

LAYING BARE: THE FATE OF AUTHORSHIP IN EARLY SOVIET CULTURE

by

Petre M. Petrov

B. A. in Bulgarian Philology, Sofia University St. Kliment Okhridski, 1997

M. A. in Russian, University of Pittsburgh, 2000

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FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

This dissertation was presented

by

Petre Petrov

It was defended on

5 December, 2006

and approved by

Paul Bové, PhD

Evgeny Dobrenko, PhD

Peter Machamer, PhD

Vladimir Padunov, PhD

Dissertation Director: Nancy Condee, PhD

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Petre M. Petrov, PhD

University of Pittsburgh

The thesis examines the transition from post-revolutionary Soviet culture (1917-1928) to the culture of the Stalinsist period, arguing for a crucial transformation in the status of agency, subjecthood, and authorship between these two historical and cultural frames. I contend that Soviet culture has much to tell us about that momentous event of the twentieth century, the “death of author” or, more broadly, the “death of the subject”—an event that Western thought has illuminated from various perspectives (philosophy, psychoanalysis, linguistics, structural anthropology, political economy, etc.). The analysis proceeds from a consideration of prominent literary and aesthetic theories of the 1910s and 1920s—Formalism, the sociological criticism of the “Peverzev school,” the artistic platforms of left avant-garde, the ideological positions of RAPP, etc.—in an attempt to present these often divergent currents of thought and praxis as homologous, as participating in the same “act”: the cultural act of modernism. Characteristic of this act, I argue, is the attempt to transcend the dimension of the individual subjective and, in this very transcendence, institute an impersonal, suprahuman objectivity. The symbolic price for reaching this state of superhuman truth is the “instrumentalization” of human agency. The concrete result of the modernist act is Stalinism: a world in which the very production of truth and reality is coterminous with the ritualistic surrender of agency and autonomy. In the thesis’ second part, I discuss socialist realism as a concrete instance of this surrender, seeking to

demonstrate to what extent the position of the so-called “representing subject” in socialist realism is antinomic with the notion of authorship.

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The existence of proletarian dictatorship is not enough to influence culture. For this, a true plastic hegemony is needed, a hegemony that would speak through me without my knowing it, or even against my will. I do not feel this.
Boris Pasternak

INTRODUCTION: THE DEATHS OF THE AUTHOR

Farmhand

Who are you?
Whose are you?

Things

What do you mean, “whose”?

Farmhand

I mean, what is your master’s name?

Things

We have no master.
We belong to no one.

(Mayakovsky, *Mystery-Bouffe*)

Something happened to the author in the century just past, something bad. It was even announced that the author is no more—a startling announcement. But what does it mean? What exactly happened?

Any investigation into this alleged fatality must begin, I believe, with two “happenings” of the early twentieth century, happenings that took place in two patently incongruous dimensions. The first of them is the dislocation between sign and referent that has severed, for an indefinite time, the reality of the text from any reality “out there.” The other is the emergence, in a Europe still committed to the values of the Enlightenment, of oppressive political regimes that conscripted artistic creativity for the production of prescribed realities. The first of these happenings precipitated what might be called the “theoretical death of the author”—the moment in European thought when the author, as the last and most tenacious of the text’s referents, was demoted to the level of the signified, alongside the text’s other fictions. The

second happening amounted to a second death, this one palpably more real, if less universal, than the first: a death in history, which occurs when a political power wrestles authorship away from the individual, thus making him/her into a mere craftsman of the mandated text.

These two deaths appear, at first, to be ontologically disparate. One is a concrete demise, occurring in very specific historical circumstances, in which historically concrete human beings submit to very real pressures, surrender precious “artistic freedoms,” renounce, recant, resign, rewrite. The other is an abstract death occurring “only in theory,” as if only in effigy, for it concerns not the actual person of the author, but only his immaterial ghost within the text. In the most famous obituary to the author, Roland Barthes’s article of 1968, the exorcism of this ghost is accompanied by a distinct feeling of relief: rescued from what has never been more than a cultural construct, a historically contingent apparition, the text is finally left to itself and to the internal freedom it has always potentially possessed. There is certainly a sense in which this second death is also a historically specific event. How can it not be, if the birth and precarious existence of the author belong to a moment in history?¹ Yet that which is set free—the true life of the text in the revel of the “writerly” and the true calling of the reader in the infinite disentangling of textual traces—all this is trans-historical (“No doubt it has always been that way” [Barthes 119]).

How can this theoretical “destruction of the Author” (Barthes 120), which sees itself as a revolutionary act, an act of liberation,² be analogous to that other destruction, which authorship

¹ “The author is a modern figure, a product of our society insofar as, emerging from the Middle Ages and English empiricism, French rationalism and the personal faith of the reformation, it discovered the prestige of the individual, of, as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person’” (Barthes 119).

² “In [...] this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a ‘secret,’ an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), *liberates* what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly *revolutionary* since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law” (Barthes 122; emphasis added).

suffers at the hands of totalitarian power? One is a cause for celebration; the other elicits morose historical and ethical reflections. In one instance, someone jubilates at the removal of an obstacle that bars supra-individual forces and energies—the forces and energies of discourse—from taking legitimate possession of the text. In the other, someone bewails the removal of a piece of human interiority that bars the supra-individual “truths” of totalitarian discourse from writing themselves directly into the artistic text.

Despite this difference in mood and the apparent heterogeneity of what is being buried—in one case, a cultural apparition, in the other, artistic individuality and freedom—how can we not suspect that these two funerals take place on the same ground, that they are made possible by the same positivity? This common ground opens with the realization that some significant part of the individual, or, “as it is more nobly put, the ‘human person’” (Barthes 119), perhaps precisely the part that defines him as a human person and individual, constitutes an obstacle. Then, the demand is not long in coming for the author to disappear into “a prerequisite impersonality, to reach that point where only language acts, ‘performs,’ and not ‘me’” (Barthes 119). If, in this dictum of Barthes’s, we decide to replace “language” with, say, “the truth of socialist construction,” we will find ourselves squarely within the critical discourse of socialist realism and the imperative of impersonality peculiar to it. There, too, some supra-individual reality seeks realization in the artistic text, eliding the human subject on its way.

The fate of the author is, unquestionably, related to the broader question of the subject and his/her fate in the twentieth century. The same ambiguity between thought and history obtains for the latter as it does for the former. It is none other than twentieth-century thought that has shown most decisively the “decentered,” insubstantial nature of the human subject. But it is also the history of the twentieth century that has derided most violently that same subject’s

assumed mastery of experience. It is between these two facts that the ambiguity opens: does the “subversion of the subject” (Jacques Lacan) have the status of truth, or does it have the character of an event? The intellectual critique of the subject—in areas as diverse as psychology, literary and political theory, economics, linguistics, and anthropology—has unfolded together with, and yet somehow outside, the traumatic histories that have actively erased the subject’s inherited dignity. From the point of view of philosophical/theoretical thought, it has seemed that history can do no more than furnish a violent proof of what knowledge has already discovered to be the primordial insubstantiality of the individual self. Yet, by simply turning around and taking the viewpoint of history, we would be justified in asking why the radical critique of the subject took place at the time that it did, what made it possible in that particular moment?

Do we have to side with either the historicizing of thought or the hermeneutics of history? Do we have to decide whether history has the power of relativizing the achievements of knowledge, or whether knowledge has the right to treat history as a testing ground for its truths? Is it a matter of choosing allegiances? I think not.

The subversion of the subject and the death of the author are not merely the conquests of some happy cognitive awakening, after centuries of pre-critical slumber, which have allowed the subject to enjoy undeserved cynosure. But neither are they merely symptoms of concrete historical traumas, after which and because of which whatever in the human subject had referred to autonomy and exclusivity can no longer be sustained in critical thought. It is much more likely that this history and this knowledge are engendered in some third place that subtends them both. Between the accident of history and the generality of theoretical thought there is perhaps a deeper reality, in relation to which history would stand as less “accidental” and knowledge—as less universal.

We should inquire about this common ground, equally beyond the actuality of history and the ideality of thought, beyond history which carries thought as one happening among others and thought which “collects” history within the timeless stretch of its cognitions. We must learn to inhabit that space where knowledge, while abiding in its historicity, does not relinquish its claim to truth, and where history, while coextensive with knowledge, does not, for that, acquire necessity and universality.

Early Soviet culture (1910s-1930s) allows us to follow the destinies of authorship in both these dimensions. The post-revolutionary decade (1918-1928) abounded in artistic doctrines and theories of creativity that challenged from a variety of perspectives the authority and autonomy of the author. The next decade saw the institution of socialist realism and the thoroughgoing regimentation of cultural production in all spheres within the newly-created artistic unions, directly sponsored and controlled by the state. Within these institutional confines, there were people who casually called themselves “authors” (it is well-known that socialist realism proudly proclaimed the unprecedented freedom of individual creativity in the land of the Soviets), but their authorship was only nominal.³ The connection between the two cultural frames is not simply causal. It is difficult to hold that socialist realism “implemented” the theoretical ideas of the 1920s. Speaking against such an assertion is the violence with which Stalinist culture rejected all the theoretical heritage of the previous period.

And yet, a connection exists. The two deaths of the author are continuous. They are really not two happenings, but one. The goal of the present study is to both follow and grasp

³ In a recent monograph, *Aesthetics of Alienation*, Evgenii Dobrenko has connected these two orders of events by a straightforward line of socio-cultural genesis. According to him, the impersonal and collectivist visions of artistic creation expressed, ideationally, the advent of a new class of cultural producers onto the post-revolutionary scene: the lumpen-proletarians. In the struggle for hegemony, their inability to measure up to the established standards of artistic quality leads them to revolt against the haloed institution of individual authorship. As the lumpen-proletarians emerge victorious from the cultural struggles of the 1920s, socialist realism becomes the institutional and ideological framework within which the willful surrender of personal initiative, originality, and identity are normativized.

conceptually this continuity. In its general movement, the exposition will follow what might be called the “road to socialist realism.” The starting point will be the late 1910s-early 1920s, a time when socialist realism did not yet exist as a formulated doctrine, institutional framework, or as a conscious praxis. What existed was the young Soviet state and, within it—a virulent cultural debate on the nature of art, its role in history and society, and, most importantly, its character and role in the history that had just begun and the society that was already in the making. This step back in time from the formal birth of socialist realism (1934)—a rather standard procedure in Sovietology—does not seek to define some ideal genesis. Something that is not ideal in nature cannot have an ideal genesis. Socialist realism is not to be grasped at the convergence of ideas on the nature and function of artistic representation, ideas of more or less distant historical provenance, which somehow congealed into a unified doctrine in the first half of the 1930s. As soon as such an ideal origin is posited, we are forced to remember that, in its nativity, Stalinist socialist realism is as much an aesthetic program as it is a political act that sought to regulate the cultural sphere of its time; it is as much an arrangement of representations in accordance with ideal aesthetic prescripts, as it is an arrangement of people and their activities. Some critics have gone as far as to claim that socialist realism is much less effective in the stipulation of concrete poetics, than it is in the ordering of psychologies as anterior to the artistic text,⁴ that its true field of action and authority is less the surface of representation, than it is the reality of human attitudes, wills, and behaviors.⁵

⁴ Taking a clue from Stalin’s famous description of writers as “engineers of human souls,” Evgenii Dobrenko has argued repeatedly (*Formovka; Metafora*) that the first object of this engineering is the Soviet writer him-/herself.

⁵ In the insightful essay, “Censorship as the Triumph of Life,” Mikhail Iampol'skii addresses the “prophylactic” function of Stalinist criticism. He observes that censoring interventions in Stalinist culture are often directed beyond the text, seeking to “remedy” the very life of the artist. The censored text is taken as a symptom of a vital malfunction in the organism of the author-patient, for which criticism must supply appropriate treatment.

Whether we accept such a position or not, we find ourselves once again in that—by now familiar—space between two orders of “happening”: one apparently “ideal”—the movement interior to representation—the other apparently “real,” inasmuch as it concerns real people, institutions, dependencies, pressures, etc. To confine the culture of socialist realism to only one of these movements, or even to give one of them priority, seems inappropriate. As impossible as it is to explain the genesis of socialist realism with reference to antecedent thought (that of Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, Chernishevskii and Dobroliubov, Pisarev and Plekhanov, or Gor'kii and Voronskii), it is equally impossible to situate this genesis squarely within the political, to find it solely in what Foucault would call the “technologies of power,” and consider the artistic texts of Stalinist culture as mere byproducts of these technologies.

Socialist realism was founded in 1934. This is perhaps the best way to put it, inasmuch as “founded” suggests the prior existence of a ground on which socialist realism—in its double nature as an artistic method and political institution—could rest. In 1934 this ground was already there, it was configured. If I return to an earlier point in time, it is in order both to demonstrate precisely this fact—that the ground was there, that it preexisted the formal birth of socialist realism—as well as to map out its landscape.

Part I offers an analytical survey of some of the most prominent artistic and theoretical platforms of the post-revolutionary decade. These include (in the order of presentation): the theories of the Formalists, the sociological method of Valerian Pereverzev and his followers, the “science of organization” (“tektology”) expounded by Aleksandr Bogdanov, the constructivist movement, and the ideology of the “Onguardists.” The analysis of these discourses does not aim at capturing some agreement, or even vague similarity, on the level of stated positions. In those years the allegiances were few and far between, the antagonisms and collisions—almost a matter

of good tone.⁶ Yet beneath the sometimes violent discords between various artistic organizations, academic groupings, and ideological parties, there persisted one secret and stubborn life common to them all. It animated the thought of the Formalists as well as that of their Marxist critics, the aspirations of the neo-Futurists, as well as the political maneuverings of their sworn enemies from RAPP. This was not the life of thought, not the stirring of some essential idea, which the opponents, in the heat of their dispute, did not recognize as common. It was the life of the object in general, the existence of “this,” before “this” became concretized as this or that, before it was apprehended as “form,” “content,” “product,” “word,” “consciousness,” “history,” etc. In 1927 Vladimir Mayakovsky wrote:

The person who produced “this” was called an “author”; authors were divided into poets and prosaists, the remaining people were readers, and an author was linked to a reader by means of a book. Readers paid money for books.

In addition, there were those who revolved around books, juggled them, or didn't let them go, or drove up the price of a book—this was criticism.

The Revolution upset this quite simple literary system.

Prose was destroyed because of the absence of time for writing and reading, because of a skepticism toward fictional events, and because of the pallor of these fictions as compared to life. There appeared poems which no one printed because there was no paper, no one had money for books, but books were sometimes printed on money which had gone out of use. The glory of writing authors was replaced by the glory of nameless letters and documents [...]. (“Broadening” 260)

⁶ The following humorous observation made by Maksim Gor'kii captures the atmosphere of that period: “If A belongs to a group B, then all other letters of the alphabet are for him either inimical or nonexistent.” (qtd. Dobrenko, *Formovka* 430).

It is difficult to agree with Mayakovsky that the profound transformation of which he speaks should be traced to the socio-economic effects of the October Revolution as to its primary determinant. But I am ready to take a clue from his words that in the 1920s something had already changed in the being of “this,” where “this” is not just “literature” or “text,” but is any “this” over which the human subject had stood, previously, in the role of a sovereign originator.

I would like to show how this role is being contested, as the various cultural discourses register, each in its own way and from its own particular position, the insufficiency of the individual subjective. I will not be writing the history of organizations and movements, but an abbreviated biography of the otherness—“this”—which both knowledge and praxis take as their field. In this field, which is, most broadly, the arena of the cultural act, I hope to delineate something like a common “plot,” a shared order of “happening,” in which most heterogeneous objects participate. I will claim that it is precisely in this general order of happening—distinct both from purely cognitive achievements or the factuality of historical occurrence—that the (single) death of the author should be located.

The insubstantiality or insufficiency of the subjective—this essentially negative fact—has a positive, enabling aspect. The displacing of the subject from the center-stage of creation instantiates a new kind of truth. This happens in a single motion, single act: as individual consciousness and will are found incapable of accounting for the essential characteristics of “this,” there opens, beyond their limits, the territory of the “objective.” Its shapes are different: for the Formalists, objective are the workings of the “constructive principle” (against the traditional emphasis on intended meaning and expression); for the Pereverzevians, objective are the workings of the “socio-psychological complex” (once again, versus the author’s intent and explicit semantics of the text); for the constructivists, objective are the dynamics of social

movement in its various instances (in opposition to the movement of individual invention); for the Omguardists, objective is the “knowing” of class ideology (rather than the unmediated knowing by which the individual proletarian consciousness apprehends the world).

And yet, there is something common about these various objectivities. They share the character of systematic totality that works autonomously, which here means: irrespective of whether it is apprehended in individual consciousness or not. They are figurations of an automatic agency to which the agency of the individual must submit willfully, since it is always-already effectively determined/eclipsed by it. On the broadest plane of happening—the stage of historical events—the very emergence and constitution of the Soviet state were seen as the manifestation of a super-personal truth about history and society—a truth that was working its way from out of latency with the implacable reliability of a pre-programmed device. The revolutionary act, then, even when it is most violent, can be seen as being, in fact, rather obedient. It is an act in which the individual adjoins his agency to the agency by which history is performing its own analysis. (Oximoronically, in “losing himself,” “forgetting himself,” the subject “realizes himself,” for his newly-discovered reality is precisely this: that he be instrumental *to* that imperious agency.)

A variation of it, the creative act is similarly disciplined. In it and through it, the latent essential nature of the object is demonstrated. In the practice of productionism, as one instance, the essential nature of the thing is determined by the range of its potential social appropriations. Hence, the creation of the thing is nothing other than the practical bringing-out of what it actually (if covertly) is. In this sense, to produce means to “lay bare,” to analyze through making. The statement can be applied with equal validity to the Futurist making of poetic texts, the remaking of the visual world in much of the experimental cinema of the period, the anti-

literary practice of “reportage,” the anti-illusionist theatrical productions of Vsevolod Meyerhold, etc. All these modernist projects seek to effect the disappearance of the (artistic) subject not only theoretically, but also “practically” (here and later, I will leave without consideration the question of whether their actual productions live up to the blueprint of the project). This is the real object of their making, the actuality of what they “produce.”

With the doctrines of the Omguardists (Chapter Five) we find ourselves on the very territory where socialist realism will be first institutionalized: the making of the Soviet writer. In their cultural project, implemented within the institutional framework of RAPP, the writer serves as the object or “material” that must be methodically analyzed back to an essential nature. This essential nature is “true class consciousness,” or “class ideology,” as distinct from spontaneous class being and its immediate reflection into consciousness. From the latter, the subject must be “conveyed” to the former. The ideological work of the Omguardists was, in this sense, the mere implementation of an objective “principle” or “tendency.” Like the different constructivist “makings,” the making of the writer is the facilitation, letting-be, in the present, of a hitherto concealed objectivity: the objectivity (or, simply, truth) of class subjecthood.

Summarily, two things take place in the plot we follow: 1) something true is brought out of concealment and instantiated (as a now-manifest “construction,” “organization,” “operative principle,” “tectonic,” “texture,” etc.); 2) in the same motion, the individual expressive “self” fades away, dissolved into the impersonal mechanism of a cognitive or practical “operation” (“method”), accessory and transparent to the essential operations of history, society, language, consciousness, etc. It is important to understand that these two things are interrelated, that they indeed belong to a single order of happening. In other words, the constitution of otherness (“this”), its production in the dimension of the “objective,” is constitutively predicated on the

self-induced fading of the “I,” its relegation to the impersonal. This is one event. And yet, as Hegel would say, this realization is “for us” (the observers of the cultural scene); it is only implicit in the otherness we are observing. When it becomes explicit, or “for itself,” we find ourselves crossing over from the 1920s into the 1930s, from post-revolutionary into Stalinist culture, from the first to the second part of this study.

Chapter One of Part II elaborates the theoretical consequences of the (extended) happening observed previously. The argument aims at a working notion of the cultural act, which would encompass two correlative aspects: the motion by which something comes to count as true or real, and the motion by which someone “finds one’s place” and, thereby, also “counts.” The curious possibility mentioned, parenthetically, a couple of pages back—that the individual could “realize” himself precisely as he abstains from individual expression—forces us, I believe, to reexamine the models through which we think about culture and creation.⁷ If the “subject”—by which, here, I mean individuated human existence as capable of autonomous agency—and, by the same token, the “author,” are just cultural products, the contingent representations under which people, for a certain stretch of history, represented to themselves their cultural being, should we not rethink the very question of cultural production? What produces in the plane where we find the figure of the subject itself as a product? Should we not postulate a prior and invariable dimension of the cultural act, where the relationship of man and otherness would not have yet received a determinate form and the vector of agency—its determinate direction?

This is, indeed, the dimension I would like to open in Chapter One with the correlated concepts of “mattering” and “manning.” Most generally, they designate the incipience (but also

⁷ And if the artistic doctrines of Soviet modernism are not enough to urge upon us such a reconsideration, we could think back to the icon painter of Medieval Rus. As Boris Uspenskii has argued brilliantly, for the icon to be true, the painter must “remove” himself from the picture, thus letting the divine image come through and imprint itself onto the board. But this individual self-effacement is still a form of fulfillment. Through it, the painter finds himself “in God” and, hence, in ontological plenitude. He truly belongs, “counts,” is.

non-substantiality) of the true/real vis-à-vis the incipience (but also insufficiency) of human being. The “vis-à-vis” here means that these two aspects should be distinguished and yet thought as a unity: as the indivisible constitutive aspects of the cultural act understood as an event (happening). With the notions of “draw” and “figuring-out,” this unity is thought in dynamic, more specifically, genitive terms: as a unity that unfolds outwardly (“figures out”) into determinate realities: determinate shapes of truth and determinate shapes of identity. In more familiar terms, this subsequent level is the one where value is articulated, where something like a “currency” emerges between man and otherness. It is in this currency that things count as true/real and men come to “count for something.”

These theoretical reflections pave the way for discussing Stalinist culture in a comprehensive overview that has not been attempted yet in Soviet studies. Where virtually every discussion of socialist realism treat its establishment as derivative from the prior and paramount existence of the Stalinist state (which regulates the “cultural sphere” by means of policies), I treat these two institutions as coeval. I do not mean temporal coincidence, of course. My point is that the very notion of “cultural sphere” (and, thus, also the notion of the cultural act) must be expanded, so as to encompass the institution of the state, rather than being relegated to a niche within it. Within this comprehensive frame, then, it becomes possible to formulate the problem of cultural creation in a truly radical fashion: how the making of the socialist-realist author *is* the making of the Stalinist state; or, in a more precise and developed form: how the un-making of the author as such *is* the making of the Stalinist state, by being, at the same time, the institution of socialist realism.

Chapter Two seeks to define in a preliminary way the relationship found to exist between the representing and represented in the world of “advanced socialist construction” (ushered by

the successful, ahead-of-schedule completion of the First Five-Year Plan). These two instances, I argue, do not relate as “subject” to “object.” In order to procure a true image of reality, an entirely different relationship must be instantiated. The world of advanced socialism is a peculiar kind of representational object. Comparing it to the objects considered in Part I, we find that this one is not *about* to perform its own analysis; it *has already* done so. While the culture of the 1920s is essentially futural, Stalinist culture is essentially perfective.

Because it *has* understood itself, in the present the world shows. It is exhibitionistic. In this its quality (which, translating an expression from Sergei Eisenstein [*uvidennost'*], I call “seen-ness”), it proves to really *not* be an object in any accepted sense of the word. Nor is, for that matter, the position of the representing “someone” the position of a subject. In the place where we expect to find the subject, we find an empty spot. This empty spot is reserved for any “one” in whom the self-knowing of the world, its being-foreseen, will be confirmed.

Chapter Four will develop this dialectic further, in order to show how the empty spot is filled concretely, how the Soviet writer is recruited into it. Before this next step, however, Chapter Three attempts to both clear and map the territory on which the question of recruitment, or subjection, will be asked. I argue that this territory lies beyond ideology. It is patently inadequate, I believe, to view the making of the Soviet subject in terms of some top-down process of “indoctrination.” For “ideology” is not some substance poured from the outside into people’s heads, nor is it the substance that, once so poured, is the thing that first constitutes them as what they are. Louis Althusser’s enduring achievement is to have shown us precisely that.

In a detailed reading of his by-now classic “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” I discuss the shift that has taken place within the understanding of ideology. As a result of this shift, the notion has transcended its proper object: “ideology” has ceased being about ideas.

Rather than to notions and beliefs, that is, to inwardness, Althusser points us, in a gesture intended not so much to provide a good illustration as to surprise our usual mode of thinking, to the ritualistic externality of seemingly insignificant motions like kneeling and praying, telling us that *this* is what ideology is really and primarily about. In this scheme of things, actions come before beliefs, motions—before notions. The reversal of the traditional order of determination—in which inner representations constellate into “motives” en route to producing “acts”—should not be taken as some sort of “discovery” credited to a French professor of philosophy, a purely intellectual illumination of a general theoretical “problem.” It is equally an event, an illumination produced by an “effective history” (Gadamer) to which we may still belong. Stalinism belongs to it certainly and cardinally. For more than any other event in modern history, more than German Fascism, to be sure, Stalinism has showed how little it matters what people think or believe in the privacy of their consciousness, conscience, or kitchen versus the consequences of their “ritualistic” public doings.⁸ To the extent to which we choose to locate ourselves on the historical trail left by Stalinism, we must be able to discern that this trail leads to a conceptual place beyond the traditional notion of ideology.

Chapter Four is situated precisely in this conceptual space, and from there it asks the question: how did the socialist-realist writer happen? By what has been said so far, it should be clear that this is a variation on the general question about the Soviet subject. In Chapter Two it has been suggested already that the writer comes to be in an empty spot circumscribed by the power of the Stalinist world to make things apparent, to lay bare. Now I illustrate and develop this argument by following the founding event of socialist-realist culture: the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers (August-September, 1934). I treat it—in accordance with the

⁸ The Soviet equivalent of the innocuous rituals Althusser discusses are the equally innocuous motions of attending meetings, getting up, applauding, voting, carrying a sign or a flag during (mandatory) public manifestations, etc.

previously elaborated concept of the cultural act—as a complex happening in which a truth receives “erection” in the same movement in which someone comes to “count for something.” Specifically: the individual comes to count as a Soviet writer when he shows himself as being “acted” by the self-revelatory movement of “our (Soviet) life.” The possibility of depicting the world in its essential reality is thus predicated on belonging, on being-Soviet, which, for its part, is made synonymous with being-acted. Following the logic of these conditions, I arrive at the character of representation in Stalinist culture: representation (in the sense of “depicting,” showing, reflecting upon) is an agency that has become detached from the person; he is more its object than its master; a function of his belonging to “our world,” this agency happens *to* him in the manner of grace.

Chapter Six expands the scope of these conclusions from the sphere of artistic praxis to agency in general. In my view, the eclipse of authorship in the institution of socialist realism is only an instance in the larger predicament of subjecthood within Stalinist culture. To substantiate the connection, I discuss Mikhail Chiaureli’s film *The Vow* of 1946, in which what I just labeled as a predicament is treated in terms of miracle, elevation, and bliss. The film presents us with a group of characters, builders of socialism, whose life we follow from the mid-1920s to the end of World War II. The story of each and all of them tells us that their achievements are not their own. With their effort socialism is built and the victory in the war won, but the agency that drives them in this effort, guaranteeing in advance that it will be successful, comes to them from somewhere else. It springs into their lives from that same empty spot that I have discussed previously as an abstract space, but which *The Vow* depicts with vivid literality. What in regard to the art of representation has manifested itself as the power of exhibition, of making-see, now manifests itself as the general power of fulfillment, of making-

happen as such. In the film, among other things, this power is responsible for making human lives happen. It is given a name and a human face: Stalin.

But this is none other than the power whose instantiations we have been following all along. We encountered it first as a characteristic of the text (in the purview of literary theory): its systematic nature. We then found it as the latent matrix that specifies in advance the making of utilitarian things, the showing of the visible world, the movements of the human body, and the cognition of class consciousness. And it is the same power, having gathered momentum and entered into a qualitatively new relationship with the individual, that is responsible for opening his eyes and, thus, producing truthful representations of reality. Finally, in an anagogic manifestation, we find it in as the agency that constitutes Stalinist society and all its subjects. It does this by recruiting and then “acting” these subjects in the quotidian enactment of a world whose ways have been objectively pre-charted, and which, for this very reason, has as its only destiny fulfillment as such.

PART I

CHAPTER ONE: THE OBJECTHOOD OF FORM

In the writings of those who came to be known as the Russian Formalists, “form” is the conceptual space in which the death of the author occurs, even if it is not announced in quite so dramatic a fashion. It is traditionally argued that, in their pursuit of “scientific” objectivity, the Formalists sought to eliminate the subjective factor both from the history of aesthetic phenomena and from the analysis of specific texts; the German tradition of *Kunstwissenschaft* (Hildebrand, Worringer, Wöfflin) and the work of Aleksandr Veselovskii (1838-1906) in Russia are, then, cited as significant precursors in this endeavor. But should we not be wary of positing the thirst for science as a *prima causa*? May be it was just the other way around. It may be that Wöfflin’s “history of art without names,” Veselovskii’s “inductive poetics,” and the Formalist “science of literature” became practicable because some change had already occurred in the life of the object—a change that made it possible for *Kunst*, folklore, or belles lettres to be conceived as fields of verifiably objective cognition.

In art, the Formalists descried a movement that occurred fully outside the subjective sphere and carried art through time, while also carrying the promise of a scientific study of things aesthetic. This movement certainly traversed singularities—of this person, of this “school” or “movement”—yet the force that propelled it was one that belonged to the object itself. Something in the very nature of art supplied the impulse toward new harmonies and cadences, new perspectives and compositions. This impulse reverberated in the soul of every

true artist, but no soul, no matter how great, was to be for it either an absolute beginning or even a privileged abode. Osip Brik expressed this fact most emphatically, when he vouched that, even if Pushkin had never been born, his immortal *Evgenii Onegin* would have been written all the same (“Formal'nyi metod” 213).⁹ It is as if this work, whose author was, ultimately, Pushkin, had been programmed, “scheduled,” in some arcane computing of form.

Even if we disregard Brik’s aphoristic foray, we should take note of the new meaning it gives to the old phrase “work of art.” The genitive attribution becomes more intimate, more engaged: “work of art” means not just a thing that belongs to the category “art”; it means, almost literally, actual work, activity, performed by the impersonal agency of art itself. What Brik really says is: *Evgenii Onegin* is work that needed to be done, that would have been done even without Pushkin. For art is no longer merely the collection of things with ascertained aesthetic properties; nor is it the generic activity performed on an object that turns it into something beautiful; outside of these definitions, art is primarily something that *works* autonomously, a device that performs tasks pre-programmed into it. As such, it is susceptible to an objective description in terms of elements and functions.

It is highly significant that the manifesto statement of Russian Formalism was an article by Viktor Shklovskii entitled “Art as Device,” even if *priem* of the Russian title (“Iskusstvo kak priem”) does not quite support the point I am trying to make. *Priem* is “device” only in the more archaic meaning of the latter, which allows us to “leave someone to their own devices.” *Priem* has a more instrumental inflection, it presupposes human agency. It keeps us in the still human sphere of strategy, dexterity, and ploy, of possible unpredictability and cunning winks.

Machines do not operate through *priemy* (pl.); the provenance of *priem* is decidedly not the

⁹ For all quotations from Russian publications throughout this study, the translation is mine (PP). Where I quote an existing English translation, the citation in parentheses refers to it, rather than to a Russian publication. In these cases, the entry in Works Cited features the English translation first, followed by a source in Russian.

mechanistic and the technological, unless it is that original *techne* with which Aristotle designated the skill of the artisan/artist. Still, the English “device,” precisely in its most mechanistic sense, conveys an essential aspect of what Shklovskii and the other Formalists understood to be the true nature of art.

Artistic form is an autonomous mechanism, whose functioning can be described synchronically, as well as diachronically. In “Art as Device” Shklovskii emphasized the latter aspect, as he spoke of art’s ability to renew the perception of things. He made very few references to “form,” while using extensively the term *ostranenie*: “making strange,” “defamiliarization.” For too long had form been viewed as something imparted onto the object and, thenceforth, belonging to it as an unalienable property; what Shklovskii wanted to point out was not a property, but a process, a function, rather than a shape.

The function of “making strange” constituted for him the positive phase in the life of form; the negative phase was that of “habitualization” or “automatization.” The former encompassed the realm of the artistic proper, but the latter was equally integral in the generation of aesthetic shapes. Each phase not only presupposed the other, but actively called it forth: every artistic form fades with time, making necessary the emergence of a new one; conversely, as soon as a new form appears, its irrevocable aging begins, bringing ever closer the twilight hour when it will sink below the threshold of vivid perception: “Each art form travels down the inevitable road from birth to death; from seeing and sensory perception, when every detail in the object is savored and relished, to mere recognition, when the object or form becomes a dull epigone which our senses register mechanically, a piece of merchandise not visible even to the buyer” (*Khod* 88).¹⁰ Above and beyond the particular forms that supersede each other through the

¹⁰ Shklovskii’s pronouncements were not always consistent with such a dynamic definition of artistic creation. In *The Knight’s Move* (from which the quoted passage was taken) we also read: “Texture [*faktura*] is the principal

history of art, there is Form as the general mechanism of this supersession, as that which perpetuates itself in ever-new instances. Iurii Tynianov described this mechanism as the evolutionary unfolding of pure oppositions:

And so in the analysis of literary evolution, we encounter the following stages: 1) in regard to the automatized principle of construction, there emerges, dialectically, the opposite constructive principle; 2) its application commences—the constructive principle seeks the easiest employment; 3) it spreads over the largest possible mass of phenomena; 4) it becomes automatized and calls forth the opposite principle of construction. (“Fakt” 108)

And so art traverses time in the dialectical shuttle of oppositions, perpetually rediscovering itself in what the Formalists called “differential quality” (*Differanzqualitaat*)¹¹—an evanescent quality, to be sure, since it exists only in the momentous motion with which the new form distances itself from the old.

Human intelligence, skill, imagination, talent, are, of course, involved throughout the life of form; at each moment in time, it is general human experience that brings about the habitualization of the object, and it is human creativity that rescues the object from its tarnished existence. But the agency of the individual, of the human subject in the singular, is now subsumed within the impersonal agency of the mechanism. Even if he reached to the most intimate of his being, to the most idiosyncratic of his subjectivity, the individual author cannot be the originator of the artistic work. To a very significant degree, the object over which he labors

characteristic of this peculiar world of deliberately constructed objects, the totality of which we call art” (102). Here it seems that the aesthetic is not the evanescent blossoming reached in the renewal of form, but a more or less identifiable property (“texture”) that clings to the object and ascertains its belonging to art (which is, thus, also a supposedly stable “world... of objects”).

¹¹ The term first gained currency in the theoretical work of Broder Christiansen.

is “conceived” somewhere else: in the impersonal logic of his craft’s history, in the diachronic automaton of form. Of course, such a “conception” does not prefigure every detail of the object; there is an inner wealth in the man-made thing of beauty that cannot be accounted for by the simple interplay of differentials; this wealth is still the work of the artist. And yet, what sets him to this work, what “employs” him in the task of creativity, is the necessity underlying the life of form: “Art is not created by the individual will, by the genius. The creator is simply the geometrical point of intersection of forces operative outside of him” (Shklovskii, *Khod* 22).¹²

What previous ages referred to as the “calling of the artist” still resounds, only now it is the logic of history that calls: “The freedom of the individual writer lies in his capacity to hear the voice of history. [...] Creation is an act of historical self-awareness, of locating oneself in the stream of history” (Eikhenbaum, *Skvoz’* 236).¹³ For the aesthetic thought of the past, it had seemed obvious that the individual selects the devices for his artistic expression. But now it has become possible to conceive of a scenario in which the artistic devices “select” their master: “a set of artistic forms brought forth by the inner laws of their development, seeks out an adequate milieu or creative personality for its realization” (Jakobson, “Randbemerkungen” 373).

By what name should we call the producer of the artistic text in such a scenario? Does he deserve the title of “author,” if the formative impulse guiding his steps antecedes his creative will? It is best to call him operator of the device, since the device—even if only *in potentia*—is

¹² In another place, Shklovskii compares the laws of artistic tradition to those of Brownian motion: “The artist, whether he be the inventor of the internal-combustion engine or a poet, plays the role of just such particles, which make manifest [*vyiavlaiut*] motions that are, in themselves, invisible to the naked eye” (*Khod* 70).

¹³ It does not take a particularly keen critical eye to notice the kinship between such Formalist pronouncements as Eikhenbaum’s and totalitarian discourses on history. Is not the “Soviet establishment,” from its very first day, grounded in just this hearkening to the immanent laws of historical evolution? Are not Stalinist policies, purportedly, guided by some “Marxist science of history,” no less worthy of its name than the Formalist “science of literature”? This would be a facile analogy if it sought to incriminate the Russian Formalists with incipient totalitarian thinking. Formalism is no more “totalitarian,” than Stalinism is “formalist.” The kinship of ideas tells us only that Formalist theory and Stalinist ideology grew from the same ground, emerged from the same “plot.”

there before him (“brought forth by the inner laws” of form), and needs to be put to work.

“Hitched” to it by objective predestination of which he is not aware, the artist works with it, on it, and for it. So that form can implement its new operative principle,¹⁴ it must employ a human agent. And thus the individual, in realizing his “artistic calling,” becomes just that: an employee of form.

But there may be, still, a prouder mission and a higher title for the human subject in the world of art. Does he not exceed the role of a mere technician when, in a sudden leap of consciousness, he comes to recognize his craft for what it really is: a contrivance, in which there’s nothing more than the interplay of conventions? When in self-awareness he undertakes to unveil the play of form as play, to show us the artifice of art, does he not become once again a subject of the text in the full sense of the word?

This promise is burdened with the same ambiguity that characterizes the problem of authorship. An individual, it is true, is capable of consciously apprehending the conventionality of this or that form, even of art in general; it happens all the time. Innumerable are the instances in which a particular aesthetic convention has been the object of parody, stylization, exaggeration, inversion, etc.—all the different modes in which the device can be “laid bare.” The individual consciousness, however, cannot claim too much credit for such revelations. For here, too, consciousness only registers—sometimes early, sometimes late—an effect that proceeds from the objective movement of form through history. Carried in the abrasive stream of human experience, art itself manifests its conventional nature.¹⁵ When a form wears out and

¹⁴ The term the Formalists used was “constructive principle.” See the quotation from Tynianov above.

