexity—to that commonly observed sense of being in the matrix. This perceived change has frequently been figured in terms of postmodernity, that is, as part of a broader shift from modern to postmodern. But then, the very notions of modernity and postmodernity seem inconceivable without technology. That is not to say, however, that technology determines modern or postmodern culture. Rather, the changes that have occurred in contemporary culture seem to be based less on technology as such, than on the very concept or essence of technology.

There have been numerous discussions about technology and the way it has transformed, and continues to transform, the way we live, act and communicate. *Wired*, *Time*, *Newsweek* and many other magazines have run articles and covers on cyber-punk, genetical engineering, techno-culture, techno-fetishism, robotics, new media, artificial life, and virtual reality. Nor have scholars ignored the issue, even if their discussions have often taken place under the broader rubric of "postmodern culture" or "techno-culture." Yet, despite the sheer mass of arguments about technology and techno-culture, they seem to have a striking uniformity: technology or some aspect of it is either celebrated or decried, cast as utopian or dystopian, in terms of its capacity to either serve humanity or to threaten it. The repetitiveness of these arguments, I would venture, results from the fact that they take the definition of technology for granted. For all the discussion of the implications of technological change, remarkably little attention has been devoted to possible changes in the concept of technology itself.

What has been left unexamined, I would like to suggest, is precisely Heidegger's "question concerning technology," which is not the question of technology per se, but what he calls "the essence of technology," which "is by no means anything technological."[1] For Heidegger, this "essence" of technology cannot simply be defined in terms of the usual, modern sense of technology as an instrument, a tool, or a machine. He attempts, instead, to broaden the definition of technology into a more general concept of making, or producing, and finds that in the Greek root of technology, *techne* (generally translated as art, skill, or craft),

[1] See, for example, R. L. Rutsky, *High Techne: Art and Technology from the Machine Aesthetic to the Posthuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 1-3.

technology and art were closely linked. For the Greeks, "it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*," but art, too, "was simply called *techne*." Heidegger's, point, of course, is not that technology's close relationship to art has been lost. Rather, he argues that the modern conception of technology restricts the definition of the technological to the instrumental, and "blinds us to" that broader essence which informs not only the modern view of technology, but also the *techne* of Ancient Greece. Thus, for Heidegger the question concerning technology is a historical question. The history of modernity, he says, can be read as an ever-increasing technological effort to regulate and secure the unsettling, "artistic" aspects inherent in the *techne*—to direct it toward instrumental ends. The very notion of modernity has been defined in terms of an instrumental conception of technology, an instrumental or technological rationality that allows modern humanity to know and control the world. From this perspective, that which is not technological cannot be modern.[2]

If however, Heidegger questions the "universality" of the instrumental concept of technology by pointing to its historical specificity (as modern), he does not mention the extent to which it is also culturally specific. Modernity, defined in terms of instrumental technology, has long been the basis on which Western, patriarchal cultures have privileged themselves over their "nontechnological others." From this perspective, cultures or discourses--for example, "non-Western" cultures and "feminine" discourses that perceive the world in terms other than those of rational, scientific knowledge are necessarily characterized as anti-modern, irrational, "primitive." Thus, although the sense of change may be specific to "highly technologized" cultures, its implications are not; for if in the new technology the modern concept of technology has changed, so too has the relation of "techno-culture" to those supposedly nontechnological "other" cultures and discourses that modernity has excluded or repressed.

Russia and the Soviet Union provide a vivid context in which to re-examine the relationship between technology and modern artistic production. This context is well described by literary scholar Robert Maguire when he writes about the Prometheanism and life-building of the early Russian twentieth century with their "fervent belief in the positive power of technology, in the human capacity to create, shape, and control one's own destiny." The technologist position is obvious in the work and statements of various artists from the Futurists and the Constructivists to the Smithy writers. As they understood it, the artists of the Russian avant-garde were producing models for restructuring the world on totally different principles. Technology played a vital role in this restructuring: not simply a promise of utopian bliss, it was mobilized to fulfill the political imperatives of a new socialist society.

Many Russian artists, however, found themselves at the crossroads of aesthetics and technology. In the works and statements of Malevich, Khlebnikov and others, one discerns an attempt to posit an autonomous, utopian aesthetic space—a ground of play, rescue and retreat—separate from the instrumentality of modern technicism and synonymous with artistic freedom. This context helps account for the following statement by Vladimir Tatlin, made in 1932 on the subject of his last significant work—a flying machine called *Letatlin*: "I don't want people to take this thing as something utilitarian," Tatlin says, "I have made it as an artist. Look at the bent wings. We believe them to be aesthetically perfect. Or don't you think that Letatlin gives an impression of aesthetic perfection? Like a hovering sea gull? Don't you think?" Considering this, isn't is possible to suggest that the Berlin Dadaists may have fatefully misread Tatlin's effort, and that despite its insistence on mechanical forms and intended use the *Monument* was intended as a failed machine, an allegory, evident in Tatlin's use of the ascending spiral—a symbol of life itself? Isn't it here that we discern another view of technology, one that has less to do with instrumentality, but with its failure, with the realm of aesthetics and art?

The workshop on "Art, Technology and Modernity in Russia and Eastern Europe" set out to re-examine the relationship between technology and aesthetics. It brought together literary scholars, film and architectural historians to suggest a more nuanced analysis of the role of technology in the artistic and political processes taking place in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and to delineate the differences between the forms of modernity they imagined. The essays selected for the present volume are not limited to a single discipline or theoretical approach. But they are united by an attempt to articulate varieties of relationship between art and technology in Russia and Eastern Europe which are neither utopian and filled with a plenitude that is easy to dismiss, nor equivalent to some kind of alienation as an 'other' to historical modernism.

The need for such a re-examination has been suggested by many critics who see the work of cultural commentary as an effort to reconstitute the broad lines of historical development, rather than privileging particular moments, which have the nostalgic charm of the "Golden Age." Cynthia Simmons is concerned with establishing the overall continuities within which the Russian experience of the twentieth century—so

[2] Ibid., 3-12.

dramatic in its apparent cultural upheavals—can be made more intelligible. Dispensing with the convenient pretext that a rupture took place—a kind of a cultural lacuna from which we can avert our eyes—Simmons insists on a continuity between Russian Modernism and the official culture of the Soviet period, arguing that "it is specifically the representation and celebration of science and technology" that constitutes the link. This shift in perspective allows her to locate the origin of Russian postmodern thought not in the explorations of intertextuality, but in the collapse of the Soviet modernist/technological agenda. Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra,* she argues, is a wry commentary on the failed promise of Soviet ideology, a "postmodern subversion of Soviet-style modernism with its privileging of technology."

To some extent, the essays in this volume can be read as a reappraisal of the Soviet critical heritage and as an illuminating and subversive commentary on the brief history of the Western reception of the Russian avant-garde. For example, in modernist history the poet Vladimir Maiakovskii might be said to epitomize modernism's internationalist, rationally based ideology. And the history of Russian modernism welcomes him as an urbanist and a futurist, committed to technological and social progress. Yet, when Maiakovskii appears in Julia Vaingurt's essay, it is not as the great propagandist of Soviet technological utopia, but as an artist deeply at odds with his country's vision of the future. Analyzing Maiakovskii's travelogue "My Discovery of America," Vaingurt shows that for Maiakovskii technology and poetry are closely linked: both are ways of communicating, "two modes of mediation between his I an the world." Maiakovskii's trip to America unsettles his faith in technology; upon his return Maiakovskii finds himself transformed by the experience and urges his fellow artists "not to sing the praises of technology but to harness it in the name of the interests of humankind." Vaingurt sees Maiakovskii's new found humanism as a response to the psychic and sensory overload of the American metropolis. Her essay, significantly, attempts to encompass, rather than repress the conflict integral to the modernists' attitudes toward technology.

Andrei Khrenov draws attention to the specificity of Soviet cultural practices and exposes the limitations of standard categories of cultural analysis. He shifts the discussion to architecture and cinema and focuses on Aleksandr Medvedkin's 1937 film, *New Moscow*, which combined deliberately illusionistic and archaic forms of representation to represent Stalin's plan for the city as a "dream of the future immanent in the present." The essay provides a sharp sidelight on two opposite approaches which frame the discussion of the period: on the one hand, Boris Groys's well-known argument that Stalinism was a continuation of the Russian avant-garde, and on the other, the idea put forward by Western art historians that Stalinism liquidated avant-garde's artistic achievements. Significantly, Khrenov argues that the validity of these paradigms is circumscribed by their particular cultural contexts, and that the specificity of Soviet visual culture provides unique material for revising and theorizing the functions of the visual in modernity.

Not one set of preconditions governs the range of arguments in this collection; there are, however, discourses held in common. The entire discussion is allied with a certain "anti-foundational" critique, that is, a critique of the historical concepts posited by a discipline (art history, for example) as its natural epistemological grounds. Kimberly Elman's essay is a vivid example of a critical practice that opens up onto the question of method. Elman traces the architectural production of the Bat'a Shoe Company located in the Moravian town of Zlin from the early 1920s to 1938. She challenges previous analyses which regarded the Bat'a buildings within the context of the "International Style," arguing that they represent a unique appropriation of the American factory towns, a model which appealed to Bat'a not for its value as an instrument of social change, but simply as that which would generate profit. This analysis leads her to question the categories of "modern" and "avant-garde" as they are applied to the study of interwar architecture in Czechoslovakia and to the general investigations of modernity.

In conclusion, I would like to remark on the dual project of the workshop—to offer distinct approaches to the study of art and technology in the Slavic context as well as a reappraisal of the modernist heritage. I believe that these projects are inseparable and that concrete studies presented here are invaluable for new ways to understand modernity and our contemporary culture.

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I would like to thank Robert Maguire, Cathy Nepomnyashchy, Kenneth Frampton, Ronald Meyer, Andrei Koltchanov and David Cooper, whose work, guidance and support made this possible.

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# FLY ME TO THE MOON:
## Modernism and the Soviet Space Program in Viktor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*

Cynthia Simmons

The impetus of European and Russian Modernism that was officially promoted in the consolidated Soviet state of the 1930s and beyond was that thematic underpinning of Futurism that celebrated science and technology. Socialist Realism rejected other thematic concerns of Modernism that were deemed skeptical, erudite, or indecent (e.g., the questioning of conceptions of reality or the nature of the divine and the interest in human sexuality). Likewise, the "elitist" Modernist interest in stylistic innovation and the relationship of the literary word to reality contradicted the tenet of Socialist Realism, *narodnost'*, according to which literature was to reflect the nature and concerns of the people. In the eras of post-revolutionary reconstruction and Stalinism, literature had to be optimistic, "morally acceptable," and accessible. Granted, both Modernism and Marxism-Leninism opposed the culture of late capitalism. Yet Modernism constituted an individualist, high-culture, often escapist, response that was, by definition, removed from the Soviet program for the masses. Only Futurist scientism and "futurism" bridged nineteenth-century positivism and Soviet literary utilitarianism.[1] The irony of the Soviet inheritance of nineteenth-century literary tastes has not escaped the attention of writers and literary scholars. In Tom Stoppard's play *Travesties*, a Dadaist poet (Tzara) observes that: "the odd thing about revolution is that the further left you go politically, the more bourgeois they like their art." Even though Modernist aesthetics thrived in the 1920s and continued to influence the Russian arts, it is specifically the representation and celebration of science and technology in *gosizdat* literature that constitutes the continuous link between Modernism and Soviet letters.

The literary representations of scientific and technological concerns in the early Soviet period were associated with government initiatives such as reconstruction, electrification, and industrialization (in such works as Gladkov's *Cement* (Tsement), Ostrovskii's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (Kak zaklialas' stal'), Leonov's *Soviet River* (Sot') and Marietta Shagianin's *Hydrocentral* (Gidrotsentral'). Yet these programs bore various taints (e.g., of collectivization, displacements of populations, and urban ills). The Soviet space program, by comparison, served as a constant source of satisfaction and pride. The successes (most notably, first nation into space) secured the country's place internationally, while the failures were relatively few and, when possible, concealed. The Soviet space program unified and invigorated a nation that had otherwise weathered too often the *failed* promises of Soviet ideology.

[1] In *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1996), Terry Eagleton describes succinctly the ambivalent relationship of Marxism to modernism: "Marxism...at once outdoes the Futurists in its praise for the mighty achievements of modernity, and outflanks the romantic anti-capitalists in its remorseless denunciation of the very same era. As both the offspring of Enlightenment and its immanent critique, it cannot be readily categorized in the facile pro- and anti-modernist terms now fashionable in Western cultural debate" (7).

In the first short chapter of his 1992 novella *Omon Ra*, Viktor Pelevin constructs the many-layered significance of space for his little Soviet hero.[2] Omon (whose name the Russian recognizes as the acronym for Otriad' Militsii Osobogo Naznacheniia—what in the USA we term a SWAT team) functions as the narrator and relates the particulars of his childhood. Yet, his story sounds familiar. He tells us his father was a policeman and although he had shot at people, he was at heart a kind man who only wanted to retire to his dacha, and for his boys to have a better life than his. Yet quick upon the narrator's sympathetic depiction of his father as an unlucky fellow, he recalls his only memory of his mother, in which she was disheveled and clutched at his drunken father's arm to keep him from pulling a pistol out of his holster. Omon concludes that she died when he was very young. He begins with this characterization to construct an atmosphere of ambivalence.

We learn that Omon's brother Ovir (Office of Visas and Registrations) died at age 11 of meningitis, along with their father's hope that Ovir would become a diplomat. In describing his brother's sad fate, Omon makes mention of the family name, Krivomazov. We cannot help but ponder the relationship between the Krivomazovs and Dostoevsky's infamous family of "black stains," the Karamazovs. Is the family tainted with a crookedness that is real (like the Krivonosovs or Krivosheevs?) or spiritual/psychological, as in *krivda* (falsehood) or *krivliaka* (poseur)? (Let us not forget that Chichikov "listed" when he walked and the emblematic significance of *his* crookedness.) In the first page and a half of the novella, Pelevin has already destabilized the reader. Reminiscent of our ambivalent reaction to Gogol's Akakii Akakevich, we are unsure whether we should sympathize with the plausible ill fortune of Omon and his family or privilege the grotesque exaggeration and blatant parody.