¹⁵ Here is how Jakobson describes the workings of this automaton in the history of painting: “It is necessary to learn the conventional language of painting in order to ‘see’ the picture [...]. This conventional, traditional aspect of painting to a great extent conditions the very act of our visual perception. As tradition accumulates, the painted image becomes an ideogram, a formula, to which the object portrayed is linked by contiguity. Recognition becomes instantaneous. We no longer see [the painting]. The ideogram needs to be deformed. The artist-innovator must

its mystical union with the object is no more, it shows itself in its true nature as just a manner of presentation. Its routine perpetuation becomes, then, “mannerism,” and the time comes for it to be exposed, for the device to be “laid bare.”

Let us pause here in order to appreciate, if only in vague outlines, an event that is to have enormous repercussions not only for the thought, but also for the history of the twentieth century. In Formalist theory we already sense the emergence, beyond the human subject, of something we might call a “subject effect.” In the immanent life of objectivity something behaves like a subject or, rather, postulates a subject, where there is no place for human agency. For the realm of objectivity called “art,” or “literature,” the laying bare of the device produces precisely such a subject effect. A text—let us say, Pushkin’s *Tales of Belkin*—shows a reflexive inward turn, a “coming to consciousness” of form, in that the various contrivances of Romantic and Sentimentalist fiction are made perceptible as such. But this coming to consciousness, while implemented through the human subject (Pushkin), is made possible outside of him (by 1830, the year the *Tales* were written, under the sheer weight of tradition and imitation, the trappings of Sentimentalism and Gothic Romanticism had become exposed, “obvious”). In such moments, when art reveals its true face, there is always a human subject on the scene. But he is there only “in attendance.” There is not enough of him, of his inwardness, to encompass this movement through which form comes to celebrate its being-for-self (*Fürsichsein*). He can only attend to it in the final, climactic instance.

The diachronic life of form is a sequence of deformations, in which each new instance does violence to a pre-existing norm. But synchronically as well, artistic form is just that—

impose a new form upon our perception, if we are to detect in a given thing those traits which went unnoticed the day before. He may present the object in an unusual perspective; he may violate the rules of composition canonized by his predecessors” (“Realism” 39-40). The imperative “must” (*dolzhen*), which Jakobson uses repeatedly, issues, of course, from the evolutionary logic underlying the history of art.

deformation, an instance of “organized violence” (Jakobson, *O cheshskom stikhe* 15). In the simultaneity of every moment, no less than in a historical perspective, form deforms. It is actively opposed and effectively negates its other—the habitualized life of the medium. Verbal discourse, for example, is at its most habitual in its quotidian communicative function. And so poetic language can be defined, for each moment in time and generally, in opposition to conversational, practical speech¹⁶: “poetry, which is nothing other than *utterance oriented toward expression*, is ruled [...] by immanent laws; the communicative function, which characterizes both practical and emotional language, is minimized here” (Jakobson, “Noveishaia” 30; emphasis in the original). Such a definition does not mean that poetry or literature can be grasped as substance, even if, a little further in the same article, Jakobson speaks of “literariness” (*literaturnost'*) as the distinguishing quality of literature and the object proper of literary studies. The expressiveness, or literariness, of literature is a relational quality,¹⁷ indeed, an effect: this quality is “in effect” only against a specific background (a linguistic norm, a textual tradition)¹⁸ and for as long as this background remains pertinent. This is why the value of a literary text can be appreciated only after a careful historical study. The task of the literary

¹⁶ The Formalists soon recognized the overly-general character of such definitions. In 1925 Boris Eikhenbaum wrote: “But these general acknowledgements that there are differences between poetic and practical language and that the specific quality of art was shown in its use of the material were not adequate when we tried to deal with specific works. We had to find more specific formulations of the principle of perceptible form so that they could make possible the analysis of form itself—the analysis of form understood as content. We had to show that the perception of form results from special artistic [devices] which force the reader to experience the form” (“Theory” 113).

¹⁷ “The existence of a fact as *literary* depends on its differential quality (i.e., on its relation to either the literary or the extra-literary series), or in other words—on its function” (Tynianov “O literaturnoi” 35; emphasis in the original).

¹⁸ “We apprehend every fact of poetic language in an inevitable juxtaposition with the following three moments: the current poetic tradition, the practical language of the present, and the poetic tendency preceding the emergence of the given fact” (Jakobson, “Noveishaia” 19-20)

historian is to recreate faithfully the background against which the text had “actualized” a certain set of devices.¹⁹

In every text now—in the place of the old duality of form and content—we have the dynamics of the deforming and the deformed, dynamics that belong wholly in the domain of form. It is only by way of a sloppy abstraction that we could speak of “content” that inertly awaits its other—a shaping force approaching from somewhere else. When analyzing narrative, Shklovskii could distinguish between *fabula* and *siuzhet*—a series of events recounted in the proper temporality and sequence of their occurrence versus the manner in which they are presented in narration (“*Tristram*” 296-98)—but this does not mean that the “story told straight” is somehow prior to its “deformation.” On the contrary: the story can only exist as deformed, as *siuzhet*; only in retrospect, after the *siuzhet* has taken its course, can the *fabula* be reconstructed.

The Formalists were particularly fond of those moments in literature when form could be shown to engender “content” from its own inner necessity.²⁰ Is not the plot of the fairy tale—this purest of narrative forms—at its purest as an enchanted meandering whose sole destination is the postponement of the end? For this enchantment to proceed along its winding paths, there is a need for material, for some pliant stuff from which twists and turns can be made. The little hen cannot just take water from the sea and bring it to the choking rooster; first, she must give the sea a wild boar’s tusk; but the wild boar will part with his tusk only in exchange for an acorn; when

¹⁹ “If we are dealing with poets of the past, these three moments must be recreated—a difficult work, which can only be partially successful” (Jakobson, “Noveishaia” 20).

²⁰ Here Shklovskii quotes Tolstoy on the conception of Andrei Bolkonskii’s character in *War and Peace*: “In the battle of Austerlitz, which will be described, but with which I began the novel, I needed a brilliant young man to be killed; in the further course of the novel, I needed only the old Bolkonskii with his daughter, but since it was awkward to describe a person who was in no way related to the rest of the novel, I decided to make the brilliant young man a son of the old Bolkonskii. Then I got interested in him, a role turned up for him in the further course of the novel, so I spared his life, severely wounding, instead of killing him” (“Sviaz” 55). As we can see, what spares the life of Andrei and allows him to grow into a major literary character is, really, the formal need for cohesion in the character scheme of the novel.

asked for an acorn, the oak tree, for some reason, demands cow's milk; the cow, of course, wants hay; the reaper needs bast for his shoes; and so the little hen's journey continues through another dozen places and another dozen helpers (Shklovskii, "Sviaz" 43). "Of course, these crooked roads are caused by specific conditions—by the requirements of *siuzhet*" (Shklovskii, "Sviaz" 48). In seeking its fulfillment, a form calls forth "content" not as an antinomic, if complementary, other, but as its own second term.²¹ Therefore, instead of "content," it is better to speak of "material," since "the idea of 'material' does not lie beyond the limits of form; the material itself is a formal element" (Tynianov, "Fakt" 15). Unlike content, material does not exist for itself: it exists solely for the functioning of the dominant formal device; it is there to be molded, deformed.

Somewhat oxymoronically, form is violence and deformation only to the extent to which it is, also, law and organization. Shklovskii's early definition (1921) of the text as the "sum total of all artistic devices employed in it" (*Rozanov* 15) quickly gave way to the vision of a systematic ensemble of functions:

We should no longer speak of a literary work as a 'sum total' of its various aspects: plot, style, etc. These abstractions are far outdated: plot, style, etc., exist in an interaction—the same interaction and relation that exist between rhythm and semantics in verse. A work of literature represents a system of interrelated factors. The relation of any one factor with the rest constitutes its *function* in regard to the whole system" (Tynianov, "Oda" 48; emphasis in the original).

Since formal devices are not planted haphazardly in it, but are coordinated into a totality, the text itself is a device, a higher-order mechanism.

²¹ "A new form engenders new content" (Shklovskii, *Khod* 38).

And if the question is asked once more, “Who is the subject of this mechanism? Who is responsible for this organization of elements and functions?”, the author would be, again, the wrong answer. The author’s interiority is, once again, insufficient to “cover” the formative work performed by the text. The mystical conception of the Genius in Romantic aesthetics had served to account for the organic unity of the work of art. But no depths of the human being, no matter how mystically conceived, can account for the same work of art seen as a systematic totality. Such a totality has no subject, no human “coordinator.” What totalizes the sum of elements into a textual whole is their subordination to a governing constructive principle:

It is abundantly clear that every literary system is formed not by the peaceful interaction of all factors, but by the domination, prominence, of one (or a group) of them that functionally subordinates and “colors” the rest. Such a factor bears the name [...] *dominanta* (Christiansen, B. Eikhenbaum). This does not mean, however, that the subordinated factors are not important and that they deserve no attention. On the contrary, the action of the governing factor, the *dominanta*, is manifested precisely in this subordination, transformation, of all factors.

(Tynianov, “Oda” 48)

In Gogol’s “Overcoat,” for instance, it is the “devices of verbal mimicry and gesture” that have the leading constructive role (Eikhenbaum, “Kak sdelana” 46). As they are “actualized,” the element of plot is subordinated, deformed. The slim story line is there to support (“motivate”) the employment of the *dominanta*.²²

What the constructive principle “does” can never be entirely intended by the author. Just as the author cannot control the ways by which the constructive principle of his work was

²² “Thus, the plot in Gogol has only a superficial significance and is, therefore, quite static [...]. The true dynamic, and, hence, the composition of his works, consists in the construction of the *skaz*, in the play of language” (Eikhenbaum, “Kak sdelana” 50; see also 46).

generated—here the evolutionary laws of differentiation have their say—so he is incapable of controlling the ways in which this constructive principle fulfills itself within the text. His intention is inevitably overridden by a necessity programmed into the very functioning of the device:

Let us add: the author's intention can be no more than a ferment. In handling the specifically literary material and obeying it, the author departs from his intention. Thus [Griboedov's] *Woe from Wit* was supposed to be in a "high," even "magnificent," style, but turned out to be a political, "archaistic," pamphlet comedy. Thus *Evgenii Onegin* was supposed to be, at first, a "satirical poem," in which the author "chokes on bile." But while working on Chapter Four Pushkin already writes: "where is my satire? There is no trace of it in *Evgenii Onegin*."

The constructive principle, the relatedness of elements within the work, turns the "author's intention" into a ferment, no more. The "creative freedom" proves to be an optimistic slogan, which does not correspond to reality, and gives way to "creative necessity." (Tynianov, "O literaturnoi" 42)

It is rather easy, from our current place in history, to take issue with the theories of the Formalists, to approve or disprove, to be critical (in the good sense of the word), to interject with a "Well, yes" or an "Oh, no." We are, understandably, tempted to evaluate their writings in the light of subsequent developments and to apply to them the standard of more current truths. "Well, yes, we know that the author's intention matters little, that it tells us next to nothing about what the text really does. Wimsatt's intentional fallacy is a truism for us." "Oh, no, the text is never such a fully coherent system of elements and functions as to warrant analysis in terms of

some absolute laws of artistic construction or aesthetic evolution. Post-structuralism has taught us to be wary of such holistic and mechanistic conceptions.”

I am consciously resisting this temptation to be critical, to arbitrate between the Formalist “contribution” and subsequent theoretical thought. The perspective I have adopted excludes the very idea of “contribution,” of the “lasting value” of this or that conceptual legacy. It is not even a question of whether the Formalists were right or wrong, whether their notions did justice to the object of their study. Once again: the theories of the Formalists must be considered not from the point of view of truth, but in the perspective of pure happening, i.e., as plot. We must refrain from asking, “Is this knowledge adequate to its field?”, in order to ask, “What happens in this field, what events transpire there?” In this kind of perspective, analytical concepts are not claims to truth; they are *figures*, in the present case—figures of thought. They are arranged in a topology, where they “take place,” do something. We are allowed to view them as “actants,” “heroes” of sorts.

A declaration made by Jakobson in 1921 encourages such a vision: “If the study of literature wants to become a science, it must recognize the artistic device as its only ‘hero’” (“Noveishaia” 32). Seven years later, Vladimir Propp faced a terminological dilemma when analyzing fairy-tale plots in terms of typical actions (“functions”). Since these were performed not only by humans, but also by animals and all kinds of fantastic creatures, the designations “hero” and “character” were bound to be misleading. Propp labeled this larger category of narrative agents “*dramatis personae*.” To accommodate the same non-coincidence between human subjects and subjects of the narrative action, A. J. Greimas introduced the term “actant.”

Are we not in a similar situation when we discover that, in the world of art, a function traditionally centered in the human subject is suddenly being performed by the decidedly non-

human figure of the “device,” or the *dominanta*? Considered in a purely functional way, the *dominanta* does, approximately, what “genius,” or the “poet’s immortal soul” have done before. They all have the same function in the plot of artistic creation; they are the same “actant” in different guises. Here is how Friedrich Schlegel spoke of Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, more than a century before the first Formalist manifestoes:

But the reader who possesses a true instinct for *system*, who has a sense of totality or that anticipation of the world in its entirety which makes Wilhelm so interesting, will be aware throughout the work of what we might call its personality and living individuality. And the more deeply he probes, the more inner connections and relations and the greater intellectual coherence he will discover in it. If there is any book with an indwelling genius, it is this. And if this genius could characterize itself in detail and as a whole, then there would be no need for anyone else to say what it is all about, or how it should be taken. (65; emphasis added).

I have highlighted the word “system” as a reminder of its central place in Formalist poetics. Like Schlegel, the Formalists spoke of the artistic text as a system, they too saw in it a “totality,” a “coherence” of “inner connections and relations.” Yet, for them, it was not the “indwelling genius” that, by fulfilling itself, makes the text into a totality, but the “governing constructive principle.” The “personality and living individuality” of a work was, for them, not the correlative of a subjective presence (the author’s), but the result of an objective process, which could be analyzed in its discrete moments.

As the text thus loses its anchorage in the figure of the author, another human figure enters the plot in what seems, at first, to be a merely ancillary role. I have in mind the figure of

the analyst. In the Romantic “work of genius,” the genius is immanently present, it is always already realized. From then on, it is up to the “reader with a sense for system and totality” to apprehend it. But if this reader never comes along, the text would certainly not be deprived of the genius that inhabits it. Not so in Formalist poetics, where the effectiveness of the artistic device is always relational. For any moment in the past, there is reconstructive work to be done, so that all the differentials of novelty, originality, transgression, etc., can re-emerge in their original pertinence, no longer felt today. But in synchrony, as well, the text’s “in-itself” is never given to us directly. What for the reader is the half-conscious experience of individual “style,” is the objective work of a dynamic system, whose elements and functions are susceptible to meticulous and exhaustive analysis. Only when this analysis is complete can the preconscious experience of style become the conscious apprehension of the text’s identity.

Thus, in order to show itself as what it truly is, the text must now “pass” through this new place—the repository of hermeneutic knowledge. The analyst is, to be sure, a mere stand-in for it; he is hardly more than the “guardian” of hermeneutic cognition. But since the place over which he presides is indispensable to the existence of the text, the importance of his role cannot be underestimated.

To convince ourselves of this, we need only to consider the place of the analyst in Freud’s theory of the unconscious, which is roughly contemporaneous with the Formalist movement in European art criticism. The “text” that issues from the subject in the Freudian analytical situation behaves no differently than the artistic text in the vision of the Russian Formalists. We find the same plot operative here, albeit, in the perspective of content. With the Freudian dream—to take the most famous type of psychoanalytical “text”—we are, once again, at the site of a deformation: the dream thoughts (the “latent content” of the dream) appear

disfigured in the dream representation (the “manifest content”). Their ostensible author—the dreaming subject—cannot be expected to know what the dream truly represents. All he sees is the enigmatic, ludic hieroglyphics presented to him in his sleep (the manifest content). These are, of course, related to the original “message” by hard links of determination. But between “message” and “presentation” a deforming instance intervenes, a mechanism, a device. Employed by what Freud calls the “censor,” this device has every right to be called “poetic,” since the principles of its functioning—displacement and condensation—are also the principles of figurative speech.

[A] psychic force is expressed in dream activity which on the one hand strips elements of high psychic value of their intensity, and which on the other hand creates new values *by way of over-determination* from elements of small value, these new values subsequently getting into the dream content. If this is the method of procedure, there has taken place in the formation of the dream a transference and displacement of the psychic intensities of the individual elements, of which the textual difference between the dream and the thought content appears as a result. The process which we assume here is nothing less than the essential part of the dream activity; it merits the designation of *dream displacement*. *Dream displacement* and *dream condensation* are the two craftsmen to whom we may chiefly attribute the molding of the dream.

I think we also have an easy task in recognizing the psychic force which makes itself felt in the circumstances of dream displacement. The result of this displacement is that the dream content no longer resembles the core of the dream thoughts at all, and that the dream reproduces only a disfigured form of the dream

wish in the unconscious. But we are already acquainted with dream disfigurement; we have traced it back to the censorship which one psychic instance in the psychic life exercises over the other. Dream displacement is one of the chief means for achieving this disfigurement. *Is fecit, cui profuit*. We may assume that dream displacement is brought about by the influence of this censor, of the endopsychic repulsion. (Freud, 286-87)

A couple of places in this lengthy passage warrant added emphasis. Firstly—the personification of objective psychic forces as “craftsmen,” which, after the earlier remarks on typical actions and “actants,” I take as more than a stylistic embellishment. These are Freud’s new “heroes,” just like the device will be the “only hero” for Jakobson and his colleagues. Secondly, there’s Freud’s note concerning “textual difference,” which should remind us of the textual difference that exists between *fabula* and *siuzhet* in Formalist theory. Is not the latent content of the dream precisely the *fabula* that becomes distorted in the plane of representation (*siuzhet*)? The fact that Freud operates on the side of content becomes significant here: while, for him, the “this is it” of the dream text is its *fabula* (the concealed wish-thoughts, which he seeks to decipher by undoing the “crooked” ways of their signification), it is just the other way around for the Formalists (who seek to make perceptible the “crookedness” itself).²³ Yet, from a purely formal point of view, the scenario is the same: in both cases, the “this is it” of the text, its “truth,” is what is systematically occluded and ought to be systematically recovered by an analytic method transparent in relation to the original “method of procedure.”

With Freud, but also with the Russian Formalists, we enter through the front gate into a distinctly modern existence of the textual, characterized as it is by an essential split. In this new existence, what presents itself “initially and for the most part” as *the* text, the manifest, is

²³ See pp. 27-28.

manifestly *not it*. Behind it, in an obscurity neither too heavy—since it can be dispelled almost routinely by a hermeneutic that claims scientific status for itself—nor too light—since it inheres in the very being of representation—lies the latent actuality of the text. Yet this split is not as dramatic as the one that underlies epistemological skepticisms in early modern philosophy from Malebranche to Hume—the split between the world of human representations (ideas), on the one hand, and actuality, on the other. Starting from some moment in the second half of the nineteenth century (in Marx this moment is already current), dissimulation is lodged at the very heart of representation. By its very nature, that which comes forth as *the* text comes forth as something other than it truly is.²⁴ But—a crucial qualification—this is a *systematically produced dissimulation*, and not the chasm of some post-lapsarian divorce between “essences” and “appearances.” Because it is systematically produced and systematically maintained, this dissimulation can also be systematically overcome.

For Freud, the manifest content of the dream is “not it” in the sense that it presents itself as a senseless formative activity that juggles the trifles of the quotidian and thus conceals the significant message of desire. For the Formalists, we read in reverse: the text is, essentially, dissimulation in the sense that it necessarily comes forth as “substance” (content of some kind, a “message”), while its in-itself is non-substantive deformation—the pure negativity of form. And this is where the hero of hermeneutics comes in. He exposes the dissimulation and overcomes it. His competence bridges the gap between the two hypostases of the text—in Freud’s terms, the latent and the manifest—and makes it One again, restores its identity/truth. And since this gap is structural (not a matter of human ignorance or insufficient perceptiveness), the *hermeneia* is also

²⁴ It was Paul de Man who captured most memorably this modern being of the textual, when he asserted that “literature exists at the same time in the modes of error and truth; it both betrays and obeys its own mode of being” (163-64). For him too, the “error,” the “blindness,” the “betrayal”—all of them referring to what I call “dissimulation”—are not pathological or accidental moments, introduced from some detachable outside, but are constitutive of the text as such.

a structural moment *of* the text, indispensable to its being. The hermeneutic act is an act of the modern text itself, not a meta-operation.

The full significance of this fact will become clear in the further course of this study. But for now, we have “collected” all the essential motifs that comprise the plot we are considering, and can lay them out in a more ordered fashion.

The object, which, for the time being, presents itself as “text” in the dimension of form, is the site of organized deformation. The one who poses as the ostensible author of “this,” turns out to be, in the last resort, a mere pretender. His role as the subject of the text is an instance of travesty, an aspect of the dissimulation that constitutes now the manifest being of the text. The work for which he, the author, can no longer claim credit, turns out to be performed by the impersonal agency of the device, or *dominanta*.

From the point of view of the *dominanta*, the objective existence of the text can be described as a systematic deformative subjugation (of one order of elements by another). The “dominance” of the *dominanta* means that the other elements of the system are totalized and over-determined by it. They exist *for* the governing constructive principle and have no independent value of their own. Their potential is “stopped,” “fixed.” (From the point of view of the constructive principle, *siuzhet*, of the fairy tale, for example, the princess is over-determined as “prize,” and cannot possibly be, say, a person torn by existential dilemmas.)

But it is only through the specialized hermeneutic intelligence that this objectively existing state of affairs can become manifest. Prior to its intervention, in what might be termed the (paradigmatic) first act of the plot, dissimulation reigns unabated: the elements of the system present themselves as unsystematic, free-floating, unrestrained in their potential for realization (the fairy tale does not “say” that the princess is, functionally, not a princess at all, but a formal

marker for the successful completion of the hero's journey). The second act witnesses the triumphant entrance of the hermeneutic hero—a hero by proxy, to be sure, inasmuch as he “performs” what is already potentially contained within the *modus operandi* of hermeneutic knowledge: the restoration of the text into its truth.

Before this first enactment of the plot can be considered done, one seeming contradiction remains to be addressed. Why is it that, on the one hand, artistic form in the writings of the Russian Formalists appears—both synchronically and diachronically—as the “work of the negative,” while, on the other hand, there is talk of some latent actuality of the text, its “in itself,” of the text as it truly is, etc.? Why does Jakobson speak of the “literariness” of literature in the same way Shklovskii speaks of the “stoniness” of stones? And are not terms such as “device,” “system,” “totality,” meant to convey a more substantive understanding of the aesthetic?

What we are witnessing here is not a contradiction but a peculiarity of the plot that interests us. True, when taken by itself, the textual can only be grasped as unfolded negativity, the evanescent interplay of differentials. And so the object, the “text,” is lost, it is, really, nothing. Yet, it is *grasped*, and this hermeneutic grasp is inscribed as something substantive that pertains *to the object*. The performative of knowledge is included within the known as the very “soul” of the latter.

In its most habitual application, the Formalist hermeneutic demonstrates how the artistic object systematically defies understanding in terms of content. But in order for this purely negative characteristic to be seen as immanent to the text, as its positivity, we must suppose that the text is capable of somehow retaining within itself that which its formal movement negates, distances, “makes strange”: “for the older technique or content must somehow subsist within the work as what is cancelled or overwritten, modified, inverted or negated, in order for us to feel the

force, in the present, of what is alleged to have once been an innovation” (Jameson, *Modernity* 128).²⁵ Taken on its own—as printed words on a page, as daubs on a canvas, or audible vibrations in the air—the text possesses no such power. Thus for it to subsist, to be at all, the text must be understood to contain and carry through space and time that which appears external to it—its own expert reader; but, optimally, it must contain and carry him in such a way that “he” is no longer “he”—some principally detachable instance of human intelligence—but somehow a part of the textual mechanism itself, a built-in reader, as it were, a reader-device (as in cybernetics). This gives us the opportunity to revisit a point made earlier: the modern text invites us to figure the hermeneutic act within the text’s own materiality, as a constitutive part of its being, and not as a meta-operation.

²⁵ In the words of Shklovskii: “The violation of the canon is possible only while the canon exists, and sacrilege presupposes a religion that is still alive” (*Khod* 73).

CHAPTER TWO: THE SUBJECTHOOD OF CONTENT

It is bound to seem a scandal of sorts that in my approach to the culture of socialist realism the first step was Russian Formalism—a movement that was to be forcefully extinguished at the end of the 1920s, a movement whose name was to become the name of a heresy in both aesthetic criticism and artistic practice during Stalin’s time. It would seem much more prudent to have gone straight to some properly Marxist aesthetic doctrine, which, whatever its shortcomings or unorthodoxies, could not but prove more akin to the spirit and the letter of socialist realism. After all, from very early on the Formalist movement was recognized as the main ideological enemy of Marxism in the field of aesthetics and art criticism.

This objection falls with the reminder that we are not tracing the ideal genesis of socialist realism. Hence the kinships and genealogies, the thematic affinities and resemblances, that emerge dutifully in that venerable mode of inquiry called “history of ideas,” do not have argumentative weight here. But this means that there are no available criteria for anticipatory judgment on whether this or that theory, this or that methodology, “approximates,” “foreshadows,” or “prepares the ground for,” socialist realism.

Soviet cultural history adds a supportive footnote to this methodological position. It is well known that nothing like a Marxist aesthetic doctrine was passed over to the 1930s by the 1920s. All more or less sustained attempts to formulate one, to elaborate a critical methodology on the basis of historical materialism, did not survive the defiles of Stalin’s “cultural revolution”;

in the years between 1928 and 1932, such attempts were branded as so many deviations from the proper study of things aesthetic, thus virtually sharing in the fate of Formalism. Those schools of critical thought that had been, only a few years back, the main players in the vigorous debate on Marxism in the arts—the followers of Bogdanov, the leaders of RAPP, the group around Voronskii at Pereval, Pereverzev and his disciples, the theorists of LEF—were effectively neutralized by the early 1930s (the most tenacious of them, RAPP, survived until the resolution of 1932). To the names of their main figures Stalinist culture will add the derogatory suffix “-shchina” (*bogdanovshchina*, *voronshchina*, *pereverzevshchina*) and use them—depending on the context—as either cautionary references or terms of indictment. And it is difficult to decide whether to be charged, say, with *voronshchina* (standing for a reactionary blend of intuitivism, irrationalism, and voluntarism), was any less stigmatizing than the charge of formalism. Still, these instances of knowledge, these schools of (professedly) Marxist thought, which Stalinism will eventually abolish, have legitimacy for us, perhaps no greater, but also no lesser than that of Formalism—legitimacy not by virtue of anticipating or approximating a later theoretical orthodoxy, but by virtue of simply being there, of taking place where, several years later, socialist realism was to take place.

Among them, the most elaborate, internally consistent, and methodologically rigorous attempt to formulate a textual analytic and to implement a corresponding practice of critical reading should be attributed to the so-called “sociological school”—an academic group, whose principal activity falls within the second half of the 1920s. The programmatic statements of the group are contained in a collection of critical essays, *Literaturovedenie* (Literary Studies), which appeared in 1928.²⁶ These were remarkably consistent with the earlier writings of the group’s

²⁶ This volume was projected as the first in a series of publications on literary methodology and criticism; it remained the only one.

leader, Valerian Pereverzev,²⁷ but went beyond them (especially in two long articles by Genadii Pospelov) toward elaborating a full-fledged science of the literary.

All external indications are there to suggest that with Pereverzev and his followers we will find something quite contrary to the theories of the Formalists, whom the former attacked on numerous occasions. For them, as for most Marxist-minded critics of the time, formalism was a survival of bourgeois consciousness, an offspring of the divorce between reality and its ideal figurations, where the latter came to be perceived as an autonomous realm sustaining itself, in the air as it were, through powers all of its own. The falsity of such a view accounted for the principal methodological falsity of Russian Formalism: its fundamental disinterestedness in the genetics of the artistic fact, the propensity to treat this fact descriptively rather than etiologically. Against the Formalist science of literature, based on studying the intrinsic laws of the “literary series,” the Pereverzevians never tired of repeating that the only objective knowledge of the literary fact lies with explaining its causal relation to the extra-literary. More than a mere principle of scientific investigation, etiology was for them but synonymous with the scientific itself: “All that is required is that the critic see the work of art as a causally conditioned phenomenon of life, that he consider his main task to be discovering this causal relationship, i.e., the scientific explanation for the appearance of the work of art” (Pereverzev, “Pisarev” 39).

Obviously, we are dealing not with mere differences, but with a fundamental rift, which is as much methodological, as it is ideological. Formalism, on the one hand, and the brand of Marxist analysis of literature practiced by Pereverzev’s group, on the other, present themselves as irreconcilable experiences of the textual. With the latter, as, indeed, with all Marxist literary

²⁷ During a discussion at the Communist Academy in 1930, whose outcome was the *de facto* elimination of the sociological school, one of its critics, N. I. Efimov, remarked: “Methodological unity was represented in their works with such exclusive consistency that the ‘Pereverzevtsy’, or members of the Pereverzev School, like the Formalists, were always identifiable by their style and by the methodological orientation of their works” (qtd. Scott 7).

criticism, an entirely new dimension is adjoined to the manifest “thereness” of the artistic text, the dimension of socio-economic being, which is absent as such from Formalist theory. And yet, as we register this heteronomy, we must also register the dialectical twist whereby it is taken up and sublated within a higher-level homology. For did we not witness, in the discussion of Formalism, that the experience of the textual is characterized precisely by a displacement such that what is manifestly there as *the* text is, really, not it or, at least, cannot be relied upon to ground any truth about the text?

And so it is that precisely when they opposed themselves to “formalist” readings of literature, when they denied the self-sufficient existence of the literary series, the Marxists showed themselves as fully partaking of this very experience. When they insisted that the seeming autonomy of the aesthetic realm, its (mis-)representation as something detached from the coarse reality of social existence, should be unmasked as the ideology of one particular social formation (the bourgeoisie), they too were confronting this realm as a scene of dissimulation. For the Formalists, it was the “overgrowth” of content and referentiality, of ideas and subjective expressions, from under which the mechanisms of formal construction must be brought out; for the Marxists, it was the independent and ideal existence of the literary that had to be dispelled in order for us to see the mechanisms by which social life reproduces itself.

To identify and dispel the dissimulation of literature’s ideal being involves identifying and dispelling also the illusion of its privileged relation to the personal “inner world.” Thus, just as inevitably as Formalist methodology “displaces” the individual author by “hitching” him to the broader movement of objective “forces operative outside of him,” we find this displacement in the methodology of the sociological school. Here, the movement of external forces is also objective, but the objectivity in question is different:

It is not in subjective process that a literary scholar operating on the basis of Marxist methodology should seek an explanation for poetic phenomena, but in objective reality, not in the movement of ideas but in the movement of material reality. [...] Nothing in the poetic fact can be explained by the poet's intentions, because from the Marxist standpoint it is not thought that is definitive, but being. It is not the idea on which a work of art is based, but being; and literary scholarship must discover not the idea but being as the basis of the poetic phenomenon [...] A literary scholar's task consists in discovering the objective reality in a work of literature which provided the material for it and determined its structure. Marxist research consists in discovering this being and elucidating the organic, necessary connection between the given work of art and the being in question. (Pereverzev, "Premises" 55-56)

Once again, there is no need to arbitrate between the Formalists and Pereverzev, to decide which "outside" should count as the truly or ultimately determining one: the outside of the objective dynamics of form or the outside of objective social being (just as there is no need to arbitrate between Marxism and psychoanalysis as to whether the ultimate "Unconscious" is not, after all, the socio-economic). All we need to do is take note of the fundamental fact that emerges at the formal confluence of these two, otherwise irreconcilable, currents of thought: the author is not the author, the individual subject is not enough.

But this fact does not emerge in isolation; it stands as the centerpiece, the main event, of a plot, whose constitutive moments were suggested in the discussion of Formalism. Now, in the writings of the sociological school, we can follow this plot as it unfolds in the dimension of "content."

Anterior to every literary text stands the social being of which Pereverzev speaks, as a unity of objectivity and subjecthood, i.e., as an objective world, which is also, and equally, consciousness (Pereverzev, “Pisarev” 41-42; “Premises” 59).²⁸ The textual is always a manifestation of the latter, but such that the duality-in-unity which we find outside the text is also to be found within it. Since consciousness cannot become manifest except through representations (“images,” *obrazy*, as Pereverzev calls them), the literary text also gives us a “world” (depicted objectivity) that is, equally and simultaneously, a self (depicting subjectivity).

Pereverzev’s monism allowed him to solve rather easily the question of whether literature is capable of adequately reflecting the objective world beyond the page—a question, which had been a stumbling stone for the materialist critics of the preceding century (Chernishevskii, Dobroliubov, Pisarev). They had thought literature fully capable of proffering such a reflection; but in those cases—hardly incidental—when the world appeared crooked in the mirror of representation, there was little for them to do but to deliberate on the inadequacies of this or that author’s “world view.”²⁹ Now Pereverzev could dispense with the problem altogether by confidently announcing that representation is always adequate to reality, if the two terms are properly understood: “Yes, art reproduces reality exactly, retaining its unity of object and subject; it reproduces the objective basis of consciousness, which is actual reality” (“Pisarev”

²⁸ Pereverzev finds support for this monistic view in Marx’s critique of earlier materialist philosophies: “The main defect of materialism up to and including Feurbach consisted in the fact that it regarded reality, the objective world perceived through the external senses, as only an object of contemplation, not as concrete human activity, not as practical activity, not subjectively” (“Premises” 58).

²⁹ “[The] main contradiction [of the materialist critical thought of the 1860s] consisted in the fact that having advanced the strictly materialist proposition that art reproduces reality and having denied the idealistic view of art as the fruit of free thought unencumbered by objective conditions, the mechanists immediately began talking about art as engendered by thought, and very often thought that diverged from reality. This contradiction was inescapable for those who, in speaking of the reproduction of reality, meant not subjective reality with its inherent consciousness but the objective world opposed to consciousness, for those who did not include the consciousness peculiar to reality in the reality reproduced by art. Under such circumstances, art was not the result of a single actual reality but of the interaction between two essences—reflected reality and reflecting consciousness, the objective world and subjective thought, i.e., a fact of both real and ideal order” (Pereverzev, “Pisarev” 42-43).

43). The key word in this statement is “reproduces.” Art does not “reflect” reality; it is the reproduction of reality; it participates in the larger process through which a form of social life, an instance of social being, perpetuates itself. When “reality” is understood to be synonymous with this very social being, its reproduction can only be more or less successful, never “false.”

Of course, it is possible, in a preliminary abstraction, to separate the world depicted from its depicter and to speak of how the former is a distorted copy of the world as it actually is or was; just as it was possible, for the Formalists, to make a distinction between the story “as it really took place” (the *fabula*) and the story as told (the *siuzhet*). But such an abstraction should not lead to the idea of an objective world predating and awaiting a consciousness that may or may not represent this world adequately. Just as the story can only exist as narrated, i.e., as (de-)formed in the movement of storytelling, *the* world can only be given to us as *a* world: an objectivity already in the shape of subjecthood. As with the Formalists, where formal distortion is ontologically prior to (what comes to be perceived as) the distorted material, in Pereverzev the “subjective” deformation is ontologically prior to the deformed “reality.” He often uses the pleonasm “actual reality” in order to dispel a vision of some naïve and simple objectivity unadulterated by the presence of the subjective. “Actual reality” is one into which the “subjective,” hence also the “distortive,” is figured from the very beginning.

Because the distortive work of consciousness (including, of course, artistic consciousness) has no positive “outside” (this consciousness, at least in Pereverzev, can never be fully transparent to its own objective determinations), distortion itself turns into a positive characteristic of the object under investigation, i.e., the text, in a broader sense. Since every representation is, at the same time, a misrepresentation (of the objective conditions underlying a given form of social life), misrepresentation does not come with a negative sign, as a “lie” or

“obfuscation.” For those same objective conditions of social existence which have been “misrepresented” in the text have also determined, in some moment anterior to the text, the specific character of this very misrepresentation.³⁰ Because we can always count on it to be there, and because—even more importantly—we can always count on it for the key to “undoing” its own masquerade, misrepresentation must be thought as one with the objectivity it camouflages, as, in fact, belonging to it. But thus conceived, what we have been referring to as “misrepresentation” is, really, dissimulation; and the new objectivity, to which dissimulation belongs not as a negative moment, a deterrent, but as a positive determination, is none other than Pereverzev’s “actual reality”: objectivity grasped together with the immanent laws of its “subjective” deformation.

Pereverzev was fully aware that the Formalists had spoken of deformation as an essential fact pertaining to the nature of things artistic. Yet, he insisted that the Marxists “knew [this fact] long before Shklovskii,” and that they knew it differently: “They [the Marxists] know that the *mechanism* of deformation, a *device* through which social reality is formed, is determined by the base and causally dependent on the base, and that it is in the base that an explanation and understanding of deformation must be sought” (“Formalists” 138; emphasis added). When the base, i.e., the material conditions of social existence, is thought in a dialectical unity with the mechanisms whereby these conditions produce consciousness, we end up with Pereverzev’s

³⁰ We might recall here the passage in Marx’s “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy” in which Marx criticizes the “Robinsonades” of eighteenth-century economists—their attempts to derive the principles of socio-economic development from fictional scenarios in which the human individual appears as a fully independent agent in confrontation with “nature.” Marx proceeds to expose these scenarios as misrepresentations characteristic of a specific phase in the historical life of bourgeois society. The human individual in question, “the joint product of the dissolution of the feudal form of production and of the new forces of production which have developed since the sixteenth century” (267) is represented as most independent precisely when, in actuality, “the inter-relations of society [...] have reached the highest state of development” (268). Yet this misrepresentation is due neither to accidental blindness, nor to some inborn defect of human reason; it is itself a product—and a necessary product, at that—of the very actuality it obscures—the actuality of bourgeois existence, in which “the different forms of social union confront the individual as a mere means to his private ends, as an outward necessity” (267).

monistic “social being.” As it “deforms,” the base also determines and structures social reality (in its “subjective” manifestations).