Yet when the focus of Omon's biography shifts from his father to himself, the narrative evokes a palpable nostalgia and poignancy. Omon describes how, after his mother's death, he was raised by an aunt who was indifferent to him and kept him whenever possible in the care of others (in extended-day programs during the school year and in pioneer camps in the summer). Omon would visit his father on the weekends, and he remembers his derelict condition, his foul-smelling room, and the detached nature of his drunken and ritualized conversation. Against this background of neglect, Omon recalls: "Everything I remember from my childhood is linked in one way or another with a dream of the sky" (5).[3] This recollection then releases other pleasant memories, all tied, it is interesting to note, to the Soviet institutions that defined life outside his family:

**...there was a long, bright room full of other children and large plastic cubes scattered haphazardly about the floor; there were the icebound steps of the wooden slide that I plodded up with eager haste; there were the frost-cracked models of young mountaineers made of painted plaster in the yard; and lots more besides. (5)**

If Pelevin at first implicitly derides Soviet *byt* with its tolerance for alcoholism and domestic abuse and its institutionalized pressures on the nuclear family, he also evokes the comraderie and comforting fantasies of life in Omon's children's collective.[4]

Omon returns in his narrative to the "sky" motif. His district had a Cosmos cinema as well as a metal statue of a rocket. What held even more significance for him, however, was the toy house on his playground that had been transformed, with the addition of a plank on each side, into a makeshift airplane. The uppermost compartment of this structure the children considered to be the cockpit. Omon always attempted to be the pilot. Finally, there was the sensation of flight that he experienced when watching old movies on his aunt's television. During this pastime he came to the realization that proved so fateful for his future:

**if I'd just been able to glance at the screen and see the world from the cabin where the two fliers in fur-lined jackets were sitting, then there was nothing to prevent me from getting into this or any other cabin without the**

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[2] Viktor Pelevin, *Omon Ra* (Moscow: Tekst, 1992).

[3] Quotations are from the English translation by Andrew Bromfield (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

[4] This ambivalent exposition of Soviet life calls to mind other recontextualizations of Soviet *byt* in the new Russia, such as the (now) nostalgic representations of life in the communal apartment by performance artist Il'ia Kabakov.

**help of the television, because flight is no more than a set of sensations, the most important of which I'd already learned to fake, sitting in the attic of the winged hut with the red stars... (7)**

He continues this train of thought: "That means, I thought, I can look out from inside myself like looking out of a plane, it doesn't really matter at all where you look from, what matters is what you see" (7-8). The reader recognizes for an instant a post-modern observation on how each individual imposes a unique paradigm on the chaos of non-meaning. It is proffered almost at the outset of Pelevin's narrative, preceded only by Omon's ambivalent account of his father (hapless, but kindly man or violent, neglectful drunk?). Yet Omon makes his philosophical observation on varying perceptions only in passing and returns quickly to the significance of his realization for his child's world. It meant he could walk the streets in a state of "flight," tilting his head to watch the world tilt in response.

It is not long after Omon discovers his ability to "fly" that he recognizes his destiny. At a visit to VDNKh, the Exhibition of Economic Achievements in Moscow, he sees a picture of a cosmonaut in space. He is overwhelmed by the depiction of weightlessness: "I realized once and for ever that only weightlessness could give man genuine freedom" (8). His inclination toward flight, coupled with the associated motifs present in his little boy's world and the Soviet milieu, merge at this moment into a recognition of the potential for absolute freedom. Omon defines this liberation both in political and existential terms:

**all my life I've only been bored by all those Western radio voices and those books by various Solzhenitsyns. In my heart, of course, i loathed a state whose silent menace obliged every group of people who came together, even if only for a few seconds, to imitate zealously the vilest and bawdiest individual among them; but since I realized that peace and freedom were unattainable on earth, my spirit aspired aloft, and everything that my chosen path required ceased to conflict with my conscience, because my conscience was calling me out into space and was not much interested in what was happening on earth (8-9).[5]**

Just after Omon realizes that he "could aspire beyond the thin blue film of the sky into the black abyss of space," he glances around and sees another boy, about his own age, who greets him with a knowing wave. It turns out the boy lives not far from Omon. Mitek knows that he will be a pilot, and that he will fly to the moon. Thus ends this brief, but dense, first chapter whose plot has doubled back upon itself. From the exposition of the narrator's evocative "Soviet" biography it has moved to the world of young boys and their frequent fascination with flight, to the potential for freedom, first from a particular reality, then from human consciousness. When Omon meets Mitek at VDNKh, the narrative "returns to earth" and to the story of a couple of typical Soviet boys and their love of space.

In the chapters that follow, the "space" motif is overshadowed by that of "deception" (which played a role in the first chapter as well—with respect to the narrator's shifting attitude). And as chapter 1 revealed a movement from the concrete to the abstract (the earth to the sky), the layering of deceptions reveals the same dynamic. Omon and Mitek enroll in a military college in Zaraisk that is named for the World War II military hero Aleksei Petrovich Mares'ev. This courageous pilot, who was memorialized in Boris Polevoi's *The Story of a Real Man* (Povest' o nastoiashchem cheloveke), was shot down behind enemy lines, crawled 18 days to reach the front, had his legs amputated, and after receiving prostheses, asked to be sent back to the front. In Zaraisk, however, Omon and Mitek discover a morbid travesty of Mares'ev's valor. The school produces sham "copies" of the hero—they amputate the legs of would-be fighter pilots, fit them with protheses, and expect them to due their duty. Yet the substantive memorializing of Mares'ev at the military school proves impossible. The Soviet Union does not possess, cannot afford, a real air force. The training is "for show."

While at the flight school, Omon and Mitek learn of another deception (a deception within a deception). For inspiration, they are visited by "professional heroes." Omon recalls especially Major Ivan

[5] Much has been written on the options for escape in Soviet society—drunkenness, madness, "aberrant discourse," and exile. Yet only cosmonauts could realize the symbolic transcendent (vertical) escape and go "out of this world." See, for example, Cynthia Simmons, *Their Fathers' Voice: Vassily Aksyonov, Venedikt Erofeev, Eduard Limonov, and Sasha Sokolov* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

Trofimovich Popad'ia, whose sacrifice to the state also involves a deception. After a Party official was killed by a wild boar he was hunting at a game reserve for the ruling elite, Popad'ia agreed to take part in a charade that was devised to protect the officials, and one which they were all aware of. Popad'ia would dress up as some wild animal, don a bullet-proof vest, and when shot, would "fall dead." The hunters would try to aim at his vest, but occasionally he would get wounded in other parts of his body. Popad'ia performed this service with his son Marat, until Marat met with an accident. Once, when Henry Kissinger was visiting to negotiate a treaty on nuclear-arms reduction (which the Soviets were eager to sign, as they did not want the West to learn that they in fact had no nuclear weapons), he was brought to the reserve to hunt bear. When Kissinger failed to shoot Marat Popad'ia, he charged him with a knife and stabbed him through his bullet-proof vest. Marat died. Later on the reader learns that Kissinger was deceiving his hosts as well and knew all along that he was attacking a man.

Omon and Mitek are chosen to train as cosmonauts. Their senior officers reveal to them that the country does not have the technology or resources to get cosmonauts to the moon and bring them home again. But in order to save face with the West, they will send a group of cosmonauts on a one-way trip. They must be prepared to sacrifice their lives to make it seem that Russia can hold its own in the space race. Omon and Mitek accept their fate for the sake of the greater good. As the Flight Leader explains:

**"We Communists had no time to prove the correctness of our ideas—the war cost us too much of our strength, we had to spend too long struggling against the remnants of the past and our enemies within the country. We didn't have the time to defeat the West technologically. But in the battle of ideas, you can't stop for a second. The paradox—another piece of dialectics—is that we support the truth with falsehood, because Marxism carries within itself an all-conquering truth and the goal for which you will give your lives is, in the formal sense, a deception." (44)**

At various points in his narrative, Omon observes higher-order "deceptions," if you will. These resonate with the now commonplace postmodern subversions of all paradigms of epistemology. For example, when Omon and Mitek, as part of their cosmonaut training, go for a "reincarnation check," Omon is given a liquid to drink and is told to watch an hourglass. When all the sand runs out, he is to leave the room. Omon observes:

**I remember watching the hourglass and being amazed at how slowly the grains of sand tumbled down through the narrow glass neck, until I realized that it was because each grain had its own will, and none of them wanted to fall, because for them that was the same as dying. And at the same time they had no choice, it was inevitable. The next world and this one are just like this hourglass, I thought; when everyone alive has died in one direction, reality is inverted and they come to life again; that is they begin to die in the opposite direction. (74)**

Mitek fails the reincarnation test. Under the influence of the drug, he speaks as various personae; one of them is a Nazi pilot. Mitek is given a confession to sign and is shot.

Omon realizes several other "higher-order" or literally celestial deceptions on the flight to the moon. For instance, he ponders the starlight and recalls that the source of that seemingly vital force, by the time it is seen on (or above) earth, may have already died. Another possible grand illusion comes to him in a dream he has on his journey. Omon dreams of the son of the professional hero Ivan Trofimovich Popad'ia who had visited the flight school in Zaraisk. In Omon's dream, Marat Popad'ia (who had been killed by Kissinger while acting the part of the bear at the hunt) observes: "I and the entire world are nothing but a thought someone is thinking" (109).

As Omon nears the end of his flight to the moon, he comes to the realization that his life's goal constituted nothing more than a deception of self:

**All my life I've been journeying towards the moment when I would soar up over the crowds of what the slogans called the workers and the peasants, the soldiers and the 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. (112)**

But the joke is not only on Omon. Pelevin has in store for us one final deceit. When Omon's spacecraft arrives, he follows the instructions he was

given. He exits the capsule and while holding his last breath of air, he sets a beacon that is to radio the USSR's message of success and good will back to earth. He then takes a loaded pistol and inspired by the supreme sacrifice made by his comrades in the already-expelled stages of the spacecraft, he shoots himself. His mind briefly registers that the gun misfired, but he loses consciousness as he "chokes on emptiness." And then he wakes up. Omon is subsequently chased by dogs and fired upon by Landratov, of the Zaraisk flight school, who had been at Central Flight Control. He runs through passages that appear to be abandoned metro tunnels, jumps over a wall and finds himself on a television sound stage. The ceiling is covered to resemble outer space and a space ship is suspended in the air. The newscaster announces that they are "going live," and Omon watches a sham space walk. After this performance, Omon passes out from exhaustion, unobserved. When he awakes, the newscast has ended, but as he wanders around the area, he is spotted by the "cosmonauts" and is pursued again. Omon escapes through a ventilation shaft, up some stairs, and through a door. He is met by an inscription, "Lenin Library," and the single thought—"the earth"! Omon's "flight to the moon" had been staged, in the Moscow subway underneath the Kremlin.

With this realization, it would seem that the narrative has arrived at the cynical dead end. But just as Omon's and Mitek's willingness to martyr themselves for the Soviet idea is proffered as a counterpoint to the system's depravity, Omon's integrity is foregrounded by the revelation, in the last few pages of the novella, of the advice Urchagin had whispered to him just before the bogus moon shot:

**"Remember, Omon, although man, of course, has no soul, every soul is a universe. That's the dialectic. And as long as there is a single soul in which our cause lives and conquers, that cause will never die. For an entire universe will exist, and at its center will be this [he gestures toward Red Square]...Just one pure soul is enough for the banner of triumphant socialism to be unfurled on the surface of the distant moon. But there must be one pure soul, if only for a moment, because the banner will be unfurled within that soul..." (150)**

Omon does more than simply survive the ruse. He takes a seat on the train that soon arrives and begins to imagine his new life. "The flight continues," he thinks to himself. The "SWAT-team King Ra" has "surfaced" from an even more subterranean defiled space—the Moscow subway tunnels that had been appropriated for the government's travesty of space travel. Yet he remains within the Soviet otherworld or "interworld" of the Stalinist Moscow metro. Like the Egyptian king, he has risen out of the night and has brought the "day," But it is still the *Soviet* day. The symbolic significance of the Moscow subway has been described by Svetlana Boym as "the ideal blueprint of Socialist Realist culture, with neoclassical columns, mosaic portraits of great poets and great leaders, and plenty of exotic vegetation to adorn the Russian tropical utopia under the ground,"[6] and by Scott Palmer as a "Copernican description of the universe, with Moscow serving as the center or 'sun' within the system."[7] Both Venedikt Erofeev (in *Moscow-Petushki*) and Pelevin himself (in *The Yellow Arrow* [Zheltaia strela]) have confronted the tenacity of the Moscow subway's or Soviet cosmography's "orbital forces."

Pelevin's devices are decidedly postmodern: subversion of his own narration, representation of the postmodernist concern with repetition and mirroring that leads to meaninglessness (a world of simulacra), and observations on the vulnerability of all paradigms of existence. Yet thematically he offers us a way out. That is Omon himself. He fulfills Urchagin's prophesy of the salvation of socialism in one good soul. He may be embarking on his new "flight" within the bowels (and control) of Moscow, but he can eventually surface upon a less mythological topography beyond the official boundaries of Moscow and its fiercest gravitational forces. On his journey he is accompanied by ordinary citizens, his "fellow-travelers" in the subway car, who carry in their net shopping bags the ingredients for the soup that has nourished him since childhood—rice, macaroni stars, and chicken.

The confrontation of postmodern devices and the possibilities for modernist transcendence underlies

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[6] Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994):114.

[7] Scott W. Palmer, "Shklovskii and the Machine: Modernist Visions and the Promise of Technique," unpublished paper presented at the AAASS National Convention, Honolulu, 1993.

the controversy over (re-)interpretations of such works as Vladimir Nabokov's *Ada* and Venedikt Erofeev's *Moscow-Petushki*. It is interesting that Liudmila Petrushevskaia, whose prose is unarguably postmodern, shuns the characterization, while Pelevin embraces the label. Yet it is Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, stylistically postmodern, that offers the modernist "way out." The SWAT-Team/Sun God Ra, who carries within him the pearl of the universe of socialism, sets out on the Moscow subway to give rise to another new day. Modern or postmodern? As Colonel Urchagin would say: "That is the dialectic."

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*Vladimir Maiakovskii, 1921. Photography by Aleksandr Rodchenko.*

# Base Superstructures and Technical Difficulties in Maiakovskii's America

Julia Vaingurt

In the 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.
—Nietzsche

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

In Russian the phrase "discovery of America" is an idiomatic expression connoting irony. Usually uttered in response to an inane statement, it contains its ironic negation. "Well, you have just discovered America," although sounding like praise, is in fact a rebuke. It's precisely the inclusion of both America's metaphorical and literal meanings that makes this idiom so effectively trenchant. It suggests that the interlocutor has failed to surprise with his new discovery, but also maliciously points to a successful attempt at discovering something new, i.e., America. The title of Vladimir Maiakovskii's travelogue "My Discovery of America" sounds both self-aggrandizing and somewhat self-deprecating; the word "my" literalizes the metaphor and destabilizes its meaning. It is to the tension between the literal and the metaphorical that this paper is dedicated.

I won't be discovering America when I say that at the beginning of the last century European avant-gardists searched for the new amid the cubist landscapes of the American metropolis. Russian artists contributed to the cultivation of the image of America as a laboratory for testing desirable and undesirable futures. By the mid-twenties, when the eyes of the new Soviet state became firmly fixed on the future, the image of America as a futuristic ideal spread outside of the exclusive domain of avant-garde artists, infiltrating mass culture. The masses were flocking to Hollywood films in order to see their fantasies of success of an average man come to life on the screen. Ravaged postwar Russia was looking for ways to recover in the shortest time possible and found its inspiration in a country whose relative youth was not a hindrance to its prosperity and whose "American dream" promised a bright future as a reward for an arduous present. Survival became synonymous with industrialization and industrialization with Americanization; Lenin endorsed Fordism in the workplace and Taylorism as a way of life, while Trotsky defended the rhetoric of American efficiency, success through hard work, and self-sufficiency as a moral ideal.[1] While America was invading the public discourse on the future of Russia and American tractors were slowly penetrating the depth of the Russian countryside, Vladimir Maiakovskii went on a mission to conquer America.

A futurist-urbanist and a faithful servant of the new state, Vladimir Maiakovskii found himself at the crossroads of various discourses surrounding America as an aesthetic, moral, and technological ideal. Analyzing the trajectory of Maiakovskii's relationship to America, my paper aims to shed light on the points of divergence between the revolutionary poet's and the

1. See Jeffrey Brooks, "The Press and Its Message: Images of America in the 1920s and 1930s."

revolutionary state's visions of the future. This discord, which neither side welcomed, manifests itself in the incompatible conceptions and applications of the metaphor of technology.

Maiakovskii's trip to America in 1925 was not the beginning of his relationship with the country; it was, in fact, its culmination. The trip was to serve either as a final refutal or a final confirmation of the potency of his artistic vision: "Ne dlia togo ia poekhal v Ameriku, chtoby potom pisat' o nei, a potomu, chto ia ran'she pisal o nei."[2] The real America was to present conclusive evidence of his victory over the imaginary America of his poetry. The self-proclaimed "plenipotentiary of Soviet poetry"[3] had some rather personal reasons for this pilgrimage. Much of Maiakovskii'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 on his way and finally reaching America, his most-desired destination. In "Ei!" Maiakovskii sails toward America in a steamship; in "Amazing Facts" Maiakovskii speeds toward America in a Flying Dutchman; in "The Flying Proletarian" Maiakovskii navigates toward America in an underwater aero, a prototype of a submarine; and in "150,000,000" Maiakovskii eschews any existing or mythical modes of transportation in favor of traveling toward America on foot.

This compulsion to repeat suggests some deep-rooted desire whose realization is all the more fulfilling the further it's postponed. Maiakovskii repeatedly calls "150,000,000" an *Iliad* of the revolution, and on a more explicit level this epic is a political tract on the battle between two economic systems. The poem attempts to propose an invasion of the prosperous United States as a solution to the postwar hunger problem. But a careful glance shows that this *Iliad* has its own Helen of Troy; America appears in this role of an "electro-dynamo-mechanical" Helen. Before relating the cosmic battle between the Russian Ivan, a collective image of hungry workers, and Woodrow Wilson, a collective image of satiated bourgeois, Maiakovskii describes the booty by cataloguing the beauties of Chicago: "Mir, iz sveta chastei sobiraia kvintet,/ odaril ee moshch'iu magicheskoi./ Gorod v nei stoit na odnom vinte,/ ves' elektro-dynamo-mekhanicheskii./ V Chikago 14,000 ulits—solnts ploshchadei luchi./ Ot kazhdoi—700 pereulkov dlinnoiu poezdu na god."[4] The parenthetical interjections of the orgiastic quality of the American lifestyle that pop up throughout the recounting of the preparation for the battle can only be construed as reminders of its objective. In this perpetual orgy Chicago is made effeminate by the reference to its sensual plumpness and by the metonymic association with wives of millionaires and other mercenary females who clutch their lap-dogs in agitated anticipation.

One American critic expressed his bewilderment over Maiakovskii's choice of Chicago as the epitome of American desirability. After all, it is New York, and not Chicago, that is located on the coast of the Atlantic Ocean from which Ivan the *bogatyr'*[5] emerges as an extinct and exotic animal, but Maiakovskii's epic is not subject to verisimilitude but to the logic of poetics. The refrain "*Ch*udnó *ch*eloveku v *Ch*ikago! I *ch*údno!"[6] following each new ecstatic recital of Chicago's splendor makes an alliterative connection between the strangeness of Chicago and the marvel it brings to humanity.

2. "I did not go to America so that I could write about her, but because I had written about her." Quoted in Pertsov, p. 7. All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

3. Quoted in Hasty and Fusso, p. 161. Maiakovskii toured America not as a private tourist but as a public persona, a representative of the Soviet state; while in America, he gave a large number of lectures about the Soviet state and several interviews to various newspapers, including *The New York Times*.

4. "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 as long as a train-ride lasting a year, branch out from every street." "150.000.000" p. 101.

5. A *bogatyr'* is a hero of Russian folk epics, known for his great strength. It's curious that in this particular poem Maiakovskii chooses to reach America via non-technological means; furthermore, Ivan succeeds in winning his battle with heavily-armed Wilson without any use of weapons, planes, or other technological aids. In fact, Ivan defeats Wilson with his bare hands. In this feat, poetry becomes a valuable substitute for the technology that Russians do not yet possess. As Russians cannot get to America by boat ("Russkikh v gorod tot ne vezet parokhod"), they get to visit America with the help of the high-speed boots of Maiakovskii's poetry ("nachiniaites' i vy chudesami--v skorokhodakh-stikhakh,/ v stikhakh-sapogakh/ iskhodite Ameriku sami"--Maiakovskii invites his readers). Ibid., p. 102. And who needs aeroplanes when in the midst of the battle poets could ascend to the sky of their own volition ("...togda poety vzleteli na nebo/ chtob sverkhu streliat', kak s aeroplana by.")? Ibid., p. 126.

6. "It's strange to be in Chicago! And marvelous!" Ibid., pp. 101-102.

Tsvetan Todorov defines the marvelous as the genre in which any hesitation between a natural and supernatural explanation of events has been eliminated. In the genre of the marvelous the supernatural takes over, and the boundary between mind and matter or fantasy and reality falls apart, as anything that mind can conceive of materializes.[7] It's the suspension of all limitations that makes Maiakovskii yearn for and create the marvelous. Inhabitants of Chicago exposed to the excess of potentialities released by technology grow if not in stature then in status ("V Chikago u kazhdogo zhitelia ne menee general'skogo chin").[8] This miracle deeply disconcerted the critics: everyone's promotion to the status of a general makes class struggle obsolete; and if no one needs to be saved from the decaying West, what is the purpose of this cosmic battle? The answer provided by Maiakovskii did not seem satisfactory: "v dikom razgrome/ staroe smyv/ novyi razgromim/ po miru mif/ vremia-ogradu vzlomim nogami/ tysiachu radug v nebe nagammim."[9] This attainment of freedom through the extension of spatial and temporal limits relegated the immediate goal of combating hunger to the background. Lenin called the work "flagrant stupidity and pretentiousness,"[10] possibly incensed by Maiakovskii's insistence on supplanting the old myth with a new one. Trotsky compared the poem to pacifying baby talk: "v nemotivirovanno primitivnykh obrazakh, nesmotria na gromykhaiushchii giperbolizm, slyshitsia dazhe prisiusiukivanie, to samoe, kakim inye vzroslye razgovarivaiut s det'mi."[11] This comparison taps into the nature of Maiakovskii's impermissible playfulness; like children's games, his epic battles are purposeless and far removed from the real. Maiakovskii's theatricality is a ground well-trodden by scholars. Yet here I propose that his playfulness is not a matter of theatrical behavior that relies on a mask, a stage, and an audience, but is a solitary activity performed with all the earnestness of child's play.

Sigmund Freud demonstrates how compulsion to repeat the same scenario characterizes child's play. By repeatedly acting out the situation that causes him anxiety, the child attempts to gain mastery over it.[12] The anxiety Maiakovskii experiences is existential and has little to do with the class struggle. The desire to magnify the scale of his life ("i chuvstvuiu-- 'ia' dlia menia malo")[13] propels him into his imaginary travels across the world. After his "futurism has taken Russia in its iron grip," it's time to expand its influence as far as the Americas. Maiakovskii's poem "Christopher Columbus" reveals this dynamic behind discoveries of America. The epigraph to the poem, written on the ship that was taking the poet to America, reads "Khristofor Kolumb byl Khristofor Kolomb—ispanskii evrei. (iz zhurnalov),"[14] pointing to the weakness Columbus was to compensate for by discovering the Indies. The poem hypothesizes a situation in which taunts about Columbus's Jewishness become the impetus for his expedition. The discovery of America is a response ("Chto vy lezete: Evropa da Evropa!/ Voz'mu i otkroiu druguiu stranu."[15]) to the provocation "Chto vy za natsiia? Odin Sion./ Liuboi portugalishka dast tebe foru!"[16] Maiakovskii empathizes with the Jewish adventurer/explorer who expands the horizons of the world in order to establish his own position within it. The editors of the complete collection of Maiakovskii's works published by the Soviet Academy of Sciences in 1958 felt it necessary to attach a footnote disproving Maiakovskii's statement about Columbus being a Spanish Jew, perhaps because the association of Maiakovskii with the Jewish Columbus exposes the poet's anxiety over his own frailty, which he tried to alleviate through perpetual conquests of American and other terrains.[17]

Franz Kafka's friends recollect that the writer was never in a more cheerful mood than when he was

7. Todorov, p. 114-15.

8. "In Chicago everyone has at least a general's rank." "150.000.000," p. 101.

9. "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 and sound a thousand rainbow scales in the sky." Ibid., p. 98.

10. Lenin, vol. 52., p. 179.

11. "In the unjustifiably primitive images, despite the thunderous hyperbole, one detects even that same prattle that some adults use when talking to children." Quoted in Rougle, p. 114.

12. Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 17-23.

13. "And I feel 'I' is much too small for me." From "Oblako v shtanakh" (A Cloud in Pants) in *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, p. 9.

14. "Christopher Columbus was Christopher Columbus--Spanish Jew (from magazines)." *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 31.

15. "Why are you pestering me? Europe this, Europe that... I'll go and discover a new country." Ibid., p. 32.

16. "What kind of nation are you? Zion and nothing more. Any little Portuguese can outshine you." Ibid., p. 31.

17. Notes to *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 475.

working on his novel about a journey to, and adventures in America, of Karl, a young Czech-German boy.[18] *Amerika,* as the novel was later titled by Kafka's friend Max Brod who published it after the writer's death, presents technology as a concrete manifestation of the miraculous New World and demonstrates the role technology plays in the desire to locate a miracle and to make oneself at home in it. Herein lies the analogy between Kafka's and Maiakovskii's conceptions of American technology. The main character, upon his arrival in the States, first encounters the new shape of America in the amazing writing-desk with "a hundred compartments of different sizes" that appear and disappear at the turn of a handle. This writing-desk was far superior to its measly imitations which his father had coveted for years back in Prague. For Kafka, who never visited America, just as for Maiakovskii, the country becomes a kind of a mythic space of promise; he envisions its technological gifts in very personal terms: a writer fancies a special desk able to enhance the pleasure of his primary activity. 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...** [19]

The writing-desk, which exemplifies the magic of American technology, reminds the boy of a moving Christmas panorama in the marketplace at home, whose scenes would change at the movement of a handle. Karl remembers himself as a child mesmerized by the panorama but mindful of his mother's insufficient attention to it. He tried hard to catch every minute detail of the panorama in order to point it out to his mother. Thus he attempted to postpone realization of the separation of the two 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 had other purposes than to remind Karl of this scene from his childhood, "in the history of its invention there probably existed some vague connection similar to that in Karl's memory."[20] The writing-desk hence does not simply parallel the Christmas panorama in its ability to enrapture a child, but also because it serves as a site of tension. It recreates the joy in the presence of the miracle and the failure to master it, to make it stay. It is very telling that the contraption is a writing-desk: it is through technology and writing that man attempts to author being and to authorize himself in it. This technological gadget, modeled on a child's toy, uncannily holds all the threads to my understanding of the miracuolous technologically-advanced America of Maiakovskii'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 illusive and transitory.

Heidegger reaches into the etymology of the term "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."[21] He asserts that technology is not just a means to an end; it's not by manufacturing, but by revealing the latent potential of the world that man gains mastery over it. For Maiakovskii technology, like poetry, is a way of communicating with the world, of winning it

18. Klaus Mann's preface to *Amerika*, p. vii.

19. *Amerika,* p. 36.

20. Ibid., p. 37.

21. Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," p. 13. Heidegger's reassessment of technology arises from the protest against what he sees as the modern utilitarian attitude toward it. He shows that man no longer directs his pursuits at discovering the real, does not attempt to understand reality and his place in it, but instead by believing himself to be the subject of knowledge and the bearer of control, concerns himself with finding ways to apply technology as means toward the end of securing and tightening this control. Unaware of his own subjective existence, man does not see that his mastery and the scientific framework on which it rests is only a construction. Such lack of awareness of his own place leads to man's increasing loss of control over technology which he considers to be his own creation but which in fact is present in Being. Heidegger proposes that man needs to realize that he is in the dominion of Being and sees technology as a way to gain "insight into that which is." Although the futurist Maiakovskii praised himself for being a very modern man and for standing in the vanguard of modernity, his relationship to technology seems to me to find more affinities with that of the ancient Greeks' one which Heidegger presents as a model rather than the fallacious modern one which the philosopher critiques.

over. In the poem "Brooklyn Bridge" Maiakovskii praises the bridge as the manifestation of the magnificence of human vision (in fact, Maiakovskii's own): "Ia gord vot etoi stal'noi milei,/ zhiv'em v nei moi videniia vstali...."[22] Maiakovskii is not concerned with the practical applications of this technological wonder; in his vision the bridge will serve as a document that future generations will use to recreate the past: "Esli pridet okonchanie sveta/--planetu khaos rasdelaet vlosk/, i tol'ko odin ostanetsia etot/ nad pyliu gibeli vzyblennyi most,/ to, kak iz kostochek, ton'she igolok,/ tucheeiut v muzeiakh stoiashchie iashchery,/ tak s etim mostom stoletii geolog/ sumel vossozdat' by dni nastoiashchie."[23] The bridge compels Maiakovskii to travel into the future, as he imagines how a future geologist will decipher the bridge's meaning as if it were a book of the past feats, the poet himself being one of its chapters. Similarly, in "At the Top of My Voice" the poet compares his poetry to an aqueduct built by Roman slaves in its capacity to withstand the destructive forces of time. What excites the poet then is not so much the bridge itself as what it represents as the product of, and the inspiration for, human imagination. As for Maiakovskii technology is a symbol, not a tool, it's not surprising that he chooses to focus his glance on two of the most tangible and ostentatious marks of technological virility: a skyscraper, a mark of the expansion of the human habitat along the vertical vector, and a bridge, a mark of this expansion along the horizontal one.