The same mechanism of dissimulation/organization is to be found operative within the artistic text, which is always a concretion of a particular class “character,” “attitude,” or “will”—of the subjective aspect of social being. On the most general level, the text “dissimulates,” inasmuch as this concretion of social being inevitably comes forth as a reified world, as depicted objectivity, thus concealing its subjective dimension and occasioning the “realist,” or “referential,” illusion. We fall prey to this illusion when we try, for example, to relate Pushkin’s *Captain’s Daughter* to the historical reality of Pugachev’s rebellion. By doing this, we fail to see the “depictor within the depicted” (Pereverzev, “Premises” 59-60). In this particular case, the “depictor” is a rather different reality: the class reality of the urbanized and well educated small-landed gentry. The reality of Pugachev’s rebellion, in being depicted, is also being *subjected*. It is constructed in accordance with the “laws of perspective” immanent to another world. But this means that it is also subjected to deformation. The irreducible measure of non-coincidence between the artistic representation and its real-life referent had been seen by the Formalists as a result of the peculiar laws of artistic construction. The critics of the sociological school attributed the same discrepancy to the immanent laws governing the historical process.³¹

It should be amply clear by now that when the latter spoke of the subjective, they did not mean the individual subject, the author. The subjectivity they were referring to was that of a social group taken as a whole, a transindividual consciousness, which manifests itself on the level of the text as a depicted world, a concrete organization of images. The text is the place

³¹ “The non-coincidence between reality and its depiction is inherent in the historical process itself. The convergences between reality and representation are always relative; they are limited in respect to both history and class” (Bespalov, “Problema” 25).

where the immanent laws of social organization become the immanent laws of the unfolding artistic content: “In the artistic works’ system of imagery, social reality (a unity of representation and essence, ‘form and content’) presents itself as detached and consciously apprehended in the image. The whole system of images, in its interconnection and logic of development, is none other than the interconnection, logic, and lawfulness [*zakonomernost*] of reality itself, given as an artistic consciousness” (Bespalov, “Problema” 26). This consciousness, which amounts to nothing less than the subjectivization of social reality,³² both “contains” and transcends each individual subjectivity. Clearly, the individual subject is incapable of knowing, willing, and intending everything that the transindividual consciousness “does” by way of representation. Much of the work takes place behind his back, eludes him.³³

In regard to the bourgeois author, this drama of consciousness is particularly poignant, for he misrecognizes even the basic fact of his belonging to a class collectivity and writing as part of it. His understanding of himself is that of a unique consciousness, free to encounter the world on its own and to make sense of it. In its manifest being, therefore, his text offers us, typically, a personal quest for knowledge and beauty, for self-expression and identity (usually within the narrow limits of individual ethics and existential credos). But we discover “the depicter within the depicted,” the latent actuality of the text within its manifest being, when we ask, “What

³² As Bespalov explains a little further in the same article, the best way to conceive of this consciousness is to see it as the artistic consciousness of the social group as a whole (“Problema” 33-34).

³³ “We should judge about style neither from the author’s pronouncements, nor from his belonging to this or that literary group, neither from manifestoes, nor from the author’s plans and intentions. Historical scholarship studies not the wills and desires of people, but the facts that emerge, at times, despite the will of people, behind their back. The formation and individuation of a given style occurs not on people’s will, but, sometimes, regardless of their will, albeit through them” (Bespalov, “Problema” 32). Bespalov’s thesis recalls this classical passage from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*: “Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them out of its material foundations and out of the corresponding social relations. The single individual, who derives them through tradition and upbringing, may imagine that they form the real motives and the starting point of his activity” (47).

social reality is immanently capable of presenting itself as a ‘world’ to be known and conquered through the individual’s own powers and skills (including artistic skills), through independently accumulated experience and hard-won sense of self?” The answer is forthcoming: the reality in question is one in which the relations of production imply the (latent) fact of ever-greater interdependence between the individual members of society, while also posing the (manifest) imperative for competition, specialization of skills, disassociation from traditional forms of collectivity, etc.³⁴

As social being is reproduced in the text, the dissimulation peculiar to it is also reproduced. Manifestly, Maksim Gor’kii’s early stories depict the conflict between two character types: the “restless”—those who yearn for a way out the bleak reality of their social existence—and the “fellow-travelers”—those who acquiesce to it. Around these two poles, a series of semantic oppositions is set up: “the exceptional and the ordinary, the free and the bounded, the rebellious and the self-satisfied” (Bespalov, “Stil” 301). In Gor’kii’s legendary-allegorical tales, the conflict is usually recast as one between the anarchic and virulent freedom of the “natural man” (Larra, Danko, the Man) and the stifling enclosures of the man-made world (the world of culture). Yet, these manifestly irreconcilable opposites are, in fact, the two sides of one and the

³⁴ In *The German Ideology* we read: “First the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals: the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and associations of individuals. Thus, on the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, and hence of the individuals only insofar as they are owners of private property themselves. Never, in any earlier period, have the productive forces taken on a form so indifferent to the intercourse of individuals *as* individuals, because their intercourse was formerly a restricted one. On the other hand, standing over against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrestled away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, but who are, however, only by this fact put into position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals* (83-84; emphasis in the original).

same “socio-psychological tendency” (*sotsio-psikhologicheskoe ustremlenie*)³⁵: in the age of triumphant capitalism, the urban petty bourgeoisie in Russia is threatened with extinction by the spread of large-scale industrial production; its unstable position above the social bottom and below desired material prosperity, translates into a psychological oscillation between rejection of reality and hopeful reconciliation with it (Bespalov, “Stil” 301).³⁶ This is a single psychological “complex,” whose moments have been separated in artistic representation and embodied as different, indeed, conflicting, realities (Bespalov, “Stil” 300-301). But the masquerade of representation does not end here; it scrambles also the vectors of desire. It is the desire for stable prosperity on the part of the lower urban bourgeoisie, frustrated as it is by the actual socio-economic conditions in Russia at the turn of the century, that dissimulates as a dreamy striving for freedom opposed by the conceit of a habitualized and stagnant life. Along the same lines, an idealized “state of nature” emerges as a redeeming alternative to the artificiality of human culture. The actual fear of an impoverished declassed existence (*bosiachestvo*) is represented-deformed in Gor’kii’s stories as a romanticized vagrancy (*brodiazhnichestvo*) outside the bonds of a social group, family, and property (Bespalov, “Stil” 297); while the actual, but impeded, desire (to belong truly to the prosperous bourgeois world and its culture) is represented-deformed as its own wishful denial.

And lest we think that these transmutations are due to some idiosyncrasy or “bad faith” on Gor’kii’s part, Bespalov sets the record straight: “The social tendency expressed in the central

³⁵ In most other cases, “tendency” would be an inadequate translation of the Russian *ustremlenie*, which is traditionally rendered as “striving” or “aspiration.” For translating Bespalov’s usage, however, the teleological connotations of “striving” and “aspiration” seem out of place.

³⁶ At this point, Bespalov’s reading echoes Pereverzev’s early study of Dostoevsky, in which the position of the petty bourgeoisie is described in the following terms: “Over the petty bourgeoisie a curse hangs, as over the biblical fig tree: it is sociologically fruitless, incapable of a historically constructive role. The tragedy of this class lies in the fact that its revolutionary impulse neutralizes its reactionary impulse, and its reactionary impulse neutralizes its revolutionary impulse; the stormiest tensions of revolutionary energy are resolved in reaction, and the most intense reaction must be resolved in revolution.” (11)

image [of the “restless”] is not the author’s commission, his conception or intention, not his political, ideological convictions; this is the objective directionality [*napravlennost*] and social content expressed in the image, independent of the will and intentions of the author” (“Stil” 280). If, in the writings of the Formalists, an objectively ascertainable dynamic of form traverses-overcomes the individual consciousness of the author, in the theories of the sociological school the same function is performed by the “objective [...] social content.” One and the same cognitive scenario is played out in two ostensibly heterogeneous dimensions. Ostensibly, two different sets of phenomena are being encountered, divergent realities are being asserted and known as “real,” incompatible positivities are being called upon to ground epistemological certainties. And yet, on their divergent paths, the “idealist” poetics of the Formalists and the “materialist” formulations of the sociological school insistently point to and affirm one and the same “situation”: the formidable weight of a new objectivity has come upon the individual subject; it now envelopes him and “instrumentalizes” his consciousness toward its own ends; it calls him along in a voice that is misheard and, *as* misheard, it is always obeyed; it acts through him, so that he is never equal to what he himself has “done”; an impersonal agency is now accountable for this work, concretized within each particular text as the agency of a particular “device” or, as we are about to see, the agency of a particular “image.”

To identify an extra-literary determinant, a socio-psychological “character” (Pereverzev), “tendency” (Bespalov, Ulrikh Fokht), or “complex” (Pospelov, Vasilii Sovsun), was insufficient, if this determinant could not be shown to be immanently *of* the text, to have a uniquely textual existence.³⁷ Just because they denied the autonomy of the literary series, the critics of the sociological school were not going to deny the specificity of literature among other

³⁷ “Being immanent in relation to the socio-historical conditions which have brought it into existence, the [socio-psychological] complex is also immanent in relation to the structure of the [text]. The latter is a result of this complex’s realization” (Pospelov, “Stil” 162).

superstructural phenomena, nor, for that matter—the possibility of poetics as a discipline distinct from economics, sociology, social psychology, and socio-economic history. Closely following Plekhanov, they saw “play” (*igra*) and “image” (*obraz*) as the distinguishing determinations of artistic phenomena, in general, and literature, in particular:

The concept of art is closely associated with that of the image as a specific feature of art. Art is always action; it consists in reproducing behavior characteristic of a particular form of life, behavior otherwise known as psychology or character. When this form of life reproduces the system of behavior characteristic of it, apart from the immediate battle for life, it is playing. The system of behavior reproduced or, what is the same thing, the character or psychology reproduced, is the image. It is impossible to reproduce behavior, to play, without the image. The image constitutes the essence of play. Play without the image, without reproduction of the system of behavior or character, is simply unthinkable, it is simply impossible. Art is play and art is image are essentially equivalent formulae, because play can be realized only in the image, because to play means to present an image. In play, the image is merged with the organism at play and has no existence apart from that organism. [...] In art, the image becomes separated from the player; it becomes objectivized and takes on an independent existence. [...] It is in this objectivization that the act of artistic creativity consists. It is through the objectivization of play, through its embodiment in the matter of the external world, that the artist creates images. In art, social character, the subject of play, becomes the object known as the image. (Pereverzev, “Problems” 155)

Partly due to the lingering connotations of its former use as the word for “icon,” *obraz* resolves more easily the tension between sensuousness and sense, between the pictorial as such and its semantic fulfillment, that characterizes its English counterpart. So that even when Pereverzev speaks of the “objectness” of the image, its independent existence in the materiality of the artistic medium, the next step is inevitably implied: to show that a representation is always inhabited by the (social) subjective, that it is not only a sensuous concretion (“image” in its most literal meaning), but also “character.” The transition is more than facilitated by the fact that in one of its standard uses, *obraz* means, indeed, a depiction of a person, character, a verbal or iconic figuration-individuation of the human.

While the capaciousness of the Russian term allows Pereverzev to think the artistic image as an agency, almost a living entity,³⁸ it also allows for a common misreading of his argument. The misreading in question collapses the social character (*kharakter*) reproduced in the text with a fictional character (*obraz, geroi, personazh*) from the text.³⁹ Although a fictional persona (a literary “type”) can exemplify a class psychology,⁴⁰ such a relation does not exhaust the reproduction mechanism of which Pereverzev speaks. The first thing to be said of this mechanism is that it is one of *structural* reproduction. A structure of social relations, once subjectivized as a “system of behavior,” is then reproduced (objectivized) in the text *as a*

³⁸ See, for example, “Problems” 161-63, where Pereverzev speaks of the text as a “complex organic structure” constituted by the interaction of “living images.”

³⁹ Thus a simplistic version of Pereverzev’s “sociological” analysis may give us something like this: In the image (*obraz*) of Pechorin we find the embodiment of a distinct social character (*kharakter*)—that of the Russian large landowner class at the moment of its historic eclipse; Pechorin’s psychological make-up dominates the semantic aspect of *Hero of Our Time*; characters and events are seen “through his eyes”; etc.

⁴⁰ See Fokht’s reading of the character of Lermontov’s Demon, Pospelov’s analysis of Lavretskii’s character in *A Nest of Gentlefolk* (“Stil”), and Pereverzev’s discussion of character types in the novels of Goncharov (“K voprosu”).

structure of images.⁴¹ In other words, the social “character” is to be identified with the structure as such, and not with separate instances of representation within it (fictional characters).⁴² An appeal, therefore, must be made to a more general meaning of *obraz*, as well as “image,” which—not without some strain—would allow them to stand for the totality of what the text depicts (an “image of the world” or an “image of reality”) and, thus, be virtually synonymous with two broader terms: respectively, *izobrazhenie* and “representation.”

Here is the place to remember that in the Formalists’ theorizing of artistic construction “device” turns up on two distinct levels of analytical description: as a designation of a particular instance within a totality (an individual device within the text) and as a figuration of this very totality (the artistic text, or even art itself, *as* a device). But the same is the case with *obraz* in the poetics of the sociological school: it appears both as an individuation within the text (*a* portrayal of something or someone) and as an individuation of the whole (*a* historically and class-specific representation of reality in its subjective dimension). In that it is a dynamic interaction of formal devices, the text in Formalist poetics can be said to be itself a “Device,”

⁴¹ “Style is a phenomenon relative to class. The psychology of this or that class is imprinted in the whole aggregate of elements in the literary work, which represents a unity. In each historical period, the psychology of a given class possesses certain basic features that define the psychological character of that class. These basic features are, so to speak, the foundation, the kernel, around which the other elements of class psychology are concentrated; they serve as the organizing principles of the given psychology, giving it a definite form [...].

These organizing psychological elements are reflected in the formative principles of the artistic work, in general, and of literature, in particular; they are realized, *materialized, so to speak, in the laws of literary construction.*

We must emphasize that the basic elements of [class] psychology are not, by themselves, [identical with] style; style is the product of class consciousness objectivized in the literary work; being objectivized, its basic elements serve as the principles of organization of [literary] images” (Khrapchneko 27; emphasis in the original).

⁴² Pospelov explains the relation between particular character-images *in* the text and the overall “image” *of* the text in the following terms: “Within the limits of the poetic work, an order of social group experiences manifests itself as a *concrete system of motifs*. When speaking about poetic structures, we will refer to this system as a *complex of psychological motifs*—a socio-psychological complex, by which we understand that very same subjective aspect of social relations between people, which has been poetically canonized” (“K metodike” 67; emphasis in the original).

“If we call [this] entire complex, in all of its aspects, an ‘image,’ it is because the distinctive being of the socio-psychological complex becomes particularly visible and intelligible for us exactly in the plane of poetic imagery, within the well-defined logical confines of the ‘image.’ The images of the ‘dramatic personae,’ of the agents in the work of fiction, are its main constituents [...].” (“K metodike” 78; emphasis in the original).

something that functions in a certain way, a working mechanism. Similarly, by virtue of being a peculiar organization of images, the text can be imaged forth by Pereverzev and his followers as an entity that *behaves* in a certain way, an *Obraz*, a character-image.⁴³

In Formalist theory, the identity of these two levels—the particulars of artistic construction and its totality—is secured through the so-called “governing constructive principle” (*dominanta*): because all formal elements in the text are governed in their functioning by this principle, they function as a whole, a Device. A similar situation obtains when the text is considered from the point of view of socio-psychological content. Here the totalizing mediator is called, variously, a “tendency,” “principle,” or “complex.” Because, as bearers of meaning, all individual image-motifs serve to articulate a tendency or principle, they are not a mere cumulation, but constitute a systematic whole. Hereby a transition is also implemented from object to subject, from the depicted to its depicor: through the manifest “thereness” of a represented world, a trans-individual agency becomes intelligible, so that this image of the world is now, equally, a Character. For the analyst, therefore, it is a question of identifying the “tendency” or “principle” that has thus totalized the text: “Marxism approaches literary phenomena with confidence, in full awareness of the fact that it will be able to dissect the whole fabric of the poetic with the sharp scalpel of its method, reaching the core where the object and subject, both the depiction and the expression of being, are organically combined, where the principle of its regular laws and necessity reveals itself” (Pereverzev, “Premises” 63).⁴⁴

The scalpel referred to above is, obviously, a tool of dissection only to the extent to which it is, also, a tool of reconstitution. For it is through this surgical intervention alone that the

⁴³ Robert Louis Jackson has used the compound in its reversed form (“image-character”) to render Pereverzev’s use of *obraz*.

⁴⁴ See also Pereverzev, “Pisarev” 16 and Pospelov, “K metodike” 59.

text can be reinstated into its truth. Only at the site of the analytical incision does it reconnect with itself, revealing its true nature as a reproduction of social being. That this truth is in no way manifestly given, but is subsequent to the hard labor of the analyst, is emphasized time and time again by Pereverzev and his colleagues:

[The] first step in a Marxist investigation of the poetic text consists in finding the subject in the object depicted in the literary work, in discovering the depicor in that which is depicted. It is not so very easy to do this. Finding the subject in question in the object depicted requires a close examination of all the elements of the poetic structure, strenuous attention to the smallest details of the scene portrayed, persistent thought, scholarly sensitivity, and even vigilance and perspicacity. (Pereverzev, "Premises" 60)

In the moment when the textual *Darstellung* is shown to be a necessary and lawful structuration governed by a single principle/tendency, is the moment when the anagoric level is attained, when the "scene portrayed" acquires the features of a living being, a trans-individual personality (*Obraz*).⁴⁵ But, from this, it follows once again that the anagoric (Social-)World-cum-Character should be identified with the textual structure as a whole, and not with a particular embodiment within it (a fictional character, "hero");⁴⁶ it is to be found in the totality of interrelations that constitute this structure.⁴⁷ He who brings these interrelations to the light of

⁴⁵ In Northrop Frye's system, the anagoric is the last level of figural representation, the furthest possibility for a figural embodiment of meaning. See Frye 151-58.

⁴⁶ Thus, from Bespalov's analysis of Gor'kii's early stories, it becomes clear that the "character" reproduced in the text is not to be confused with either of the two central character-types; it emerges from their structural opposition, which articulates the vacillating social position of the urban petty bourgeoisie.

⁴⁷ "The order of experiences of a given social group, fixed in a verbal structure, creates through its features the characteristics that permeate all aspects of this verbal structure, thus forging a distinctive poetic style" (Pospelov, "K metodike" 66).

knowledge and shows their “regular laws and necessity”—the carrier of specialized knowledge, the analyst—is an indispensable agency in the plot of the text’s existence.

Once the content-generating principle/tendency has been identified, the textual elements, on all levels of the structure, can be seen as falling into two distinct categories: the “autogenic” and “heterogenic” ones (Pospelov, “K metodike” 101). The former are those in which the organizing principle has been realized more or less directly; the latter—those that contribute indirectly to its realization. In the former, according to Pospelov’s terminology—the said principle is “subjectified” (*sub"ektivirovan*), while in the latter it is only “objectified” (*ob"ektivirovan*):

The organizing [socio-psychological] complex can be subjectified in the literary work, in which case the work would contain an organizing *image* or *images*, those images into which the organizing complex is subjectified. In the other case, the organizing complex can be only objectified in the literary work, and then the latter *would not* feature an organizing *image*. [Griboedov’s] *Woe from Wit* can serve as an example of the first instance: the socio-psychological complex subjectified here in the character of Chatskii organizes the structure of the play. [Gogol’s] *Dead Souls* can be cited as an example of the second instance: none of the socio-psychological complexes subjectified into the character-images of the “poem” organizes it fully; the organizing complex here is objectified in all these images and organizes them from outside. (Pospelov, “K metodike” 83-84; emphasis in the original)

Through Pospelov’s abstruse language we can still glimpse the reason for the rather symptomatic misreading discussed earlier. Although, in principle, all character-images in the

text are equally important for the realization of the “organizing complex,” in certain circumstances some of them (i.e., the “autogenic” ones) stand as “more equal than others.”⁴⁸ Under these circumstances, one character-image—let us say, Chatskii—could seem to have determined from within, through an agency all of its own, the textual presentation. Now all other characters in the play, their roles and trajectories, the manner in which they are presented, would appear to be subordinated to the character of Chatskii. They would exist *for* another, i.e., as sheer “material.”

But is it even possible to think a character-image as fully autochthonous in relation to the structuring principle of the text-as-totality, and thus—as fully embodying the anagogic Character (*Obraz*) that reproduces itself through the text? For the critics of the sociological school, the answer was firmly negative. A positive answer would imply that the much-sought-for nexus of the representational structure—the point where a represented world “turns” into self-reproducing/representing subject—is not hidden at all, but is there, on the surface of representation, in the body of a fictional character. Rather than residing in the space of hermeneutic cognition, this nexus would be found in the space of the diegesis itself: in the figure of one of its characters, the text would appear to have always-already “read” itself; its latent actuality would be, also, its manifest “face,” and the intervention of specialized knowledge would be quite superfluous.

⁴⁸ The same ambiguity emerges also in the Formalist dialectic of “device,” where, in relation to the governing constructive principle (*dominanta*), a given formal element or group of them can stand as privileged carriers of the said principle. Thus, for instance, in Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* the device of narrative digression is, clearly, in privileged relation to the operating dynamic of the whole. But this is so because—to remember—the dynamic in question consists simply in the fact that a given creative gesture (in the case of *Tristram*—the idiosyncratic meandering of fictional narration) is promoted at the expense of others (namely, those associated with the habitual unfolding of an autobiographical story). Although the latter are equally “form,” they necessarily appear as less “formal,” or not “formal” at all (which makes Tynianov’s reminder—that the subjugated elements, i.e., the so-called “material,” are also formal—a necessary one).

CHAPTER THREE: ORGANIZATION

The life we discern in the general realm called “artistic text” is not exclusive to it. Beyond the artistic text proper, other spheres of human experience are configured similarly around the basic fact of lost authorship. Twentieth-century Western knowledge has made three of these spheres especially prominent: the economic sphere, human interiority, and semiosis. For us thus far, “this” was “text,” and “this” turned out to be a systemic organization of elements and functions, a dynamic ensemble of interrelations, a totality, whose objective determinations exceed the purview of the individual who is its putative master. For the historical moment loosely identified as “Western modernity,” the same crucial fact is “discovered” by political economy, psychoanalysis, and linguistics: “this” exceeds the grasp of him who owns it by an irreducible shadowy margin. After Marx, the “market” exceeds the simple intercourse of production and consumption, just as “commodity” exceeds “product”; after Freud, the psychic apparatus exceeds the comfortable self-possession of the ego-cogito; and after Saussure, “language” exceeds the immediacy of speech. The measure of excess is called, respectively, “exchange value,” “the unconscious,” and “signification.” Instituting a peculiar modern cryptology, these items are more (or less) than mere facts, more (or less) than “real.” For they set the terms for a completely new experience of what is “true” and what is “real”, and are, to that extent, immune to ontological or epistemological challenges. They define, in relation to the individual subject, the extent to which the fullness of the empirical, of “this,” evades him. These are the names of

modern hungers, the respective obstacles that prevent the full consumption of material life, the full absorption of the inner into the self, and the full availability of speech to expression.

Because there is “exchange of commodities,” “an unconscious,” and “signification,” existential value, identity, and meaning are not fully *present to* the individual subject. Rather, they are *presented away* from him, *re-presented*.

What separates the thing of use from the “commodity,” the intended from the realized meaning of speech, the psychic act from its true significance, is a movement of re-presentation with no subject (at least not in any traditional sense). I want “re-presentation” here to stand for the process of casting-away of values supposedly present to the individual, where “casting” is equally “throwing” and “giving shape.” Through the market, signification, and the “primary process,” the elements that constitute my material, linguistic, and psychic life are “cast away” in another place, on “another scene” (*Andere Schauplatz*, as Freud has it). In this sense I am giving it here, “re-presentation” is tantamount to trans-valuation: both a transposition and assignment of value somewhere else.

Who is the author of representation, understood in these novel terms? Who imparts the definitive value-form to the materialities of outer and the intangibles of inner life? Thus far we encountered only very particular answers to this question, coming from two particular experiences of “this” as “artistic text,” and the answers were: “formal construction” and “socio-psychological complex.” Other particular answers, in respect to the experience of “this” as “economic life,” “interiority,” and “communication,” could be phrased as the “system of exchange,” the “psychic complex,” the “mechanism of signification.” Obviously, the nominal terms in these phrasings are readily substitutable for one another (we can just as well say the “complex of economic relations,” the “psychic mechanism,” the “system of signification”),

which points us to the general answer: the generator of representations, their true “author,” is the system in its systematicity, the Device as such. Far from being mere cumulations of facts or events, the economic, the psychic, and the semiotic were found to be *systematically working* aggregates. Never mind that the “work” in question appeared sometimes with the grinning face of deceit and sometimes under the countenance of play (the play of the signifier, the tricks and jokes of the unconscious, the ludic existence of the commodity form⁴⁹). To be sure, deceitfulness or dissimulation are not characteristics of the Device and the work it performs, only of its relation to the individual subjective consciousness.

This basic situation—which warrants the label “predicament” only insofar as we are assuming the point of view of the “castaway,” i.e., of the supposedly centered individual subject—becomes “plot” when we figure into it the act that ends the masquerade and puts an end to the dissimulation. Thus far, we have encountered it as a hermeneutic act, an exercise of method, a conquest of analytical knowledge. But this is only half of the story. For this climactic act can equally well take place on the other side, the side opposite knowledge, usually called “reality.” It is a true double act full of ambiguity: what knowledge accomplishes in regard to “this” can also be effected internally by the immanent logic by which “this” exists. The same event—the overcoming of dissimulation—can occur “in analysis,” but it can also occur “in reality,” in the very objectivity that knowledge observes.

⁴⁹ “A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (Marx, *Capital* 163-64).

Let us consider the example we already encountered in the discussion of Russian Formalism. There we saw that the hermeneutic act unveils, “lays bare” for us, the conventionality of the artistic text and of art itself in its historical being. The act becomes double when we realize that *there*, in art’s actual existence, quite independently of scholars who might or might not heed it, an objective movement also brings about the “laying bare of the device.” Contemporaneous with (and very much aligned with) the Formalist movement in criticism, the poetic practice of the Russian Futurists was to bring about “in practice” that terminal episode in the existence of art when the artistic text is nothing more than the blunt exposure of its own formal determinants. Most conspicuously in the work of Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh, Russian Futurist poetry became a “practical analysis” of textuality and language. Here the creative act itself demonstrated the hitherto concealed being of poetic speech. And this concrete demonstration was, in turn, always ready to become a general statement, to be abstracted into “theory” by those who performed it. Thus Kruchenykh could cite the example of his own famous piece “Dyr-bul-shchyl” after he wrote on the nature of verse:

The structure [*struktura*] of the word or of verse consists of its component parts (sound, letter, syllable, etc.); let’s symbolize them as a—b—c—d.

The *texture* [*faktura*] of the word consists in the *arrangement* of these parts (a—d—c—b, or b—c—d—a, or in still other ways); texture is the *making* [*delanie*] of the word, its construction, layering, accretion, the distribution in one way or another of syllables, letters, and words” (qtd. Al’fonsov 55; emphasis in the original).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ In Kruchenykh’s usage, *struktura* refers to the systematicity of language and poetic speech as latent, while *faktura* refers to the moment when this systematicity is made manifest through literary practice, through poetic “making.”

So we shall now turn to that other side, the side of the “real world,” where the making of words and things takes place: from the systematicity of “this” as discovered by knowledge, to the systematicity of “this” as a field of practices. This is not only a methodological turn called for by the purposes of the present discussion; it is just as much a call that resounds in Soviet culture of the post-revolutionary years:

Our epoch is characterized by the fact that mankind, because of the increasing collectivization of the productive forces of society, *is moving from systematicity in knowledge* (in this case, theoretical linguistics) *to systematicity in practice, to organization* (the construction of language). Mankind is beginning consciously and intentionally to create and advance those elements of life that, up to now, seemed to be beyond the jurisdiction of society’s organizational-practical interference (psychology, the laws of physiology, the labor process and along with these, language). (Arvatov, “Rechtyvorchestvo” 91; emphasis in the original)

Addressing primarily the possibility of creating a new language for a new society, Boris Arvatov had, obviously, a much broader frame of reference. He envisioned a transition “from systematicity in knowledge to systematicity in practice” across most various spheres of human experience, of which the linguistic was but one. The “elements of life” in all these spheres, hitherto constellated in the shadow of subjective consciousness, had begun to emerge from that shadow. And there had opened now the prospect of a human creation, of “construction,” as Arvatov calls it, of “making” (*delanie*), as Kruchenykh calls it. But this proud, revolutionary, activity shall not reinstate the individual’s alienated rights to authorship, nor shall it simply transfer them onto some collective subject. Whoever their subject, “making” and “construction” do not quite amount to authorship, for “making” here does not mean original creation, and

“construction” is not to be understood as erection *ad nihilum*. The kind of praxis these acts constitute is less originary than regulatory. And thus it is not by chance that where Kruchenykh uses “making” and “construction” he also speaks of “arrangement,” and where Arvatov says “construction,” he equates it with “organization.”

“Organization” became a slogan word in the 1920s in large part due to the theoretical work of Aleksandr Bogdanov (pseudonym of Aleksandr Malinovskii, 1873-1928). Long before becoming the founder and leading figure of the Proletkult movement (initiated in 1917, on the eve of the Revolution), Bogdanov was working on an analytic of “life” in which the project of a revolutionary culture to come would be immanently grounded. He believed that the scope of Marx’s hermeneutic had to be expanded toward the utmost horizons of the empirical world (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 134). The positive knowledge to be derived from studying the historical experience of mankind was to be coopted by the positive findings of the natural sciences (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 77-79). At their meeting point, these two hitherto disconnected pursuits, were to coalesce into a new, truly universal science (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 50-52, 78-79).⁵¹ The *Tektology* (1912-1929), Bogdanov’s grand theoretical project, was to institute such a science by generalizing the apparently heterogeneous existence of the empirical. Where others saw heterogeneity, Bogdanov saw a common mode of being for all things available to experience. The name of this common mode of being was “organization”:

Drawing on the facts and ideas of contemporary science we reach the only exhaustive, the only monistic understanding of the universe. The universe presents itself as an endlessly unfolding panoply of forms at different degrees and levels of organization: from the unknown to us elements of the ether to the human collectives and the planetary systems. All these forms—in their interweaving and

⁵¹ See also Bogdanov, “Taina” 404-405.

mutual struggle—constitute the universal organizational process: endlessly dividing itself into parts, boundless and seamless in its wholeness. Thus, the realm of organizational experience coincides with the realm of experience as such. Organizational experience is nothing other than *all of our experience considered from an organizational point of view*, i.e., as a world of organizing and disorganizing processes. (*Tektologiia* 73; emphasis in the original).

Every empirical fact can be understood as composed of activities and resistances, of “organizing” and “disorganizing” elements (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 118-25). To that extent, every moment of experience, regardless of its provenance, falls under the competence of tektology, the general science of organization.

As Bogdanov explains (*Tektologiia* 92), the word “tektology” derives from the Greek sememe for making, building, and construction (*teuchō, tekton*). A science of organization it is, yet a science that wants to make and do, just as much as it wants to know.⁵² Like Pereverzev⁵³ and many other revolutionary critics of the time, Bogdanov was wont to quote Marx’s imperative for a cognition that does not just interpret, but transforms the world.⁵⁴ That the world is ubiquitously “tektological” means that it is ubiquitously open to “organizational-practical interference.”⁵⁵ If everywhere we turn we only find a factually existing organization of things, ideas, or activities, then all these fields of objectivity, in their bewildering multiplicity, offer themselves as fields for the praxis of organization (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 106). And it is a shame that language, as we have it and use it, does not bear out this universality. For we can say

⁵² See Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 57.

⁵³ See note 28.

⁵⁴ The reference is to Marx, “Theses” 243.

⁵⁵ See the quotation from Arvatov above.

“to organize a party,” or “to organize a meeting,” but why do we still say “to write,” and not “to organize” a book, to “construct,” and not “to organize” a building (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 95-96)?⁵⁶ Yet the construction of a building and the writing of a book are equally organizational activities, as they involve the coordination of multiple elements into an effective whole (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 99). The linguistic impediment proceeds from the impediment of history; it is the stuttering of an imperfect historical world in which human endeavor has been disjointed, split up into specialized “occupations,” and is no longer recognized as common and one.⁵⁷

It should be noted that Bogdanov uses “organization” in two different senses, which hold in English usage, as they do in Russian: organization as a fact and as an act, as an objectively existing state of affairs and as praxis. As long as we are in the world of nature, this distinction poses no problem. Crystals, planetary systems, and living bodies are all organized entities; the subject is implied and irrelevant: nothing is to be gained by identifying Nature as the “organizer” of these structures. The fact has precedence over the act. As soon as we cross over into the man-made world, however, the ambiguity sets in. “A society of men” is both a fact and a hidden imperative, it is both a neutral description and a call to action. The genitive works both ways: to assign to the organizational structure (society) its constitutive elements (men), leaving in abeyance the question of agency; or to charge these same elements (men) with the responsibility

⁵⁶ See also Bogdanov, “Taina” 407-408.

⁵⁷ “The problem is that specialization [...] undermines the homogeneity of the [class] collective, it engenders disunity, mutual misunderstanding, and thence also contradictions between its differentiated elements; then [the class collective] is no longer one in its life and constructive work, and is incapable of producing a unified and wholesome structure for the entire society. Such was the case with the bourgeoisie: it never became a true collective, it could not devise any form of organization other than the anarchic. And to the extent to which the proletariat is ruled by the specializing powers of bourgeois culture, it too manifests disunity, which turns into direct contradictions” (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 50).

for their own creation (society). Alternately, man stands as that which is being “organized” and as that which organizes, as the object and subject of organization.

In thinking and toiling, ordering and executing, man is the organizer of ideas and materialities, of life. Yet through the entire expanse of history, this very life, as an objective system of interrelations, has exceeded the purview of its supposed organizer. The fact of organization has been in excess of the act. In the bourgeois world, this discrepancy manifests itself as a conflict between an individual, “specialized,” subjective consciousness and the objective-latent communality of human experience:

The “absolute” individual “I” expresses the socially fragmented experience of man and his existential opposition to others. It is clear that the unity of the social whole is outside of his field of vision. Not only is this unity invisible to the individual: it is also imperfect, elemental, unorganized, full of existential contradictions. The individual is *overcome* by these contradictions of the unattainable and incomprehensible whole; he is powerless in front of them; the elemental forces of social life reign over him. (“Sobiranie” 37; emphasis in the original)

Closely following Marx,⁵⁸ Bogdanov rehearses the already familiar scenario in which a totality of interrelations outstrips the powers of the individual and thus remains transcendent to his consciousness. When he says “man,” Bogdanov, clearly, does not mean this individual. Rather, “man” is an ontological imperative *addressed to* the individual. As he explains earlier in the same essay, “man” is more than either the corporeal or psychic-ideal identity of the individual subject. “Man is the *entire world of experience*” (“Sobiranie” 29; emphasis in the original). Such a definition, of course, in no way means that a person could possibly possess all

⁵⁸ See note 30.

experience accumulated by humanity through its history (Bogdanov, “Sobiranie” 43). What he *could* possess, however, is the *common content* of all human experience: those organizational forms and methods that underlie and unify the life of nature and human culture. This optimal condition would permit each person to relate to and assimilate, if necessary, the experience accumulated by any other (Bogdanov, “Sobiranie” 43-44).

We are given to understand that the individual is the historical distortion-dissimulation of man’s genuine being. A historically specific organization of socio-economic relations has “presented” man away from himself and into the “individual.” The predicament of this representation can be reversed through what Bogdanov calls the “conscious-systematic gathering of man” (“Sobiranie” 42). Man is to be gathered back from his incomplete and dissimulative existence as an individual-subjective monad, he is to be retrieved from his being-represented.

But what and whose is the agency through which such a lofty project would become reality? Does this agency rest with “us who know”? Is it a matter of “us who know” installing consciousness in “them who don’t,” of educating the masses, of organizing their communal existence? The answer is equivocally affirmative: the “conscious-systematic gathering of man” can be “our” doing only because it is the immanent doing of the historical process itself. For *there*, in the historical reality of today, the gathering of man is already under way. The same inexorable mechanism that has fragmented human being is now working toward manifesting the truth-reality of that being.

Inherent to the productive activity of every individual—the measure by which this activity is never equal to itself—is the fact that it takes place within an immanent organization of society’s productive forces. As the forces of production develop, they obscure ever further this essential fact. In advanced bourgeois society the process reaches a crisis, which is at the same

time anastasis. The specialization of the production process, the farthest alienation of labor from labor's true character, has made man a "cog in the machine," it has reduced him to a mere accessory. Yet also there, where he is at his most atomized, where he has become one blind motion, man is inexorably driven back to the fullness of his being. And what thus brings him back from re-presentation, what "retrieves" him or "gathers" him, is, once again, a device:

The machine was born in the world of competition and social antagonism. As we know, the machine sharpened and brought to the limit this competition and this antagonism. But, thereby, it also sharpened and increased the *need for development*. In each sphere of [capitalist] competition there arises the need for ceaseless, planned perfection of technologies. This need is satisfied through the elaboration of new technical methods.

The common technical methods bring machines ever closer to their highest type: the automatic mechanism. This process [...] decreases, immediately and directly, the importance of specialization by increasing the homogeneity between various forms of labor. ("Sobiranie" 41-42; emphasis in the original)⁵⁹

And further still, the increased homogeneity of various labors calls a future in which the machine will relieve man of all but one task: that of supervision and organization (Bogdanov, *Tektologiia* 108). Becoming more self-sufficient, the machine progressively eliminates the great divide in man's existence—that between intellectual and manual labor, between command and execution (Bogdanov, "Obshchestvo" 93; "Stroi" 300). It calls into existence a new type of human being in whom the "practical" is immediately the "intellectual," and vice versa: his practical involvement *is* the exercise of his organizational intelligence.

⁵⁹ See also Bogdanov, "Obshchestvo" 91-94; "Stroi" 296-99.

As it works, the automated mechanism of the machine also *works out* the latent reality of human existence. As it produces, it also produces the realization that this existence is communal and shared, that it is, essentially, organization. In other words, the machine produces consciousness.⁶⁰ And thus, as history draws closer to its great turning point, the machine comes to symbolize-embodiment in a powerful metaphor the nature of the historical process itself. For isn't history just such a mechanism that works systematically and works out in the determinate course of its operations the genuine organization of human life?

If the machine can be experienced as a maker of a veritable historical revolution, it is just as true that the Revolution taking place in history can be experienced as a machine-like mechanism, inexorably precise and effective in the execution of its "iron formulas":

The materialist dialectics of class struggle—here is the genuine algebra of the revolution. What the naked eye sees on the arena [of history] is chaos, turbulence, formlessness, and boundlessness. But this chaos has been calculated and accounted for. Its stages have been foreseen. The lawfulness of their succession has been anticipated and clasped into iron formulas [...]. Revolutionary strategy is not formless, like an elemental force, but complete, like a mathematical formula. For the first time in history we see the revolutionary algebra in action.