Lev Vygotskii 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."[24] Hence, if we assume for a minute that the trip to America provided Maiakovskii with a chance to see his visions come to life, then the realization of his desire would inevitably stymie the workings of his imagination.[25] In effect, the wonders of New York turn the poet into a mute. The theme of muteness, the inability to communicate amidst the din of cars and trains, recurs throughout the American cycle and the travelogue, and the wonders themselves reduce the poetic richness of expression to puerile expletives: "A lampy kak stanut noch' kopat',/ nu ia dolozhu vam plamechko,/ nalevo posmotrish'—mamochka mat'!/ napravo—mat' moia mamochka![26]"

For Maiakovskii, witnessing the material equivalents of his theoretical projections did not produce the desired effect; it only shook further his certainty in the potency of his visions. By giving a concrete form to Maiakovskii's abstract, cosmic visions America congealed them, condensed them, and reduced them. Having heard Maiakovskii 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 unemployed jumped off into the river. Reprimanded, Maiakovskii immediately included a line to that effect into his otherwise celebratory poem.[27] But the pinch of reality seems trivial in the face of this beauty, and the line about the poor unemployed rather incongruously loses its political pitch as the suicidal movement down is counteracted by the resurrecting movement up that immediately follows it: "Zdes' zhizn' byla odnim--bezzabotnaia,/ drugim--golodnyi protiazhnyi voi./ Otsiuda bezrabotnye v Gudzon kidalis' vniz golovoi./ I dal'she kartina moia bez zagvozdki/ po strunam-kanatam, azh zvezdam k nogam."[28] In Maiakovskii's

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22. "I am proud of this steel mile; in it my visions come to life..." *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 85.

23. "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 suceed in recreating our contemporary world." Translation by Reavey, pp. 177-79.

24. Vygotskii, *Mind in Society*, p. 93.

25. The sublime, as Maiakovskii comes to realize, is in the play of the imagination: "Ocean is a matter of imagination. When you are at sea, you also don't see the shore, the waves are also bigger that needed for household use, and you also don't know what's underneath you. But it's only imagining that to the right and to the left there is no ground all the way to the pole, that there is an altogether new, second world up ahead, and that Atlantis might be beneath you—it's only this imagining that makes it the Atlantic Ocean." (*Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, p. 265). But how to sustain his imagination in such close proximity? What can save Maiakovskii from the boredom of nothingness that the ocean becomes over the multiple days of the trip? The closeness ruins the illusion, and the ocean's inevitable presence habitualizes his perception of it.

26. "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!" *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 57.

27. The incident is described in Pertsov, pp. 32-33.

28. "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./ Now my vision moves unobstructed/ along the cable-strings to the very feet of the stars." Translation by

vision the unemployed appear to jump into the river simply to refresh themselves before their swift crawl up the metal cables to the stars. The bridge, however, marks Maiakovskii's transition from enchantment to disillusionment. His American comrade's comment must have touched a nerve, because in the next poem of the cycle, "Camp *Nitgedaige,*"[29] Maiakovskii complains about the discrepancy between imaginary bridges ("Nami cherez propast' priamo k kommunizmu/ perekinut most, dlinnoiu--vo sto let")[30] and their material equivalents ("chto takoe most? Prisposoblenie dlia prostud").[31] Maiakovskii laments the inability to dwell in his spectacular metaphorical constructions; a god-man just does not seem as godly when he worries about catching a cold.

Since Maiakovskii conceives of technological wonders as symbols and not objects, potentials and not finished products, American skyscrapers and bridges make him question the stability of the relationship between signifier and signified. He explores this slippage of meaning in "A Skyscraper in Cut-away View," the facade of which hides the same banality and drudgery as one would find in "ancient burrows and cubbyholes." In the travelogue, describing his visit to one of Ford's plants in Detroit, Maiakovskii shows the discrepancy between the first impressions of harmony and faultless organization of Ford's famed assembly line and the stories of discontented workers. Writing the notes in the mid-twenties when the government-appointed Central Institute of Labor worked on introducing Ford's system into Russian factories as a guarantee of increasing productivity, Maiakovskii complains that Ford's assembly line depletes workers' strength. He ends the litany with the ultimate argument for the assembly line's counterproductivity: "Detroit has the greatest number of divorces. The Ford system makes workers impotent."[32]

Maiakovskii remonstrates that American technology makes an impression of impermanence and flimsiness. Construction sites transport and evade him at the same time; although he cannot take his eyes off them, 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, turning it into a trick. Maiakovskii mocks the high society for preferring candles to electricity, theater to movies, and records to radio; the mass quality of technological spectacle, its immodesty embarrasses them, he suggests. They take its shock value to be vulgar in its excessiveness, in its lack of moderation: "they are made uneasy by the magician who has summoned spirits but is unable to control them."[33] But Maiakovskii unwittingly shares this distaste when he recoils from the magnificent New York, calling it "a giant accident stumbled upon by children."[34] What he holds against New York then is its contingent nature; its wondrous technology seems like a deus ex machina, a mere plot device that drives the American master narrative of progress but lacks in deeper meaning and artistic truth.

As technology as a sign loses its meaning, so do words themselves. In "Young Miss and Woolworth" Maiakovskii attempts in vain to persuade a young woman in a shop window advertising sharp American knives to join him in his battle against capital. The glass of the skyscraper separates them and mutes the sound, and his pleas reach her as confessions of love. He imagines himself handsome and corpulent in her fantasy. Is it possible that what Maiakovskii sees as the girl's romantic fantasies are just his own fantasies reflected in the window of the skyscraper? The woman symbolically turns her knife against Maiakovskii instead of capitalists, when she exposes the impotence of his words. The poet stands alone and disillusioned outside the skyscraper, speaking to himself.

Traveling to America opened the poet's eyes in more ways than one, making it clear how playful and fantastic his projections of America and of his place in it had actually been. Maiakovskii's recurrent theme of muteness and failure of communication should be

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Reavey, p. 181, slightly revised.

29. A summer camp run by the communist Yiddish-language newspaper *Freiheit,* which together with the Russian-language newspapers *Russkii Golos* and *Novyi Mir* sponsored a larger number of lectures Maiakovskii gave across America (Moser, pp. 243-44).

30. "Across the abyss we erected a bridge straight to communism, spanning a hundred years." *Stikhi ob Amerike*, p. 89.

31. "What is a bridge? A device for catching colds." Ibid.

32. *Moe otkrytie Ameriki*, p. 341.

33. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 179.

34. From the interview in the New York newspaper *The World*, 1925. Quoted in Moser, p. 253.

considered in the context of his lack of knowledge of English. Maiakovskii's language skills do not ensure communication in America, and technology not only falls short of his expectations, but, in fact, hinders his attempts or at least exposes his defeat. In fact, upon his arrival home, Maiakovskii writes an essay "How I Made Her Laugh" relating how at one of the parties in New York, compelled by the unquenchable urge to make conversation, he had to resort to repeating over and over the one phrase that he could say in English, "Give me, please, some tea," varying it in intonation. At last, exasperated by his own inadequacy and by the mocking glances it provoked, he entreated his friend 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." Burliuk translated, "My eminent friend Vladimir Vladimirovich asks for another cup of tea."[35] In his earlier poetry Maiakovskii persistently fought against tea rituals as the epitome of his imperishable enemy *byt*; America did not help the futurist to win this battle. Such inability to communicate insured his isolation and separation from the overwhelming majority of his intended audience. Maiakovskii, who in the poem "100 %" pronounced himself to be more American than any American, was not understood by the country whose ear he so fervently desired. It is through language that Maiakovskii found his freedom and his purpose and not to be able to use it must have been intolerably decentering and humbling for him.

Roman Jakobson said that at the core of Maiakovskian mythology lies the antinomy of "I" versus "not-I."[36] For Maiakovskii, technology and poetry are two modes of mediation between his I and the world, of subsuming the not-I into I. The impracticability of Maiakovskii's technophilic dreams exposes the ultimate separation between his world of play and reality. 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 country on more intimate terms. The separation, which in his pre-trip poetry had been conditioned by the unavoidable epic distance, paradoxically becomes even larger when this distance is seemingly breached. Even in his paean to the Brooklyn Bridge this separation is palpable as the only link between the metaphors Maiakovskii applies to convey his feelings for the bridge: "Kak v tserkov' idet pomeshavshiisia veruiushchii,/ kak v skit udaliaetsia, strog i prost,-- /tak ia v vechernei sereiushchei mereshchi, vkhozhu, smirennyi, na Bruklinskii most./ Kak v gorod slomannyi pret pobeditel'/ na pushkakh--zherlom zhirafu pod rost--/ tak, pianyi slavoi, tak zhit' v appetite,/ vlezaiu, gordyi, na Bruklinskii most./ Kak glupyi khudozhnik v madonnu muzeiia/ vonzaet glaz svoi, vliublen i ostr,/ tak ia, s podnebesia, v zvezdy useian,/ smotriu na Niu-Iork skvoz' Bruklinskii most."[37] He is as far from his ideal as an "insane believer" from what he believes in, as alienated from it as a "conqueror" entering the ruined city, and as unmanned as a "foolish painter" in love with the madonna that belongs to the museum. Revealing the impossibility of transporting the technological wonders of Maiakovskii's imagination into reality without turning them into articles of everyday life, America deflates Maiakovskii himself.

An ethical imperative suddenly emerges in the conclusion of the travelogue, and it is hardly surprising in a genre where man supplants god-man. Maiakovskii begins his travelogue by providing a rationale for his choice of genre. The travelogue is a result of his realization that a reader needs to hear things interesting in themselves instead of fantasies. Thus, he acquiesces to restrain his fantasy in the interest of the common good and produces a travelogue. In the statement that traveling provides almost a substitute for reading, it's the word "almost" that stands out. The result of reading books was the epic poem "150,000,000," which, according to Charles Rougle, portrays America as an inflated composite of the images borrowed from the books of Maiakovskii's predecessors.[38] In the poem he plays the part of a seer of great deeds, his visions encompassing the whole world, his agile eye mastering the universe. By contrast, traveling resulted in the travelogue in which Maiakovskii confesses to his own smallness: "I lived

35. "Kak ia ee rassmeshil," p. 360.

36. Jakobson, *Language in Literature,* p. 278.

37. "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." Translation by Reavey, pp. 173-75.

38. Rougle, p. 108.

too little to describe the particulars correctly and in detail; I lived little enough to give a faithful picture of the general."[39] 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.[40] Maiakovskii is unable to set his own pace; he is constantly on the move but he is not in control of direction or speed. His moving glance cannot encompass the width or penetrate the depth of America, driving him to desperation: "Rasteriannyi, opuskaesh'sia na skameiku--net nadezh, glaza ne privykli videt' takoe."[41] "Flabbergasted," "stricken dumb," "stunned," and "crazed," Maiakovskii seems like an old man unable to withstand the shocks with which the new reality besieges him. In contrast to the Benjaminian flaneur, Maiakovskii cannot keep up 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 get energy from it; instead it saps the energy out of him.

When Maiakovskii sang the melding of man with machine, he was anthropomorphizing the machine, not automatizing man. Yet, American technology resists his attempt to anthropomorphize it, stubbornly remaining inanimate and unmoved. Its meaningless violence is an affront to the poet: "S-pod koles pronosiashchikhsia elevatorov pliuet pyl', a kazhetsia poezda pereezhaiut vashi ushi. Ne grokhot vospevat'--a stavit' glushiteli--nam, poetam, nado razgovarivat' v vagone."[42] The racket suddenly becomes too loud for the futurist poet, who even "at the top of his voice" is unable to keep up with it. He turns into an old man who cannot stand the pace of modern life.

In her article on utopian visions of the Russian avant-garde, Kristina Pomorska analyzes Maiakovskii's interest in Einstein's theory of relativity; she persuasively argues that Maiakovskii was hopeful the theory would help to immortalize man, and that in his struggle to overcome the everyday routine he was trying through poetry to achieve a total transfiguration into a new form of being. She uses "150,000,000" as an example of this metamorphosis. Pomorska explains it by Maiakovskii's metaphysical dread of mortality and on a smaller scale a parallel dread of aging: "for Maiakovskii the most horrifying property of human existential limits was the inevitable process of aging."[43] Thus, paradoxically, the futurist feared precisely what comes next, the future. The trajectory of Maiakovskii's writings about America can be understood as a process of aging. While Maiakovskii's pre-trip poetry is infused with a child's free spirit in which he animates and rules over his toy world, his travelogue as an attempt at grasping at and finding one's place in the real is a sign of maturation. As a child Maiakovskii towers over his universe; as an old man he stoops his shoulders under its weight.

Thus, Maiakovskii turns against "the futurism of bare technology, a superficial impressionism of smoke and wires" conceived by him and accomplished by 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."[44] Does the humanism emerge as a result of the recognition of his own limitations? Maiakovskii calls for an artistic plan, for a direction without which technology does not produce the future but simply recycles the past. A strange concept of culture appears in Maiakovskii's vocabulary; Rougle argues that when Maiakovskii accuses American technology of a lack of culture, he means the discrepancy between technique and consciousness. Rougle suggests that Maiakovskii begins to believe that Americans' technological know-how "has outstripped their consciousness."[45] That would be an odd concession from a futurist who used

39. *Moe otrkytie Ameriki*, p. 265.

40. Maiakovskii 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 smokes, nor slanting rains, to say nothing of any hazes, could be seen.''' Translation by Hasty and Fusso, pp. 191-92, slightly revised.

41. "Baffled, you plunk down on a bench—it's hopeless, your eyes are not used to seeing such things." *Moe otrkytie Ameriki*, p. 298.

42. "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." Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 207.

43. Pomorska, p. 376.

44. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 343.