(Trotsky 2)

This experience of history, which belongs properly to the domain of politics, is not altogether different from the experience of the text that we observed in two instances of early-

⁶⁰ "[...] machine production transforms the proletariat [...] into a class infused with working consciousness, infused with positive attitude toward labor, a class that realizes the meaning and value of labor [...]. In the worker's thinking, the idea of labor occupies a central position: it serves as a starting point for him. In his inner world [...] there develops, firstly, the love of labor and, secondly, the pride in labor, because he sees constantly [...] how labor overcomes nature, overcomes the elemental forces. All this is done by the machine, which carries the self-consciousness of labor [...]." (Bogdanov, *Elementy* 38-39).

twentieth-century poetics. Both “text” and “history” offer themselves to the “naked eye” as something other than what they truly are, and what they truly are is a systemic aggregate that works according to its immanent laws. (It matters little whether this systemic aggregate is called “device,” “complex,” “living organization,” “dynamic structure,” or something else.) What we must now observe is the peculiar kind of praxis engendered when an “eye” no longer naked, but properly equipped, approaches “this” and regards it as a field for “organizational-practical interference.”

At the most general level, this kind of praxis is characterized by a fateful hesitation between subjective agency and objective determination, a hesitation that is not an overture to some fulfillment in the subsequent act, but is what constitutes and characterizes the act itself. As soon as revolutionary will demarcates its “arena,” it discovers that this arena—whether it be society, language, psyche, art, etc.—possesses an immanent dynamic of its own, that it functions as an autonomous device. Hence, the ensuing cultural act, whether it calls itself “organization,” “construction,” “making,” etc., must recognize as authoritative the objective movement that takes place “there,” in the arena; it must synchronize itself with this movement and somehow belong to it. This means, for example, that a project of radical education, aimed at transforming human consciousness, must take into account the transformation already taking place *there* through the actual alteration of socio-economic conditions; it means that any impulse toward radical reorganization of language must recognize that language is already being remodeled “there” by the objective demands of the revolutionary present; it means that any project aimed at producing the true revolutionary text must reckon with the movement through which reality itself is already “writing” this very text. Because there is such a wager between agency and objective

determination, no praxis can be authoritative without ceasing to be authorial. For its authority would come from nowhere other than the objective and autonomous functioning of the Device.

Now that we are on the side of praxis, the culminating act of our plot is, of course, not a hermeneutic intervention, but an act of “organizational-practical interference.” Whether political or artistic, this act is always double, for as it “makes” and “creates” it, simultaneously, gives up authorship and gives in to the authoritative power of a new objectivity working independently of it. The theoretical knowledge that we considered earlier in the two “scientific” approaches to artistic creation does not count its activity as anything substantial, as in any way altering the object under investigation (the text), but as a pure translucency toward the object’s latent truth. The kind of cultural act we are about to consider is similarly constituted. Just as the intervention of that knowledge does not really create the truth of the text, but merely “lets it show,” so the praxis that corresponds to it does not really create a new reality, but, rather, helps to bring into the light of day the essential, yet hitherto concealed, reality of “this.” As it “interferes” into a given field of objectivity, it thereby merely “lets it be.”

CHAPTER FOUR: IMPERATIVE OBJECTHOOD

“The things are coming!”
(Mayakovsky, *Mystery-Bouffe*)

In one of the inaugural statements of the newly constituted Left Front of the Arts (LEF), Nikolai Chuzhak was able to express eloquently this essential relationship between a nascent practice and the imperative objectivity of its field: “*There*—an entire uprising of things [is taking place] as a result of some process of dialectically developing matter, produced by an unknown collective artist-creator; and *here*—even the very construction of the thing, even the production of values [exists] as some barely reachable, dreamed-of ideal!” (“Pod znakom”¹³; emphasis added). Ostensibly, “here” is my studio, my writing desk, the place where something called “art” is still being made—the sanctified domain of aesthetic creation. “There” are the streets and the masses, the factories and production, the exertion of labor at its most pragmatic and the procession of life at its most mundane. But “here” and “there” are also the essential coordinates of representation in the traditional sense, the places, respectively, of the representing subject and the object to be represented. And the project of the Soviet left avant-garde should be understood as an attempt to collapse the distance between the two, to make them one. This project, in its various modes and phases—from the “making of the thing,” through constructivism and production art, to the biography of the object and the literature of the fact—unfolds in the dramatic divide between “here” and “there,” between a point of departure, where the subject and

his expressions still subsist, and a point of anticipated fulfillment, where they are to be abolished, swallowed in the movement of “dialectically-developing matter.”

A cultural agency is thereby constituted whose essence lies in the active disavowal of one’s being-here. Saying this amounts to quite a bit more than restating Bakunin’s famous “I don’t want to be ‘I’, I want to be ‘We’.” Certainly, the space from “here” to “there” can be understood as the separation between the individual and the collective and further thematized within the ongoing drama of the Russian intelligentsia: its desire and inability to merge with the masses, to be the true voice of the *narod*, etc.; much in the history of the Soviet left avant-garde would testify to similar desire and similar inability. But if we are to avoid uncritical confluents, we must see how the masses of the 1920s are different from “the masses” of the nineteenth-century Russian populist movement, or, for that matter, from any other figuration of the communal in Russian history.

For one, the masses of the 1920s are *working* and *producing* masses, by which I mean some fairly obvious and some not-so-obvious things. Most obviously, these are proletarian masses, and so they are working in factories and manufactures, they are producing goods and material goodness. In so doing, the masses stand in, “fill in,” for something that is beyond them: the totality of production and consumption, the economic mechanism as such. The masses are not quite *it*. They are not quite “there” yet. These millions of bodies, minds, and muscles are still not one with the Device that works through them, the Device whose most truthful figuration is not the organized working collective, but the perfect cohesion and regularity of the machine. In this sense, the Soviet machinism of the late 1910s and early 1920s was driven much less by Taylorist utilitarian concerns, than by the realization that the human mass is an imperfect subsidiary to the mechanism of production. In those days it was possible to claim, as Aleksandr

Gastev did, that the people are not yet worthy of the infrastructure created through Lenin's electrification program (*Vosstanie* 21).⁶¹ Gastev's attitude was echoed by the peeved words of Sergei Tret'iakov, one of the leading spokesmen of LEF: "Every movement, every step of the people, their inability to achieve harmony in work, even their inability to walk in the street in a sensible way, to get on a streetcar, to get out of an auditorium without crushing each other, is a sign of the couterrevolutionary action of tonguetiedness, blindness, and lack of training" ("Otkuda" 202).

Just under the streets, with their hustle and bustle, beyond the exertion of labor at its most pragmatic and the procession of life at its most mundane, lies the essential reality of all these things: the actuality of the masses as an organized communal collectivity, the actuality of labor as a totality of productive activities, and the actuality of life as a process of "dialectically developing matter." To say that the masses, the forms of labor, and quotidian life in general are "not there yet" is to say that these are things to be worked on, organized, interfered with, that these are the insistent targets of a revolutionary practice. For the Soviet left avant-garde, this practice begins (phenomenologically) from an inherited "state of affairs" characterized by falsehood and distortion, a "here" as a dissimulative plane of being. Here is the proletarian multitude, still not living, still not acting as the total unity that it is; here is language, whose communicative efficiency lies dormant beneath the plethora of unnecessary conventions passed down from hoary pasts; here are all the things we use in our daily life—food, furniture,

⁶¹As the director of the Central Institute of Labor, Gastev's most nagging preoccupation was that of reducing the gap between the "human, all too human" nature of physical labor and the inexorable functioning of the machine: "The contemporary machine, especially the machine complexes, have their laws of calibrations, executions, and respites, which are not in correspondence with the rhythmic of the human organism. [...] We must introduce some corrective coefficients in [the machine's] iron, disciplined oppression; but history insistently demands that we address not these small problems of individual safety, but the bold engineering of human psychology in accordance with such a decisive factor as machinism" (Gastev, *Nashi zadachi* 10).

clothes—still cast in obsolete shapes and volumes; and, finally, here are all the things called “works of art.”

In the realm of artistic production, the predicament of not-being-there-yet derives from the inherited relation between a representing instance and represented objectivity. The very difference and distance of one to the other was seen by the cultural workers of LEF as the source of falsehood and distortion. For them, the page, the canvas, and the stage—those traditional enclosures of artistic representation—framed the disingenuous existence of the object. It seemed quite obvious that, if the object is being made *in absentia*, re-presented, it could not possibly be the “real thing,” as it exists out there in the real world. The blatant truism of such a proposition did little to temper Mayakovsky’s passionate rejection of “celestial delights and bookish passions” in favor of “rye bread to chew [...] / living woman to live with” (*Misteriia* 170). Art as the distortive making of the object was to be abolished in favor of a true “creating of things” (*tvorenie veshchei*). From the pages of the Futurist “Art of the Commune” (*Iskusstvo kommuny*, December, 1918-April, 1919), Osip Brik demanded: “Not to distort, but to create [*tvorit*]. And not an ideal haze, but a material thing [...]. We love our living, material, carnal life [...]. If you, artists, are capable of creating, of making, then make for us our human nature, our human things” (qtd. Mazaev 134).

The task was simple: to produce useful, material things, things to be chewed and lived with. If the word “art” was to retain any positive meaning, it had to refer exclusively to this task. In Brik’s definition, “art is the direct, material creation of things” (qtd. Mazaev 136). Those who, like Vsevolod Dmitriev, Nikolai Tarabukin, or Aleksei Gan, felt that the word “art” was irredeemably tainted by what it had previously designated, preferred to speak of “craft” or simply “qualified labor.” By virtue of being “aesthetic,” the objects of traditional art were not

“real” or “material” enough; the process of their (previous) making was understood as dematerialization or de-realization. Now this movement had to be reversed: leaving the illusionistic space of bourgeois aesthetics, creativity was to rediscover itself in the open “there,” where social life produced and reproduced itself. Malevich’s famous *Black Square* had seemed to mark a turning point, or rather, an exit point: having reached the utmost limit of dematerialization here, on the canvas, the object now had only one way to go: piercing the surface of representation, moving outward, and taking place on the other side, among the material things of life.⁶² Referring to Malevich’s painting, El Lisistskii wrote: “If the slab of the square has blocked up the narrow channel of painterly culture (perspective), its reverse serves as the foundation for a new, volumetrical growth of the concrete world” (*El* 334). Representation “in reverse” is simply the fattening of the world’s consumable materiality, the task of augmenting “our living, material, carnal life.”

The cultural act that overcomes the dissimulation of the object or—which is the same thing—overcomes re-presentation, deals initially with something called “material.” It imparts a form on this material en route to producing useful things. Whatever the object is to be made from—stones, wood, linen—is found “out there”: a prosaic fact, which now acquires an additional significance. The material for what Brik christened as the practice of “objectism” (*veshchism*) is found in such a state that it does not lend itself to arbitrary/voluntaristic appropriations. It most certainly cannot be dragged “over here,” into the sphere of subjective artistic invention, into the studio, this parlor of aesthetic pleasures and idealistic elevations. It must be worked “there.” This means that the material is locked to a determining environment

⁶² The turning inside-out (or here-to-there) of the traditional space of representation is perhaps most visible on the example of theater. In the projects of Vsevolod Meyerhold and Liubov’ Popova (as in those of Berthold Brecht in Germany), the stage was to encroach onto the space formerly reserved for the audience and become the site of political demonstration, or the training ground for the rhythmic of movement and the efficiency of labor (Meyerhold’s school of “biomechanics”; see further in this chapter).

of social need and cannot be extracted from it. It also means that the formative work performed on the material is of a peculiar kind: in creating, it does not really create; in transforming, it merely brings out what is already “there” (as the material’s immanent use value). Here we might recall the stone from which Michelangelo made his famous statue, carving away everything that was not David. Just as mysteriously as David had resided in the formless slab about to be sculpted, social need inhabits the material about to be made into a *veshch*’.

Unlike the Formalists, who were also deliberating on the relationship of form to material, the theorists of objectism and, later, of industrial art and constructivism, saw the material as the active agency and form—as its subsidiary function. As if pre-soaked in potential social use, the material is, thereby, endowed with an immanent preliminary structure, a utilitarian tectonic. The formative activity is the bringing-out (*vyiavlenie*), actualization of this structure: “In ‘industrial craftsmanship’, the ‘content’ is the utilitarianism and expediency [*tselesoobraznost*] of the thing [*veshch*], its tectonism, which determines its form and construction and justifies its social purpose and function” (Tarabukin 18). The reference to Bogdanov is explicit not only in Tarabukin use of the word “tectonism,” but also in the significant encounter between organization as an act (the making, or construction of the object) and a fact (the material’s inherent texture).

An associate of Bogdanov’s in the early years of the Proletkult movement, Boris Arvatov believed he had found the moment in history when the act had begun to betray the fact, when the construction of material things had departed from social utility as pre-invested in the material.⁶³ Through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, art had existed as craft, and the aesthetic quality of the object had been coincident with the level of its technical perfection. The celebrated “artists” of those days had been simply the most qualified artisans. “Giving form” to the

⁶³ In the rest of the paragraph, I gloss Arvatov, *Iskusstvo* 3-13.

material at hand had meant realizing its social value in a technically competent manner. In the seventeenth century, there occurred a radical break with this tradition. Highly qualified artisans began forming workshops for the production of luxury items. No longer part of the communal process of social construction, they saw their own work as somehow different from that of manufacture workers. Their craft became “art.” “Now artistic production was guided not by *socio-technical tasks*, but by *socio-ideological ones*” (Arvatov, *Iskusstvo* 12; emphasis in the original). The material was now conceived as a means to an end, and this end (in itself) was “form”:

They started making the legs of chairs in the shape of paws, door handles—in the shape of lilies, book covers—in the shape of grottoes, that is, they completely perverted the essential meaning of every production: instead of turning the elemental forms of nature into socially-utilitarian forms, they started modeling the socio-technical forms after the forms of nature, began copying their external appearance, forgetting that this appearance is the result of an organic structure [...] that has nothing in common with the construction of the particular objects. (Arvatov, *Iskusstvo* 13).

No longer experienced as the carrier of social function, the material became the material for “representation.” In that it now served to represent a lily, the metal of the door handle had been violated, its socio-technical structure/texture (*faktura*) obscured.

With this history (putative or not) in the background, the cultural project of the left avant-garde becomes the restitution of the object into its latent-genuine being. In their early days, the Formalists saw the purpose of artistic construction in “making stones ‘stony’” (Shklovskii, “Art” 12); for Arvatov, “construction” works toward a similar end: it is the act that demonstrates the

texture of materialities. *Veshch'*, the thing, is simply the product of this demonstration. Yet, it is not enough to say that a constructivist table, for example, is the result of making wood “woody” (instead of “pawy”). Constructivism demonstrates not the natural properties of the material, not its “organic structure” (see above), but rather its socio-utilitarian texture (tectonic). Marx’s table, which “stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas,”⁶⁴ is stood up on its feet and firmly supported by objective social demand. And yet, in the hands of the Soviet constructivists, it continues to be a curious thing. While still a piece of wood, it already possesses a brain of sorts, for it knows in advance that it will become a table with a very determinate shape.

To show how another material, textile, can “know” its socio-utilitarian texture, let us take an article on clothing design from the second issue of the journal *LEF*. The article begins with a fairly typical declaration: in the revolutionary present, design that hearkens to the whims of aesthetic taste and market-dictated vogues must give way to “clothes [purposefully] organized for specific social action” (Varst 65). Of course, taken by itself, the textile from which these clothes are to be made does not “know” anything, it does not dictate any specific cuts or stitches. But this is exactly the point: the material does not come by itself; it comes with its own particular “there”—the place where this or that costume is to be employed—and must be worked “there.” The work itself is only partly the tailoring of the costume. Just as important is its *demonstration* in “action,” at the work place: “The most important component [of workers’ clothing] becomes its texture [*faktura*], i.e., *execution*. It is not enough to offer a design for a comfortable, ingeniously conceived costume—the costume must also be *made* and demonstrated at work; only then we can see it and have a conception of it” (Varst 65; emphasis in the

⁶⁴ See note 49.

original). If in the experimental poetic practice of the Futurists the linguistic *faktura* is the functioning of language made visible⁶⁵ (predicated on demystifying language's non-functional, "poetic" effects), the *faktura* of the material in constructivist practice is the making-visible of the material's functionality (similarly predicated on demystifying its aesthetic appropriations).

What the constructivists work with is never raw matter (*syr'e*). Woven into the textile for workers' clothing is an objective social commission (*zadanie*; Varst 65). This commission should not be thought of as something separate, detachable from the material at hand—an ideal moment that must be "consulted" and "applied" in the process of making clothes. Like Michelangelo's David, it has somehow entered the material beforehand. Now all that needs to be done is to make it manifest: "The organization of the contemporary costume must proceed from the commission to its material modeling; from the specifics of the work for which the costume is intended—to the system of the cut" (Varst 65). Once again the act of organization—the modeling of the costume, the "system of the cut"—meets the fact—the specific organization of labor within which the costume is to function. And then the act is no more than the demonstration of the fact, a laying-it-bare, letting-it-be. Nothing is added to, nothing is subtracted from "this." In "making it," "giving it form," I simply let the primordial, essential being of "this," its being-there (as an object within a systemic organization of social forces and needs) emerge from latency.

The essential being of the text—its artistic construction or social character—emerges in the act of analysis. Earlier, I referred to the experimental poetics of the Russian Futurists as a "practical analysis of language." Constructivist practice can justifiably be called the "practical analysis of things"; the end result of this analysis is that the *faktura* of things—their social character cum social construction—is made manifest. These do not have to be, necessarily,

⁶⁵ See p. 63.

material things: all material or ideological values count as *veshchi* (Chuzhak, “Pod znakom” 15, 37-38).⁶⁶ And so does the entity “man”—itself a complex of material and ideological values.

Just like the trans-sense verses of the *budetliane* analyzed language in order to lay bare its morphological tectonic, Meyerhold’s constructivist theater was to be the practical analytic of human movement that lays bare its physical *faktura*. Here the “material” was the human body itself, a bio-mechanic ensemble whose “economy”—the efficient generation, distribution, and application of force and motion—obeyed determinate laws. These laws, hitherto neglected, mystified, repressed, fall within the practical-analytical competence of biomechanics:

[On] the basis of studying the human organism, biomechanics strives to create a human being who knows the mechanism of his own construction, who is able, ideally, to manage and perfect it. The contemporary person, living in the conditions of mechanization, cannot not mechanize the kinetic elements of his organism. Biomechanics establishes the principles for the measured analytical execution of every motion, the differentiation of every motion en route to achieving the greatest clarity, demonstrativeness, specular taylorism [*zritel'nyi teilorizm*], of the motion. [...] The contemporary actor must be shown from the stage as a perfect auto-engine [*avtomotor*]. (quot. Kotovich 49)

It is difficult to imagine a more literal rendition of the Formalist injunction to “lay bare the device.” Freed from randomness and slouch, from all the impediments Tret'iakov bemoaned, the body of Meyerhold’s actor is an object of demonstration or, rather, the object-as-demonstration. It does not “represent” anything; it simply enacts its own analysis. In the “measured, analytical

⁶⁶ In another place, Chuzhak states: “It would be a huge absurdity to understand the ‘thing’ only as an externally perceptible materiality—a error committed by the first productionists, who relied on vulgar-fetishistic, metaphysical materialism; the ‘idea’ should not be excluded from the concept of the thing, inasmuch as the idea is the necessary prerequisite of any real construction—a model for tomorrow” (Chuzhak, “K zadacham” 145-46).

execution” of movements the body abolishes representation and manifests what it truly is: a device.

And because this body is not only a motion device, but also the vessel of consciousness, the act that demonstrates and the fact being demonstrated coalesce, furnishing the already familiar duality of organization:

In art, we are always dealing with the organization of material [...]. The art of the actor consists in his organizing of his own material, that is, in the ability to use correctly the expressive means of his body. Within the actor, the organizer and the organized (that is, the artist and the material) are brought together. The formula of the actor would be an equation like this: $N = A1 + A2$, where A1 is the constructor, conceiving the task and ordering its execution, A2 is the body of the actor, the executive that puts into action the directive given by the constructor (A1). The actor must train his material—his body—in such a way as to make it capable of executing immediately the directives it receives. This is necessary, because every expression of force (including the living organism) obeys the solitary laws of mechanics.⁶⁷ (“Akter” 10)

To all appearances, we are witnessing the traditional encounter between subject and object within the human dyad, between “soul” and “body,” between the agency of consciousness and its most immediate malleable otherness. But these appearances are deceptive. The directives given to the body are certainly not the imperatives of subjective interiority seeking expression. They are the specific articulations of that same social commission, this time directed at the human physicality: “1. absence of superfluous, non-productive movements, 2. rhythmicity, 3.

⁶⁷ These laws extend to and encompass the entire space of theatrical performance: “The stage and the theater are to be an enormous machine with very complex construction, which works with mathematic precision according to the laws of mechanics” (Sokolov 21).

correct positioning of the center of one's body, 4. stability" (Meyerhold, "Akter" 10). So that even when it is "here," on the stage, the body of the actor enacts (demonstrates) its being-there, its belonging to an objective organization of labor, to the determining rhythms of industrial production, to the machine. Thus it also enacts the disappearance of the subject. Far from being a reinstatement of the creative subject under a new name, the figure of the "constructor" is a figuration of that subject's absence.

Now we can give the enigmatic "here" and "there" their proper significance, which, so far, has been illustrated rather than articulated. It is time to say that "here" and "there" do not stand for anything in particular. They are not some determinate places in either the actual or discursive geography of the Soviet 1920s. Rather, they are the place-holders of an essential ontological relay between the false (dissimulative) being of "this" and its demystified-genuine existence. For every particular practice, these place-holders are "filled" with different realia, so that a specific opposition is expressed on the level of cultural discourse. For constructivist theater, such is the opposition between the artistic conventionality of the "stage" and the grand stage of real life. In the anti-passeistic discourse of the Comfuturists (*komfuty*), such is the opposition between the bourgeois art of representation and the revolutionary art of life-building. Finally, throughout the history of the Soviet left avant-garde, such is the opposition between the individual creative personality (*tvorcheskaia lichnost'*) and the communal creativity of the factories and the streets.

On the whole, the project of the left avant-garde is the abolition of the former for the latter, it is a movement from "here" to "there," which can be thematized differently and on various levels. "The individual and the masses," "conventions and facts," "the studio and the factory" ("representation and production"), "bourgeois past/present and revolutionary

present/future,” “subjective expression and objective social commission”—all these are different figurations, articulations, of a profound condition which, a little earlier, I described as the condition of re-presentation, hyphenating the word so as to suggest its relevance beyond the meanings of artistic, linguistic, or psychological representation.⁶⁸

At its most profound, this condition is also at its most inarticulate. It simply says that the particulars of experience are not where they are first encountered, that they are found somewhere other than where their true value is determined. Not “here,” but “there”: not in content, but in artistic form; not in form, but in “socio-psychological content”; not in speech, as a flow of supposedly transparent sememes, but in language, as a system of differentials; not in the savorable flesh of this apple, but in the systemic vis-à-vis between this apple and other marketable goods; not in my waking discourse, but in the slumber of my resistances; not in the worldliness of the world, but in the retreat of *Da-sein* (Heidegger’s being-there).

This is the condition of Western modernity,⁶⁹ and these are some of its most audible articulations. It is not merely a “condition of knowledge”; it is just as much a “condition of praxis.” The problematic conceptual distinction between the two—as if knowledge can be born without any praxis, or practice can proceed in blind, unknowing acts—is attenuated further by the particular epistemological and practical attitudes we have been considering. I have tried to show how similar these attitudes are. The immanentist pretense of modern Western knowledge—the analytical act that does not affect the object, but explicates the object’s content—is mirrored in a practical act that simply releases things unto their genuine existence,

⁶⁸ In this sense, the avant-garde revolt against artistic representation should be understood as a particular experience/interpretation of a broader cultural situation.

⁶⁹ “Not here, but there” is, of course, also the condition of every transcendentalism, of every religious transport and metaphysical construction, perhaps of desire in general; it is universal and trans-historical. But it becomes the specific condition of Western modernity with the stipulation that the dissimulative “here” is a systemic and lawful extension (function) of the genuine being-there.

lets them be. The agency of the “constructor,” no less than the agency of the literary analyst, consists in a demonstrative analysis of how things essentially are. And since they are essentially “there,” the job of the constructor is to free the object from dissimulation and demonstrate its being-there.

In the vacated place of the author, we now have a vehicle for demonstration-analysis—a vehicle that can still be imagined in a human guise (as a constructor, organizer, or director), but whose functioning has nothing particularly human about it. If we have to give it a name, we should call it a “conveyor,” keeping both meanings of the word in play: a vehicle that “conveys” objects, taking them from here to there, and “conveys” them, demonstrating what they truly are. In regard to the cultural condition I am describing, these two meanings are identical, they are one. For to convey what the object truly is means to convey it “there,” i.e., to demonstrate its belonging to a systemic totality of things in the world. And while it might be flattering to imagine that a person, a human being, could perform this function, it is hard not to see that the “conveyor” is a mechanism, and, thus, is best represented by a mechanism.

I am a kino-eye. I am a mechanical eye.

I am a machine, I am showing you the world as only I can see it.

I am in ceaseless motion, I approach objects and move away from them, I get underneath them, I get on top of them, I move apace with the horse’s muzzle, I spear into the crowd at full speed, I run in front of the running soldiers, I fall on my back, I rise together with the airplanes, I fall and soar together with the falling and soaring bodies. [...]

I decode in a new way the world unknown to you. (Vertov, “Kinoki” 141; emphasis in the original)

This is Dziga Vertov speaking on behalf of the movie camera or, rather, speaking as the movie camera. Although Vertov's most powerful statement on screen remains his *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), the most truthful statement of his conceptual position, indeed, of the conceptual position of constructivist cinema, is the metaphoric identity between man and the mechanized medium of filmmaking: man *as* a movie camera, the human eye *become* a cinematic apparatus (*kino-glaz, kino-oko*).⁷⁰ In the figurative substitution of one for another, "man" is the vanishing term, the tenor, whose properties are displaced by the properties of the vehicle.⁷¹ And the vehicle is the movie camera, also a vehicle in the sense suggested above: a conveyor of things.

The camera is an intriguing piece of machinery. By its very construction and functioning, it inhabits two places at the same time. It is here, sitting on a tripod or handheld, attached to the eye of the cameraman. But it is also there, with the things of the world, attached to them, spying on them, studying them. It is, simultaneously, with the "seeing" and with the "seen." This double residence is a source of tension, of conflict, which can be expressed in the terms of a schizophrenic denial: "Where I am is not where I am." The dilemma offers two alternative ways of being for the movie camera, two modes of existence: a here-being and a there-being. The camera can draw the world to itself, to its own absolute position in space, it can

⁷⁰ *Kino-glaz* ("kino eye" or "cinema eye") was to provide the title of Vertov's film project of 1924. From the compound *kino-oko* ("cine-eye") derived *kinoki*—the name adopted by a group of documentary filmmakers that gathered around Vertov in the early 1920s.

⁷¹ "The cinema eye lives and moves in time and space; it perceives and records impressions in a manner entirely different from that of the human eye. The position of our body during observation, the amount of features of this or that sensory event that we are able to apprehend, is not at all obligatory for the camera, which perceives more and better the more perfect it is.

We cannot make our eyes better than they already are, but we can perfect the camera endlessly" (Vertov, "Kinoki" 138).

On the superiority of the cinema-eye over the human, "naked" eye, see also Vertov "Kino-Eye" 67 and "From Kino-Eye" 87. In "We: Variant of a Manifesto," Vertov echoes Tretiakov's dissatisfaction with man's imperfect motions: "The machine makes us ashamed of man's inability to control himself, but what are we to do if electricity's unerring ways are more exciting to us than the disorderly haste of active men and the corrupting inertia of passive ones" (7).

arrange the world around itself, stage it in front of the lens, invent a world of its own making.⁷² Or it can surrender to the world, adapt itself to the world's structure and rhythms, become the eye of the world's objectivities, as they stare back at us. These alternatives, one false, one genuine, are not a matter of abstract choice. Now that the October Revolution has taken place, they can be seen as an actual historical sequence, two moments in the biography of cinema.

Initially, like many other things, the movie camera is found leading a false life. At the very dawn of cinema, it had been quite sufficient to show the public such simple facts as a galloping horse or a train arriving at the station. Very soon, however, the infantile delight in watching moving objects on the screen was outgrown (Brik, "Fiksatsiia" 44-45). There appeared the need to show more elaborate attractions. What could be easier? All that was needed was to enact some kind of dramatic performance and record it on film (Brik, "Fiksatsiia" 45). It was the age of theater-become-cinema. The audiences were happy and quite willing to ignore the glaring distortion of theater's three-dimensional space on the flat surface of the movie screen (Brik, "Fiksatsiia" 45). But tastes change, and soon the cardboard sham and buffoonery of these early spectacles began to offend the eye. The demand for "photogenic model life" (*natura*) was now to be heard. It became clear that some objects and situations easily lend themselves to the camera's "naked eye," while others need some preparatory work (Brik, "Fiksatsiia" 45). New contrivances had to be invented in order to capture the photogenic nature inaccessible to the camera:

The studio appeared. The studio is a place where photogenic *natura* is prepared through artificial means: from the entire system of lighting devices to the complicated constructions with the help of which one could create anything, all the way to earthquakes and naval battles; everything in the studio serves one

⁷² See Rodchenko's critique of traditional (artistic) photography in "Puti," esp. 36.

purpose: to create artificially that which the camera is incapable of creating in living reality. In this way, the camera's imperfections, instead of fostering efforts to improve its mechanism, led filmmakers to begin from the other end: from the artificial transformation of the life to be filmed. (Brik, "Fiksatsiia" 45)

The studio circumscribes the disingenuous, here-being of the cinematic apparatus. It is where objects are being re-presented.

The obverse of the concocted studio act is the arrested fact of real life ("life caught unawares,"⁷³ in Vertov's sloganized expression). Instead of bringing the world to the camera, the camera must go out into the world, "to flee—the sweet embraces of romance, the poison of the psychological novel, the clutches of the theater of adultery [...], to flee—out into the open, into four dimensions (three + time), in search of our own material, our meter and rhythm" (Vertov, "We" 7). Although Vertov says "our material," the warning is still in effect: the material is not free to be appropriated in every each way "we" choose.⁷⁴ Every object, event, that captures the camera's attention is not a free-floating monad, but belongs—less obviously—to the world's determinate totality and—more immediately—to society's economic structure ("Kino-Eye" 66). Only there, as part of that totality, do objects and events become "facts." From within the chaos of visual phenomena, the camera must provide a "scientific illumination of reality" (Vertov, "To the Kinoks" 51), placing each event within its effective context. Vertov calls this practice the "decoding of life as it is" ("Essence" 49, 50) or, in another place, the "communist decoding of what actually exists" ("To the Kinoks" 50), and, in still another, the "documentary cinematic decoding of both the visible world and that which is invisible to the

⁷³ *Life Caught Unawares* (*Zhizn' vrasplokh*) is also the alternative title of Vertov's 1924 film *Cinema Eye* (*Kinoglaz*).

⁷⁴ "The newsreel must demonstrate events truthfully, and the forms of newsreel montage are determined not by the author but by the material" (Kuleshov 32).

naked eye” (“From Kino-Eye” 87). Perhaps more explicitly than any other constructivist practice, Vertov’s “kino-eye” is a practice of analysis. It rescues the object from its dissimulative existence and demonstrates it in its truth (i.e., as a “fact”): “Kino-eye as the possibility of making the invisible visible, the unclear clear, the hidden manifest, the disguised overt [...]; making falsehood into truth. Kino-eye as the union of science with newsreel to further the battle for the communist decoding of the world, as an attempt to show the truth on the screen—Film-truth” (“Birth” 41-42).

Let us briefly observe how the camera does its work as a conveyor of things. This time it is a photographic camera—itself a rather sophisticated device—and the thing at which it is directed is a house. Of course, the house can be captured on film as just a house. But such a perspective, Brik tells us, underlies the falsity of traditional representation: “It is impermissible to present in isolation one house, one tree; this might be very beautiful, but this would be art, it would be aesthetics, it would be an aesthetic savoring of the particular object at the expense of its relation to the other phenomena of nature or the phenomena of human labor” (“Ot kartiny” 33). According to Brik, the vision that foregrounds an object, extracting it, as it were, from its real-life context, is the artistic vision *par excellence*; it is somehow inherent to the practice of painting (“Ot kartiny” 31). Photography offers the technical possibility for overcoming this limited, distortive, perspective: “Photography is not forced to isolate a particular person in order to capture him; it has the ability to capture him together with his surroundings, to capture him in a way that would make obvious this person’s dependence on his environment; the photographer has the ability to solve a task that an artist is unable to solve” (Brik “Ot kartiny” 32). In Brik’s estimation, photography is somehow uniquely equipped to show the interconnectedness and totality of worldly phenomena. And so, our house is no longer just a house: “this house is not

interesting all by itself, [...] it is interesting as part of the overall structure of the street, of the city [...], its value lies not in its visual contours but in the function it fulfils within the social environment” (“Ot kartiny” 33). Through the photographic lens, the house is “conveyed”: it is taken to where it belongs—there, on that street and in that city, within the determinate structure of urban life—and thus enabled to show what it truly is—a functional element of social existence. It is now a house-fact, a house-truth.

In an earlier instance I argued that in order to manifest its identity, to be what it latently and truly is, “this”—at that time, the text—must pass through a special place in the topology of our plot: the analytical apparatus, the repository of hermeneutic cognition.⁷⁵ As reenacted in the project of constructivist cinema, this movement—essentially the same—now passes through the kino-eye. It is by way of the kino-eye that the object—a house or anything else—is conveyed to its being-there, that is, to the totality that determines it. The kino-eye is not just the camera lens, nor is it the mechanism of the camera as a whole. It is a figuration of the entire apparatus of analysis—before, during, and after the shooting—that utilizes the camera’s revolutionary potential. The preliminary research, the scouting of locations, the drafting of the shooting plan; the determination of angles, distances, cadences; the actual recording of visual data; the cataloguing of the recorded fragments; the process of the final editing—all of these moments belong to the physiology of the kino-eye.⁷⁶

In the end result, “if the material is correctly analyzed, i.e., if the work of its passportization [*pasportizatsiia*] (the place and time of shooting, the content of the filmed object) is completed, and the meaning of the separate fragments is made clear—not only in regard to their source, but also in regard to the various juxtapositions necessitated by the thematics—the

⁷⁵ See pp. 36-38, 56.

⁷⁶ See Vertov, “From the Kino-Eye” 88-90.

[montage] gives facts their true voice” (Pertsov, “Igra” 35). Although the auditory metaphor runs against the silent nature of the medium, Viktor Pertsov’s point is clear: like the material of other constructivist practices, the material of cinema possesses authoritative dynamics of its own. And like all others, the praxis of *kinochestvo* must submit to this authority and abandon the claim to authorship. The act of “organizing” the visual world is met and overdetermined by the dynamic organization internal to objectivities: “*Kinochestvo* is the art of organizing the *necessary* movements of objects in space as a rhythmical artistic whole, in harmony with the properties of the material and the *internal* rhythm of each object” (Vertov “We” 8; emphasis added). The immanent logic of visible phenomena, and not the will of the film director or cameraman, governs the various analytical operations of the kino-eye. It is the world itself that guides its own “decoding.” This is a crucial moment in the optics of the kino-eye, as it exemplifies the turning inside-out of representation in the visual field. Directed at the world, the kino-eye is, at the same time, governed by the world. The world is its “socket,” while being also its target.

The subject of visual representation (in the traditional sense) is situated behind the focusing point of impressions received from the external world (anatomically, the retina). Directly opposite this point, behind the socket that is the world itself, we can now begin to imagine a different type of agency, a different kind of “subject.” This agency is exercised in an act that is the obverse of “seeing”: that other subject does not watch; it *displays*. And the “organ” responsible for this function is, in turn, the functional inversion of the eye: it is an eye that *shows*, one that *demonstrates* through images, an eye that is, really, a *screen*. Cinema, in its double nature as a recording and projecting medium is thus situated on a significant borderline. Vertov’s method of the kino-eye must be understood as an attempt to traverse the ontological

split in the scopic field between seeing and manifesting, to attain the point where “looking” vanishes to emerge on the other side and become a pure “letting-it-show.” But this is none other than the movement we have been following all along, the movement from “here” to “there.” It now takes place between seeing and the seen, between the here-being of the visual—watching, gazing, observing, discerning—and its there-being: the self-display of things, their exhibitionism, the “showiness” of the world in its true colors.

This movement is not yet complete. That other agency, residing opposite the traditional subject of representation, has not yet emerged and shown itself in body and countenance. Or, to put it in a philosophical jargon, it has not yet been subjectivized. For now, in the culture of the 1920s, that agency exists in the amorphous shape of objective necessity and immanent logic, of social commission, inexorable mechanism (device), and imperative structure (organization). Only later—and why not look ahead?—in the years of Stalinism, will come the time when the there-being of things will undergo its anagogic transformation, “when in a Joycean fashion the landscape slowly turns into a sleeping giant and with allegorical literality the various ‘members’ of society knit themselves together into a genuine organism” (Jameson, *Unconscious* 72). At its most explicit, the anagogic embodiment will present us with the gigantic figure of the Leader, stretched across the landscape of history and society, containing within itself the elements of both, imparting on them organic totality and natural necessity.

But we are not there yet. In the cultural moment we are now considering, the unity of empirical things is not organic, but structural and systematic. And the mediatory instance through which this unity becomes manifest is itself of a systematic nature. It is an act of organization-analysis, a hermeneutic, whose methodological rigor and executive precision make it less human-like and more akin to the operations of the machine. To shed their false,

dissimulative being, things must pass through this machine-like apparatus, through the “conveyor.” Therewithal, they are transported back to where they have never ceased to belong—there, within the world’s totality of goods, signs, images, labors, ideas, lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: IMPERATIVE SUBJECTHOOD

What we have been following so far is a cultural act of “organization” that deals with people and things as things, a kind of praxis aimed at the revolutionary transformation of the world’s *objecthood*. To the extent that “man” is thematized at all within the early projects of Proletkult and the (anti-)artistic doctrines of the left avant-garde, he appears as determined by his own “thingness” and the thingness of the world. As he labors, Gastev’s man is composed of muscular forces, expenditures of energy strictly quantified in accordance with the task at hand, movements tailored (taylorized) to the operations of the machine. As he acts, Meyerhold’s man is, similarly, an aggregate of bio-mechanical variables, vectors of motion and exertions of strength, a device under a human guise.⁷⁷ As he sees, Vertov’s man with a movie camera is an optical device synchronized with the device he operates. Insofar as this general “man” can still be conceived as a bearer of consciousness, the consciousness in question has been so fully “instrumentalized” that it is indistinguishable from the objective functioning of the device. And because he thus recedes into the impersonal thingness of whatever it is that he “works with,” man no longer represents. He is now one with the conveyor of objectivity—the vehicle that allows things to be what they are, to show off their true nature and function.

We shall now inquire into a different kind of praxis—still a praxis of organization, but one that takes and deals with men in their *subjecthood*. The transition we are making is

⁷⁷ To be sure, Meyerhold’s actor possesses emotions and moods, but these are in strict subordination to the physiological-kinetic aspect of human being—what Meyerhold calls “physical disposition” (*fizicheskaia predposylka*; “Akter” 11).

analogous to an earlier one, when we passed from the formalist theory of the text to its sociological hermeneutic. What we saw then was, first, the truth of “this” emerging in the mode of objecthood: initially dissimulating as something subjective (the author’s “message,” an “expression” of one’s views or moods), the text turned out to be, on the contrary, an object-like entity, a device, a working mechanism. And just as convincingly, afterwards, “this” traversed the same road, but from the other end: from an initial dissimulative being in the mode of objecthood (depicted world), the text showed itself to be, really, a systematic thing possessed of subjecthood (Character, *Obraz*). In the same way, we now pass from a form of praxis where the reality of “what is to be done,” is dictated by imperative organization of things as things, to one whose coordinates are set by the authoritative systematicity of consciousness.

If we remember that deluded house—a yellow house to be sure—standing apart from the rest of the world, in a narcissistic display of its picturesque singularity, we could follow a line of symmetry to the realm of subjecthood and observe an analogous deviancy. The false being of the object in the world has as its correlate the false being of human consciousness. And the whole movement of praxis that seeks to reconstitute the object into its truth, to return the house to its proper place, will now unfold as an exercise upon consciousness, bringing it back to the birthplace from which it has been estranged.

It has become customary for us today to speak of “cultural politics” as an inseparable component of culture itself. The production of cultural artifacts, of any materiality that can be conceived as belonging to the domain of “culture,” always takes place from a certain position, it serves a certain set of interests, etc. We can assert confidently that the cultural act is always a political act. And yet, this “always” has not always been “always.” The realization that culture is

unavoidably political is a rather recent one. Even more recent is the praxis that puts this realization into action, the conscious act of “cultural politics” itself. In this sense, it could be argued quite convincingly that nothing like cultural politics existed before December 7, 1922.

On that day, a rather mundane event took place: a group of young literati gathered in the headquarters of the journal *Molodaia gvardiia* (“Young Guard”) in Moscow and formed the group *Oktiabr'* (“October”). *Oktiabr'* was the core of what eventually became the Onguardist movement.⁷⁸ Among the founders were Semen Rodov, Aleksandr Bezymenskii, Iurii Libedinskii, Aleksei Sokolov, and Grigorii Lelevich; the critics Il. Vardin and Leopold Averbakh were to join soon after. Most of the group’s members were also members of the Communist Party or the League of Communist Youth; most of them had belonged to VAPP, the All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (*Vserossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*). The immediate enemy of *Oktiabr'*, the enemy against whom the group initially defined its identity and purpose, was *Kuznitsa* (“The Smithy”)—a group of proletarian poets that supplied the leading cadres of VAPP. The split was between two generations of cultural activists, but also between two very different conceptions of what constitutes genuine revolutionary culture.

In its first pronouncements, *Oktiabr'* charged the leadership of VAPP with inability to expand and unify the movement of proletarian literature. For the poets of *Kuznitsa* literature had become the work of self-proclaimed archpriests of art (“Oktiabr” 206). Theirs was the religion of some mystical union between class origin and truth. The mere fact of belonging to the proletariat seemed to them a sufficient guarantee of the poet’s ability to see the world truthfully. The act of literary creation was not so much a product of reflection upon the world, as a direct

⁷⁸ Named after the journal *On Guard* (*Na postu*), which the group published between 1923 and 1925. From 1927 to 1931, the journal appeared under the title *On Literary Guard* (*Na literaturnom postu*).

emanation from the redemptive nature of industrial labor. The proletarian poet was the medium through whom the class character of the proletariat was revealed in texts.

In opposition to this mystical creed, the *Oktiabr'* group advanced the demand for political indoctrination of both proletarian and non-proletarian writers. The mere belonging to the working class guarantees nothing, “and often the proletarian artist is very detrimental to the cause of the working class, just because he is so little familiar with the dialectic-materialist method [...], [because he] is unacquainted with his class’ system of thought” (Libedinskii, “Temy” 124). The act of artistic creation is not a spiritualistic séance, “and mere intuition, the hope that the proletarian instinct will show the way, that ‘the poet is a medium of his class’ [...] and truth is, thereby, revealed to him—all this is a simple-minded and dangerous utopia” (Libedinskii, “Temy” 124). What the poets of *Kuznitsa* had failed to realize is that the cultural act is a political act, and that “political” had nothing to do with *occupying* a place in the socio-economic structure and everything to do with *assuming* a conscious position. In its main thrust, the platform of *Oktiabr'* did not call on writers from *other* class backgrounds to adopt the position of the proletariat. It was the proletarian writer himself that had still to take the position proper to him. As Libedinskii’s words make it clear, the proletariat was, on the whole, divorced from its own “system of thought.”

In those very days when the movement of proletarian culture in Russia was being institutionalized, this seemingly paradoxical condition (the working class’ divorce from its own system of thought) was subjected to a most penetrating “psycho-analysis”—where else, but in Vienna?—by a thinker who was to play a significant role in Soviet cultural politics during Stalinism. In one of the earlier essays of what was eventually to become the major text of twentieth-century Marxism, *History and Class Consciousness*, Georg Lukács wrote:

Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions “imputed” [*zugerechnet*] to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual—and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.⁷⁹

This analysis establishes right from the start the distance that separates class consciousness from the empirically given, and from the psychologically describable and explicable ideas which men form about their situation in life. [...]

Thus we must never overlook the distance that separates the consciousness of even the most revolutionary worker from the authentic class consciousness of the proletariat. (*History* 51, 80).

Without changing its constitutive moments, its “situations,” “movements,” and “acts,” the plot we have been following is now to be played out in the domain of class consciousness. Like any other “this” that we have encountered so far, class consciousness is “initially and for the most part” displaced-distorted in relation to its authentic being. As such, it is “false consciousness.” And yet, its “falsity” is not some idiosyncratic aberration that could be somehow prevented or avoided. It is a determinately necessary moment in the life of “this.” The displacement and falsity of class consciousness is systematic, as is its authentic being (the “imputed” cognition appropriate for a given class amounts to a determinate “system of thought”).

⁷⁹ In *The Holy Family* Marx and Engels had put forward a similar argument shored up by an explicit ontological statement: “The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat, at the moment regards as its aim. The question is *what the proletariat is*, and what, in accordance with this *being*, it will historically be compelled to do” (28; emphasis in the original).

With the appearance of the proletariat, there appears the unique possibility for one class to overcome this discrepancy and actually to be what it truly is. Near the end of history, there is now a social identity that could be imminently equal to the *fact* of its latent-authentic organization. Yet for this to happen, there must be, first, an *act* of organization, a political praxis that treats class consciousness as its “field.” In its highest instantiation, this is none other than the political praxis of the Party, the vanguard of the working class. But why shouldn’t there be also—as a subsidiary, a specialized extension, of the Party’s function—a cultural, or even just literary, “vanguard” of the workers’ revolution? It was not a secret that, from its very first day, *Oktiabr’* wanted to play just this role. The group’s official “Platform,” published in the first issue of the journal *Na postu* (“On Guard”), stated:

§4

[...] with the commencement of planned socialist construction in all areas [...] and with the movement of RKP (b) [Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)] toward a *systematic* and deep propaganda amongst the widest proletarian masses, there appeared the need to introduce into proletarian literature some kind of *system*.

§5

[...] the group of proletarian writers “October,” as a part of the proletarian vanguard infused with the dialectic-materialist worldview, strives toward the creation of such a *system* and regards the achievement of this possible only on the basis of a unified artistic program, ideological as well as formal, which would serve as a foundation for the further development of proletarian literature. (“Materialy” 194; emphasis added)

The institutional framework through which this “system” of proletarian literature was to be implemented was established and expanded between 1923 and 1928. *Oktiabr'* first initiated the creation of a Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP, *Moskovskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*), which was incorporated, in 1925, into a national organization, a new VAPP. When, in 1928, the latter was itself subsumed within an even broader institutional framework,⁸⁰ it changed its name to RAPP, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (*Rossiiskaia assotsiatsiia proletarskikh pisatelei*).⁸¹ The prodigious growth of institutional structures and super-structures within the movement of proletarian literature followed its own “natural” progression. The expansion was to continue until every single proletarian writer in the Soviet Union was a member of the organization. There could be no “outside” to it, just as there could be no “outside” to the position that afforded objective representation of reality.

Around this latter issue irrupted the main cultural polemic of the 1920s: the struggle between RAPP and “Pereval,” between *Na postu* and *Kransaia nov'* (“Red Virgin Land”), between Averbakh, Vardin, and Libedinskii, on one side, and Aleksandr Voronskii, on the other. In the early 1920s Voronskii was the undisputed magnate of Soviet literature, the (semi-) official representative of the Party, entrusted with uncovering and upbringing fresh literary talent. When the Onguardists appeared on the Soviet cultural scene, Voronskii became their primary target. The struggle was for hegemony in the field of literature, for access to publishing houses and printing presses, for material support and endorsement by the Party; but it was also a struggle over principles.

⁸⁰ The All-Union Organization of Proletarian Writers' Associations (*Vsesoiuznoe ob"edinenie assotsiatsii proletarskikh pisatelei*, VOAPP) coordinated the activities of the separate national organizations.

⁸¹ In subsequent Soviet history, RAPP became—through a sort of retroactive genealogy—the blanket reference for the entire movement of proletarian literature initiated by *Oktiabr'*. For a historical account of the “proletarian episode” in Soviet literature, see Brown, Ermolaev.

Famously and notoriously, Voronskii had allied himself with a group of non-proletarian writers—the so-called “fellow travelers”—whose Marxism was, at best, personal, and whose allegiance to the Soviet regime was, at best, understated. Justifying this liberal cultural coalition were Voronskii’s views on the nature of representation. In what was to remain his principal conceptual exposition, the article of 1923, “Art as the Cognition of Life and the Present Day” (“Iskusstvo kak poznanie zhizni i sovremennost”), he advanced a rather traditionalist, gnoseological understanding of artistic representation. As the title suggested, art was a means for knowing the world, and this cognition could rival and complement the objectivity of science (“Iskusstvo” 367, 378, 381). The “objective moment” (*ob"ektivnyi moment*) was attained when the author’s subjective position was assimilated to the objective content of the represented reality (“Iskusstvo” 368-69). A cardinal act of will made possible, in both science and art, this cognitive attunement, which excludes subjective “interferences” and allows the immanent properties of the object to become manifest (“Iskusstvo” 368-69).

The Onguardists understood Voronskii to mean that there was some exclusive state of cognition, a phenomenological encounter between preceptor and perceived that falls outside the lines of political engagement and class struggle.⁸² In the following issue of *Na postu*, Vardin and Libedinskii led the attack:

Well, of course, speaking generally, there exists in nature an ‘objective moment.’

But comrade Voronskii has lost sight of one trivial detail: he has forgotten to point out precisely which class, which party, which ideology, which social, political, and philosophical movements are the bearers of this ‘objective moment’ [and]

⁸² Voronskii’s position was certainly more nuanced than that; it was also less remote from the position of his opponents. He insisted that all cognition proceeds from a class-determined point of view. But when a class gains strength, when it is the “progressive” class of its day, objective cognition becomes both necessary and possible for it (“Iskusstvo” 378). It is the objective historical being of a social group that opens to it the possibility for objective knowledge of reality.

which [...] stand as die-hard enemies of objective truth. (Vardin, “Voronshchinu” 11)

By this trivial omission, Voronskii had opened the door to an illusory space where truth can be possessed solely through abstract ethics, pure exertion of will, and intuitive penetrations. Even to begin to conceive of such a space was already an indictment. For it is only through an atavistic mindset—through a disposition characteristic of a previous age—that the artist could be seen as hovering above social life and representing it “from the outside” (Libedinskii, “K voprosu” 56). Under capitalism, the artist’s (typically, petty-bourgeois) existence is, in this wise, reflected-distorted into consciousness as a disinterested and unfettered pursuit of eternal truths (Libedinskii, “K voprosu” 56). His de-classed *no-position* in society takes on the form of appearance of a messianic license, an appointment to an exclusive *non-position* outside particular “interests” and “agendas.” “[Such] a quality is being ascribed also to the artist in our present time, a time of fundamental destabilizing in capitalist society, when this ‘from the outside’ is laid bare [*obnazhaetsia*] through particular actions in the clash of class forces” (Libedinskii, “K voprosu” 57).

The very relation whereby consciousness disavows its own class nature constitutes the basis of its false existence. Truth is to be found in the obverse. Consciousness must discover itself within the totality of which it is, latently and inalienably, a part: a collection of people, events, and lives, to be sure, but *as reflected in consciousness*. The true definition of a class and, hence, the true home of consciousness, is where this collection of people, events, and lives is raised into a system of thought—no longer an inert, “factual,” aggregate, but a whole held together by intellected relations and necessary prospects. If it is to offer us the world as it really

is, a consciousness engaged in artistic representation must see the world from *there*, from within that totality.

The proletarian writer's road to that new and unique, yet native, point of view is double. His "getting there" proceeds in a twofold way: "intrinsically," he is driven there by the momentum of socio-historical change; "extrinsically," he is taken there by a conscious practice of political-cultural organization of which he is the object. Intrinsically, the Revolution "lays bare" the reality of class struggle and redefines the proletarian writer's relationship to his class (Libedinskii, "K voprosu" 55, 57-59). In the same momentum, "a new reading public creates its own proletarian writer and establishes a new type of connection with him through the writer's consciousness of the social significance of his work, [of his] responsibility toward the socialist revolution [...]" (Libedinskii, "K voprosu" 58). Extrinsically, "this relationship [...] is established by the [working] class through its vanguard in the plane of conscious directorship [*soznatel'noe rukovodstvo*] over proletarian literature" (Libedinskii, "K voprosu" 60). What is the essence of this relationship, furthered by both history and organizational supervision? "This is, first of all, a conscious relationship. The artist must stand equal to his own class' worldview, he must clearly understand every turn in the class struggle and participate in it through each of his actions; he must be a conscious participant in the struggle for communism" (Libedinskii, "K voprosu" 59).

As organizations, (the new) VAPP and RAPP were established nowhere else but "in the plane of conscious directorship over proletarian literature." Their existence as structures ("organization" in the substantive) was grounded in the need for that kind of cultural-political praxis ("organization" in its other meaning). And we can see immediately that this praxis, like the ones discussed earlier, does nothing to its object—human consciousness—that is not already

in potentia contained therein. For the consciousness in question—the proletarian—has this most essential content: that it is not *a* consciousness (in the substantive), an individual self, but consciousness (awareness) of others, of collectivity. And so, for this content to be laid bare, for light to be shed on the writer’s responsibility toward his own class, is really nothing more than for him to enter his one and only true existence. His consciousness is to be, in Hegelian (but also Marxist) terms, one whose being-for-self is its being-for-others. In the more specific terms of the post-revolutionary cultural jargon, the consciousness of the proletarian writer is, necessarily, consciousness of the “social commission.”

Yes, indeed—the very same social commission that we encounter in the writings of LEF. To recall, “their” social commission had found an ingenious way into the material object, before this object was given form as a product, a thing of use; and it had resided there in such a definitive and imperious way that the subsequent process of form-giving, or “making the thing,” had been simply the laying bare of the product’s dormant functionality. Because of this peculiar arrangement, apparently soulless stuff like linen had seemed to “know” its social purpose and the tailoring appropriate to it. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that consciousness should resemble that linen in its capacity to possess the social commission latently before it displays it manifestly.

From the inception of the RAPP movement, its leaders were suspected of seeking to regiment proletarian literature, to command its course in a military fashion, through political directives and ideological strategies. Without ever denying that they were a militant formation, mobilized to fight on the cultural front of class struggle, the Oguardists rejected the charge of administrative authoritarianism. At the 1927 congress of MAPP, they set out to explain the meaning of their “conscious directorship over proletarian literature.”

Responding to an open letter from writer Marietta Shaginian, in which she had raised in a new context the age-old question of freedom and determination in artistic work, Averbakh expounded the dialectic of the “social commission.” The social commission proceeds intrinsically from the individual’s class-specific social experience. It seeps through and informs his consciousness immanently, if latently. It is certainly not some sort of mandate, conceived at Party plenums and imposed “from above” (Averbakh, “O sovremennykh” 11).⁸³ And yet to many writers, like Shaginian herself, the social commission could appear as just this kind extrinsic mandate, a political imposition that limits one’s artistic freedom. It is normal, even necessary, that it be so. To a consciousness that has yet fully to reflect its position in the world, the social commission takes on the deceptive form of appearance of compulsive externality. Not so in the case of the “artist-Marxist, who understands the mechanics of social relations” (Averbakh, “O sovremennykh” 11). He is aware that his freedom is determined by the “socio-psychological task” of the current historical moment; hence, this determination “does not appear to him in the form of a compulsively imposed requisition for a literary work” (Averbakh, “O sovremennykh” 11).

In this manner, social subjecthood, no less than social objecthood, turns out to be an internally segregated field. Its topology encompasses two moments, a “here” and “there,” that could also be grasped and articulated as a progressive succession—a “before” and “after.” The before-, or here-, being of social consciousness is the inert existence of the social psyche (*obshchestvennaia psikhika*). In its acts and representations, this psyche is objectively determined by its belonging to a class; it objectively fulfills a social commission; and yet,

⁸³ Libedinskii went as far as to argue that “it is impossible to assign a particular theme to a particular author, until [this theme] has fully ripened in him, i.e., until there is no longer a need for it to be assigned. We [the organization] can direct the author to certain objects, which elude him, we can analyze his work and, translating it into the language of ideas, criticize his worldview. But we cannot ‘commission’ a given author to write about a given object, and moreover—to write exactly what we consider necessary in the given moment” (“Problemy” 21).

“subjectively,” it remains opaque to this immanent relation. Only in the after-, or there-, being of consciousness does the social commission immanent to it become also manifest in it. In this second state, the social psyche becomes an assumed ideological position. “Psyche” and “ideology” are not some qualitatively different conditions or phenomena. They belong to the same ontological continuum: “Marxism does not find an impassable abyss between [social psyche and social ideology]. On the contrary, [Marxism] views social ideology as a definite form of reflected, organized, systematized social psyche” (Averbakh, “O nekotorykh” 6).

The transition from false to genuine subjecthood, from unreflected class existence to the position of true class ideology, occurs as a matter of course in the progressive unfolding of class struggle through history. As noted, socio-economic development itself makes manifest to consciousness the “mechanics of social relations.” But an identical effect can be brought about in yet another way, through a shortcut, as it were: through a hermeneutic capable of explicating those very same relations. Quite apart from any actual knowledge that the proletariat may or may not possess, there exists a kind of general knowledge—the dialectical-materialist method—that makes visible what is otherwise concealed. What interests us here is not the way in which the method “works” in representing the world, but, rather, the way in which, anterior to the act of representation, it allows the representing consciousness to attain the position of radical objectivity. In other words, we are not yet asking about consciousness’ relation to what is to be represented, but, rather, about consciousness’ own disposition.

Anterior to the actual production of representations, the organization of proletarian literature has the task of producing the proletarian writer himself. This product, as stressed earlier, cannot be a “natural” one. Just as it was not the natural properties of the material that

determined the utilitarian fashioning of the “thing,”⁸⁴ so it is not the natural class origin that defines the production of the proletarian writer as genuine proletarian literature.⁸⁵ A proletarian writer is he “*who sees the world with the ‘eyes of the proletariat,’ who is infused with the proletarian ideals, worldview and sensitivity [mirooshchushchenie]. [...]*” It is clear that here the cornerstone cannot be one’s profession or social origin, but the *point of view*, ideology” (Vardin, “Revoliutsiia” 79; emphasis in the original). The cornerstone for the proletarian organization of literature is the imperative movement from “here” to “there,” which now occurs within the field of subjecthood, within the otherness called “consciousness.”

The distance separating the two positions of proletarian consciousness, the immediately given and the immanently possible, is once again the distance between a misguided singularity and a determinate totality. The first position, the disingenuous here-being of the proletarian, is the “subjective” (in a bad sense), particular, contingent, and unmediated absorption of class struggle into the psyche (in Lenin’s terms, the position of “spontaneity”). And yet, there is nothing whatsoever contingent, arbitrary, or fortuitous about the fact that proletarian consciousness should exist in this way. Its distortion, its being as a false consciousness, is systematically induced; it is a lawful extension of its own true being:

Regarded abstractly and formally, then, class consciousness implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one’s own socio-historical and economic condition. This condition is given as a definite structural relation, a definite formal nexus which appears to govern the whole of life. The ‘falseness,’ the

⁸⁴ See pp. 80-81.

⁸⁵ Confusing the *actual* consciousness of the proletariat with the class’ *imputed* system of cognition became, during the 1920s, the distinguishing mark (and stigma) of political “opportunism.”

illusion implicit in this situation is in no sense arbitrary; it is simply the intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure.” (Lukács, *History* 52)

Fortunately, to proletarian consciousness is given—by the same systematic and lawful determination—the possibility of transcending this partial and illusory perspective. By a transposition, it can get *there*, “at the heart of that totality” (Lukács, *History* 52), which is the socio-economic structure; it possesses the “ability to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole” (Lukács, *History* 69). That other place of seeing, circumscribes the genuine-predestined being of proletarian consciousness.

When the writer is asked to “see the world with the eyes of the proletariat,” that is the vantage point to which he is pointed. En route, his “social psyche” (the here-being of consciousness) must be “organized, systematized.” The procedure is non-invasive. It is an act of facilitation, a conveyance, really. The organizational manipulation of the psyche—what Evgenii Dobrenko has called the “molding of the Soviet writer” (*formovka sovetskogo pisatel'ia*)—is conceived similarly to the manipulation of the material in constructivist practice. Now the “material” is consciousness itself, and its molding is aimed at nothing more than the bringing-out or letting-be of a latent inner content. The method of dialectical materialism is the conveyance utility that facilitates the process. In passing through the conveyor, proletarian consciousness does not undergo any trans-substantiation. Remaining self-identical, it merely sheds its false being. The instrumental utility of the method consists in allowing consciousness to become transparent to its own “situation,” its “position,” to see itself as in fact determined by both a synchronic and a diachronic totality of socio-economic phenomena. Having been, thus, conveyed to itself (in both meanings of the word), proletarian consciousness now possesses as

subject, what it has always possessed objectively: its own function and utility, its “present” and “future”—a social commission in the shape of destiny.

In the ranks of RAPP, there was an ongoing debate on whether proletarian literature should have its own method, whether next to the general analytic provided by Marxism there was a need and a place for a doctrine specifically suited to the purposes of artistic representation. Some considered the distinction immaterial.⁸⁶ Others thought it necessary to speak of “proletarian realism,” mostly in order to distinguish a new way of artistically apprehending reality from the approach implicit in the bourgeois realisms of the past.⁸⁷ Quite often, under the rubric of “style,” the problem of methodology was conflated with the question of whether proletarian literature possessed a special character that separated it from all other literary traditions. Nobody could dispute the axiomatic assertion that, by virtue of working-class consciousness’ unique view point on the world, its artistic representations must, indeed, manifest a unique quality, a distinct “style.”

Little could be said of this quality, short of restating in qualitative terms the substantive advantages of being “at the heart of that totality,” of being able “to see society from the centre, as a coherent whole”; the clarity, objectivity, and comprehensiveness afforded by being there, meant that the style of proletarian literature is, necessarily, ... clear, objective, and comprehensive. Borrowing a term once used by Marx, B. Reich proposed that the new literary style be called “sociographics.” He went on to explain:

⁸⁶ Since the organization of proletarian literature, Averbakh reasoned, rested on ideological, not formal, principles, the problem of artistic method was overridden by considerations of the author’s ideological position: “The writer’s artistic method cannot be torn away from ideology, from his worldview as a whole. Moreover, the writer’s artistic method is fully subordinate to [...] his ideological stance” (Averbakh, “Tvorcheskie” 9).

⁸⁷ See, for example, Zonin 14-15.

It seems to me that that the term “sociographics” defines the “special style” of the working class, its “special character” expressed in a “special form.”

The attributes of sociographics are: *precision*—each of its lines, each of its signs is the exact equivalent expression of precisely quantified magnitudes; *unambiguous, unmediated, demonstrative reproduction*—each of its lines, each of its signs, conveys content in a form which excludes any approximation, any digression into another content, and which demonstrates plainly the interrelationships within the content. [Sociographics] is *universally comprehensible, concise, concentrated*; each of its lines, each of its signs, is made clear through universally comprehensible means. It brings together homogenous entities and distills their most characteristic features. (21)

In not so many words, the envisioned style of proletarian literature is simply the perfect analytic of every possible social content. In it, writing and reading coalesce. “Each line, each sign” appears on the page only to dissolve into a pure transparency toward the object it delineates. To write is to render legible; to apprehend is to demonstrate; to have seen is to have shown.

It is difficult not to see the conceptual symmetry between Reich’s vision and that of Vertov, not only in the shared anticipation of a universally intelligible sociolect⁸⁸ (one on screen, the other on page), not only in the common emphasis on exactitude and scientific rigor,⁸⁹ but also

⁸⁸ The term “sociolect” (*sotsiolekt*) was coined by Mikhail Bakhtin, in whose theory of culture and novelistic discourse it designates a modulation of the common language, marked stylistically and ideologically as issuing from a particular social position. In the present context, Reich’s sociographics claims to be an exclusive discourse, in which the heteronomy of the various conflicting sociolects has been resolved. Belonging to the proletariat by objective entitlement, this type of discourse cannot be identified with any *particular* position within society, but only with the objective existence of the social as whole (the universal).

⁸⁹ For example, in Vertov: “Cinema’s unstrung nerves need a rigorous system of *precise* movement. The meter, tempo, and type of movement, as well as its *precise* location with respect to the axes of a shot’s coordinates and perhaps to the axes of universal coordinates (the three dimensions + the fourth—time), should be studied and taken into account by each creator in the field of cinema. Radical necessity, *precision*, and speed are three components of

in the peculiar dialectic of perception operative in seemingly heterogeneous experiences. Now in the field of consciousness, which lends itself so easily to analogies with sight and vision, we once again approach that threshold between seeing and the seen, where the first promises to cross over and merge into the second. The eye of consciousness, like the mechanical eye of the movie camera, promises to void the distance that separates it from the object of observation and become the pure showing (demonstration) of things as they are.

And just as the camera, once freed from its false existence in the studio, discovered its true position to be, literally, *in medias res*, in the midst of things, in those interstices of the world where its totality is being knit—so does the proletarian artistic consciousness. It is the same road and the same destination. On the iron tracks of objective *pre*-destination, “this” accomplishes the trip back from re-presentation, from its alienated, cast-away being. Unlike the theorists of the left avant-garde, the “organizers” of proletarian literature did not aim at abolishing artistic representation. On the contrary, they remained, for the most part, strictly within the framework of the traditional vis-à-vis of subject and object, author and portrayed reality. And yet, within this old-fashioned framework, a novel relation between the two terms is established.

The author now bears that title through a new kind of endowment. Not he is an author who, keeping reality at the distance of artistic perspective, “portrays” it in writing, but he who apprehends how the reality of which he is part has never ceased to write *through* him and *in spite* of him. Aphoristically, we can call an author the individual who maintains this line of determination by consciously accepting the “through,” so that it is no longer “in spite.” Having consciously assimilated his work’s inevitable dependence on the historical existence of his class (the social commission), the writer enjoys freedom in necessity. Try as he may, he cannot free

movement worth filming and screening. The geometrical *exact* of movement through an exciting succession of images is what is required of montage” (“We” 8; emphasis added).

himself from the social commission. He can only accept it freely and freely employ his abilities in the task of fulfilling it:

He is free in the choice of his theme. He is even more free in his use of methods for shaping the material at hand. But we know that his freedom is a function of class necessity [...]. In the free choice of theme, the author is determined by the social-psychological task of the present day. This is how we understand the social commission. This is why we say that the artist-Marxist, who understands the mechanics of social relations [...] does not need the illusory freedom of artistic work. (Averbakh, "O sovremennykh" 11)

Averbakh's words do not, in the least, dispel the ambiguity pertaining to the author's position in the world. Is the proletarian writer seizing upon something, or is something seizing upon him? Is he, really, "choosing" his theme, or is the theme "choosing" him? As conceived by Libedinskii—himself a proletarian writer of some renown—the subject of an author's work, its "theme" (*tema*), documents the author's objective relation to the social world ("Problemy" 20). That relation is, certainly, given, not chosen. Developing a theme by means of writing is similar to solving a mathematical problem. The problem as given, contains in an embryonic form its own solution (Libedinskii, "Problemy" 20). Hence, the author's activity is the activity of demonstration, of bringing out and making manifest this initially concealed solution. But since he is himself an inextricable part of the problem, since it is *his* objective relation to the social that will emerge at end of the process, he is equally that which demonstrates and that which is being demonstrated, the "subject" and the "object" of representation, the portraying and the portrayed.

Human interiority, consciousness, appears, at first sight, to be something quite different from, say, linen or stone. But just like linen and stone, consciousness emerges from its dissimulative being to find itself as one “item” in a field of otherness that is knowable and available to praxis. This field consists of things coextensive with individual consciousness in such a way that their cohabitation forms a systematic and “working” ensemble, a totality. The agency that informs the whole, whatever makes the totality “work” and “behave” in rationally predictable ways, also “disposes” of each particular item in lawful and necessary manner. It gives to consciousness, no less than to stones and linen, a “disposition”: a tendency to which it conforms, a function it cannot but fulfill, a shape it will eventually assume. It is, therefore, not surprising that object-like and subject-like items alike should be immanently invested with something called social commission. This is the operative principle of the whole of which they are constitutive parts, just like the *dominanta* and the socio-psychological tendency were the operative principles of textual totalities.

As something separate from the totality and its operative principle, there exists the general hermeneutic of “how it all works” and “what it all comes down to.” This knowledge is neutral. It does not interfere with the analyzed phenomena, but simply raises them into clarity. Under its grasp, “this,” the intellected field, is conveyed to its own “unconscious”: the true, if hitherto concealed, interrelations between all of its items.

Similarly constituted is the cultural praxis that calls itself now “construction,” now “organization,” and now “systematization.” Whatever this praxis approaches proves to be a thing with a disposition and purpose, a thing already headed somewhere. And so a cultural “making” becomes possible that showcases the unobtrusiveness of pure analysis. To organize items, whether they be possessed or deprived of consciousness, means to convey them to the

background that has always been “behind” them—to their “unconscious.” Human or not, animate or not quite, they prove to be possessing and possessed of a certain “structure,” “tectonic,” or “organization.” Here the ambiguity sets in, for this property of items, whatever its designation, is neither fully within nor fully outside of them, it is neither solely *their* property, nor is it entirely bestowed upon them from without. The utilitarian tectonic of material things, as well as the social tectonic of human subjects, is what relates them to the background totality and assigns to them a function therein. It constitutes their identity and, by the same token, refers them to where this identity is no longer theirs to own.

For human subjects, the issue of identity is also an issue of agency. It is a matter of that very same “making” and “doing,” regardless of whether it comes in the form of seeing, building, or writing. In all these forms, the act issuing, apparently, from the human subject contains, in fact, two vectors. In order to be what he is truly, to enjoy identity, the subject must, in the same act, affirm himself and showcase the operative principle of the systematic totality to which he belongs. He must allow another agency to pass through him uninhibited; another, imperious act, issuing from the totality as a whole, must come to inform his act. At the point where these two dynamic vectors begin to interact, we shall begin to think totalitarian culture and the institution of socialist realism. And as we do, we shall be forced to find new words and concepts in order to describe the act of cultural creation.

PART II

CHAPTER ONE: MATTERING AND MANNING

Perhaps we can never experience anything concerning things and make out anything about them except as we remain in the realm in which they encounter us. Meanwhile, we cannot get loose from the question whether or not we approach the things themselves, at least within this realm, whether in it we aren't always already with them.

Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*

We cannot remain in this dilemma of having to fail to understand either the subject or the object. We must discover the origin of the object at the very center of our experience; we must describe the emergence of being and we must understand how, paradoxically, there is *for us* an *in-itself*.

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

At least in one respect, the study of Stalinist culture provides those who pursue it with the promise of clarity and almost metaphysical solace. If culture is, most broadly, a realm of created things, Stalinism appears to return us to a realm of ontological simplicity long lost in the history of the Western world. Centuries after the decline of the Western medieval civilization, within whose confines *ens creata*, the entire multitude of beings and things, could be found to issue from a single source, we chance upon a similar world in Soviet Russia. Certainly, throughout these centuries, secular metaphysics has sought to restore the lost unity of creation by devising various transcendental egos (particular or universal “spirits”) and abstract subjects, which have allowed one to say, for example, that German culture is the creation of the German *Volkgeist*, Western civilization—the product of the laws of History, bourgeois culture—the offspring of bourgeois Ideology, etc. And yet, these capitalized and capital abstractions have been quite far

from the simple presence and identity of the Christian Creator; and the act of cultural creation had never approached the intuitive immediacy of a magisterial hand directly shaping the countenance of worldly things.

How comforting it is, then, to hear at the end of the twentieth century, words like the following, coming from one of the most distinguished and prolific students of Stalinism?!

23 April, 1932. On that day, when the Central Committee of the Communist Party passed the resolution “On the Reformation of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” our national literature and art entered upon a new quality. *Soviet* literature and *Soviet* art began, *de jure*, on that day. [...] [On] that day was born a peculiar kind of literature, *state* literature, and its birth means a lot. Actually, it means everything. Soviet literature has no authors: the *state* is its author. As far as the writers who were making it are concerned [...]—these were not even writers but, above all, employees of the state [...]; in I. Lezhnev’s precise expression, [they were] “the organ of the Party’s imaginative thinking.” (Dobrenko, “Gosudarstvo” 4; emphasis in the original).

Surely, Dobrenko’s statement can be applied not only to the creations of Soviet literature, but also to all the other productions of Stalinist socialist realism and, beyond it, to every other sphere of production. If the State can be conceived as the creator of artistic works (culture in its narrowest definition), we are not risking anything by calling it also the creator of “works” like tractor plants and irrigation systems. Across these suddenly isomorphic spheres, one hand wields the power of creation.

Boris Groys’s has been the voice speaking most audibly for treating Stalinist Russia as just such a unified realm in which things utilitarian and artistic issue forth from the same

demiurgic will: “Because [Soviet leaders] were connoisseurs of the only necessary poetics and genre—the poetics of the demiurgic construction of a new world—they were entitled to issue orders on the production of novels and sculptures as they were to direct the smelting of steel and the planting of beets” (36). The surface on which beets and novels emerge side by side, following the command of a single intentionality, is what Groys calls “the total art of Stalinism.” Over this realm, the State stands in the place of God, but the Gospel of creation still reads, “In the beginning, there was the subject.” Instituted through the state, the subjectivity of this subject—communist ideology—is not unlike the Biblical *logos*, which is not an airy “word,” as the canonized translation would have us believe, but an “intelligence-design” with the power to become flesh unconditionally in the materiality of a created world. Among the created things, there are also people, the Soviet subjects, made in the image of ideal humanity.

When approaching a sphere of created things—and Stalinist culture is one such sphere—it is perhaps only natural to want to know “who did it.” If we have our “who,” the story can begin in a traditional fashion, with the introduction of a main hero as the center of action. This is why it is so intellectually soothing to see that, even in a cursory overview of Stalinism, the figures of the Party and State, of the Leader and his entourage, of Ideology and Propaganda, come forth and suggest themselves as unavoidable choices for the appointment.

But what if this way of asking is not the way to go about understanding culture? What if the desire to know “who did it” is just a bad habit of thought? What if the appointment of towering subjects at the head of creation, despite the intuitive facility of such choices, is not at all how the story of culture should be told? Unlike the original making of the world, the creation of cultural worlds is never a creation *ex nihilo*. Whenever we approach it, there are always existing, already “made,” people and things. Whatever originary subjectivity we may devise, we would

not be able to conceive of it as something wholly original. Unlike God, who is capable of absolute self-subsistence before anything else properly *is*, all subsequent demiurgic subjects would have to answer as to the ground on which they stand. In the process, they would inevitably show themselves as undeserving of being placed at the beginning of all creation. Even if, in its very name, the state alludes to something standing on its own, the story of Stalinist culture cannot begin with the words, “In the beginning was the Stalinist state.” The state and its ideology, the supposed subject of culture and its subjectivity, must themselves stand in a pre-existing world, which cannot but be a world of people and things. A human institution, the state is itself a cultural product and, as such, its agency cannot be the primal agency of cultural creation.

If, in addressing Stalinist culture, we do not want to reify abstract idols in the image of God, we may begin by saying, “In the beginning was a state,” where “state” does not designate anything like a subjective entity capable of design and executive will, but is used in the sense in which we speak of a certain “state of affairs.” This state, which precedes—principally, not temporally—all institutions of a particular culture, including the institution of the state, should be thought as the primary environment for any cultural investigation. When considering a given cultural world, we first encounter a state of affairs, a situation. Here we find nothing like a gargantuan and masterful being from which all creation issues. No agency announces itself as the source of all things. All we find on this primary level are people and things in a certain state of affairs. In the traces of culture, all we discover are the traces of men dealing with things, speaking about things, fighting for things.

In the first part of this study, approaching Stalinism by way of the post-revolutionary decade, I presented a series of such “affairs” between people and things. My goal was to show

an underlying pattern, a common way of being. The procedure may appear similar to the type of modeling Foucault has performed in *Les mots and les choses*: a historical realm is delineated, representative texts are selected and interrogated en route to deriving a proto-discursive paradigm, which can be said to account for the essential (in Foucault's case, cognitive) affairs of a particular period. The similarity is only superficial. Unmistakably indebted to the Kantian legacy, Foucault's approach seeks to establish for each historical-cultural frame (the Renaissance, the Classical age, the modern period) an absolute epistemic horizon that delimits the possibilities of how things are known and what kind of things are known. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had elaborated the universal conditions (categories) under which something like an "object" of human cognition is at all possible; Foucault historicizes the procedure without changing its essential movement: his "episteme" systematizes the conditions of possibility that allow things to become objects of knowledge in a particular, historically bounded realm.