45. Rougle, p. 136.

to ascertain that advanced technology would change consciousness. Perhaps, Maiakovskii comes to the realization that the superior technology that he has been dreaming of cannot but reside solely in the mind. Does he defend the necessity of reflection? Does the concept of culture suggest the need to contemplate, to ponder, to continue striving which the finality of American perfections precludes? Maiakovskii 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."[46] He ends his travelogue by contrasting the short-lived shock value of the American technical advances to Europe's centuries of deliberation that informed even the pettiest materialistic desires: "even this detestable clinging to the little house, to the bit of land, to their own property—thought over for centuries—now appeared to me as unbelievable culture in comparison to the bivouac structure and the opportunistic character of American life."[47] The writer makes it a matter of choice; between America with all its polished facades and exalted accomplishments and Europe where every inch of land speaks of an "age-long struggle" and where so much remains to be achieved, he finally embraces the latter.

The unbreachable difference between America as a place and America as a symbol results in the permanent displacement of Maiakovskii as a traveling subject who is unable to ever reach his desired destination. Maiakovskii arrives at a dead end in his travelogue, as the future only offers a salvation when it remains a promise. A distance is essential for the experience of the sublime; yet he still longs to breach this distance in order to master the universe. After returning from America, Maiakovskii writes two plays about the future: *The Bedbug*, where the future is no more appealing than the past, and *The Bathhouse* which ends just as the heroes leap into the future aboard a time machine. The reader and the author are left behind with those whom the time machine did not take along.

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46. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 207.

47. Translation by Hasty and Fusso, p. 209, slightly revised.

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# Power and Technology as the Political-Aesthetic Project:
## Towards the Similarity of the Russian Avant-garde of the Twenties and Stalinist Cinema

Andrei Khrenov

### Two Utopias

The Western presentation of the revolutionary "Golden Age" by leftist art historians of the *October* journal promotes the concept of liberated, creative labor and "human" technology. This view accords with Peter Burger's theory that the avant-garde traditionally seeks to break down the boundaries separating art and life.

If the *October* radicals point out that Stalinism liquidated all the social/artistic achievements of the twenties, the theorists of Moscow conceptualism argue that the Stalinist discourse merely incorporated the totalitarian aspirations and utopian methods of Russian experimenters, such as the will to power, mastery over the collective subconscious, or the creation of the New Man as the total work of art. These two paradigmatic approaches, two opposing interpretations of the Russian avant-garde, could not be explained without the other. To some degree, both are but reflections of each other.

The first approach was developed by American leftist theorists and art historians associated with the journal *October*. Its founders, Annette Michelson and Rosalind Krauss, argue that the brief historical period following the 1917 Revolution was unique in that the radical concepts of the artistic avant-garde coincided, mirrored, and fit in with the challenging social experiment. The artistic practices of El Lissitzky, Vladimir Tatlin, Aleksandr Rodchenko, artists whose works have become an integral part of museum collections and the subject for academic research in Europe and North America, replicated the experiment in social construction, somehow "reinforcing" it. Even those works of Western avant-gardists stylistically close to the Russians (for example, Mondrian's compositions remind one of Malevich) and not supported by revolutionary social projects, had exhausted their utopian, subversive potential much faster and became incorporated into the technical rationality of the bourgeois society. Starting with a critique of commodity culture, Mondrian gradually became an integral part of it. His radical protest became co-opted by a specific mode of representation that transforms phenomena into commodities ready for consumption. Unlike their Western counterparts, the works of the Russian avant-garde became art objects of high value in every Western museum, while retaining their revolutionary, utopian potential for global changes.

The *October* vision of a revolutionary "Golden Age" promoted the concept of a liberated, utopian society where the division of labor would be abolished and, as Marx put it:

> **...individuals would be liberated from the various national and local barriers, be brought into a practical connection with the material and intellectual production of the whole world and be put in the position to acquire the capacity to enjoy this all-sided production of the whole earth.**

This credo became their only subconscious salvation from the unbearable immanence of the late-capitalist society with its commodity culture. This pathetic "dissident" perception of Russian revolutionary experience ironically coincides with the praxis of the Russian experimenters themselves, who stayed in a country devastated by Civil War to defend their artistic principles and put their "collective utopian impulses" in the service of the state.

Another approach, no less utopian, is shared by the theorists of Moscow conceptualism, a movement which emerged in the 1970s alongside *sots-art.* The vectors of both approaches are somehow aggressively—but not deliberately, of course—aimed at each other, like nuclear missiles on either side of the Iron Curtain. The *October* critics, including their predecessor Leon Trotsky, point out that Stalinism liquidated the social and artistic achievements of the avant-garde and developed a "backward" art in the spirit of nineteenth-century realism. Moscow conceptualism claims that avant-garde practice was originally intended to seize power by any means necessary; in a sense, it was totalitarian even before the advent of totalitarianism. Socialist Realism appears as a continuation of avant-gardist strategies by totally different means.

Most essential for this argument are the purposes of the new, revolutionary power, which were declared to be aesthetic. The Bolshevik state did not organize itself first and foremost as the founder of the Law or "social contract" (as Jean-Jacques Rousseau defined it in the Age of Enlightenment), but was conceived to be the creator of the total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*)–"the New Man, the liberated worker, the true Communist" (Boris Grois). Functionally dressed citizens of this aesthetically perfect utopian society would inhabit the rotating cities of glass and concrete, designed by the radical Constructivists; and art as a method of knowing life would be replaced with art as a method of building life.

As a result, Stalinism became the only discourse to implement this political/aesthetic project. Sensing the threat posed by the avant-garde, Stalin's conservative, despotic regime crushed the true, contemporary revoutionary art. All avant-garde collectives and their activities were disbanded in 1932 by Stalin's decree, which organized artists into "creative unions" modeled on the medieval guilds. The victory over the experiment—to paraphrase Kruchenykh's opera— as well as over the collective subconscious was achieved in the trials and purges of the 1930s.

The mastering of the subconscious through language and the visual arts (architecture, cinema, fine arts, etc.) with its religious nature became one of the central issues for the creators of the New Man. Many artists undertook to reconstruct this "language of the subconscious," as Malevich called it, and to master it consciously. They delighted in linguistic singularity and aberrance. Conventional systems of linguistics and visual representation were to be transgressed, the boundaries were to be exploded and new forms were to emerge out of the pieces. Like Artaud and Breton in France, Russian innovators wanted to expropriate the "expropriated language." The organizing, "engineering" nature of Khlebnikov's poetry and Malevich's paintings originated in the notion that the subconscious dominates human consciousness and can be technically manipulated to construct a new world.

Velimir Khlebnikov, for example, abolished ordinary linguistic forms in order to create utterances (*zaum*) that would work magically upon the reader's mind. He declared himself the "President of the Planet Earth" and the "King of Time," since he believed that he had discovered the laws that delimit time. These linguistic experiments coincided with his remarkable urban visions in his poem "The City of the Future":

**Here we enter the City of Sun,**
**Where all is balance, order, and expanse**
**This palace of the people now commands**
**The covering roof be rolled away,**
**To contemplate the ranks of constellations**
**And amplify the law of retribution**

The omniscient, god-like point of view in Khlebnikov's poem provides the visual equivalent to Stalinist art, monumental propaganda and cinema, as we will see later.

## The Paths to the Collective Self: Eisentstein's Experience

A significant body of film texts of the twenties and thirties demonstrates this authoritarian coalescence of art, politics and technology, providing a possibility for both approaches mentioned earlier. The patterns of fashioning the social Imaginary were widely explored by the radical filmmakers in the twenties.

Eisenstein's discourse, for example, bridges the artist's conscious self —striving for technological progress and building a better life—with the whole socialist society and such technocratic methods as reconstruction of the subject's subconscious through "visual atomism" (Lev Manovich) and fragmented montage, the concepts of "pathos" and "ecstasy," or totalitarian psychotechnics, borrowed from Loyola, and so on.

The religious nature of art and the task of delivering the ideological message, of grasping the socially demanded idea was an essential component in Sergei Eisenstein's theoretical heritage. The starting point in the filmmaker's research was projection theories of religion, which argue that any form of religion is actually a projection of human wishes and fantasies. Freud, for example, argued that an individual's image of God is related to the individual's early experience of

his/her parents and the need for security. In "The Future of an Illusion" he defined religious belief as "a universal obsessive neurosis of humanity."

The accounts of life in tribal societies provided Eisenstein with materials for his "sensuous thought" theory, which was founded on the mechanism of image-centered thinking. He was also interested in mystical revelations, the participants of which tend to move beyond words, rational thinking and even images to the immediate presence of the Divine Force. Eisenstein's analysis of St. Ignatius Loyola's "Des Graces d'oraison" focuses on the nature of the ecstatic experience: Loyola "saw the Being of the Father, but in a manner that at first he saw the Being and then the Father, and his prayer ended with the Essence before arriving at the Father" (10). Eisenstein points out that in the mystical process the personal experience is "formless and objectless" (some "Essence" in Loyola's case) and can take any form which later will be associated with the doctrines of religious faith, among others. Every religious system, according to him, long before Loyola's observations, combines this "objectless, formless, contentless psychic state" directly with images and concepts connected to a cult, and religion. During rituals, humans as "bundles" of thinking material experience the rhythm of matter, of the Universe. The libidinal (in Freudian terms) energy of the masses here is channeled into the appropriate and socially accepted forms. The mystic's trance, the saint's sermon, the Catholic Mass, and so on, unite the self with a transcendental Other. Eisenstein claimed that revolutionary works of art should utilize this psychotechnics. His 1927 film *October* reveals an abstract idea of God from an atheistic position. A straightforward cinematic syntagm in this film consists of a series of "sacred" images: Catholic crosses are followed by the smiling Buddhist mask and then the wooden effigies of pagan and primitive gods. The inanimate and deliberately ugly deities at the end of the syntagm appear to be mere symbols of the individual's wishful thinking.

Working with the concepts of "pathos" and "ecstasy," he defines how the dialectical process of an art form should be shaped in order to achieve a specific type of emotional involvement called "pathos." This is done to transport the viewer out of the plane of everyday routine (*ex-stasis* means "out of stasis") and eliminate the boundaries between the "self" and the "others." Every revolutionary artist, according to Eisenstein, must follow this path towards collective self provided by an artwork. This "totalitarian psychotechnics," borrowed from Loyola, or targeted manipulation of the audience's emotions still remains one of the main critical charges against Eisenstein.

This kind of research was conducted not only in totalitarian Russia. Wilhelm Reich, a German psychoanalyst who investigated the connections between the individual psyche and the material relations of production, took a particular interest in the Eisensteinian approach to art. In a letter to his Russian colleague, Reich raised the question of "how the cinematic sexual politics of the bourgeoisie could be consciously and consistently opposed by a revolutionary one," insisting on the primacy "of personal and especially of sexual life" for the correct "revolutionary cultural politics": *Earth* brilliantly expressed the orgiastic element; in *Battleship Potemkin* one was simply overwhelmed by the rhythm, which is a direct continuation of the basic biological-sexual rhythm. Reich noted that the "rational ideas of communism are most effective in film if they are properly articulated with biological rhythm" (11).

## Imagination to Power. Stalinist Architecture and Film

The strategies of reshaping the social Imaginary were also widely explored by Stalinist film. The totalitarian hierarchy of the arts in the thirties abolished the open, relatively uncensored multiplicity of artistic practices of the twenties. Literature took over, while the coming of sound in cinema reassured the primacy of logocentrism, the totalitarian "scriptures," the Word.

Architecture was given the assignment to find iconic and symbolic equivalents to the great slogans, abundant in the thirties, which would be as efficient as Khlebnikov's "zaum" (transrational poetry ). Stalinist cinema presented a transhistorical, transtemporal urban space of Moscow as the sacred center of the already achieved Utopia. It required, therefore, characteristics completely different from the montage era of Russian experimenters of the twenties. In fact, the almost mythical spatial-temporal dimensions of this Utopia required a deliberately illusionist, imaginary, fairy-tale hypostasis of the filmic properties which manifested itself through theatrical miniatures, layout and scenery. These films demonstrate that the art of Socialist Realism was in fact not realistic, since it was not mimetic.

Stalin's plan of the reconstruction of Moscow was adopted at the time when, as Boris Grois put it, "the art of the Stalin period, like the culture of Nazi Germany, claimed to be building a new and eternal empire beyond human history, an apocalyptic kingdom that

would incorporate all the good of the past and reject all the bad." A drastic transition between the cosmopolitan, revolutionary, and dynamic architectural discourse of the 1920s and the conservative, hermetic, and static discourse of the 1930s to 50s was accomplished by incorporation of the avant-garde strategies.

The transhistorical temporal/spatial relations determined the coordinates of the four wonders of the Stalinist utopia designed for the city of Moscow which retained its radial structure. Its sacred center, the Palace of the Soviets, symbolized the "vertical" pyramid of totalitarian order with the figure of the leader on top. This non-existent building figured so often in architectural drawings that it was simply imagined into the landscape. The plan of reconstruction was based on the concept of Moscow as the capital of the world. Cinema became one of the most suitable equivalents to the mythological spatial-temporal dimensions of the reconstruction plan.

The very selection of these places was made to shape an image of a futuristic, magnificent metropolis which merged into a "typology of the non-existent." The new city was to preserve the traditional, historical structure of Old Moscow (such as the circumferences around the Kremlin, for example), but its architectural strategy was to be reevaluated according to the utopian ideas when Moscow was perceived as a sacred space which embodied the dream of the future immanent in present. And while the real, actual space of the city did not suit this idea, Moscow was to be drastically converted by different sets, miniatures, sketches, masks, rear-projection and similar devices to arrange an artificial but life-like environment.

When avant-gardists, those dinosaurs of the twenties, tried to pursue their ideals, their efforts to operate on the same "political" territory with the authorities were doomed. The 1937 comedy, *New Moscow* by Alksandr Medvedkin is emblematic in its depiction of the sacred urban space which is an adequate visual representation of the Stalinist aesthetic project. It is also an example of a "creative" urban space shown with the help of illusionist, Melies-like, special effects. It tells the typical Hollwood romantic story of a happy reunion of two couples with a "love-affair mismatch." The protagonist, an artist specializing in cityscapes, simply does not have time to draw Moscow. The metropolitan organism is being constantly transformed by the Stalinist architect's will and is betraying him day in and day out: the buildings are disappearing, being pulled down and built anew. And it is not only urban reality that the artist loses - his model, a beautiful girl, leaves him to join an architect who lives in Siberia.