Patently different in both scope and ambition from Foucault's, my approach differs from his also in matters of principle. Not only in its title, but also in what it has to say, *Les mots et les choses* excludes man. If he appears at all, it is only when he turns up on the side of the known, i.e., as an object of knowledge (the fact that in the modern episteme man is not merely one object among others, but the very paradigm for the "order of things," does not principally alter the situation.) Although no one else but people are the carriers of the knowledges Foucault analyzes, man is never addressed as an active participant in the event of culture. Nowhere is the question posed, "Who knows?" Human subjectivities are subsumed under the objectivity of structure. Ultimately, it is the episteme that "knows." The authors discussed on the pages of *Les mots et les choses* are there simply to fill out, with their words and the things of their knowledge, the frame prepared for them by their own historical finitude. Only the outline of this finitude

matters, as we watch, throughout the book, how the *things* take place and become ordered inside this or that cognitive grid.

By contrast, my approach (so far enacted, rather than explicated) seeks to account for the way *man* also takes place: not only how something (“this”) is articulated as a cultural matter, but also how someone comes to be a cultural agent. As a consequence, the space where I seek the defining affairs of culture is quite unlike the categorical space of Foucault’s episteme. I conceive of it as more akin to the kind of space Heidegger had in mind when he spoke of the “clearing”: the zone where things encounter man in a reciprocal event of being.⁹⁰ Thinking along similar lines, I designated this primary space of culture as “plot.” I rely on both its spatial semantics, as well as on its evocation of an interactive, “eventful,” environment.

In the following theoretical reflections, I will try to anchor the concept of plot in a specific understanding of the cultural act. It should be said from the outset, that this understanding is decidedly opposed to demiurgic conceptions and to the triumphant advance of the subject/cultural hero (“I came, I saw, I made”). Plots consist of positions, roles, actions, and movements. They cannot be reduced to or generalized as a single action issuing from a single agency (individual or corporate, human or not). After Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, I would like to think of the basic (Heidegger would say, “primordial”) cultural act as an event, a “happening,” that contains not just one vector of force (usually mapped along the line subject—object). Hence, I am appealing to the other meaning of “act,” the one correlative with “plot,” the one intended when we speak of an act in a play. While preserving the moment of *telos*—the concerted movement toward something—this meaning includes the element of interaction and, by the same token, excludes the possibility of attributing the directed movement to one actor only. Thought in these terms, the “act” is not driven by the unleashing of a force; instead, it is

⁹⁰ See the epigraph to the present chapter.

advanced by the very accord, or concert, of the parts (roles) that go into it. It is to be grasped as “composition,” more than as “execution” or “accomplishment.”

What, then, are the constituents of this composition, what “goes into” the cultural act, understood as an interactive happening? Obviously, man goes into it, and so does something else, something other (“this”). Such a way of speaking, however, although it says very little, may suggest that we are still within the old dichotomy, featuring “man” as the subject (taking the place once occupied by God) and “this” as the inert matter about to be made into a cultural artifact. I prefer a different way of speaking in which man and matter would not stand opposed as substantive entities (one part “man,” one part “matter”), but would figure as complementary parts (to be read, here, as “roles,” rather than “ingredients”) in a single event. With this conceptual predilection in mind, I would like to designate the parts constitutive of every cultural act as “manning” and “mattering.” Prior to “man” (and “subject”), there is “manning”; prior to “matter” (and “object”), there is “mattering.” At the most primary level, the cultural act is the event of mattering and manning.

“Mattering” is how things are in a human world. In such a world—the only one we know—things are matters of interest, concern, involvement, cognition, or indifference. In being all this, they “matter.” I place no axiological weight on this usage, and no ethical proposition is forthcoming: “mattering” means less (but, in a way, more) than to be held dear, to be of concern, be important, valuable, or worthy of attention. It means the ability of things to lend themselves to man, to be approachable, knowable, and doable in such-and-such a way: their fundamental openness toward a historical someone who knows and does. Heidegger never took for granted this openness of things and never ceased to interrogate it. Throughout his life, he asked repeatedly and in marvel one and the same question: how come that there are things available for

us to know, love, revolt against, or ignore? It seemed inconceivable to him that such attitudes can be deduced *in toto* from the activity of some subject intent on knowing, loving, revolting against, or ignoring. That we should have “projects” and “involvements” did not seem to him something that we could singularly bring about, regardless of how vastly this “we” is conceived. The general disposition of things, their being-at-the-disposal-of-, being-a-matter-of-, for us, is what I mean by “mattering.” The modes of mattering are many; they can be differentiated in both a diachronic (historical) perspective, or in a synchronic overview (how things become a matter of scientific inquiry is different from the way they become a matter of pragmatic daily concern).

The conceptualization of mattering takes its first, most “literal,” incentive from Heidegger’s gloss on Kant in *What Is a Thing?* In speaking about phenomenal appearances, Kant distinguishes, classically, between their “matter” and “form.”⁹¹ Heidegger reads “matter” not so much in terms of primary “substance,” but in terms of “pressure” (*Thing* 189). From matter comes something like a primary rush that presses (im-presses) upon the senses and is, thus, responsible for our sensations (*Thing* 208). It is important for Heidegger to stress the aspect of directedness-toward⁹² us that pertains to matter. How does this aspect come about? In Kant’s terms, matter is what is made present in intuition, the given in regard to its content; it is the “stuff” of sensation, what affects us. By contrast, things like space and time are “pure” intuitions without sensations: not the matter (content), but the form of intuiting. They are not

⁹¹ “I call that in the appearance which corresponds to sensation its *matter*, but that which allows the manifold of appearance to be intuited as ordered in certain relations I call the *form* of appearance. Since that within which the sensations can alone be ordered and placed in a certain form cannot itself be in turn sensation, the matter of all appearance is only given to us *a posteriori*, but its form must all lie ready for it in the mind *a priori*, and can therefore be considered separately from all sensation.” (155-56; emphasis in the original).

⁹² When he writes “toward” or “against” (*gegen*), Heidegger keeps in mind the morphology of *Gegenstand* (“object”), which he spells out conceptually as something brought to a stand (*stand*) vis-à-vis man (*Thing* 184-85).

given as something concrete, but are the “wherein” of all concrete appearances (*Thing* 194, 198). The distinction implicit throughout in Heidegger’s interpretation is that between *what* is given to us and the *giving* (*Gebung*) itself.⁹³ Expectedly, he is interested in the latter—that which, while different from the things themselves, directs them toward us and lets them encounter us.⁹⁴

If “matter” is what we encounter *in* sensations, how should we call that which brings us into the encounter?⁹⁵ Here I would like to say “mattering,” and thereby turn the conversation to a context quite remote, but not divorced, from that of Kant’s basic epistemology. While *The Critique of Pure Reason* deals with the fundamental structure of all experience, it is clear that Kant takes the world of nature and the natural sciences as his starting point. The world for which I intend the term “mattering” is the man-made world of culture. In this world, we are dealing with more complex phenomena, which cannot be addressed at the level of elementary sensations or perceptions. The “matter” that encounters us here is never virginal, and cannot be decomposed down to primary elements or stimuli; at each point, it possesses a characteristic thickness made up of have-been experiences, knowledges, practices. The weight of these material and immaterial traces is what tells us that we are within the horizon of culture, and not in that of science. We cannot lose it without losing, in the same instance, the field of culture.

⁹³ Contrary to canonical (Neo-Kantian) readings of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, which have treated as primary the problematics of judgment, Heidegger, not surprisingly, insists on the crucial role of intuition (144-48). He calls it a “giving” representation (*Thing* 197), meaning that what we obtain through it comes to us from somewhere else; by contrast, he designates conceptual thinking as “spontaneous” representation, one which “unfold[s] itself out of itself” (*Thing* 142).

⁹⁴ “In human cognition the cognizable must encounter and must be given, because what is, is something other than ourselves, and because we have not ourselves made or created what is. [...] Since we human beings have not created what is as such as a whole and could never create it, it must be shown to us if we are to know it. [...] [T]he work of art is only *one* proof that we come to know what is, only when it is specially given to us” (*Thing* 207-208; emphasis in the original).

⁹⁵ The easy (and somewhat tautological) answer—“sensation”—does not satisfy Heidegger. He finds it fraught with ambiguity (*Thing* 208-11).

A pivotal theme of Gadamer's philosophy is that this weight—the weight that he summarily calls “tradition,”—is not dead. As, I hope, the following discussion will bear out, the concept of “mattering” owes much to Gadamer's elaboration of the conditions of understanding—an elaboration that, for its part, is heavily indebted to Heidegger's analysis of the “hermeneutic circle.” As Gadamer saw it, the heavy matter of “custom,” “value,” and “prejudice,” carried by historical time and deposited into every present—the very deposit from which Enlightenment thought sought to free itself—is an indispensable condition for understanding. Tradition is what first makes possible a context of relevance or significance, from out of which the act of understanding is, then, able to reach for and grasp its truth. Holding-as-true is, in other words, predicated on a prior holding-as-significant; and this latter hold, is the one in which our cultural-historical being always holds us.⁹⁶

The truth in question is, of course, not some absolute knowledge. Because in the realm of culture we always know and act from a “situation,”⁹⁷ we encounter not the thing-in-itself, but things that are always so-and-so “to us,” or “to them” (we witnessed, for example, that “to them” the body is a machine-like mechanism, “to them” the text is a socio-psychological complex, etc., etc.). Separating the cultural thing from the thing-in-itself are not, as in Kant, some abstract and universal categories of understanding, but the concrete horizons of a given cultural world. This aspect, which is the phenomenal proper, has the apparent character of limitation. But it cannot be just that. That something is “to us” in this and that way should not be understood as mere

⁹⁶ “[D]eterminate thinking of any kind can go on only because being has already been understood in some specific way—and in this sense *it is not us who grasp being, but being that grasps us*” (Linge, lii; emphasis in the original).

⁹⁷ Gadamer, in whose hermeneutic philosophy the correlated concepts of “situation” and “horizon” play a central role, provides this succinct explanation: “Every finite present has its limitations. We define the concept of ‘situation’ by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of ‘horizon.’ The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point [...]. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word [“horizon”] has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy, and the way one's range of vision is gradually expanded” (Gadamer, *Truth* 302).

privation (phenomenality in the negative sense), as what prevents us from reaching the thing-in-itself. If it is understood this way, it is misunderstood. If we, for example, say that the Enlightenment notion of society (as a rational association of free individuals for the benefit of each) is a culturally particular presentation of society, this, obviously, does not mean that we have recourse, even in hypothesis, to “what society really is.” The cultural-phenomenal appearance of the thing “society” does not have as a background society-in-itself; instead, in the background there is only our continuing, but discontinuous and forever unfinished, endeavor to understand and make “society.”

At each particular moment, an endeavor like this cannot but take its bearings from within a particular cultural horizon. This is its limitation, but also its grounding. Hence, we must say that the *to-us* constitutive of every cultural horizon is perhaps what prevents us from having an absolute grasp of things, in either cognitive or practical way, but also what enables us to have any grasp at all. Differently put, the very conditions that constitute the finitude of our knowing and doing are—how could it be otherwise?—also the conditions that make possible any knowing and doing in the first place. Consequently we should give these conditions a positive meaning as well. We should read “to us” not only in terms of contingent appearance and bad phenomenality (“things only seem this way to us”), but also in terms of engagement and giving directedness: that things are addressed—to us.

This understanding underlies the notion of mattering: what makes present the matter (*Sache*) not as a something in-itself (*Selbst*), but as something given specifically *to us* (thus, as a possibility for knowing and doing, as an opportunity which is there for the taking), is what I call mattering. It is a succinct conceptual expression of what may be called the pregnancy of finitude: the seemingly oxymoronic proposition that the opening to truth is made possible by the

enclosure of horizon. “Mattering” indicates the possibility of conceptualizing a general “wherein” from which things emerge to encounter us as matters of... The opposition between the gerund (“mattering”) and the noun (“matter”) seeks—very much in line with the central theme of Heidegger’s philosophy—to unsettle the semantics of inanimate passivity and indifferent standing-against, and to suggest, instead, the “directed,” “engaging” character of this fundamental emergence.

In that they are cultural things, i.e., since “mattering” is their fundamental mode of being, things have their ways of recruiting us into an involvement with them. When the study of a particular culture commences, such involvements are always already under way and in front of the observer. The recruitment has taken place, so that there is always, in concert, mattering *and* manning. “Manning” is not something principally different from, even less opposed to, mattering. It is, simply, that same recruitment, viewed from the other end. It is the indispensable correlative of mattering. Mattering and manning are two ways of considering one and the same involvement (event). “Being-a-matter-of-” leaves an open space (graphically, after the last dash). To fill that space with “systematic study,” “life or death,” “political strategy,” etc., presupposes a someone who is “into” things (matters), who takes on a part, adopts these attitudes, a someone who has the “disposition” of systematic study, life or death, or political strategy. It presupposes manning. We use the word in speaking, for example, of manning a phone line. This tells us that there is manning only because something calls for it, something that “matters,” because there is a call to be answered at the other end.

Even in their lexical form, the two concepts are meant to evoke each other. Each is nothing in itself, subsisting only through its relation to the other. “Mattering” is what calls for manning (since things can matter only to someone); conversely, “manning” is nothing but what

has already responded to the call of things that matter. Together, the two articulate a primary *draw* constitutive of our being in the (cultural) world—the draw that, among other things, assures us that we do not begin our dealing with our matters-of from the distance of once-and-for-all constituted subjectivity and objectifying reflection.

If the cultural act is to be seen as an event, we must see not only how *something* takes place (a text, a monument, a war), but also how *someone* takes place, through manning. We will then obtain not just an “order of things,” but also, and in accord with it, an “order of man.” The inalienable unity of these two “orders” is presupposed in my understanding of the cultural act and in the attendant concept of “plot.” Summarily: “plot” is the descriptive space proper to the cultural act understood as the unitary happening of mattering-manning.

To understand this happening better, we may conceive of the cultural act by analogy with the act of speaking, which Paul Ricoeur has described as an event (the “occurrence of discourse”) marking “the simultaneous birth of the spoken being of the world and the speaking being of man” (“Question” 261). In speaking, the things of the world are posited, and so is the speaking “someone.” But even before that, something else must be posited: before a specific “matter” is articulated in speech, and through the discursive determination of this “something” a certain “someone” receives his reciprocal determination, one must posit, as the fundamental condition of the speech act, an engagement with things. This engagement can be viewed from two perspectives, which are complimentary.

On one hand, for us to speak, something must precede us, as it in fact always does, and precede us both determinatively and engagingly. In Mikhail Bakhtin dialogic conception of the

utterance, what so precedes the act of speech is the word of the other.⁹⁸ Simply put, we speak because we speak with or to the other; because what the other has said matters and, thus, elicits. In this sense, our own act of speech can never be conceived as pure “expression” (and is, consequently, not fully or really our own). In that it is conditioned by the word of the other, ours proves to be a dialogic word; it is “responsive” by its very nature,⁹⁹ even if it sometimes pretends, in what it says explicitly, not to be answering to anything. By addressing us, the word of the other locates us in a situation. In doing so, it seemingly confines us; but it also gives our word its determinate content.

I am proposing that we think Bakhtin’s dialogic situation further than he intended it: beyond the conversation between two people, beyond what he called speech genres, and beyond speech itself, to the most general level of our being in the world. Here we are impelled to ask whether the world itself is not “dialogic,” since it is, before anything else, a *cultural* world. What else is culture if not just this word of the Other, a word in the flesh, so to speak, that has always-already engaged us, so that our words and undertakings should have ground and meaning, and so that, from these words and undertakings, we may learn what we are? This preliminary aspect of enabling-determining addressivity¹⁰⁰ is what I call “mattering.”

On the other hand, for the speech act to take place, another preliminary condition must be posited, a condition that is the obverse of the previous one. “Mattering” is what has called to speech, eliciting it, necessarily, as the speech of a possible “one”; what has met this possibility

⁹⁸ In the present context, Bakhtin’s “other” can be seen as correlative to the function of the “significant other” (Harry Stack Sullivan) in psychoanalysis: the one to whom the subject’s vital discourse is addressed, even when it is ostensibly addressed to (“insignificant”) others.

⁹⁹ “[A]ny speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe” (Bakhtin, “Problem” 69).

¹⁰⁰ In “The Problem of Speech Genres,” Bakhtin speaks of addressivity as a property of the utterance (“the quality of turning to someone” [99]). And yet, it is clear that being-addressed is also what makes any utterance possible.

half way, answering the call, is “manning.” “Manning” is not yet this “one,” a subject, a determinate someone. Something must animate discourse as speaking (the level of “enunciation”) before, as saying (the level of the “enunciated”), this discourse could be the verbal concretion a certain “someone.” Differently put, something must propel speech for speech to continue moving toward meaning and, having arrived—no matter how precariously—to point us to someone as the “one” *of* that meaning.

As intended here, the word “manning” is supposed to bring into play also the idea of “staffing” and, through it—suggest a kind of work that is not initiated or planned in advance by us; we undertake this work only to the extent to which it has, first, taken us in and “employed” us. And this is possible because there has been a determinate “slot” available in advance, an “opening” in a certain order of business. We do not create the opening; it is much more accurate to say that the opening creates us, by letting us in and giving us something to do.

Now speaking presents us with an “order of business” of this kind. To speak, one must have something to say. This appears as a straightforward and slightly naïve proposition until we inquire about the relation between this “one” and this “have.” How are they situated in relation to each other? Exactly where, topologically speaking, does one “have” what is to be said? Within? This has been the answer traditionally given by all expressionist theories of language. In them, man is constituted somewhere outside of language, and reaches for language when the content, i.e., what is *contained*, or found “inside,” presses outward. After a century of pervasive meditation on language and linguisticity within the humanities, in which properly linguistic inquiry has been corroborated by the perspectives of philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and sociology, these pneumatics of expression cannot but seem hopelessly inadequate.¹⁰¹ One of the

¹⁰¹ Here is how Merleau-Ponty explains the illusion of the anteriority of interiority: “Thought is no ‘internal’ thing, and does not exist independently of the world and of words. What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to

great certitudes of this century has been that we cannot speak without entering the dimension of the Other, and one of its most gnawing suspicions—that the otherness that is language is our primary dimension, and that any “mineness” that claims the profundity of the unrepresentable may well be just a profound illusion.

In view of this suspicion, the very problem of expression now stands in a wholly new light, with the poles of the constituting and the constituted reversed: “It is not a question of knowing whether I speak of myself in a way that conforms to what I am, but rather of knowing whether I am the same as that of which I speak” (Lacan, “Agency” 165). “That of which I speak” runs ahead of me. Before me, it instantiates me as “one”: the one who says what is being said. The “one” does not precede the act, but is constituted in it. Therefore: “one” *has* something to say not in a contained and privately possessed “within,” but as a constitutive and open *before*, where “before” expresses the notion of precedence (what is ontologically prior to the “one” who says it) and, through it, also that of essential possibility (as when we speak of having “our whole life ahead of us”). In other words, “having something to say” does not refer to the content of the speaking consciousness—what is “within,” available in advance of the speech act—but to there being an “opening” in the event of spoken being (what lies in front, as a potentiality). Mattering calls precisely by making such room available, by creating an opening. Manning is what fills the opening and, thus, makes possible the expression of a certain “one.”

The case of the so called “shifters”—personal and demonstrative pronouns, adverbs of place and time—illustrates, on a purely formal level, how speaking is the occupation of available room. Items like “I,” “here,” “this,” are empty signifiers prior to being taken up in a concrete instance of speech. Only then, in reference to the particular situation in which they are

believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language.” (214).

instantiated, do they acquire reference and sense. Behaving as they do, shifters bring out, more demonstratively than other linguistic forms, a quality that characterizes the whole of language: its existence as potentiality, its being-there for the taking. In discourse, the potentiality is always realized, the room is always filled. And so we realize: for the vessel of language, which would, by itself, float in abstract indeterminacy, to be anchored in a “person,” “time,” “place,” “proximity,” in other words, to be anchored in actuality, the vessel must be manned.

If we assume the clichéd instrumentalist view of language as an inventory of available forms (the level of *langue*) from which we choose, as from the shelves in a store, the ones we need in a given situation of speech (the level of *parole*), we could say that “I” is one such selection.¹⁰² But this cannot be the authentic experience of speech. Taking seriously the dialogic conception of the utterance, we are obliged to admit that we never take actual possession of the “I.” Rather, we are “slotted for it” by what waits silently to be said. In each instance of speech, we are being possessed by a certain situation that has addressed us—almost always implicitly, rather than explicitly—as the potential “thou” of a potential meaning/significance; to make this meaning “work,” to realize the significance with which the situation is pregnant, we must inhabit the “thou” from the other end; from that other end, the “I” marks the opening given to us in order to respond, the slot that is waiting for the “one” who has something to say, so that there is meaning. Our speaking is speaking in this opening, it is the opening’s filling, it is—before being the speaking of a definite someone—manning.

Linguists tell us that “I” can come to designate “me” only because it designates the “one who is speaking” at this particular moment. But, as previously stated, one wouldn’t be speaking

¹⁰² Ricoeur is guilty of stating, if not really meaning, this fallacy when, following Benveniste, he declares that “the pronoun is waiting there, in my language, like an instrument available for converting this language into discourse through my appropriation of this empty sign” (“Question” 255).

if he didn't "have something to say," if, furthermore, he didn't have it *before oneself*—and not inside— that is, before the emergence of the "one" as self. The "one" is posited in retroflection by "that of which I speak":¹⁰³

But if reduction must be taken in its positive sense,¹⁰⁴ as the necessary condition of reference, it must also be taken in its subjective sense, as the possibility for an *ego* to designate itself in the occurrence of discourse. Positing and subjectivity go hand in hand to the degree to which the reference to the world and self-reference—or, as we said above, the showing of a world and the positing of an *ego*—are symmetrical and reciprocal. In the same way, there could be no aiming at the real, thus no claim to truth, without the auto-assertion of a subject who is both determined and involved in his speaking. (Ricoeur, "Subject" 260-61)¹⁰⁵

It should be clear by now that mattering and manning are not intended as substitute for the relation subject-object and do not "cancel" it. They are anterior to it. They conceptualize a level prior to the moment discussed in the above passage from Ricoeur: the moment "this" and the "one" are given specific content.

In a historical perspective, we may say that the instantiations of man as "subject" and of the things he knows and works on as "object" are of a rather recent descent. These figures are specific concretions within the cultural process, not its points of departure; they belong— to borrow from the jargon of discourse analysis—to culture's level of the "enunciated." Only if we

¹⁰³ See the passage from Lacan quoted earlier.

¹⁰⁴ Ricoeur is referring to Husserl's phenomenological reduction.

¹⁰⁵ In another place in the same essay, Ricoeur states, along the same lines: "the subject, in fact, is what refers to itself in refereeing to the real; retroreference and reference to the real are symmetrically constituted" (257).

see them as subsequent to what enunciates, i.e., to the cultural act as an event of mattering and manning, can we begin to conceptualize a cultural reality (I am tempted to say “eventuality,” so as to maintain the emphasis on the event-like character of culture) like that of Stalinism, in which it is the very relationship of subject and object that changes. Mattering and manning are meant as the unchanging and primary coordinates of the cultural act, providing the conceptual framework within which such inquiry can get under way.

Just like the speech act, the cultural act is not contained in the primary and ambiguous draw of mattering and manning, but is carried by an immanent momentum into a different dimension—the dimension in which the “something” and the “one” are co-positd.¹⁰⁶ This movement, through which alone something determinate emerges and *is*, is what I call *figuring-out*. When we use the phrase, we usually mean someone’s intellectual activity in solving a problem or dealing with a situation. This someone is the one who “does” the figuring-out. As I mean it here, figuring-out is not attributable to anyone; no one does it. Quite the contrary, it is what first brings about a “one.” Remaining stubbornly in the form of a substantive gerund, *figuring-out* refuses to take a subject. In the present context, its proper usage is not “Someone figures out something,” but “There is a figuring out of...” Of what? Figuring-out is the momentum toward the realization (appearance), in accord, of two phenomenal shapes, cultural figurations: of man and a certain matter-of. Wherefrom do these figurations emerge? Out of what are they figured? Where else, if not from what is prior, from what constitutes the ground of the cultural act: from mattering and manning? The three terms participate in a dialectic, so that none of them is to be thought outside its co-articulation with the others. They are all aspects of

¹⁰⁶ The distinction between these two levels may be likened to the distinction, within phenomenology, between, on the one hand, the ante-predicative being-in-the world and, on the other, the explicit positing of subject and object in reflection.

“the same thing,” conceptual perspectives on a single and unitary happening—the cultural act understood as an event. “Figuring-out” is not the conclusion, resolution, or item-like product of the cultural act. It is this very same act and nothing else, but considered, this time, in its productive, “genitive” aspect.

This dialectic, in the complementarity of its terms, expresses the idea that the “order of things” involves man, but does it in such wise that “man” is not initially a definite someone standing apart from things and being, subsequently, drawn to them by God knows what attributes of those things; nor is he, standing aside like that, the one who first draws things to himself with the power of some primal wanting or want, which may serve to define him as an entity (the entity that wills, or the one that lacks and, hence, desires). Man is first, the being-in of this involvement, of this draw, from which the answer will be presented to him as to who he is or what he is. Definitions that have him as a “subject,” “thinking animal,” “social being,” “desire,” etc., belong on the level of the answer. Mattering and manning, by contrast, provide us with the conceptual measure by which man is always “ahead of himself,” ahead of that answer, which is also the measure that renders any answer provisional.

The unity, or draw, of mattering and manning, which unfurls through figuring-out into the dimension of the determinate, can be illustrated by Escher’s well-known etching, in which two hands draw each other. As the two hands execute their reciprocal motions, their just-materialized presence covers the sheet. It also covers up the dimension from which they have emerged: that enigmatic space which the two figures share as an unacknowledged origin and suppressed background, the space where nothing is yet concrete, where nobody yet draws and nothing is yet drawn. That space is blank, but not empty: behind the ambiguity of who is drawing and what is being drawn, lies the *draw* itself.

The draw of mattering and manning is not a “Newtonian” force acting between already constituted entities, so that these entities could be understood as principally prior, while the force—as the resultant. Quite the contrary, the draw should be imagined as a kind of attraction that first constitutes entities as such,¹⁰⁷ drawing them out toward determinateness, i.e., figuring them out. The draw itself is what draws out, it constitutes, it is, essentially, the power of cultural ontogenesis. The *onta* in question, as already stated, are not just things, but the cultural figurations (instantiations, appearances) of man and his matters-of... : the joint emergence and co-determination of the “who” of saying, knowing, and doing, and the “what” of these same. The whimsical appeal of Escher’s etching resides obviously in the fact that in the conjoined emergence depicted there, it is impossible to know for certain who is who and what is what. Both hands are “who” and both are “what,” at the same time, and, for this very reason, each is neither. *What* is the subject of what is being drawn? And *who* is its subject? The patent impossibility of answering these questions forces our glance past the two figures, making us look attentively into the space where there is *no-thing* to see.

It also forces us to think past those two meanings of the word “subject.” As used so far in this study, the notion of “plot” demarcates precisely the conceptual space behind the two figures that have traditionally borne the name “subject.” Plot, as the Russian word for it tells us, is something altogether different. *Siuzhet*, at least in the sense the Formalists gave it, is neither a “who,” nor a “what”; rather, it is a happening-movement.

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger might have had something similar in mind when, in discussing Rilke’s poetry, he wrote about the “globe of Being” as that unifying presence “which does not embrace [what is present], but rather itself releases illuminatingly into presencing” (“Why” 226). If I understand it correctly, the force he envisioned there is not the collecting togetherness of a realm of already constituted beings, but the begetting unity of the realm itself, as it releases being into presence. The (non-Newtonian) physics of Heidegger’s thinking here cannot but bring to mind the Lemaître-Hubble ideas of cosmic creation (the so-called “Big Bang” theory).

To elucidate this movement further, particularly in the aspect I called “figuring-out,” let us consider the following phenomenological description, which seeks to capture the constitution of the object (and, as I would claim, also of the subject) on the level of perception:

If I walk along a shore towards a ship which has run aground, and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on the sand dune, there will be a moment when these details suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused with it. As I approached, I did not perceive resemblances or proximities which finally came together to form a continuous picture of the upper part of the ship. I merely felt that the look of the object was on the point of altering, that something was imminent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a manner satisfying to my vague expectation. Only afterwards did I recognize, as justifications for the change, the resemblance and contiguity of what I call “stimuli”—namely the most determinate phenomena, seen at close quarters and with which I compose the “true” world. “How could I have failed to see that these pieces of wood were an integral part of the ship? For they were of the same color as the ship, and fitted well enough into its superstructure.” But these reasons for correct perception were not given as reasons beforehand. The unity of the object is based on the foreshadowing of an imminent order which is about to spring upon us a reply to questions merely latent in the landscape. It solves a problem set only in the form of a vague feeling of uneasiness, it organizes elements which up to that moment did not belong to the same universe and which, for that reason, as Kant said with profound insight, could not be associated. (Merleau-Ponty 17)

This is one of the examples in the early part of the *Phenomenology of Perception* through which Merleau-Ponty seeks to undermine the objectivist constructions of empiricist psychology and epistemology. He wants to show that the “perceptual ‘something’” (4) is not made up of objectively present stimuli, but is made in the very act of perception as a response by consciousness to the challenge of what encounters us in the sensory world. In this particular episode, the constitution of the “something” depends on the articulation of figure versus background familiar from Gestalt psychology: the figure of the funnel, masts, etc., suddenly emerges, as the forest behind them recedes to become a background.

How is this perceptual figuring-out precipitated? Merleau-Ponty answers, somewhat enigmatically: by a certain “tension,” which issues from the ambiguity of what is being observed, and which the observer experiences as a “vague expectation” and a “feeling of uneasiness.” Thus, what in the empiricist view is a mechanistic concatenation of resemblances and proximities is, in Merleau-Ponty’s rendition, an entire little drama, a *siuzhet*. The drama unfolds, for the most part, on the pre-objective stage, which, we may add, is also a pre-subjective one: the object has not yet emerged in its unity, nor has, for that matter, the subject, as a subject of clear vision. What *is* there, then? There is, to repeat, ambiguity and uneasiness. And these are enough to tell us that we are in a humanly inhabited world, a cultural world, and not in the universe constructed by the natural sciences.¹⁰⁸ Only in the latter is it possible to wonder how

¹⁰⁸ As the following passage shows, the distinction between these two worlds is central to Merleau-Ponty’s thinking: “By way of guarding against myths it is, then, desirable to point out everything that is made incomprehensible by empiricist constructions and all the basic phenomena they conceal. They hide from us in the first place ‘the cultural world’ or ‘human world’ in which nevertheless almost our whole life is led. For most of us, Nature is no more than a vague and remote entity, overlaid by cities, roads, houses and above all by the presence of other people. Now, for empiricism, ‘cultural’ objects and faces owe their distinctive form, their magic power, to the transference and projection of memory, so that only by accident has the human world any meaning. There is nothing in the appearance of a landscape, an object or a body whereby it is predestined to look ‘gay’ or ‘sad’, ‘lively’ or ‘dreary’, ‘elegant or ‘coarse’. Once more seeking a definition of what we perceive through the physical and chemical properties or stimuli which may act upon our sensory apparatus, empiricism excludes from perception the anger or

such states as ambiguity and uneasiness can come about. Because it begins from a worldless man (as no more than a specifically constructed receptor of external stimuli) and an unmanned world (as no more than the locative of these stimuli), the empiricist view can only struggle and fail to bring them into an authentic union. In the episode we are now considering, the empiricist cannot justify the passage from indistinct to determinate perception. The pattern of objectively present proximities and resemblances, which is supposed to explain the eventual appearance of the true object (the ship with its masts and sails), cannot explain the tense duration in which the seeing stays with the seen prior to this appearance. The indefinite time in which the eye supposedly scans the said similarities and proximities—why should it last and, drawing itself out into a *telos*, reach a resolution? Why doesn't the observer lose interest and turn away from the scene before the scanning is completed?

For the kind of phenomenological analysis Merleau-Ponty undertakes, such a question need not be posed and certainly warrants no answer. As long as we take as an absolute point of departure our having a (cultural) world, we do not need to invent special reasons for why the seeing should stay with the seen, for why there should be those “vague expectations,” and for why something like a “landscape” should hold “latent questions.” We could say that the indistinct vision of the ship ashore holds significance for the eye, drawing it in and on toward further explication; or we could say that the eye takes interest in the scene and pursues this interest toward greater clarity. In both cases, then, we would be expressing, in a patently inadequate way, one of two sides of the same unitary event, the sides, respectively, of mattering and manning.

the pain which I nevertheless read in a face, the religion whose essence I seize in some hesitation or reticence, the city whose temper I recognize in the attitude of a policeman or a public building” (Merleau-Ponty 23-24).

The original unity of these two, expressed in the concept of “draw,” is evoked when Merleau-Ponty’s speaks of a “tension” pervading the scene he describes. This tension is not a subjective state. It does not refer to our observer’s anxiety; nor does it refer to the matter-of-fact mingling of masts and trees in the distance. It is a more primal moment, in which the subjective and objective sides are not yet distinguishable; they are “in a draw.” The tension belongs to the scene as a whole. As the following sentences make it clear, the tension is that of a pregnancy: the scene will soon conceive an “imminent order.”

The draw is a concept not just of unity, but also of generation. As stated, the draw is what draws out (figures out); it constitutes. In our scene, we see this in the movement from tension to its relief, from pregnancy to the birth of that anticipated order. At this point Merleau-Ponty gives us an opportunity to misunderstand the event of perception and take it that the “order” refers just to the newly-constituted unity of the object. But the little monologue in the middle of the passage tells us otherwise: it is not only the ship that is rendered complete; something similar happens to our observer, as he “comes to his senses.” Just as the ship existed, at first, in the indeterminacy of a vague pattern, so did the observer exist in the indeterminacy of a vague apprehension. He was lost; the recovery of the object is his recovery as well. The figuring-out gives them both determinate being. What counts as truth, on one end, counts as identity, on the other. The resulting order is double: not only is the pattern of masts and trees regulated; the observer too is “put in order.” He is now the “one” who sees clearly.

In this reciprocal (re-)constitution something is inevitably lost. When the ship comes to a stand on the shore in its full and true shape, complete with its funnels, masts, etc., the observer comes to see it “just as it is” and “just as it was.” He, himself, finds himself such as he has always been. The assumed permanence of subject and object renders, retroactively, as

unessential the previous moment of blurred outlines and vague uneasiness. This previous moment now counts, on the side of the object, as a mere failure to show (due, for example, to the masts' objective resemblance to the trees behind them), or, on the side of the subject, as a bit embarrassing failure to see ("How could I have failed to see that these pieces of wood were an integral part of the ship?"). Lost is the duration, no matter how momentary, in which the seeing had clung to the seen, not letting it drop, but working until a separation of figure and background was achieved. This concrete activity, which is not a mere clarification of "what is there," but genuine productivity, falls by the wayside. In general, lost is the understanding that the subject and object are not given, but eventful; that they "happen" in the instance of perception, and happen in such a way that their just-acquired stability projects backward, as a truth and identity that have been there all along.

But how should we, who have gained this understanding, judge the scene? We know that neither subject nor object was given in advance; but, still, something *was* there, something that manifested itself in a vague foreboding, "imminence," as Merleau-Ponty puts it. Where does it come from? Looking back, from the point where the subject and object are already standing, we can grasp what was there before—in admittedly negative and retroflective terms—as an instance of a not-yet-object and not-yet-subject *drawn together*.¹⁰⁹ To state this in positive terms is to restate the gist of the preceding discussion: the "imminent order," which is always the reciprocal order of truth and identity, figures out of the primary draw of mattering and manning.

Can we now look back at the Soviet cultural scene of the 1920s, as presented in the first part of this study and, through Merleau-Ponty's description, see it anew as a scene giving birth to an

¹⁰⁹ From here, we can summarize the act of perception, in Lacanian language, by saying: what filled the lack of the perceived (the not-yet-object) was the lack of the perceiving (the not-yet-subject).

“imminent order”—not just a socio-political order, but a broader “order of things”? The chapters composing this study’s first part described local episodes within this larger scene, particular encounters between people and “this.” In each of these encounters, we can see the constitution of “this” in its truth as the articulation of figure against background: formal construction against semantic content, depicting (social) subjectivity against depicted world, the thing of utility against the object of art, “imputed” against “natural” class consciousness. In all these instances, the object is (re-)constituted in the movement whereby it emerges from “behind the back” of the individual subject. The measure by which “this” exceeds the immediacy of the subjective—the immediacy of authorial intent or apparent meaning, the priority of “expression” in the making of the thing or in the conduct of the body, the spontaneity of class position, etc.—is also the measure of its truth, the measure by which it counts as the “real thing.” But to notice all this is still not to take in the whole scene.

It is not enough to understand that the appeal of objectivity resides in this coming-out-from-behind the immediacy of the subjective. We must also notice how this distance between background and foreground holds also the appeal to a certain “one”; we must see it as that very opening through which not just a truth, but also an identity is to be had. To put it in the terms of the earlier discussion, it is that space where “one” shall “have something to say” and “have something to do.” In the event of its coming-to-be, truth necessarily features such “room” or “opening” within itself, because truth is not just a matter of fact; it is also a matter of belonging.¹¹⁰ Expressed differently, “truth” is not just where things count as adequate to their essence; it is also where men “count for something.” (In the Conclusion, I will return to this

¹¹⁰ Is not this the lesson we should learn from Hegel’s *Phenomenology*? Does not the quest of consciousness, in which it, initially, searches for truth in the mode of the factual, become, eventually, a quest for truth as indistinguishable from recognition?

point in order to ask, specifically within the context of Stalinist culture, what is this “something” *for which* people count.)

By the measure of their non-coincidence with themselves, that is, in the self-distancing of their cast-away (or re-presented) being, things call. They make available the opening where something “needs to be said” and something “needs to be done.” That is, they are authoritatively and imperatively addressed to a knowing and doing that would (re-)instate them in their truth/reality. The knowing and doing in question are understood as laying bare an organization immanent to things, latent in them, and pressing to be recognized—an immanence synonymous with imminence. And so the cultural act is, in each case, what satisfies this pressing desire for recognition, a reaction to this felt imminence, an answer to a “question... latent in the landscape” of culture.