The Siberian architect managed to produce a layout for the modern capital, a city which he has never seen in reality. His powerful imagination helped him to foresee the future of the sacred metropolis from his Siberian remoteness. The Siberian architect's fantasy, infused with the mythologemes of Stalinist culture, acquires the quality of the final, real truth proved by the film's culmination. Therefore, his project of the new City of Moscow, an embodiment of avant-garde aspirations, a physical Utopia with skyscrapers of glass and steel, receives the highest award at the architectural contest. An urbanist artist encounters the new girl, a shock-worker swineherd and a friend of an architect. The happy ending ensues. Thus the choice of the Moscow model in favour of the Siberian, who is loyal to fantasy and imagination, only proves one of the basic utopian paradigms of Stalinist culture, that is, the "typology of the non-existent."

The "typical" is the key issue of that which is not encountered the most often, but that which most persuasively expresses the essence of a given social force," according to the speech of Minister Georgii Malenkov at the 14th Party Congress, stressing the most paradoxical oxymoron of Stalinist aesthetics. "From the Marxist-Leninist standpoint, the typical doesn't signify some sort of statistical mean... The typical is the vital sphere in which is manifested the Party spirit of realistic art." The underlying meaning of the narrative is that the power of imagination, of the collective subconscious must prevail and be ontologically real. That is why the real city, which does not meet the requirements of Stalinist "typology," is sacrificed for the sake of the fantastic/imaginary one. And even this sacrifice was not acceptable—Stalin's selection committee was disappointed with such a straightforward image of the inhumane, militarized technology which consisted of metaphysical, sinister, de Chirico-like cityscapes. *New Moscow* was immediately shelved. The last two reels of *New Moscow* are of particular interest for our binary opposition "imaginary/real." They feature a short demo, presented by a Siberian at the exhibition's contest, a separate "purely architectural" entity that animates a futuristic miniature of reconstructed Moscow in a traditional comedy narrative. The new Moscow appears as an impressive Soviet "Metropolis."

The expected pathos of the seemingly magnificent utopia is undermined by Medvedkin, thus creating a comic effect: due to technical faults, the demo the architect has prepared is projected backwards—the crystal palaces of paradise are followed by a

documentary record of Stalin's "architectural terror." First comes the demolition of Russian religious centers, like Strastnoi Monastery, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Sukharev Tower, etc., and then the temples are fully reassembled from the ruins. The demo then portrays the new Moscow with a standard set of carefully chosen significant places and buildings, for example, the recently built classicist Hotel Moscow, the new buildings on the renovated and expanded Gorky street, the Stalin Waterway.

The last, "futuristic" part of the demo animates the idea of the Palace of the Soviets as the largest building on Earth. The broadness of the radial highways, esplanades and embankments, which radiate from the center, proves the sacred concept. The original design of some architectural constructions-- the Red Army Theater, the Arbatskaya metro station, both modeled on a five-pointed star, or the enormous expanse of the prospect of the Palace of the Soviets—could be viewed and appreciated only by virtue of belonging to Heaven in this Stalinist paradise, either by the Demiurge himself, its statue atop the Palace, or the pilots and aviators who occupied one of the highest ranks in the paradisiacal hierarchy.

Another incredibly comic episode, not intended by the author, culminates in the flight of the aircraft squadron right above the cardboard Palace of the Soviets. The primacy of the totalitarian imagination indulges in the creation of the simulacrum of the city - marble and granite turn into painted cardboard, while the monumental metaphor of Stalin's omnipotence is transformed into decorative scenery that is nothing but a clever screen backdrop.

The almost mythical spatial-temporal dimensions of the Stalinist Utopia required the deliberately illusionistic, imaginary, folkloric hypostasis of the filmic properties which became manifest through theatrical miniatures, layout and scenery by virtue of gratifying the wish-fulfillment of the broad audience. A subject of a totalitarian state could successfully fulfil the functions required by mythological narrative only within the realm of the "de-materialized" architectural theater, its hagiography and demonology. It is a theater of metaphysical space, of a visionary space of deliberately illusionist dream and transhistorical stage which remarkably embodies and illustrates the nation's wish-fulfillment. Visual representation was dominant and therefore adequate to the contemporary cultural demands of the masses. Stalin's artistic discourse became the supreme realization of the avant-garde anticipations, the ultimate authoritarian coalescence of art and politics.

It is worth mentioning here that Sergei Eisenstein planned to explore the temporal simultaneity of the theatrical/urban simulacrum in his project *Moscow 800*, aborted by Boris Shumiatskii, Minister of the Cinema Industry. The historical evolution of the city was intended to be developed through different epochs - the times of Ivan the Terrible, the Napoleonic war, as well as the crucial events of our century—revolutions and World War II in Russia. They would be cemented by the recurring fates of proletarian families, and the film would show the simple people as the real driving force of History and, therefore, of the city of Moscow. The only chance for the film to be made would be the acquisition of the mentioned-above characteristics of the Golden Age. Most scenes were to be filmed in Mosfilm pavilions.

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# Garden Cities and Company Towns:
## Tomaš Bat'a and the Formation of Zlín, Czechoslovakia


# Kimberly Elman


**The pretentious, well-bred facades of the Habsburg Empire belonged to history. White, smooth, geometrically simple forms were a protest and at the same time the new trademark of the young State [Czechoslovakia]. As opposed to places such as Germany and Austria, where the New Architecture movement was being carried by the Social Democrats, here in Bohemia and Moravia the bourgeoisie was the driving force. The left scorned the style as State functionalism, claiming that it was nothing but stylistic platitudes, like the flat roof and the strip window... and not an instrument for changing society.**

**—Stephan Templ, *The Werkbund Housing Estate Prague* (Basel, Berlin, Boston: Birkhäuser, 1999), 11**

This quotation, taken from the introduction of a recent publication on the 1932 Baba housing estate outside of Prague, presents a compelling framework for any study of modern Czechoslovakian architecture between the world wars. After the creation of Czechoslovakia in 1918, out of lands that were formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the new country was faced with the challenge of shaping for itself a distinct national identity. As the home of more than 60 percent of the factories and mines of the former Habsburg Empire,[1] it was one of the most industrialized countries in post-World War I Europe. This strength became a rallying point for the country and a symbolic representation of the new nation, particularly in art and architecture where the machine aesthetic of the "International Style" was the preferred vocabulary of the generation.

Only since 1989 have the achievements of these innovative Czech and Slovak architects become widely known to an international audience. The prospect that this work represents a unique manifestation of the typical white architecture of the 1920s and 1930s challenges the underlying assumptions that architectural historians have consistently brought to discussions of this period. If there is truth to Templ's statement, how can we approach an analysis of this architecture, generally termed "Modern Architecture," which in every other European context claimed to be a movement born out of the desire to affect social change through architecture, through art and through a complete re-evaluation of the traditional modes of daily life?

I will address this issue in the context of the architectural production of the Bat'a Shoe Company which was headquartered until 1938 in the Moravian town of Zlín. The majority of the town was built by the corporation during the 1920s and 1930s to house its manufacturing operations and its continually expanding workforce. The town has been the subject of architectural study since its earliest beginnings because of the innovative strategies in construction technology, the use of modern materials, and city planning. In contrast to the traditional view of Zlín as a modified attempt to emulate the initiatives of the Englishman Ebenezer Howard, who is credited with formulating the idea of the "garden city," I want to propose that the more influential model, both architecturally and conceptually, was instead the American company town.[2]

Although these towns were themselves loosely based on Howard's model, the intentions of the industrialists who built them were strikingly different from the motivations of contemporary European avant-garde artists and architects. For these businessmen, the

[1] Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 163.

[2] This paper will look specifically at the American models. There is still research to be conducted on the relationship to other company towns, including those in Russia and Germany.

*Workers' housing built by the Bat'a Corporation during the 1920s and 1930s in Zlín, Czechoslovakia.*

primary reason for their architectural production was to increase productivity in the workplace by providing a comfortable living environment for their workers and their families. The discussion will focus on three themes, the history of the factory at Zlín and its founder Tomaš Bat'a, the general principles of Ebenezer Howard's "garden city," and two American models of company towns.

Tomáš Bat'a, the driving force behind Czechoslovakia's famed Bat'a Shoe Company, was a highly successful, self-made man who had already built one of the world's most successful shoe manufacturing operations at the time of his tragic death in an airplane crash in 1932 at age 56. Because of his exuberant personality and unusual prowess for business, the story of Zlín is as much the re-telling of Bat'a's life, as it is the chronicle of the formation of a city. In addition to utilizing novel approaches to scientific management and corporate organization, Bat'a left a legacy of innovative town planning and progressive social initiatives aimed at improving the lives of his workforce. He considered himself a father figure to his many thousands of employees and provided them with both economic and spiritual resources, including job security, local entertainment and shopping outlets, as well as affordable housing and a good public education. After Tomáš' death, his half-brother Jan Bat'a faithfully represented his brother's legacy by continuing to construct workers' housing and civic buildings in Zlín, including the famous office building with the glass elevator that served as Jan's mobile workspace.

Initially, this investigation has been founded upon the assumption that the ideals of the garden city, as set forth by Ebenezer Howard in his 1898 text, *Tomorrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform*,[3] provided the necessary foundation for a comprehensive discussion of Tomáš Bat'a and his town planning initiatives. This viewpoint has been generally accepted in the small body of literature about Zlín[4], in which authors tend to

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[3] Ebenezer Howard, *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, 1898. Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow*, reprint of 1898 edition with some minor changes, 1902. For the purposes of this paper, a later reprint of the book was used: Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-morrow* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1960). A Czech translation was published in 1924.

[4] Some examples: Erik L. Jenkins, "Utopia, Inc.," *Thresholds*, vol.18 (1999):60-66. In this article, Jenkins makes a rather unconvincing argument that the strong work ethic and community oriented lifestyle of the inhabitants of Zlín can be best understood in the context of Czech cultural history.
Jane Pavitt, "The Bata project: a social and industrial experiment," *Twentieth Century Architecture* (Summer 1994):[31]-44. She presents an impressive article on the Bat'a Company and the architecture, but she downplays the role of America and more generic 'industrial' housing examples in favor of the Howard

treat the town as a stylistically updated version of a typical arts and crafts style garden city. Although to some extent this remains the case, a more subtle reading of Bat'a's intentions and the achievements of Zlín suggests that rather than relying heavily on the model provided by Howard, there are a number of sources from which Bat'a drew his inspiration.

His only surviving statements are a series of political speeches, public addresses, and a short memoir, which were collected and published as *Thoughts and Speeches* (*Úvahy a Projevy*) in 1932. The book, however, does not directly posit a coherent thesis on the building of Bat'a's cities, although there are short passages in two of his speeches, from 1927 and 1931 respectively, in which he offers some indication of how he envisions his architectural projects,

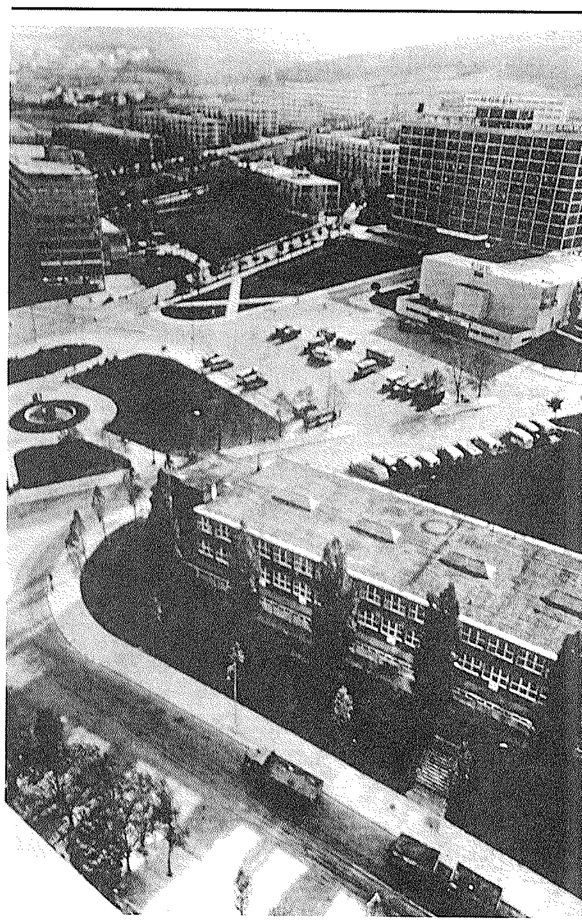
**The true freedom of a family depends on a home shielded from neighbors and located in green space, air and sunshine—exactly the way we are planning and building the residential sections of our enterprise.** [5]

**Our goal however is a garden city, full of sun, water, refreshing greenery and cleanliness, and a city with the highest wages, blossoming small businesses, stores, and craftsmen, a city with the best schools. Our ambition is to free many of our women from the last remnants of household drudgery and help them to build a home that would be their pride.** [6]

Here Bat'a's phrase "garden city" is misleading, since by the 1920s the term had come into more general usage to describe a type of housing that aimed to bring a better quality of life to the inhabitants.

A brief summary of Howard's model will be instructive since it is rarely extracted directly from his original text. Many authors seem to rely on a mistaken yet widespread interpretation of the model as architectural or even aesthetic, when in fact it is an economic endeavor. Howard's most famous work is the 1898 book, *Tomorrow: a Peaceful Path to Real Reform*, republished in 1902 as *Garden Cities of Tomorrow*. The book was written following a series of bad crop years in Britain during the 1870s, when much of the rural population was forced into the already crowded cities in search of industrial work. Howard responded to this crisis with a plan to decentralize the population into a series of small cities connected by a localized transportation system. These clusters of cities would eventually replace the traditional urban centers.

The benefit to the population from this arrangement would be the achievement of a healthy rural lifestyle that retained some of the desirable qualities of the city,



*Zlín's transformed city center with new movie theater, a large department store, and high-rise hotel, all built by the Bat'a Corporation in the 1930s.*

model for the architecture, although she is very articulate about the relationship of Americanism to the "Bat'a System." Slapeta, Musil, and Novak, "Czech Mate for Letchworth," *Town and Country Planning* (November 1984):74-75. This short article attempts to align Czech examples directly with Howard's Letchworth, although Zlín is called a "variant". It must be noted that because this journal is a direct result of the association founded by Howard, the argument is slanted towards this position by its very appearance in this context.

[5] Tomas Bat'a, *Knowledge in Action:The Bat'a System of Management*, trans. by Otilia Kabesova (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 1992), 140-41.

[6] Bat'a, 143

such as stable sources of employment, outlets for entertainment and a variety of services. The crux of the plan lay in the economic structure of these towns, which would have been financed solely by the rents, or what Howard termed "rate-rents," paid by the inhabitants. All of the properties would initially be leased on a long-term basis to the inhabitants by an investment group.[7] Most importantly, Howard was strongly against any centralization of power, either of a single corporation, a single governing body, or person. To combat this, one of his strategies was to hand control over to the inhabitants once the initial shareholders in the investment had been bought out with the money raised through the "rate-rents," in order to remove any remnant of centralized power.

Physically the garden city was conceived as a series of concentric rings that even Howard admitted was only a schematic design which would then be adapted to a particular site. The city would be comprised of six wards, to be built one at a time around a neighborhood center. Along a central avenue in each ward would stand the school, the church, and the larger homes for the wealthier inhabitants. Citywide activities, particularly leisure activities, would be grouped in the center of the city around a large park, named "Central Park," as well as a concert hall, theater, museum, library, hospital, and town hall. Surrounding the park was the "Crystal Palace," a marketplace where competitive merchants could sell their goods, including fresh food from the agricultural settlements on the outskirts of the town. The industrial district would include factories, warehouses, and coal yards, all of which would be located beyond the residential rings, facing the circular railway line allowing for the most convenient transportation of goods. The actual design of the buildings in the town was of little consequence, but like many of his contemporaries, Howard's inclination was towards the arts and crafts style reminiscent of the stereotypical English country village. When faced with the choice during the construction of Letchworth, Howard employed the British architects Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin to design the town in this popular style.

7 In a series of flawed mathematical calculations, Howard proved that the revenue generated by the 'rate-rents' would be sufficient to pay back the interest accrued on the initial investment, put some money aside to repay the principle over time, and continue to maintain all of the city works including roads and schools For his discussion of the 'rate-rents', see Howard (1960), 50-88

Although a "garden city" as truly envisioned by Howard has never been built,[8] the concept that a planned city should include recreational and green spaces, as well as convenient services, quality schools and access to transportation, has become the standard for most suburban development. These are also the concepts that were embraced by Bat'a and his planning department in Zlín. It is important to note, however, that many other aspects of Bata's company town are at complete odds with Howard's intended project. Among the prescribed characteristics that were no longer of any interest to Bat'a were the inhabitants eventually owning their own property, the concept of rate-rents, or the organization of the city with the park in the center and the industry on the outskirts. It was also impossible for Bat'a to envision this new city without his complete ownership and control over all aspects of its development. His personal interest was so extreme that Bat'a himself paid for the area to be wired for electricity and telephone service, as well as for the paving of roads and building of localized transportation network.

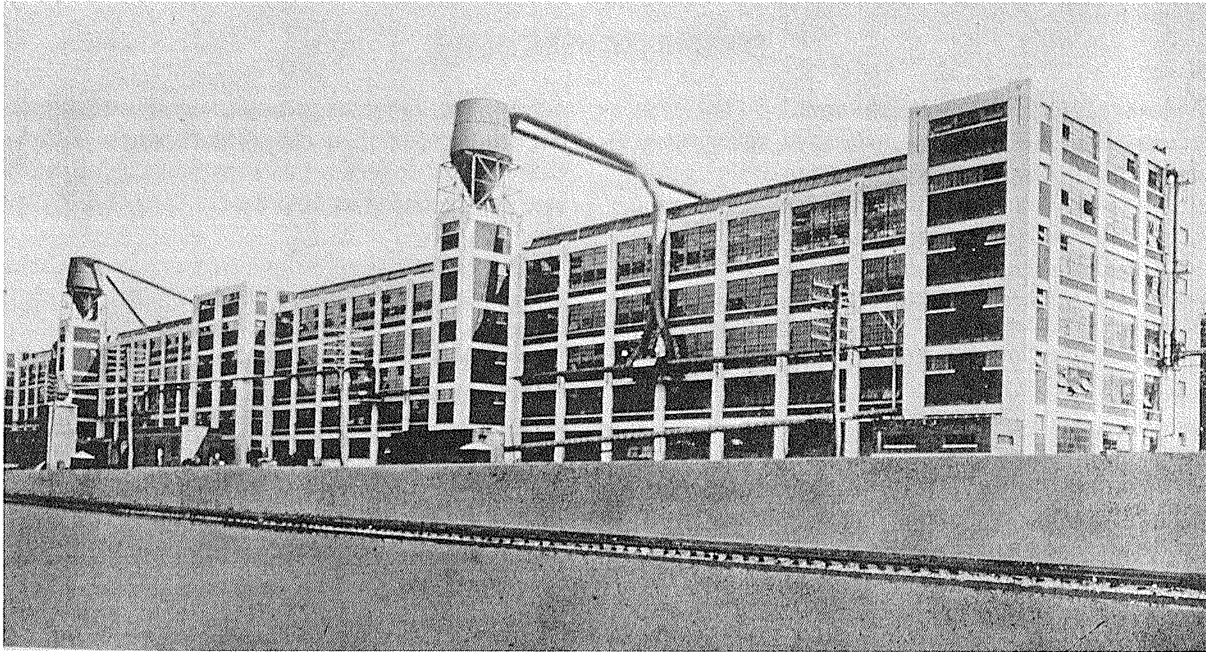
This misappropriation of Howard's model is a phenomenon that can be attributed to Bat'a's association with American factory towns. In her study of the American company town, *Building the Workingman's Paradise*, Margaret Crawford, writes,

> **American garden city enthusiasts defined the garden city in a very general way, often ignoring the most radical aspects of Howard's program, such as cooperative ownership, economic self-sufficiency, and innovative living arrangements. Used carelessly, the terms of garden city, model industrial village, and garden suburb became interchangeable.** [9]

It was this "Americanized" version of the garden city that Bat'a adopted, not for its value as a social instrument, but simply as the model that would benefit him most through increased production in the factory.

8 Letchworth was a "garden city" built in the English countryside starting in 1903. Howard served as the main force behind the project, however most of the economic initiatives that he had first proposed in his book were never fully carried through because of problems raising the initial capital necessary for construction and to subsequently generate the "rate-rents."

9 Margaret Crawford, *Building the Workingman's Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns* (New York : Verso, 1995), 75.



*Endicott-Johnson's "Victory Factory," built in 1918 to honor the end of World War I. This building had only recently been completed when Tomaš Bat'a visited the factory complex with some of his employees in 1919-20.*

This connection to the American company town is conspicuously absent in almost all accounts of Zlín's history.

Bat'a first came to the United States in 1904-5 with three of his young employees. By the time Tomáš embarked for America he had already built a small, steam-powered factory. He left for America because, "I did not trust my knowledge, acquired through work and travels in Europe, to start so many new ventures with confidence."[10] Along with three colleagues, he worked in American factories and gathered information about all parts of the business. During their year-long visit, Tomáš Bat'a investigated both new technologies and the far-reaching cultural implications of America for the Czech lands, then still a part of the Habsburg empire. He later acknowledged that this year working as a laborer in several Massachusetts shoe factories transformed his philosophy about industrial production. He gained technical skills and also learned how the factory functioned as a social mechanism that was dependent on meaningful human interaction at all levels within the company hierarchy.

His experiences in the American factories instilled what may be called an "American" work ethic in this young Czech, who would subsequently build his empire on the principles of American scientific management. American factories were being revolutionized by new machine-driven production methods which changed the way that workers performed their tasks and included the introduction of the assembly line, eight-hour workdays and better safety and training procedures. Bat'a was most impressed with the higher level of integration between the workers and their managers in these factories, due in part to the cooperative nature of the task. He wrote,

> **I liked in America the better and more human relations between the worker and the entrepreneur. I am a master, you are masters; I am a businessman, you are a businessman. I want that such a system of life should be created between us at Zlín. I want that we should somehow be equal.** [11]

His now famous Bat'a system was the response to this time in America; it redefined for him what would constitute a good company, both in economic and sociological terms. It was not so much the importation of technology that was necessary, instead a new

[10] Bat'a, 19.

[11] Pavitt, 35.

individualized corporate culture needed to be introduced to his employees. He was given an opportunity to greatly expand his workforce when the Austrian government signed a contract with him to make boots for their soldiers fighting the war.

In 1918, when Czechoslovakia gained its independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, much of the success of the new country depended on its ability to exploit the existing means of production in a post-imperial, post-war economy. It was within this environment that Bat'a returned with some of his employees to the United States in 1919-20 for a tour of industrial sites. [12] They visited the Ford Factory outside of Detroit and the Endicott Johnson Shoe Company in upstate New York, as well as again spending time in the shoe-making district of eastern Massachusetts.[13] The trip was an opportunity for Bat'a to re-examine those aspects of the American system which had first interested him in 1905.

Wartime innovations had profoundly changed the post-1918 landscape of the American factory. The workforce had diversified to include many women, new machines were involved with the production of shoes, and reinforced steel construction was now the standard, since factories could be built more quickly and inexpensively. Bat'a anticipated being able to modernize his factories in accordance with the American model using his own profits from the war industry; however, the early postwar economic problems of the new country forced him to wait several years before beginning this process.

It was not until a period of workers' strikes and general production problems in 1924 that Bat'a decided that in order to keep his business thriving, he needed to integrate the employees into the hierarchy of the factory. He believed, perhaps correctly, that the unrest was due to their disassociation from the decision-making process within the corporation. It was at this point in his career where the legacy of his American experiences was most valuable. He firmly believed that happy employees would be more productive. Bat'a equated "happiness" with self-confidence, a strong family, and a sense of value to the community. To achieve this, he gained personal control not only within the private sphere, but also at work, where in Bat'a's case, his employees were compensated at a variable rate that depended on both the quality and quantity of their output.

He attributed this perception of worker satisfaction to his American counterparts. In a 1924 speech, he stated:

**The Highly Developed American Industry has already solved this extremely difficult problem, leading the rest of the world toward the only right way. –Certain American industrialists dedicated their enterprises to public service. By giving top priority to the interests of their customers and workers, they won their hearts. As a consequence, workers and customers stay faithful and favor that enterprise which made it its goal to serve them... The workers are better paid, the customers get better merchandise for very low prices and the enterprises are expanding almost daily...It is mainly a moral issue, In their hearts, these industrialists have given up all the advantages of their privileged situation assuring them comfortable life and became the first workers of their enterprises.** [14]

A detailed analysis of the "Bat'a System,"[15] as exemplified by the Zlín complex, is outside the scope of this paper. It is important to note, though, that this "system" was not novel and that many of Bat'a's innovations were taken directly from the American business model, as is evident from his outspoken admiration for American accomplishments. One element of his own invention was a system of workshop autonomy, whereby each department would function as an autonomous unit responsible for its collective work. Each of these units was responsible for a particular product or point in the production process. In 1930, there were 250 autonomous departments that interacted as if they were separate entities, issuing invoices for all transactions and buying and selling

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[12] Pavitt, 35.

[13] Unfortunately there is no written statement by Bat'a about this visit, it is only speculation as to how much the factory architecture may have influenced him. Bat'a was certainly aware of Ford's management techniques by this late date.

[14] Bat'a, 80.

[15] For the most comprehensive discussion of this system, see Paul Devinat, "Working Conditions in a Rationlised Undertaking, Part I and II," *International Labour Review* (Jan.-Feb. 1930): 45-69, 163- 186. The article, published in two parts over the course of two months, states in simple terms the main characteristics of the Bat'a system. The editor adds that the article is excerpted from a larger report that could not be published in the journal and to my knowledge has never been published in full.

materials with each other at competitive prices.[16] Within the unit, each employee was compensated both for his/her own work and for the collective work, based on a payscale which was differentiated by age, sex, and experience.

This incentive-based organization succeeded in increasing production and worker satisfaction. Because of the region's reliance on agriculture, recruiting was never a problem, especially in the winter when the fields were non-operational. Bat'a soon realized, however, that in order to employ such a sizable workforce, he needed to provide more housing and services within the community. It was at this point that the architecture of the town of Zlín began to develop beyond the initial settlement that supported the factory and the historic old town center. A master plan for the city had been in place before World War I and a small residential portion of the plan was built. The designer of the plan was the well-known Czech architect Jan Kotěra, who also built an art nouveau style villa for the Bat'a family in 1911.

The war and the subsequent independence of Czechoslovakia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, forced Bat'a to abandon this master plan. It appears that his 1919-20 visit to the United States was partly a fact-gathering mission for the anticipated construction of more factories and workers' housing, intending to move away from the more romantic image that had been provided by Kotěra. Although this is not expressed anywhere by Bat'a, the choice to visit the River Rouge Plant in Detroit and the Endicott Johnson Shoe Company in upstate New York, where another large shoe manufacturer had recently built a housing complex for its workers, suggests that he was already planning for his own city's growth. [17] As with all other aspects of the Bat'a organization, by the 1920s architectural design services were provided by an in-house staff of architects, who answered directly to Bat'a. Like the other 250 divisions within the company, the employees worked in a collective environment; although certain names were assigned to particular projects, the number of architects who were allowed to design individual projects seems rather extensive.[18]

The most important members of the architecture department were František Gahura and Vladimir Karfík. Gahura, who had been a pupil of Kotěra, came to Zlín to become chief architect after his university thesis project for a town hall was built there in 1923. Vladimir Karfík was named chief architect after his return from the United States in 1930, where he had worked for Holabird and Root, a large Chicago office that was known for its skyscraper designs. Karfík had originally become well-known among Czech architects for briefly working with Le Corbusier on the Plan Voison in 1925. He was also a student of Frank Lloyd Wright's at Taliesin East and West. Together these two men were responsible for the majority of the larger building projects between 1923 and 1948. They designed buildings for Zlín as well as many of the other Bat'a factories in locations around the world, including England, Switzerland, Poland, India, and other parts of Czechoslovakia.