To repeat, the cultural act is not the action performed by a person, group, or institution. It is not what one *does*. One does only what needs to be done (for instance, in the case of the Formalists, we may say that they did what was needed for things literary to become a matter of rigorous, “scientific,” investigation). The cultural act is the movement encompassing this “needing,” the responding that responds to it, as well as the assumption of these moments into the dimension of the determinate; it is mattering, manning, and figuring-out.

The kind of truth we dealt with in the preceding chapters was truth as autonomous objectivity, the objectivity of a dissimulating device, i.e., one that does its work without manifesting itself in immediate consciousness. And yet this hiding is also a calling. In evading immediate consciousness, this truth makes room for “one.” The room opens up precisely where immediate consciousness is not. There the subterfuge will be seen through by an eye that is properly equipped for the purpose. Now, clearly, the “one” to which such an eye belongs, exists

on an entirely different plane from the possessor of immediate consciousness¹¹¹ (but it is also clear that the two planes are not discontinuous, since the “one” refers to the transcending of that immediacy). He is neither me nor you, nothing personal, but simply the position that corresponds to what “has to be said” and what “has to be done”: the “one” of method.

We can glimpse its nature at the very dawn of the modern era in Descartes’ stipulations on how the things of nature are to be known. Regula IV of his early *Rules for the Direction of Mind* asserts that “Method is necessary for discovering the truth of nature”; while in the preceding rule, Regula III, we find the most general content of the method: “Concerning the objects before us, we should pursue the questions, not what the others have thought, nor what we ourselves conjecture, but what we can clearly and insightfully intuit, or deduce with steps of certainty, for in no other way is knowledge arrived at” (8). We can see that the things of nature, which present themselves here as “objects,” also present themselves in a general aspect of “needing.” They need method. Method is where their truth shall be revealed. We could partake of this truth if we too find ourselves in the method. To the extent to which the order of things needs method, we too are needed there. There we shall find not just the truth of the said things; we will also find ourselves as what we truly, if potentially, are: beings capable of proper reasoning. The truth reflected from things will reflect upon us.

We need to notice and distinguish between the two “we” in Descartes’ exposition: the “we ourselves”—the immediate “we,” which is given to undisciplined intuitions and random conjectures—and another one, constituted in a transcendence of the former: the clear and insightful “we” of the last clause. This second “we” exists in the same impersonal dimension as the “one.” Its character is general and potential. It belongs, simultaneously, to all and no one.

¹¹¹ The disparity is illustrated nicely in the opposition between the “kino-eye” and the limited field of human vision. In the political realm, it is exemplified, famously, in the paradigmatic separation between the main mass of the proletariat and its “vanguard,” the Communist Party.

We might say that it refers to “the *ones* who follow the steps of certainty.” This means that the steps are, initially and for the most part, not ours. They are there for the taking. When we take these steps, this fact would be indistinguishable from them taking us (and carrying us unto certainty of who we are). Until then, they are the empty footprints on the ground that grounds truth. It is certainty itself that has laid them down. For any specific knowledge to be arrived at, for the truth of things to “happen,” human beings must supply feet for the empty footsteps of certainty. Or, more accurately, human beings, in the preeminent sense of the word, shall be those who will have done that—those who will have responded to the “needing” coming from the very nature of things.

This “needing”—which, like “appealing” and “addressing,” is just a particular way of designating the general aspect of the cultural act I called “mattering”—is different for each cultural scene. Depending on the “nature of things,” different is also that which is needed:

Now when we encounter the expression “the nature of things,” the point is clearly that what is available for our use and given to our disposal has in reality a being of its own, which allows it to resist our efforts to use it in unsuitable ways. Or to put it positively it prescribes a specific *comportment that is appropriate to it*.

(Gadamer, “Nature” 70; emphasis added)

To prevent potentially dangerous misreadings, it should be said right away that the “nature of things” of which Gadamer speaks cannot be taken literally; this is certainly not how he intends it. On pain of falling prey to naïve essentialism, we must refuse to believe that some “natural” truth, an authentic being, guides or should guide our dealings with people and things across historical times and cultural places. The “nature of things” is, of course, always a second nature; and the authority that it commands is neither primal nor absolute. And yet, even as

“second,” the nature of things is not a fiction; it is something actual, and no theoretical account of the cultural process can be considered satisfactory if it does not take its authority seriously; if, furthermore, it does not attempt to account for how things acquire this second nature and how, through it, they come to “prescribe,” “appeal to,” or “need” cognitive and practical “comportments.”

On the Soviet cultural scene of the 1920s we witness a kind of “needing” (we can think of it as desire that belongs to otherness itself) that needs something other than the “comportment” of authorship. The latter attitude has become inappropriate. Since the needing comes from an imperious objectivity that is about to manifest itself, the corresponding comportment is one that provides the means for that manifestation. It is the instrumental and methodical “letting it be” of that imminent immanence. In one sense, this comportment is submissive, for it takes its lead from what *needs* to manifest itself. In another sense, it is majestic, for it instantiates a “one” of a seemingly super-human stature. In this “one,” the promise and possibility are held out to me that I shall be the willing of history’s objective will, the producing of social (re-)production, the seeing of that total perception Vertov envisioned, the speaking of Language itself, the writing of the Literary, and the knowing of that consciousness to which I have unknowingly belonged.

The truth of these new objectivities is satisfied (“happens”) *through* the “one.” And *as* a “one,” i.e., as belonging to what is true, someone “realizes” himself and finds satisfaction therein. It bears a repeated emphasis that this truth and this identity are, in principle, interdependent and coeval. The former does not precede the latter. The “one”—the figure of none other than the so-called modernist subject—figures out of the same act that lays bare the existence of art-as-device, of the social commission, of true class consciousness, and so on.

In the following chapters we shall consider a different order of things—one whose truth will demand a more complete, if somewhat perverted, satisfaction. It will not be enough for it to have its other, the “one,” the “subject,” in the submissive compartment just referred to. This order will be certain of itself only where it itself *makes* its other and possesses him on the level of the creaturely. Its truth will manifest itself in a laying-bare in which the subject participates only to the extent to which it is he—as knowing and doing—that is engendered in it. Such is the order of things defining Stalinist culture.

CHAPTER TWO: THE UNBEARABLE LIGHT OF BEING

“And your painting, comrade Arnol'dov, is remarkable for being a reflection of the life created by our creators.”

Panferov, *Bruski*

A certain straightforwardness of life, an uncontainable power of saturation, was staring at him from everywhere...

Nikolai Zarudin, “The Sleeping Beauty”

The first epigraph, taken from Panferov’s epic of collectivization, is meant to give us a first taste of a distinctly new mode of cultural creation. The taste is not without an admixture of bland pleonasm. Comrade Arnol'dov’s painting, his creation, reflects what is created by “our creators.” This is its value and distinguishing quality. Some of the creators in question are seated around him: a tractor driver, a kolkhoz worker, an aviator, a party activist—a miniature model of the new social world. The person speaking is an old Bolshevik, Bogdanov. He is announcing the arrival of a present in which the ranks of comrade Arnol'dov’s profession have expanded enormously. From Lenin and Stalin to common folk like Pavel and Stesha over here—are these not also artists, creators? In all of them, from the first to the last, some new energy pulsates, a “dynamic force,” as Bogdanov puts it (980). Let us begin by asking about this force, about its nature, as well as about its pertinence to artistic representation—to the kind of work someone like Arnol'dov performs.

What is so distinct about the situation Panferov describes, other than the pomp of Party rhetoric? After all, people have worked since time immemorial, and inasmuch as they produce

something that was not there beforehand, they could be called “creators.” And the artist—what has he done, other than depict an episode of socialist construction, a world being made? There does not seem to be any novelty here either. Many of his profession, many times before, have sought to provide a truthful picture of the world, and more often than not that world had borne the traces of an earlier activity, of a making that precedes the artist’s. How could any representational art avoid the encounter with the world as a pre-existing creation, that is, as a cultural, man-made reality? If this is all that there is to comrade Arnol'dov’s creation, why make such a fuss about it?

The scene we are considering seems rather drab as long as we are aware of only one picture in it—the picture Arnol'dov has just completed. But there is one other—the picture that the old Bolshevik is drawing for his listeners and for us as he speaks. This outer frame encompasses the “creators,” their creations and their creativity, as it wells up from the very foundations of socialist reality. Here, in the second picture, Fenia, Kirillov, Pavel, and Stesha, their labor and their lives, are the immediate outlet and expression of socialism’s “dynamic force.” If they are artists, they are artists in a sense quite different from what is meant in Arnol'dov’s case. Whatever Bogdanov says, our painter occupies an altogether different position from that of the other creators. From all we know about realism—and this is, no doubt, Arnol'dov’s method—he has presented on another surface what his eye has captured on the surface that is reality; while those around him are part and parcel of that original surface, and what they produce blends seamlessly with it. His painting did not emerge in the same way as a tractor station emerges somewhere in the Soviet countryside. In that sense, it is not the immediate blossoming forth of the force generated by socialism, but only a reflection of its manifestations.

The people in whose midst Arnol'dov now stands are the representatives of socialist construction; he is no more than its representor. His work is a *Darstellung* of the world now emerging; theirs is a *Vertretung*—not so much a symbolization, as a direct embodiment. They are not only the creators of the new life under socialism—they are also its native creatures. Could it be that the artist, by virtue of his age-old craft, is excluded from this immediacy? The praise that he receives, then, may be read as a concealed reproach, and his success—as a success in failure. Or could it be that there is a way to represent that surmounts this dilemma—a kind of representation that is not a reflection *upon* life, but a reflection *out of* it, when the artistic vision is generated not with the subject, but with the object of representation? What if the vital force evoked by the old Bolshevik is so fecund that, apart from directly reproducing itself in the labor of people like Fenia, Kirillov, and Stesha, it is able to also “perceive” and “think” its own workings in the labor of someone like Arnol'dov? What sort of thought and perception would those be, and how would they relate to the thoughts and perceptions of those who still call themselves creative authors?

In a speech entitled “The Powerful Energy of Class” and delivered at a Moscow Party conference on the eve of the Seventeenth Congress of the CPSU,¹¹² Maksim Gor'kii spoke of the same dynamic force: “This energy, which is being embodied in the grandiose construction of a new culture, is at the same time raising new forces, creating conditions and atmosphere that quickly transform the great quantity into a superb quality” (“Energii” 1). He told a story from personal experience in order to show how this energy manifested itself. Not long ago, he had been invited to a meeting of the All-Union Institute for Experimental Medicine. A dozen or so

¹¹² The Seventeenth Party Congress, which has remained in history as the “Congress of Victors,” was held in late January – early February, 1934, in Moscow. It celebrated the achievements of the First Five-Year Plan and, on the basis of them, charted a course toward classless society in the next five years. The congress also celebrated the unity of the Party after the neutralization of the so-called “rightist deviation” (led by Bukharin, Rykov, and Tomskii).

of the Institute's employees had been, only until recently, factory workers, farm hands, or disinterested, apolitical intellectuals. "But lo, it turned out that, infused with the energy of the working class, which fertilizes people's feelings and thoughts, [this] dozen workers of the Institute, while researching the organism of animals, came to the dialectic of development that constitutes the foundation of revolutionary thought" ("Energiia" 1). Gor'kii's telling of the story does not allow us to reconstruct all of its specifics (what does he mean by "it turned out"? when did it turn out? how? what sort of revelation has come to these people?). Still, its general significance is sufficiently clear: truth had dawned on the Institute's employees as a (predictable?) consequence of their work. We are supposed to infer that not any work will "turn out" this way: only one that proceeds in the atmosphere and conditions created by the victorious class struggle of the proletariat. Whatever we may want to call the medium in which these people are immersed, we should see that they come to a state of cognition with no agent of enlightenment present on the scene, other than the immersion itself. From what we can gather, the "dialectics of development" that they finally attain is not exactly the fruit of their efforts or scientific rigor. Gor'kii's words lead us to suspect that scientists working with equal diligence and passion for objectivity, but working, let us say, in London, would be presented with a rather different picture of how living organisms evolve. Unlike "their" scientists, ours—even if they are the dregs of a former world or the bystanders of the Revolution—are delivered unto knowledge/truth by a power that is, at least initially, outside of their awareness. The fact that, prior to being possessed by this power, they had been blind to or had even blindly resisted the teachings of dialectical materialism, matters little. If anything, this fact makes their deliverance that much more wondrous. Wondrously they arrive at the "foundation of revolutionary thought"—a thought that, as something distinct from their own thoughts, has been confidently

waiting for them in the depths of their object of study. It is as if, placed in the atmosphere and conditions of socialism, the object arrives at the thought proper to its content, and the human subject is the site of this happy arrival.

We can say that the culture of socialist realism dates from the moment when “miraculous” stories like the one told by Gor’kii become a common-place occurrence. The official founding act of the new culture, the Resolution of the Party’s Central Committee of 23 April, 1932, told just such a story. The resolution decreed a radical reform in all spheres of cultural production, citing as a basis for the decree the “significant successes of socialist construction,” which had resulted in a “qualitative as well as quantitative growth of literature and art” (“On the Reformation” 124). On the same basis, the resolution ordered the liquidation of RAPP and its sister organizations, which had become, by that time, a hegemonic presence in Soviet culture. According to the Central Committee, the leaders of RAPP had lost step with the times. After an initial run (during the NEP years), when the organization had played a positive role, it had missed a crucial change in the socio-political situation. The antagonistic treatment to which RAPP continued to subject non-proletarian writers (the former “fellow travelers”), could no longer be tolerated. According to the resolution, in the new conditions created by advanced socialist construction, the psychology of fellow travelers had undergone significant transformation (“On the Reformation” 124). As an editorial in *Literaturnaia gazeta* explained, it is these newly-created conditions that “had not been understood in a timely way and in their depth by RAPP” (“Budem” 1). Its leaders had failed to see how these conditions “had ensured [*obespechili*] the active participation of the main mass of the intelligentsia in solving the tasks of [socialist] construction” (“Budem” 1). Hence, the organization’s recent activity had been ridden with “grave political errors”; and this—despite the demonstrative clarity of the said conditions

and the Party's repeated instructions ("Budem" 1). According to the Party press, all needed clarifications were contained in Stalin's speech at the Convention of Economic Cadres (23 June, 1931), in which the Leader had called for a new approach to the old technical intelligentsia and indicated their changing attitude toward Soviet power. As it *turns out*, something other than overt political indoctrination—RAPP's approach—had brought the broad masses of previously apolitical writers to the acceptance of socialism.

So, what is this "something," which, despite its blinding obviousness, the leaders of RAPP had managed to ignore, and which, almost against the grain of their efforts, had ensured the intelligentsia's participation in the building of socialism? As we answer this question, we get, once again, the taste of tautology, for this "something" is nothing other than socialism itself. The resolution says, more or less, the following: "In the process of being built, socialism not only creates itself: it also creates the conditions that secure the participation of previously indifferent subjects in the building of socialism." The tautology arises from the fact that socialism is inscribed twice: once as an empirical world in the making, and a second time—as pure and practical self-evidence that takes possession of an external consciousness and instrumentalizes it toward a predetermined purpose. Without the need for propaganda, socialism's own growth and ontological plentitude recruits subjects for the cause of socialism¹¹³: the subjects who are supposed to see.

In the Central Committee's resolution, we find these subjects in two places. First, there are the poor functionaries of RAPP, who were supposed to see, but failed to do so because of a deeply ingrained "coterie mentality" (*grupovshchina*), which had isolated them from the crucial

¹¹³ In his speech at the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers, N. Mitsishvili formulated a similar thesis: "in the years prior to the Second Five-Year Plan, the transformation of people's consciousness, the liquidation of the leftovers of capitalism in the consciousness of authors, was determined not so much by ideological factors, as by the very progress of socialist construction [...]" (*Pervyi* 155).

developments in the life of their country. Secondly, there are the “broad masses” of the previously non-committal intelligentsia, who are—as a matter of fact—able to see. It seems useless to ask whether this official characterization correctly describes the actual position of the subjects in either of these groups (how could we ever hope to get reliable answers to such a question?). What matters for us here is that the former, as well as the latter, set out immediately to show that they are, indeed, the subjects of socialism. They began acting *as if* they were those supposed to see. While the leaders of RAPP (Averbakh, Libedinskii, Ermilov, Selivanovskii, Kirshon, Chumardin) engaged in the cathartic exercises of self-criticism (*samokritika*), former fellow-travelers strove to image themselves forth as people possessed by the transformative power of the new epoch.

One such “possessed” subject was Shaginian—the same Shaginian who, in the mid-1920s, had difficulties reconciling traditional notions of creative freedom with the compulsive necessity of the social commission.¹¹⁴ Speaking in 1932 in front of a group of young writers, she saw these difficulties as a thing of the past:

Much has happened since then. Since those days, *socialism has become reality*. It exists on one sixth of the world map, and we exist *in it*. And from all sides, from the depths, as well as from the surface, of our new phenomena, of our new practice, socialism gushes at us, surrounds us, infuses us, and not only changes our attitude toward things and phenomena, but also opens our eyes to the essence and meaning of the transformations taking place within us. (“Besedy” 205; emphasis in the original)

Let us notice that the socialism Shaginian inhabits with her passionate discourse is not equal to the sum of its own “things and phenomena.” Over and above them, it produces—as a

¹¹⁴ See pp. 106-107.

kind of para-phenomenon—also clarity. The said things and phenomena do not live in quiet repose, as a world that is merely there. They gush, surround, and infuse. Through this restless ebullience they are able to take possession of the subject, opening her eyes and giving her the ability to see clearly not only outside herself, but also within. In short, they make sense.

When we say, in casual parlance, that “things make sense,” we of course mean that they do so for someone present at the scene, a person who reaches an understanding of a certain state of affairs. And we believe that, ultimately, it is this person who, despite not being the grammatical subject of the expression, is the one actually making the sense. The case I am trying to argue here runs counter to this “pedestrian” logic. In the state of affairs Shaginian describes, it is, literally, the things that make the sense. “Oh, well,” someone may object, “but what about our speaker and the ‘we’ to which she belongs and appeals? Obviously, it is to them that socialism makes sense, and, hence, their activity as subjects is implied. Is not Shaginian saying simply, ‘We have come to understand the society we live in, its mechanisms, advantages, etc.’?” This would be true only up to the point where we notice that the “we” in which the clarity of understanding and self-awareness are born is itself a product of what it comes to understand. Socialism manifests itself to consciousness in such a way that it transforms this consciousness into something new. The subject who comes to understand was not there prior to the object of understanding (socialist life). The people included in Shaginian’s “we” are what they are in the present moment because they were made by socialism. Quite literally, they were *made to understand*, made in order to be the site where true vision occurs. In Stalinist socialism—considered as a cultural phenomenon, and not as an empirical state of affairs—we have a sort of reality that not only unfurls the inner wealth of its content into a manifest

externality, but, by means of this ebullience, also procures its own representation. That is, it creates, as one of its phenomena, the subject for whom this wealth is appreciably real.

Let us consider the case of another such subject, another fellow traveler who, in the early 1930s, embraced the cause of socialism. During the previous decade, Il'ia Erenburg (1891-1967), had been one of the most prominent figures of the Soviet literary avant-garde. His experimental style of writing and open skepticism toward the social utopias of modernity (including the Bolshevik utopia) had made him a favorite target for the zealots of proletarian culture. The fact that Erenburg had taken up permanent residence in Western Europe (Berlin, 1921-1924; Paris, 1925-1936), only contributed to his image as an “alien” element on the Soviet literary scene. But in 1932 Erenburg made a long sojourn to his home country, during which he toured some of the major sites of socialist construction. Having gathered impressions and inspiration, he returned to Paris, where he wrote *Den' vtoroi* (*The Second Day*; 1932-1933). Despite mild criticism of the author's lingering penchant for fragmentary narration,¹¹⁵ the novel was welcomed by the Soviet press as Erenburg's highest achievement, his first truly Soviet work.

In 1933, even before the publication of *Den' vtoroi*, an article appeared in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in which a well-meaning critic set out to explain the recent changes in Erenburg's

¹¹⁵ The following statement from a review of Erenburg's *Ne perezivai dykhaniiia* [Not Catching One's Breath; 1935] highlights these shortcomings, while also providing a revealing explanation for them: “the internal principles [*zakonomernosti*] of our development and their iron logic have not yet fully *etched themselves* [*otchekaniis'*] in Erenburg's consciousness, so as to *shape themselves* [*otlit'sia*] into the sharply-defined plot lines of his books. Hence—the amorphous structure of *Ne perezivai dykhaniiia*, its formless, musical-lyrical construction” (Gal'perina 233; emphasis added). We should take note of the way in which the author is displaced as the subject of the sentence and his consciousness—as the agency of representation. They appear, instead, as locatives. In the place they circumscribe, another agency does its work. This other agency is reality itself, which, through the internal dynamic of its “principles,” proves capable of “etching” and “shaping” itself in the receptive medium, en route to producing representations of itself. Since this power of reality is constant and axiomatic, the shortcomings of actual representations (Erenburg's books, with their discordant plot structure) can only be explained through the inadequacies of the medium. The critique's implicit message is that the place of inscription—Erenburg's consciousness—is still a “dense” one, if the hard tip of history's “iron logic” cannot inscribe therein the neat lines of a coherent story.

worldview. The article is entitled “In Search of the Truth” (“V poiskakh pravdy”).¹¹⁶ It begins by presenting to us the Erenburg of old, “a disillusioned, cynical skeptic” (4). The Western world in which he lived and which he depicted as late as 1931 in his novella *Spain*, appears in scenes of chaos, misery, and moral destitution without redemption. In front of us is the image of a writer who does not see. In the working people of Western Europe Erenburg did not see the harbingers of a bright new world; instead, he focused on the “monotony, doom, and boredom” of their everyday existence (4). Divorced from the contemporary life of Soviet society, “he did not believe that [...] a new world is truly being built, that socialist relations are being created, that new, happy people, the genuine people of the future, are being raised” (4).

After these introductory statements, there is a page break in the article, which is supposed to alert us to a meaningful break in Erenburg’s career. On the other side of the break, we learn that at the present moment (1933) the capitalist world has entered the fourth year of acute economic crisis. It turns out that the economic depression in the West has much to do with Erenburg’s transformation as a writer and person: “for it laid bare [*obnazhil*] so deeply the essence of capitalist society, revealed [*obnaruzhil*] with such clarity the rotting foundation of capitalist economy, so distinctly defined [*opredelil*] the real interrelations between classes, that even for a person not equipped with the method of Marxism-Leninism, there appears the possibility of understanding the deep foundations of events” (4). Faced with a reality that aggressively bares itself, “flashes” the subject, the latter stands defenselessly receptive. How could he help seeing?! “Naturally, in depicting the crisis, Erenburg *could not but see* the exposed [*obnazhivshiesia*] lines of class struggle and understand the deep foundations of events”

¹¹⁶ Since Russian lacks markers for the definite form of nouns, their translation into English always involves an interpretation of the semantic context. In this case, the choice is between “in search of truth” and “in search of *the* truth.” I believe that the latter is more appropriate when the context is Stalinist discourse. In it, “truth” usually figures as something already known, quite definite, and definitive.

(4; emphasis added). The conviction that Erenburg could not but see is restated a couple of paragraphs down, and clearly constitutes the conceptual backbone of this short critical biography.

An interesting picture emerges: one in which the artist is confronted with a vision (picture) he cannot refuse. In the liminal moment at the onset of perception, the moment to which the statement “he could not but see” pertains, this vision is not his. It comes from without, already explicated, almost as an assault on him. If we had to describe the activity of our hero in this moment, we could only do it in the passive: the subject is being beamed.

Under the word “beam” in the Collins Cobuild English Dictionary we find, among others, the following definitions:

1. If you say that someone *is beaming*, you mean that they have a big smile on their face because they are happy, pleased, or proud about something.
2. A *beam* is a line of energy, radiation, or particles sent in a particular direction.
3. If something such as a radio signals or television pictures *are beamed* somewhere, or *beam* somewhere, they are sent there by means of electronic equipment. (emphasis in the original)

Let us try to think these three meanings as one, so as to bring together into a single conceptual knot: 1) the triumphant faces of those new happy people, the true people of the future, which Erenburg had failed to see, but which now, we must assume, have become apparent to him (we shall return to them in Chapter Four); 2) the energy evoked by Panferov, Gor'kii, and Shaginian, the energy through which socialism “gushes at us, surrounds us, infuses us”; and 3) a concept of representation in which the representing subject, the author, would appear to be not unlike a television set in that the “picture” he presents does not come, strictly speaking, “from inside”

(only small children believe that the people and things they see on the television screen live in the boxed space behind it), but from some place else.

Erenburg's case tells us that it matters little whether the picture is that of advancing socialism or rotting capitalism, whether the must-see show are the happy faces of Soviet citizens or the desperate miens of industrial tycoons in the throes of economic depression. These phenomena, seemingly so disparate in character, constitute one kind of reality by virtue of a function they share: the ability to glare (the contradictions of capitalism, just as the successes of socialist construction, can be "glaring"). Wherefrom do phenomena acquire such an ability? Where else, but from the fact that both the blossoming of life under socialism, as well as its gradual exacerbation under capitalism were *meant to be*? They are equally part of a history whose unfolding brings only the confident inscription of its own systematic presuppositions. The events and phenomena comprising this history are events and phenomena that *could not but* occur.¹¹⁷ As such, they dictate the position-comportment of the subject confronted with them: he becomes the subject who *cannot but see*.

"Observer," then, would not be a good way to describe this subject, if by "observing" we imply any sort of analytical faculty. When something meant to be takes place, it leaves no place for the analytical attitude. It flies in the face of the observer and disarms him. It says to him, "You see!" (in the sense of, "You see! I told you so!"). This kind of encounter between the subject and reality precludes the possibility of original perception. "You see!" does not mean "Begin to observe the situation." It is too late, and there is no need to observe or analyze

¹¹⁷ In the words of Régine Robin: "The general laws that govern nature apply to the realm of History, taking into account the specificity of human societies. History is no longer anything but a natural phenomenon; it produces only singularizing effects growing out of the laws of nature-History, illustrations of a general evolution, phenomena actualizing an essence [...]. History thus becomes a version of nature in the service of the political; it is preinterpreted, events are already foreseen; or, if an event takes place that does not coincide with the path already traced, this is because the struggle includes resistance from forces hostile to socialism, which may take various forms (rightists, Trotskyites, kulaks, saboteurs, spies, neo-Mensheviks, and so on)" (xxvii).

anything at this point: whatever the situation that the subject was supposed to see (but did not), it has now turned into one stark exposure; it beams, robbing the subject of the chance *not* to see.

In the article chronicling Erenburg's transformation, the place of the meant-to-be(-seen) is marked carefully. Right after the statement that the capitalist world has entered the fourth year of crisis, there follows, without a special transition, a quotation from Lenin in which the leader of the Proletarian Revolution explains the inevitable and fatal exacerbation of class struggle in the late stages of industrial capitalism (4). But apart from this explicit indication, the meant-to-be persists tacitly as a backdrop to our author's creative pursuits. It is clearly from this backdrop that socialism stares triumphantly at Erenburg as the inevitability in which he had not been able to believe.

Before it is actually built, Stalinist socialism is, in a sense, pre-built. Its empirical existence is erected on the ground of unconditional certainty about the ways of history and the mechanisms of social life. Hence no collection of empirical facts and observations can give an adequate presentation of this world. For what any conscientiously empirical picture of Soviet life in the 1930s will surely miss is one feature that underlies all "hard facts" and endows them with a surplus quality. This additional feature, which only a cultural investigation can adequately address, is brought out in Shaginian's words quoted earlier. She speaks not simply of socialism, but of socialism-become-reality, which is not the same thing. It is a thing whose content is overridden by, folded into, the purely formal feature of fulfillment. Over and above any number of descriptive features that may be proper to it (a particular organization of productive forces, a certain standard of living, a determinate structure of government and political institutions, etc.), Stalinist socialism is that which was meant to be, that which was foreseen.

It would be quite pedestrian of us to mistake the voice that says “You see!” for the voice of actual people (say, that of loyal adherents of the Party line speaking to previously disheartened non-believers). We should think of it as the voice of the world itself addressing, or rather, beaming, the subject with its manifest truth. The whole point of Erenburg’s biography is that he needed no people telling him which way the Western world is headed. What is more, he did not even need the “armament” of Marxism-Leninism. We are, clearly, in a new cultural frame, if the “equipped” eye of the observer is rendered obsolete. The otherness confronting the subject has lost the aspect of systematic subterfuge that can only be overcome by the systematic application of method. It could bear no “decoding”; in its presence, hermeneutical exertions are inappropriate. For it freely emits whatever there is to know and see in the direction of the subject.

While speaking about the cinematic theory of Vertov and the *kinoks*, I pointed, along the dotted line of a hypothesis, to a certain place in the objective world that stands in inverse symmetry to the eye of the human subject. To remember, our subject was not happy with his inherited position, he did not want to see the world “subjectively.” He, therefore, strove to attain a position in the world from which the objective interrelationships of phenomena will be visible, from which life could be “caught unawares.” For the purpose, the subject became the vanishing

tenor of a cultural metaphor: $\frac{\text{camera (mechanism)}}{\text{(human) eye}}, \frac{\text{method}}{\text{expression}}$, etc. At the same time, it was

abundantly clear that the sought-after fulcrum of the visible world, the space where things make (objective) sense, does not exist as such, that it is not an actual place—some sort of “display” or “exhibition” of phenomena that one could attend. Rather, it is the virtual space of the hermeneutic operation itself, the point of the application of method. The same turned out to be the case with the world of the literary text: its fulcrum is not an actual place in the fabric of

writing, either a formal property or a semantic element, in which the organization of the whole comes together to form either a formal or semantic “principle,” “tendency,” etc.

And yet, in all these instances, I suggested, as a sort of unfulfilled fantasy, a what-if, the possible birth of a world that, through some device of its own, would “see,” “know,” “read,” itself in our stead. The last part is to be understood quite literally, in accordance with the etymology of “stead”: in the place where the subject is (supposed to be) standing, i.e., in the place where seeing, understanding, and knowing have been known to occur. Now I would like to suggest that Stalinist culture is the fulfillment of this fantasy. In Stalinism we encounter a primary cultural substance, which may be called “socialism,” “our reality” [*nasha deistvitel'nost'*], or simply “life” [*zhizn'*], that requires no mediation, in the ordinary sense of the word. It produces knowledge of itself without the prerequisites of “method,” “system of thought,” or “position.” Rather than being the starting point of consciousness, these are now the end results of a new type of cognition. Let us recall those employees who “arrive” at dialectical materialism at the end of their empirical research. There we have matter (the living organisms being studied) that, by being subjected to socialist praxis, “knows” itself in the space provided by the individual minds of our researchers. We may say: in the “stead” of their individual views, opinions, prejudices, etc., dialectical materialism takes place, taking possession of their consciousness. M. Rozental', one of the most influential critics of the Stalinist period, gave a “theoretical” account of this type of situation, now involving writers:

Every writer who deeply studies and observes real objects may come into conflict with his own views on the world; *life itself* [*sama zhizn'*] suggests to him entirely different methods than those dictated to him by his limited worldview. [...]

Reality [*deistvitel'nost'*] bursts into [*vryvaetsia*] the writer's work with tremendous

force, and under its pressure the writer's ideological positions weaken and often give in. (qtd. Rozhkov 178; emphasis added)

Once again, the subject begins by studying objects and phenomena through the distortive prism of his parochial mindset. This fact is nothing to worry about, for whatever in Stalinist culture is termed "reality" can generate a thrust that eliminates the distorted perspective and installs, in its stead, the proper view of things. What is this aspect or property of objects that makes the subject see? We are told that they are "real" objects, but the triteness of this description obscures more than it tells. How shall we name the quality of things, the quality bestowed on them by "life itself," through which they assault the eye studying them and pry it open?

For the purpose, we may borrow a felicitous expression once used by Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948), the famous avant-garde film director. In an article that appeared exactly a year after the Central Committee's resolution, Eisenstein, who had himself become part of the establishment (albeit, not the most reliable part),¹¹⁸ called on Soviet writers to provide better texts for the script-starved film industry. He asked them to convey a certain property of contemporary life, which he designated as "*sotsial'naia uvidennost'*" (Eisenstein 2). The first part of the expression is clear: "*sotsial'naia*" means "social." The noun that follows is a neologism, derived from the verb "*uvidet'*" ("to see," in the perfective). *Uvidennost'* operates in opposition with *vidimost'* and *vidimoe*, both of which pertain to what can be seen, the visible, the apparent, and carry a slight connotation of superficiality. *Uvidennost'*, on the other hand, is that which *has been* seen and has, as it were, sedimented inside visible phenomena: the "seen-ness" or "having-been-seen-ness" of reality. Eisenstein leaves it at that, not caring to explicate the meaning of the phrase or the implications of his injunction to the writers any further. Still, it

¹¹⁸ The tragic fate of *Bezhin Meadow* (1935-1937), which the authorities ordered destroyed before final editing, as well as the ensuing vociferous campaign against its director, proved that the "sins" of Eisenstein's modernist past were never quite forgotten.

does not seem to be much of a stretch to include his pronouncement in the line of the present argument.

The social seen-ness of the world must be a property that pre-exists the eye of the subject. It must be there before he comes along, or else Eisenstein's counsel makes no sense: how can writers capture this property if it were not independent and prior to their artistic seeing? If so, the question then becomes, how does one relate to seen-ness, and what does it mean to "convey" it? Is it a property that one is supposed to see? I would suggest that seen-ness pre-exists the subject's eye also genetically. It is the world's way of being, its demeanor or "disposition," through which it makes the subject see. It refers to the world's ability to beam and be, in the colloquial expression, an eye-opener. This suggestion is in keeping with the two instances of psychological transformation we just considered: to both Shaginian and Erenburg, the capacity to perceive truthfully comes from the laying-bare of the world's historical inevitabilities.

If we had to discover the primary source from which the sexual excitation of the exhibitionist springs up, our search for a properly corporal point will be—pun intended—pointless. His pleasure does not issue from any part or property of the body itself. And still, an erogenic zone exists, even if it is not, strictly speaking, somatic. To name this surface, we can certainly redeploy Eisenstein's neologism: the exhibitionist's source of pleasure is his "seen-ness." We can imagine it as an extension of his physical being (since it borders, ultimately, on a climactic sensation that is purely physical), an ineffable flesh woven into his natural flesh. Of what does it consist? Everyone knows that it has nothing to do with the person being simply naked. It consists of appearing naked in front of someone, *for* that someone. If we wish to give a more physiological flavor to our description, we can say that the erogenic zone of "seen-ness"

is made from the same tissue as the enlarged pupils of the other's eye. That eye, with the perplexity and shame that keep it open, is prefigured at the source of excitation. The *dilator pupillae*, those tiny muscles of the other's iris, are somehow also included in the exhibitionist's sexual apparatus. Their stimulation in the other is strictly co-lateral with the exhibitionist's erotic stimulation. It is as if we are dealing with a single sexual member that begins with what is shown (by itself, quite insubstantial), arches across the way, and incorporates, as its most vital function, the arrest of the other's attention, the capture of her vision, her *could-not-but-see*. Speaking figuratively, we may conclude that the exhibitionist's real organ of pleasure is not his penis, but his eye-opener.

To say that the other's eye is prefigured in the exhibitionist's libido is to say that its place in the coordinate system of the sexual encounter is set much before an actual encounter occurs. When a real person comes along, she is simply slotted into a position that awaits her. What for her is a moment of surprise, is, from the standpoint of the libidinal structure, a moment of confident fulfillment. In that structure, her eye becomes the concrete instantiation of the pre-scripted glance-from-there. In the assault to which she is subjected—the aggressive laying-bare that surprises her—her eye turns into an effective continuation of the exhibitionist's sexual member. Her individual-particular seeing, as the fulfillment of a general condition that disregards individual characteristics, is subsumed within the function of seen-ness. In her, in the place her eye has come to occupy, his penis sees itself.

These are, then, the constitutive elements in the anatomy of exhibitionistic pleasure: at the beginning—as no more than a “pathological” prerequisite, there is the actual piece of flesh, the carnal member itself; added to it—as the true measure by which it is not merely a penis, but an exhibitionistic phallus—is the ineffable flesh of the meant-to-be-seen. To be sure, it is made

from the stuff of (sexual) fantasy, which does not make it any less real. There, in that place, the penis is, so to speak, fore-seen, meaning that the accountancy of the libido knows ahead of time what makes our hero go. It is this part, i.e., the fore-seen (we can imagine it as an intangible foreskin), that the libido casts out into the world as a net in which its fulfillment will eventually be caught. The catch arrives in the form of a pair of “eyes wide open.” When they appear on the scene, they do no more than “fill out” the place that was left waiting for them: the place of the meant-to-be-... In short, they ful-fill the fore-seen.

This reflection in (the place of) the other is the whole point of the act. In that sense, “exhibitionism” is not a very accurate name for it. The gesture of showing, taken by itself, accomplishes nothing. The dialectic of the act unfolds between these two moments: the fore-seen, which is there as pure potential waiting to be activated; and the moment of “capture,” when an unsuspecting subject saunters into the charted libidinal field and arouses what had lain pre-inscribed within it. It is, obviously, difficult to speak of her seeing as an “act”; not only because, at this particular time, she is helpless and cannot but see, but, more importantly, because another act has swallowed up and negated hers. This second act, which frames her seeing, is of an entirely different nature. It is not to be understood by analogy with “action.” Here we must appeal once again to the other meaning of the word: “act” as a series of scripted actions—more a “scene,” or “performance,” than a single execution. In this sense, her seeing becomes “part of the act,” part of the whole “production” that is the exhibitionistic scene.¹¹⁹

For the dialectic of seen-ness to be complete, something in the nature of a raincoat proves necessary. We are mistaken if we think of the raincoat as a mere accoutrement of convenience, something that allows the exhibitionist to remain unnoticed before the “right moment” comes. The drapery is very much part of the right moment itself. It affects the entire meaning of the

¹¹⁹ The concept of “production” will be elaborated in the following two chapters.

performance. Without it, we may understand the exhibitionist as saying, “Look at my penis,” which is not at all the case. What he really says is, “You see!? I have nothing on!” The distinction is crucial. In the first instance, one is showing *something* (supposedly, an object worth showing, something substantial); in the second instance, one is showing the *nothing* of obstruction, the very absence of concealment. The actual item on display is not the exhibitionist’s body, but its non-hiddenness, unconcealment. To the other, he is showing exposure as such.