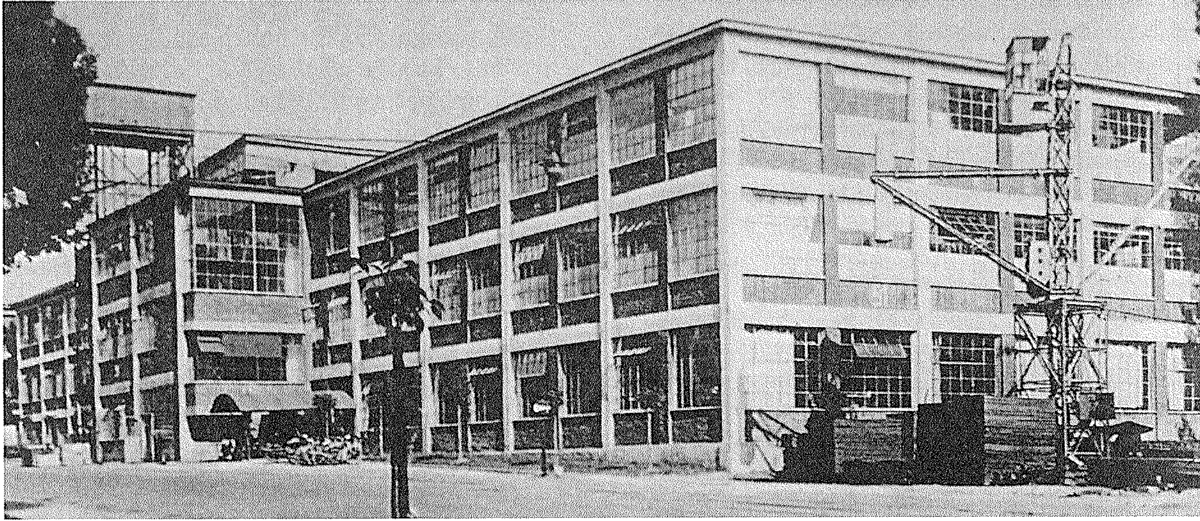
Like the other parts of his enterprise, Bat'a streamlined the architectural production with a standard building module that was approximately 20 x 20 feet. Structurally, the buildings were either reinforced concrete or steel skeleton construction, with a variety of cladding materials. This module dictated the architecture of the factories down to the smallest cottages. The most unusual use of the system was the memorial built for Tomáš Bat'a after his death, designed by Gahura. This structure was completely encased in a glass curtain wall; inside hung the airplane from his fatal crash, the silhouette of which could be seen through the glass. Gahura described the intentions behind the use of this particular measurement,

**Ever since the beginning we have tried to build up the town in such a way as to grow organically out of the industrial architecture forms and with the new conception of life and work of an industrial city. The main influence on Zlín's appearance has been the factory building itself. It is the "leitmotif" of Zlín's architecture. It is repeated in numerous variations in all structures, serving public purposes, schools, dormitories, community house, social welfare institute, etc. The architect's invention had to**

16 Devinat, 60.

17 Pavitt, 35.

18 Vladimir Šlapeta, *Bata :architektura a urbanismus, 1910-1950* (Zlin : Statni galerie ve Zline, 1991). See the section that details the variations of the houses, there are a number of architects who were allowed to design variations suggesting a different approach than in offices where the chief designer's name is attached to all projects in the office. This type of office would mirror what has already been written about the organization of the workshops.



*An example of one of the many factories built in Zlín during the 1920s and 30s on the prescribed 20' x 20' construction model.*

**develop all lay-outs starting from this structural, industrial standard.** [19]

Unlike the romantic garden cities of England in which a particular architectural style was not integral to the concept of the city, Bat'a conceived his entire complex as an extension of the factory, both functionally and stylistically.

Within this streamlined system, the scope of the work produced in the architectural design office is astounding. Beginning in 1925, the construction of a workers' housing complex, which would eventually house almost 40,000 workers, began on a large scale. Although there was an existing historic town near the factory, it was apparent that it could no longer serve the exploding population that was soon to be employed at the factory. Modern Zlín was divided into three zones: residential, manufacturing and civic. Each family was given their own small home that they rented from the company for the token sum of one crown a month. Unmarried employees lived in communal apartment buildings. The community buildings were concentrated in the civic zone, which included a movie theater, a large department store, a modern high-rise hotel, churches and new schools. All of the buildings were designed to be erected quickly and inexpensively with a minimal amount of wasted materials.

This concept of the city as a literal extension of the factory is not only a formal architectural condition, but it also propels the social concept behind this factory town. The 1930 *International Labor Review* report makes a bold statement about Bat'a's supposed humanitarian efforts to improve the lives of his workers:

**It thus seems that Bata in the course of his advance towards large scale industry has been sorry to see the qualities he had been able to appreciate in his father's workshop dying out in his workers and has tried to restore to them, together with a sense of their responsibility, a little of that professional conscience and interest in their work that were the pride of the old-time handicraftsmen. There is nothing surprising in such a feeling, but it should not be misunderstood. For Bata, philanthropy is a word devoid of meaning. His driving force is solely the wish to increase profit.** [20]

Karfík recalled the atmosphere that he encountered upon his arrival in Zlín,

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[19] Šlapeta, 105.

[20] Devinat, 59.

**Tomáš Bat'a had a motto: "Work as a collective, live as an individual." Town architect F.L. Gahura told me with a smile, "that the chief believes the man who has a flat in a building with a garden is more stable, and instead of following politics would rather potter about in the garden or sit out on the lawn, so he doesn't go to the pub or political meetings."** [21]

This attitude resonates with the American approach to employee relations during the prosperous era of "welfare capitalism." Two American examples that closely echo the project undertaken in Zlín are the towns built by the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Corporation and the cities built by a large manufacturer of pre-fabricated industrial housing, the Aladdin Company.

As one of the stops on Bat'a's second American visit, the Endicott-Johnson settlement, known as Endicott and Johnson City, New York, is an appropriate place to look for points of similarity with Zlín. This company was a large shoe manufacturer that was a friendly competitor of the Bat'a organization.[22] According to Gerald Zahavi's history of the company, Endicott-Johnson's greatest strength was the personal interaction between the management and the employees.[23] Like the approach taken by Bat'a, this relationship involved a certain amount of public propaganda, along with some genuine interest in the welfare of the employees, but only to the extent that they were working more productively in the factory.

Loyalty was the backbone of the Endicott-Johnson organization. In order to sustain the enthusiasm for the company among the employees, social programs were instituted, such as profit-sharing, free health care, quality schools, and low-cost housing, which the company built and sold to its employees based on their performance in the factories. Many of the initiatives that were successful for Endicott-Johnson were adapted by Bat'a after unrest in his factories in 1924; subsequently a similar series of benefits were offered to the employees in Zlín and the other Bat'a sites.

Architecturally, the towns of Endicott and Johnson were built in a traditional style, with small two-story houses, low-rise commercial boulevards and recreational facilities. The large factory complex was in the center of the town and served as the focal point for the development. In 1918, the year before Bat'a's visit, the company had built a new factory, which they named "The Victory Factory" (see illustration on page 29), in honor of the end of the war. This building appears to have been the model for Bat'a's 20 x 20 module and all further architecture in Zlín.[24] Endicott-Johnson, however, did not conceive of their construction project in the same integrated fashion as Bat'a, and the modern aesthetic in Zlín was absent from the more traditional Endicott-Johnson settlement.

The second potential source for the approach taken in Zlín and other Bat'a settlements is the Aladdin Company.[25] This American business offered its customers entire industrial settlements that were pre-fabricated, delivered, and assembled by the company on site. About their products they wrote,

**The Aladdin Company was established fifteen years ago on the fundamental principle that the construction of dwelling houses was susceptible to the same standardized manufacturing methods as steel building fabrication, automobile production or any other modern industrial activity.** [26]

Their clients were American and European businesses that needed quick, inexpensive housing for their workers. By 1920, their cities included a variety of building types, such as houses, churches, community centers, and schools. Since many of these towns were located near factories and far from the traditional urban centers, Aladdin argued that the location prohibited the usual type of architectural development. The company would provide everything including their own building materials, construction workers, industrial housing "experts," engineers and architects.

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[21] Šlapeta, 106.

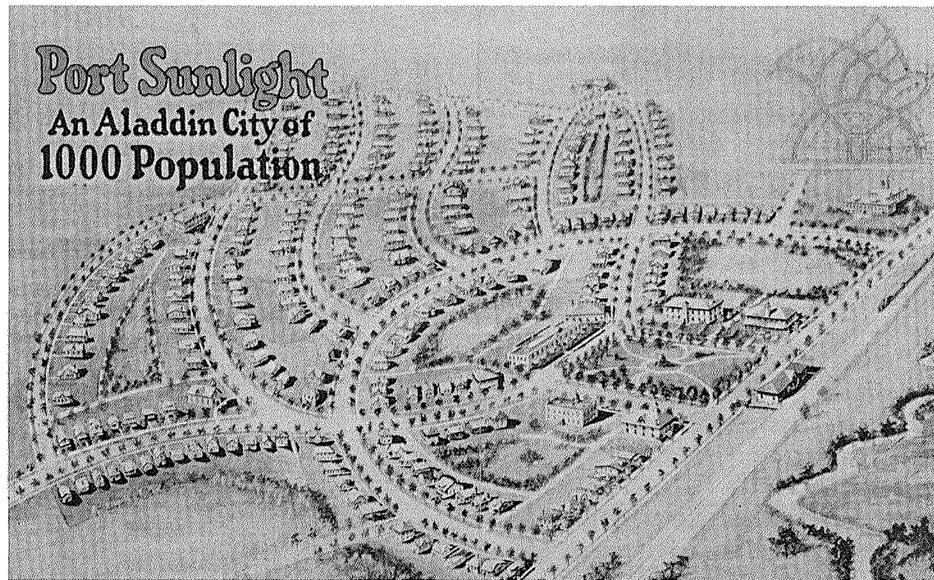
[22] Thomas J. Bata, *Bata, Shoemaker to the World* (Toronto: Stoddard Publishing Co., 1990), 25.

[23] For more information on the Endicott-Johnson Corporation, see Gerald Zahavi, *Workers, Managers, and Welfare Capitalism* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

[24] The extent to which this factory was simply an example of the normal industrial type needs further investigation. For my purposes here, it is not so important since there is a record of his visit to this specific factory.

[25] There is no evidence that Bat'a visited or knew of the Aladdin Company, although the company was headquartered in Michigan, where Bat'a toured the Ford's River Rouge plant during the trip. This example is used to suggest the larger idea of the American company town that was developing around this time.

[26] The Aladdin Company, *Aladdin Plan of Industrial Housing* (Bay City, Michigan, 1920), 4.




*This illustration, taken from a 1920 Aladdin catalog, is one example of the prefabricated industrial cities that could be ordered and subsequently assembled on site by the Aladdin Company.*

The client could choose from a number of site plans in a variety of patterns, many of which were illustrated in their catalogues and given names such as "Port Sunlight" and "Garden City." The illustrations show the towns from an aerial perspective, floating in seemingly random patterns against the flat, completely white landscapes of Aladdin's imaginary empty planet. Each city was organized in a unique rationalized pattern around and away from a center where the community buildings were located. Some of the patterns were geometric, others resembled organic shapes like flower petals, and many imitated the style of the English garden city. The homes were modest and regularized with pitched roofs and front porches, there were 60 one- and two-story variations.[27] The company's catalogue describes the purpose of the cities:

**Aladdin Cities were planned, designed and prepared primarily for rapid completion, and yet built upon established principles of health and comfort in modern civic life. The usual preliminary delays incident to studying the situation are eliminated by Aladdin Service. City building is a new art. Its relation to the profession of city planning is that the latter is merely a part of the work of the organization engaged in city building. The profession of city planning begins and ends on the drafting board. City building, on the contrary, is practical work of experienced engineers, contractors and builders.**

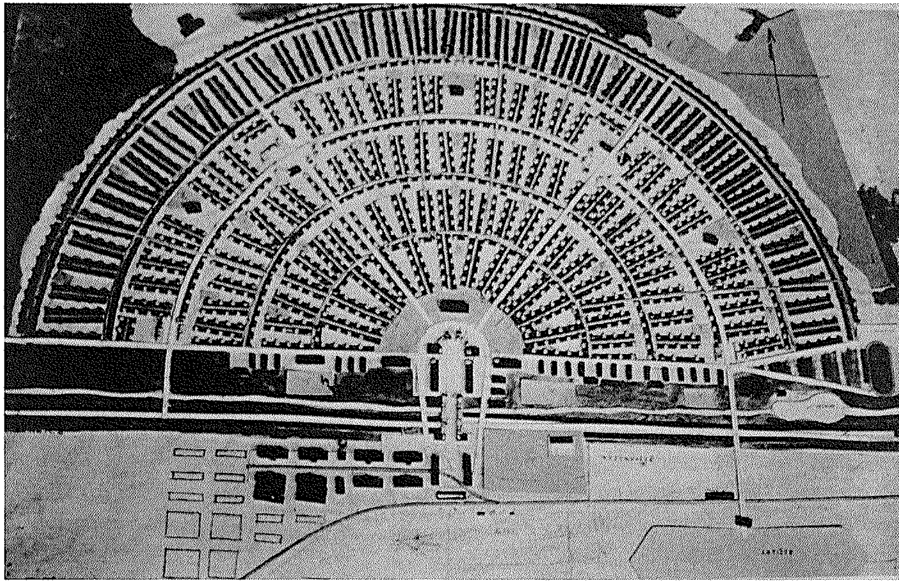
**The responsibility of city building, which embraces every branch of constructive and engineering science, is the task for the larger organization with wide experience and tested efficiency. Significant, therefore, that this new task be initiated and fostered by the Aladdin organization, the largest of its kind in the building and manufacturing industry.** [28]

These Aladdin cities are the "American garden cities" to which Margaret Crawford refers. The company has appropriated the terminology and aesthetic of the Howard model without any real basis for this claim since like Bat'a, their philosophy does not follow any of the principles put forth in Howard's text.

These plans can be compared to Bat'a town plans from the mid-1930s which exhibit a similar objectification and tabula rasa mentality. Bat'a's architecture department was responsible for the design

[27] The *Aladdin Plan of Industrial Housing* illustrates numerous examples.

[28] *Aladdin Plan of Industrial Housing*, 10



*This model, for an unrealized Bat'a company town from the 1930s, shares many characteristics with the similarly stylized Aladdin cities.*

and construction of all of the company's new industrial settlements across the world. Like Aladdin, Bat'a provided all of the services from within the company. For each new site, Bat'a would send what Eric J. Jenkins describes as a "colony package," which included "building and town plans, construction supervisors, formwork and manufacturing machinery, a cadre of instructors and their families, as well as the Bat'a management and social programs officers."[29] This insured that the company could control the quality and cost of their factory towns in the same manner that they directed the production of their shoes.

In conclusion, I would like to refer back to my initial question about how to approach Modernism in Czechoslovakia. I would argue that what is at stake here are the boundaries between the "modern" and the "avant-garde," since it should be apparent that although the building of Zlín certainly falls under the rubric of Modernism, we are not within the polemic of the avant-garde, nor was that ever the intention of this businessman. The Bat'a Shoe Company adopted an architectural style which promoted its place as an industrial leader in inter-war Czechoslovakia. This occurred without the same political or social agenda that the presence of this style suggested in other circumstances. It is necessary to move the discussion beyond the traditional understanding of "Modern Architecture," in order to see these multiple operations occurring under this larger heading.

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[29] Jenkins, 64