Only when we pass from “Look at *it!*” to “You see!? *Nothing covers it!*” do we understand the raincoat’s true significance. Such is the dialectical logic of the moment that the obstruction must be present in some form, for its negation to be effective. The possibility of covering the exposed part must be present on the scene in a sublated form. The Russian verb that translates “to sublata” is *sniat’*, which also means “to take off,” “to remove.” “In sublated form,” would then be “*v sniatom vide*,” which tells us with charming literality about the purpose of the raincoat: not only is it there in order to be taken off; also: in being taken off, i.e., when it is there *v sniatom vide*, it represents the possibility of *not seeing* as denied—the veritable fulcrum of the exhibitionistic act. When its flaps fly open, the raincoat stays on as material support for the little *but* that turns the formula of concealment—“(she) cannot see”—into a preserving negation: “(she) cannot *but* see.”

My excuse for devoting this much attention to the exhibitionistic performance is that it may help us to understand the position of the subject in Stalinist culture. The parallel should not be taken too far—only so far as to clarify the relationship between consciousness and the general domain of what is called Stalinist “life” or “reality.” At a first go, we must reverse Vertov’s slogan: now it is not life, but the subject, who is “caught unawares.” Caught by/in what? Caught

by and in life's disposition, which is that of seen-ness. I again intend in simultaneity the two meanings of the word "disposition," which makes it possible to both be captivated by it and captured in it: disposition as "demeanor," a way of being; and as "arrangement," assignment of positions (if someone possesses, say, a melancholic disposition, this fact has bearing on how we approach the person, what position we take vis-à-vis him or her).

In speaking of Stalinist reality's disposition, I mean to say, in the first place, that we are dealing with something more than an object-like entity, just as the phallus on which the exhibitionistic encounter centers is more than a bodily part. By the same measure by which the phallus exceeds any physiological definition, this reality exceeds the lifeless abstractions of diligent historians, economists, and political scientists, who seek to establish a factual state of affairs segregated from ideological illusions and mystifications. Against such dissections, I am arguing for an understanding of the object that would include—as with the phallus—the fantasy that permeates it and constitutes flesh of its flesh. Only when we count in one entity Stalinist reality *together with* the social fantasy woven into it, can we begin to ask how reality can captivate the subject, so that she becomes *its* subject, the subject of Stalinism. We must reach the point where we grasp the constitution of reality as inseparable from and dependent upon the constitution of identity. We must see once again, and this time in specific reference to Stalinism, that no "order of things" exists independently of the "order of man." Expressed differently, something can count as true or real only where someone counts (or is counted), i.e., where there is room for "one."

In the cultural act of Stalinism, understood as an event, this room is where one *cannot but*.... When the room is filled, that is, when someone like Shaginian, for example, identifies herself as the one who has been *made to see*, we witness the birth of a "subject," which, in this

instance, does not mean the center of sovereign action. As used so far in this chapter, “subject” refers to the “one” who is “part of the act” and who, in this act, is *subjected* to the glaring visibility of “life itself.” It is the position, or “comportment,” necessary to bring about the erection of the true-real. Where this “one” appears, is also where the order of things called Stalinist socialism celebrates its certainty at its firmest. Remembering the terms of an earlier discussion, we may reiterate that this order achieves its satisfaction through the “one.” The satisfaction, which here is synonymous with the celebration of “truth” and “reality,” consists in nothing more than this: to have caught this “one” unawares and to have made her see. She is the “one,” that is, the one in whom the act attains its satisfaction, not because of *what* she sees, but by virtue of the fact *that* she sees. The content, the “what” of her seeing, is, as noted apropos of the exhibitionistic scene, the unessential and contingent prerequisite of the act. The thing that really counts is this purely external characteristic: that her eyes are, now, in fact, wide open.

“But wait,” someone may interject, “why is the act of the perceiving consciousness formal? Haven’t the workers of the Institute seen the dialectical evolution of living beings? Hasn’t Erenburg seen how the West declines? How does this not constitute determinate content?” This objection misses an all-important component of what happens in both cases, namely, the presence of the fore-seen. When we take this component into account, we are obliged to say: the workers of the Institute have seen *that indeed* living beings evolve dialectically, just as Erenburg has seen *that indeed* the West declines.

The difference between “what” and “that” is the difference between two types of reflection. The first is the kind we are readily familiar with: the active reflection that akes hold of something outside itself, bringing something new out of it, and which, in doing this, feels

itself internally,¹²⁰ thus constituting itself as an “ego.” By contrast with this seeing, whose possession of “object,” is correlative with its self-possession, the second kind, with which we have been concerned throughout this chapter, is not self-generative and self-constituting, but reactive. We might say that here, it is the object that “feels itself” and firms up into certainty by being reflected in me. “I see” here means that I display. I display, externally, the awareness through which the artifice called “socialism” is aware of itself, of its own reality.

With this last formulation, in which a new kind of reflection and a peculiar form of identity, on the one hand, are co-articulated with socialism and reality, on the other, we have the means necessary to inquire in a proper fashion about socialist realism. Quite obviously, after everything said so far, this cannot be simply an inquiry about representation in the traditional sense of the word, even less about aesthetics. We should not ask how socialist realism reflects reality (which will, thankfully, spare us from the tiresome platitudes about the ideological “varnishing of reality” and suchlike). The preceding discussion has allowed us to pose the question in the following way: How does Stalinist socialism find its reality in the kind of reflection that underlies and sustains also the institution of socialist realism?

¹²⁰ To remember, Locke defined reflection as the “inner perception” by which the mind is aware of its own thoughts; while, before him, Descartes had famously grounded the being of the ego in the self-evidence of this same inner perception.

CHAPTER THREE: THE MATTER OF IDEOLOGY

Disappeared: the term *ideas*.
Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

This chapter is meant as something of a footnote to the preceding two. The footnote is necessary in order to explain and (only temporarily) dispel, a silence, which, by now, threatens to become embarrassing. The silence concerns ideology. It must seem quite inappropriate that in a discussion of Stalinist culture, a discussion that has gone some way already, no substantial reference has been made to an item as conspicuous as ideology. We have begun to consider the Soviet author's relationship to the world, to "reality," to "our life," but there has been no indication, other than the ambiguous appearance of quotation marks around "reality" and "our life," of the seemingly obvious circumstance that this relationship is "ideological." That nothing of the sort has been meant or said so far is made more striking by the fact that the dominant interpretation has treated socialist realism as a subspecies of ideology: the former represents, so to speak, the artistic workings of the latter.

Without disputing this interpretation, which has validity as far as it goes, I would like to advance in what follows two sets of reasons for avoiding the mention of ideology. One of these has to do with the context in which the concept is used, the second—with the concept itself.

Where the context is Soviet studies, the use of the word "ideology" elicits almost automatic reflexes, some of which I would like not to elicit. Prime among them is a reflex to which I alluded in the preceding chapter: the old and discredited hope that by removing

“ideology” we may discover, as an entirely separate body, an unadulterated “reality.” A complement to this sloppy alchemy, which adds “ideology” to “reality,” but is always able again to separate the two, is another, which adds “ideology” to the mind as some sort of foreign substance. In this case, the hope is that, by reversing the operation, even if just in theory, if we remove all the mystifications and delusion, we may discover the quintessential human, just as he is. A historically specific collection of these will present us with the “Russian people” just as they are, unadulterated by Stalinist ideology and propaganda. In this view, people are the neutered something that remains after all “acculturations,” “internalizations,” and “indoctrinations” have been wished away.

Another reflex conditioned by the context of Stalinist culture is that, when used in within it, “ideology” refers us directly to power by a short circuit that I find fraught with peril. Let me explain by starting off from the classical definition of ideology in Marx and Engels. Here we find a twofold meaning, which has one positive and one negative side. Positively, “ideology” is related to existing relations of production and, more specifically, to the class interested in reproducing these relations of production. Bracketing the question of whether the representations constitutive of it are “true” or “false,”¹²¹ ideology, in this meaning, points us to a determinate set of (dominant) interests and an equally determinate social body, whose interests these are. Negatively, “ideology” is defined as that which obfuscates or distorts reality, an illusion, a “phantom,” whose function is that of sublimation.¹²² The sublimation is needed

¹²¹ In Marx, this question is, of course, not bracketed. Here ideology is, by default, a distorted representation of the world conditioned by a contradictory social existence. It is only in later Marxism that the term begins to change its connotations under the influence of the broader and axiologically more neutral concept of superstructure. Lenin, in particular, should be credited with giving ideology the more descriptive meaning of a system of ideas characteristic of a class, which makes the term equally applicable to the proletarian, as to the bourgeois, world outlook.

¹²² This is the interpretation advanced in *The German Ideology*. A controversy surrounds the question of whether this early interpretation should be considered representative of Marx’s thinking, or whether it should be discounted in favor of—so the argument goes—the more mature and “scientific” insights of his later work. Jürgen Habermas is

because, for most of history, social reality features a contradiction that is constitutive of it.¹²³

“Ideology,” in the second sense, is what masks this contradiction,¹²⁴ answering with imaginary satisfaction the call of an actual exigency.¹²⁵

Now, when applied to Stalinist culture, meaning (1), if we really get serious about it, proves to be next to inoperable. On pain of repeating what Stalinist propaganda itself maintained, it is impossible to claim that “Stalinist ideology” encodes the interests of the working class or the Soviet people as a whole. This would be intellectually and politically self-defeating. If, having avoided the embarrassment, we still wish to maintain the connection whereby ideological representations are coordinated with certain interests localizable in social space, we are left with the anemic proposition that Stalinist ideology defends the interests of the political and economic elite. I call the proposition anemic, because it, really, says no more than this: “Ideology defends the interests of those in power.” When we consider, further, that “those,” i.e., the Stalinist elite, are not a determinate social group constituted in advance of their accession to power, but, on the contrary, a highly perishable extension of the positions they happen to occupy at a particular moment in time, the proposition gets impoverished even further. We now

among those defending the former position. Louis Althusser and Nicolas Poulantzas are two of the prominent exponents of the latter.

¹²³ “Thus society has hitherto always developed within the framework of a contradiction—in antiquity the contradiction between free men and slaves, in the Middle Ages that between the nobility and serfs, in modern times that between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat” (Marx and Engels, 116).

¹²⁴ The thesis is reiterated by Poulantzas in *Political Power and Social Classes*: “ideology has the precise function of hiding the real contradictions and of *reconstituting* on an imaginary level a relatively coherent discourse which serves as the horizon of agents’ experience” (207; emphasis in the original). The same understanding, strengthened by the insights of psychoanalysis, underlies the cultural theory of Frederic Jameson and much of Slavoj Žižek’s writings on ideology. Most prominently in Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, symbolic production (which is, of course, ideological by default) serves to “screen” the traumatic “real” (in the last instance, class struggle), the latter functioning as the “absent cause” that sets symbolic production to work and secretly shapes its structure.

¹²⁵ This definition does not repeat the fallacy criticized in the preceding paragraph. Here reality is not externally opposed to the “illusion” that masks it; instead, the latter is a function of the former, the two forming a mechanism of a higher order “reality.”

have just this: “Ideology inscribes the maintenance of power” or “Ideology is the (non-coercive) mechanism by which power perpetuates itself.”¹²⁶

This conceptual short circuit between the two concepts, in which the former turns out to be no more than an aspect of the latter, is dangerous in that it reifies, hypostasizes, and ultimately mystifies political power.¹²⁷ In Stalinism, this power is not the power of anything, of any interests, other than those of the blind lust for power. If it is the power of someone, this is merely an attendant circumstance, for it has made this someone out of itself. It is self-referential, self-generative, and non-axiological. Conjugated with it, ideology is illusion pure and simple, illusion as such. If it serves to mask a contradiction, then it masks not a determinate social fissure, but Contradiction as such: the failure of the entire project, the fact that “the whole thing makes no sense” or at least that “it’s not certain where we’re headed” and, furthermore, that “the price is way too high.”

Since ideology is simply the perpetuation of power, and culture in the narrow sense—the culture of socialist realism—is one of the conductors of ideology, then socialist realism could be seen as nothing more than a “metaphor of power,” which is exactly how Evgeny Dobrenko sees it. In the study whose title it is, the expression carries a double meaning. On the one hand, there is the meaning we already indicated: the cultural production of socialist realism reproduces political power; on the other, socialist realism is the mechanism (“metaphoric” in the sense of “transformative,” but also in the sense of “mythic”) through which the truthful language of

¹²⁶ We may say that ideology, Stalinist style, falls on the second side of Gramsci’s distinction between “organic” and “willed” ideologies (376-77). Organic are systems of representations that arise necessarily from a given socio-economic structure; willed ideologies lack this necessary connection and, to that extent, are, in Gramsci’s view, unworthy of theoretical consideration. In the context of the present discussion, the sense of Gramsci’s term can be related to the will for power: what wills the willed ideology of Stalinism is Power itself.

¹²⁷ The obverse of this situation obtains when political power is thought as an extension of the Idea. Here the power that is political power is simply the intensity of the Idea itself, transposed into another dimension. Sergei Sel’ianov’s film *The Russian Idea* (1995), which places Soviet history within a trans-historical and inherently Russian project of establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth, is a recent emblemization of this view.

“reality” is transfigured into a believable lie (34-35). When these two meanings of “metaphor” are brought together, we get socialist realism as the discourse through which power manipulates reality in accordance with its will: “The traditional view of socialist realism as some political (socialist) – aesthetic (realism) centaur must be revised, recognizing that *totalitarian artistic culture is, in fact, the language of power, that the discourse of socialist realism is the discourse of power*” (33; emphasis in the original).

To recapitulate: First, we have power, which has folded into itself, into its own element, and appears, to that extent, as elemental. Even if it has had, somewhere at its origin, a connection to values and aspirations, it has cut itself off from that origin. The only value it now recognizes is power. In principle, it no longer belongs to culture, meaning that in it we can no longer recognize a power that is or could be ours, a power of meaningful creation. Included in the mechanism of power, Stalinist culture, in the narrow sense, ends up, paradoxically, also outside of culture. In this illusory world of representations, created for the sake of power, we can no longer recognize the work by which we make and remake our world, the work of culture, in the broadest sense.

The second set of reasons for skirting the notion of ideology relates to the fact that, in itself, in its own concept, as we have come to think it, ideology already refers beyond itself, to something it is not. The theorization of culture, as undertaken on these pages, takes place precisely in this beyond, indicated by the very development of the notion of ideology, a development, it might be said, that has made ideology “non-ideological.”

This beyond is clearly visible in Althusser’s “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” arguably the most important reformulation of the concept since Marx’s original

definition.¹²⁸ This text does not destroy the notion of ideology; far from it. But it undermines the object to which the notion has referred previously. After it, “ideology” begins to refer to a new object or, better, to a new “matter.” I propose that we now turn to the text and, in an admittedly partial, but careful exegesis, follow the confident steps through which Althusser executes this shift, opening for us the said beyond.

We begin with the section that has as its heading the assertion, “Ideology is a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence” (162), which we should leave aside for the moment. In this section, Althusser asks, without actually spelling it out, a disarmingly simple question: Why does ideology need to lie? He then proceeds to argue against two common answers to this question.

The first answer refers us to a “few bad men.” Ideology needs to lie because a few bad men need to lie to the “people,” and thus keep them in submission (163). In a footnote, Althusser points out that this explanation is prevalent even in Communist circles, where various “deviations” are blamed on the action of such “cliques” of bad men. We may add that for a long time this was also the prevalent explanation for the epochal historical deviation called Stalinism. Along with the tragedies and crimes of this period, the ideological lies that served to cover these up were deduced from the actions of Stalin and his clique. Although in recent years this type of historical demonology has mostly descended to the shelves of semi-scholarly literature, its currency in popular consciousness—both in Russia and the West—remains high.

It should be noted that, in dismissing the “few bad men” thesis, Althusser does not say that bad men in power do not fabricate deceptive ideas. Even less is he saying that they do not use such ideas to maintain their domination over the people. He simply dismisses the thesis, for

¹²⁸ I say “original,” because, for obvious reasons, I choose not to count the first appearance of the term in the writings of Destutt de Tracy. Ideology, in the sense in which it is taken here, begins with Marx.

even though bad men in power fabricate lies to keep the rest of the people in their power, *this is not what ideology is about.*

From there, Althusser moves on to a second erroneous thesis. This one comes from Feurbach, via the early Marx. The thesis answers the question, Why does ideology need to lie? by pointing not to the tyrants and priests, but to the people themselves: the people (i.e., not just the “common folk,” but men in general) create ideal representations that they superimpose onto the less-than-ideal conditions of their existence (163-64). In other words, ideology needs to lie because men need to escape, even if just in their imagination, the alienating social world they inhabit every day. Once again, Althusser denies neither that people construct imaginary worlds for themselves, nor that they inhabit these so that they do not have to face straight-on the harsh real world. He simply dismisses the thesis altogether, for even though people do all that, *this is not what ideology is about.*

Having dismissed in this fashion the two wrong answers to the question, Althusser now moves on to dismiss the question as well: It cannot be at all a question of anyone “needing” the lies of ideology.¹²⁹ Expressed differently, the “need” through which ideology “needs” to lie, is not the need of anyone. But a need that is not the need of anyone is not a need at all: it is a necessity. Hence: the question of ideology becomes a question of necessity. And here is how Althusser formulates this new question: “why is the representation given to individuals of their (individual) relation to the social relations which govern their conditions of existence and their collective and individual life *necessarily* an imaginary relation?” (165; emphasis added).

In the last three words is to be found, I believe, the key to the thesis that opens this section in the article: “Ideology is a ‘Representation’ of the Imaginary Relationship of

¹²⁹ The way this insight is phrased in the text differs (“in letter, not in spirit”) from my formulation. In Althusser’s words, the question of ideology cannot be a question of “cause” (165).

Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence.” It is, to all appearances, pressingly important for Althusser to distinguish between this formulation and: “men represent their real conditions to themselves in an imaginary form” (163). For those who read the article for the first time, the distinction may seem to be a little bit more than a confusing scholastic exercise. The sense of confusion is only increased by the use of the verb “represent” in the two formulas: in the latter, it has a subject (the people, who “represent [...] to themselves,” etc.), while in the former it is subjectless (“it is their relation to [the real conditions of existence] that is *represented* for them [in ideology]” [164; emphasis added]). But the confusion is dispelled once we have the key: ideology rests on a “necessarily [...] imaginary relation.” This should be read along the lines of the preceding argument: just as it is not a matter of anyone “needing” the lies of ideology, so it cannot be a matter of anyone “representing” what is represented in ideology.

And thus we come, by small, consequent, and quiet steps, to what, otherwise, has the power of a bomb shell—the assertion I highlighted in the epigraph to the present chapter: ideology is not a matter of ideas. How should we understand this sudden inversion of the content that “ideology” carries and announces in its very name? For a third and last time, a caution is in order: Althusser does not dispute the fact that people have distorted ideas about the world, ideas of which they are conscious and in which they believe. He simply states: “Disappeared: the term *ideas*” (169; emphasis in the original). Disappeared from where?—From consideration. Although people have “ideological” representations of which they are conscious and in which they believe, *this is not what ideology is about*.

Ideology is a Representation that nobody “represents.” Let us be perfectly clear on this: although people *can* think and constantly *do* think this representation, they do not *give* it to themselves, in the essential sense of the word. This is why Althusser is very careful to write

“representation *given* to individuals.” Nor should we be curious to know *by whom* it is given to them: it is simply given, without a “who”; we left the clique of priests and tyrants far behind, and no new candidates have appeared since. Now we should take the next step, which is strictly consistent with our previous formula: “A need that is not the need of anyone is not a need at all, but a necessity.” In a similar way, a representation that nobody can “give” is not a representation at all, but an immanent *relation*. This, then, is what has remained of ideology, after we put aside all the things it is *not* about: an immanent imaginary relation, i.e., a relation whose “imaginariness” (Althusser’s expression [165]) is not imagined by anyone (supposedly, standing in the real world). If we wish to retain the word “representation,” as Althusser does, we need to say: ideology is a kind of representation that cannot be given; only inhabited. We cannot be *with* it, only *in* it. This is the fundamental meaning of the since-then sloganized assertion that we all are “in ideology” (166).

An analogy with the theatrical stage and the spectacle would not be unwarranted: in the play that unfolds on the stage we have just this kind of “representation.” The actors are *in* it, but they do not “give it to themselves” (the play, as everybody knows, is “given” by the theater). They live the imaginary relations between themselves, relations whose totality constitutes the “representation” we are watching from the gallery.¹³⁰ That these relations are imaginary does not mean that the actors, while on the stage, are “imagining things.” The “imaginariness” in question is of a completely different dimension: the dimension in which the entire play has been “imagined.” Hence, for the actors, to be “part of the illusion” does not mean to have illusory

¹³⁰ I should say that, in this little scenario, we, the people watching from the gallery, occupy the seats of “science,” in the sense in which Althusser speaks about it. Although the imaginary relation constitutive of ideology is not imagined from somewhere outside of it, from the “real,” ideology in Althusser does have an outside: the position from which the mystification is seen through and demystified, the position of (Marxist) objective-scientific knowledge.

ideas or to be deceived. Not at all: it means to “play the part,” to do one thing or the other—whatever the role requires.

Those well acquainted with the article have noticed that my gloss so far has not followed faithfully the order of Althusser’s exposition, but has, instead, jumped ahead and, from there, interpreted what comes earlier. In my defense, I can say that in order to follow the spirit, one must often go against the letter. “By the letter,” the exposition is as follows: after Althusser has reformulated the question of ideology (“why is the representation given to individuals [...] necessarily an imaginary relation”), he suddenly stops and drops the question, promising to return to it later; for the time being, he decides to advance a whole new thesis: “Ideology has a material existence” (165). For those who follow the letter, the transition may appear quite sudden: “Didn’t we just say that ideology is not only an imaginary, but *necessarily imaginary* relation? How do we get from there to the thesis that ideology has a *material* existence?!”

We, who follow the spirit, should not be baffled. We should try to understand Althusser’s statement by approaching it from a subsequent point—from the thesis advanced only later in the article: ideology is not a matter of ideas (representations, in the sense discussed above). If not, then what *is* it a matter of? The answer is: it is a matter of... *matter*, of something *material*. In the article, the order of argument is: “ideology is material, hence—ideas drop out of consideration.” Our way of proceeding here, which is just the reverse of this order, allows us a better grasp of what Althusser means by “material” existence, i.e., the real matter of ideology.

The examples he gives of the material life of ideology are curious, at best: kneeling, praying, confessing, signing petitions, protesting (167). Supposedly to illustrate the preponderance of the “material” over the “ideational,” he even quotes Pascal: “Kneel down,

move your lips in prayer, and you will believe” (168). Now these actions can be called “material” only in a very approximate and idiosyncratic sense. Althusser had sought to forestall the problem earlier by asserting that “[of] course, the material existence of the ideology [...] does not have the same modality as the material existence of a paving stone” (166); and then, with a wink to Aristotle, “I shall say that ‘matter is discussed in many senses,’ or rather that it exists in different modalities, all rooted in the last instance in ‘physical matter’” (166). So, what is this modality of “matter,” different from a paving stone, which gives to ideology the matter proper to it?

The reference to theater gives us the answer: the materiality of ideology is the materiality of *acting*. Since this is our frame of reference, it should be said right away that, in it, “acting” has a very specific meaning; this meaning is controlled by the new sense given to “representation.” Hence: it is not a matter of our acting *from* or *with* representations (acting in accordance with ideas that we have and believe in), but acting *in* representations. The former thesis is what Althusser calls the “ideology of ideology” (168). He catches it, quite literally, “in the act” and exposes it in this celebrated passage:

[T]he ideological representations of ideology is itself forced to recognize that every “subject” endowed with “consciousness” and believing in the “ideas” that his “consciousness” inspires in him and freely accepts, must “*act* according to his ideas,” must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, “that is wicked.” (167-68; emphasis in the original)

In the same way that people do not give themselves ideological ideas, they also do not give themselves (generate) the actions in question. Of course, they are the ones *de facto*

performing these actions, just as they were the ones *de facto* thinking those ideas. But like the ideas, the actions are given to them by the performance in which the people find themselves. Before being theirs, i.e., the actions of the actors, these are the acts of the Representation, in the broader sense, the acts pre-inscribed in the script of the performance.

[The ideology of ideology] talks of actions: I shall talk of actions inserted into *practices*. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*, be it a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports' club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc. (168; emphasis in the original)

As a result, we have the chain: ideas count to the extent that they are “performed” in (individual) actions, which are, in each case, the instantiations of practices, which, for their part, take place within institutionalized rituals, the latter constituting the concrete life of various ideological apparatuses. Following the logic of the chain, we are allowed to say that the individual’s ideas are “thought” by his actions, which are “acted” by social practices, etc. In the ultimate instance, the individual’s actions are “acted” by ideology, in the new sense that the concept has acquired by now.¹³¹

This ultimate instance has, within itself, its own ultimate instance: the summative and climatic consequence of the fact that the individual’s actions are “acted” by ideology, namely—the realization that he himself is produced by ideology. As such, he is, preeminently, not himself: he is the *subject*. Expressed differently, the subject is what ideology has made of the

¹³¹ “It therefore appears that the subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief” (170).

individual. When I say that it has “produced” him, I am placing more emphasis on the meaning associated with theatrical “production,” as discussed previously (as relative to theatrical “representation,” “performance,” etc.),¹³² than on the meaning associated with industry and manufacture. From here, we can reformulate the definition of “subject” as follows: “subject” is the individual *as* recruited for the production that is “ideology,” as inserted within the performance, where he performs the actions through which the said production “acts” him.

Before we could begin to entertain the hope that we could somehow forestall the moment when, as individuals, we are recruited by ideology and, henceforth, become subjects, Althusser tells us that we have always-already missed that moment. Even before the first recorded moment of our lives, the moment of birth, a “pre-appointment” is waiting for us, which appoints us to the roles we will be playing (176). Hence: “ideology has always-already interpellated individuals as subjects, which amounts to making it clear that individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects, which leads us to the last proposition: *individuals are always-already subjects*” (175-76; emphasis in the original). If so, “individual” stands for the never-actually-available (as an actuality), yet necessary, presupposition of the existence of the subject.¹³³

If the meaning of the term “subject” is determined exclusively by its relation to “ideology,” this exclusive determination is reciprocated: “ideology” cannot be thought outside of this relation in which individuals are constituted as subjects. In fact, ideology is nothing *but* this relation: “The existence of ideology and the hailing or interpellation of individuals as subjects are one and the same thing” (175). Earlier we said that, in his ultimate instance, the individual is

¹³² Lest it be thought that this semantic emphasis is arbitrary, or serving better the purposes of my argument than as a faithful rendition of Althusser’s, here are the words in which Althusser himself speaks of interpellation: “I shall now turn my attention to [...] the way the ‘actors’ in this *mise en scène* of interpellation, and their respective roles, are reflected in the very structure of all ideology” (177).

¹³³ Althusser expresses this with the statement, “individuals are ‘abstract’ with respect to the subjects they always already are” (176). The obverse of this conception, was given earlier in the text: “concrete subjects exist insofar as they are supported by a concrete individual” (174).

what has been produced by ideology, namely, the subject; he does not exist, *except* as a subject. In reciprocation, we must now say: ideology, in *its* ultimate instance, is what produces subjects; it does not exist, *except* as this production.

At this point we can stop and take a look back, in order to measure the distance we have traveled in the company of Althusser. I said, at the beginning, that this distance takes us beyond ideology. We can now see why it is so. In itself, that is, in its very name, ideology is a matter of ideas. To this literal evocation, we added the moments of (political) interest and the illusion-distortion through which ideology hides reality. None of this has survived by the point at which we stand now; or, rather, they have survived, but as the insubstantial, as what can no longer be the real matter of ideology. Beyond all this, ideology, as we see it with Althusser, is something completely different: it is a matter of production. To put it in vaguely dialectical terms: ideology is the supersession of what it has previously been; it is its own beyond (i.e., the beyond of its previous object, or “matter”).

When I said, previously, that ideology has become “non-ideological” I meant the expansion whereby the notion has spilled way beyond its proper object. I hold that, if we are mindful of this expansion, it no longer makes sense to speak of ideology. If it has become a question of contemplating the act whereby we are produced as what we consciously are, then this can no longer be a question of ideology, but, much more broadly, a question of (cultural) being. Does Althusser understand this? I believe not. And because he does not understand it, he continues to speak of ideology, even when, through his own elaboration, the concept has spilled far beyond its object. Despite this spillage, the concept has not yet quite reached the expanse of cultural being as a whole. It has not quite become a question of how we are as cultural beings.

And this is because the sphere of ideology, despite all appearances to the contrary, does not cover everything. Something remains, something that does not fall within its bounds. Although he has declared that ideology has, first, no history (it is “eternal” [175]), and, second, “no outside” (quite obviously since even before birth we are “interpellated” as subjects and since even a simple handshake has been seen as an ideological involvement), Althusser, in a remarkable argumentative twist, finds such an “outside”: “ideology *has no outside* (for itself), but at the same time [...] *it is nothing but outside* (for science and reality)” (175; emphasis in the original).

The concept of ideology still holds, despite the expansion of its content, and thus fails to open the question of cultural being, to the extent that it is differentiated-articulated against true knowledge (“science”) and reality. In this vis-à-vis, on its lot falls—what else?—falsehood. But let us pause and ask in what does the “falsehood” of ideology consist? Althusser has given us no easy way to answer this question. From within the definition of the concept, as he has it, there is no immanent criterion for determining either truth or falsehood. The evaluative criterion proper comes from the socio-economic order over which ideology operates: ideology is “false” insofar as the order it assists in reproducing is “false.” But this is an external criterion. Because it has been defined functionally—i.e., as the production of “subjects”—ideology cannot specify, from within itself, from within this production, whether the subjects are recruited for something “good” or “bad.” The fact that subjects recognize themselves as the “ones” who are addressed by that which addresses them—“*Yes, it really is me*” (178; emphasis in the original)—i.e., the fact of (social) identity, is, by itself, neither good nor bad.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ We must assume that even a perfect social order would consist of subjects whose social identity would consist in the fact that they recognize themselves in the values foundational to that social order. If so, then they too, in a purely formal way, will be “ideological” subjects. And this is another way of saying that Althusser has not given us

The bad comes only later and, to repeat, from the outside. Althusser says as much in the last sentence of the text: “The reality in question in this mechanism, the reality which is necessarily *ignored (méconnue)* in the very forms of recognition (ideology = misrecognition/ignorance) is indeed, in the last resort, the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them” (182-83; emphasis in the original). In other words, the recognition constitutive of ideology—the recognition whereby the subject recognizes himself as the addressee of the call—is a misrecognition of the objective conditions of social existence. Conversely, objective knowledge is “good” because it is the proper understanding of these conditions and, hence, the seeing-through that gives the lie to the various ideological “enactments.”

An external instance must bear witness to the “falsehood” of the ideological relation because ideology, not only in regard to the socio-economic, but also in itself, is not a genuine production, but only *reproduction*. What does the production, which is ideology, produce (enact)? The answer can be, only: subjection. But, let us remember, that this was already inscribed in the notion of ideology, which exists as nothing *but* the recruitment of individuals for their role as subjects. We thus end up with a conceptual tautology: ideology, that is, the (non-coercive) mechanism of subjection, recruits subjects for the sake of subjection. In other words, these subjects are not recruited *for* anything, except for their own function; the spectacle in which they are “acted” has no content of its own, other than this “acting” of actors.

The tautology can be appreciated also from the other side, the side of the subject, when we ask the question complementary to “For what are individuals recruited?” The question now is: “Why do individuals respond to the call that recruits them?” We can ask this in regard to the

an immanent index for distinguishing between “recognition” and “misrecognition” within the general act of bestowing-accepting social identity.

famous piece of “theoretical theater” Althusser stages for us: the scene with the policeman and the passer-by (174-75). The fact that the passer-by turns at the policeman’s hailing, recognizing that “‘it was really him (sic.) who was hailed’ (and not someone else)” (174) is intuitively convincing. But still, how does he know that “it was him”? From within Althusser’s perspective, we can only say: the individual knows, because, by his very nature as an always-already subject, he is the one who recognizes himself in the hailing of ideology. How else are we to understand the following statement: “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete subjects, *by the functioning of the category of subject*” (173; emphasis added)? I have highlighted the later part of the statement (whereas Althusser highlights the earlier) to emphasize the tautology: the functioning of ideology simply realizes what is already implied in the category of “subject”: recruitability. Thus, if what recruits the individual for subjecthood-subjection is recruitment as such, what responds in him is responsiveness as such.

In a recent theoretical rehearsal of the scene, Judith Butler has restated the question just posed: “How are we to understand the psychic disposition at the moment in which the pedestrian responds to the law? What conditions and informs that response?” (112). She responds by first pointing out the problem I just suggested: that, in Althusser’s conceptualization, ideology implies subjection, the law implies (submissive) conscience, etc. (115). The consequence is that Ideology and Law are hypostasized, coming to occupy the place once occupied by the Divine (113). They are the uncreated entities, having come into being God knows how and facing the human subject in such a way that, in him, their domination is inscribed (as “conscience”) before it is realized in actual subjection.

I second this critique by also recalling the short-circuited relation discussed earlier, which had as a consequence the hypostasis of Power. The new short circuit that we reach with

Althusser is, obviously not a viable alternative. The metaphysics (theological, as Butler insists) of Ideology is no better than the metaphysics of Power.¹³⁵ The problem is not only that, in one instance, Power dominates without being the power of anything in particular, just as, in the other instance, Ideology recruits without recruiting for anything in particular. There is also the problem that both conceptions institute, at the center of our world, a mystical Force (once called political Power, once called Ideology), which, because it stands mysteriously on its own, uncreated, no longer returns to us our own image as beings who create our own world, that is to say, as cultural beings.

I believe we escape the mystification and fatalism incumbent upon these theoretical constructions when we relate the matter ideology to the further beyond, where, as I suggested already, it becomes a matter of cultural being. We, thereby, do not dispense with ideology as an object of inquiry; we simply ground it in a more fundamental dimension, that is, we show its function as derivative of that fundamental dimension. Along the lines charted by Althusser, we can now say the following: the essential act of ideology, by which it has always-already inserted the individual into a “representation” and “acted” him, is a function of the cultural act. Ideology is able to “recruit” individuals into subjecthood-subjection because mattering and manning are constitutive of our being as cultural beings. We thus give a positive significance to what is, otherwise, a mysterious predicament. The strange compelling power that makes the passer-by turn when the policeman calls out “Hey, you!”—namely, the power of interpellation—can now be related (and theoretically subordinated) to the addressivity of which I spoke earlier, the addressivity through which it is Being that has always-already addressed us. On a most

¹³⁵ And, in particular reference to a favorite cold-war interpretation of Stalinism, we may add: a hypostasis of relation (a relation in which the Subduing succeeds because it confronts that which is submissive by default), even if intellectually more sophisticated, is not all that much better than a demonology of Evil Characters (Althusser’s clique of Despots and Priests).

primordial level, we turn around because only thus we will see what we are and know that we *are*, by seeing what *is* (true).

The one who turns around in response to the call does not respond to a demand to turn around. The turning around is an act that is, as it were, conditioned both by the “voice” of the law and by the responsiveness of the one hailed by the law. The “turning around” is a strange sort of middle ground (taking place, perhaps, in a strange sort of “middle voice”), which is determined both by the law and the addressee, but by neither unilaterally or exhaustively. Although there would be no turning around without first having been hailed, neither would there be a turning around without some readiness to turn. (Butler 107)

This critical gloss on Althusser requires a gloss of its own: the mutual determination spoken of here is, at the most fundamental level, the mutual implication of mattering and manning. And the “middle voice” evoked by Butler gives body, in this concrete situation, to what I earlier called “draw.”

The above does not mean—as Butler suggests of Althusser—that, in the depths of their being, people are connatural with the Law and complicit with its operations. Why it is not so becomes clear when we remember that the draw is not a force acting between constituted entities. It is what first constitutes (figures-out) these entities. With this reminder, it becomes necessary to deduce Althusser’s scene of interpellation from a more “primal” scene in which it would not be just the subject who is constituted, but, simultaneously, also the Law. Expressed differently, where interpellation shows itself as a scene of reproduction (of relations of domination), it is necessary to show it as a scene of (cultural) production. It seems to me that the first step in every critique of ideology is just this: to show that Order and its institutions do not

precede, ontologically, the constitution of the “one,” but are cultural products, in principle, coeval with the moment when some-body turns around and becomes “one.”

We can deduce the primal scene, and the primal meaning, of interpellation by considering the encounter between the Law and “the man from the countryside” in Kafka’s *Trial* (215-17).¹³⁶ For most of the parable, Kafka keeps us in what constitutes the ideological illusion *par excellence*: the imposing existence of the Law seemingly *outside* and *prior* to the subject. Its erection seems completely independent of whether the man from the countryside appreciates it or not, or even of whether he exists or not. The impression is confirmed by the long years during which the man waits fruitlessly for permission to enter through the (actually, open) Door of the Law, as well as by the indifferent attitude of the doorkeeper; it appears, indeed, that the Law has no regard for the provincial solicitor, that it has completely forgotten about his existence. All of this changes in the moments just before the man’s death, when the doorkeeper tells him that the door in front of which he has waited all these years was meant for him alone.

When the man had first arrived from the countryside, the doorkeeper had told him that behind the first door there are, inside the building of the Law, many other doors through which he must pass before he comes into the presence of the Law Itself. It had seemed, then, that the Law possesses an internal structure—let us say it—an In-Itself, which holds whether the man enters through the first door or not. At the end of his life, the man has (hopefully) learned otherwise: that the first door was, for him at least, also the only one; that, rather than possessing an immanent internal structure of its own, the Law was just a façade with many such first-only doors carved in it, each intended for a “one.” In other words, the Law had no existence apart from this being-open or being-addressed to a potential “one.” When the address is taken up,

¹³⁶ The short reading offered here follows the spirit of Slavoj Žižek’s interpretation advanced in *For They Know Not...* (90-91).

when the call is heard, and not one but many “ones” are waiting to enter, the Law ceases to be just a façade and has, in fact, an in-itself. To give this understanding a succinct formulation: the erection of the Law (i.e., its institution, substance, and power) holds in the regard of the subject.¹³⁷

If we remember the more archaic meaning of “regard,” still current in French, as “look” or “gaze,” we should remember also the scene in the preceding chapter of this study, where I wanted to show just this: how a particular kind of “regard” occasions a particular kind of erection. This erection, by which I mean, in the ultimate instance, the institution, substance, and power of Stalinist Order, is not something standing on its own. It springs up and holds to the extent to which—to use Althusser’s phrase—there is a “turning around” and, hence, a “one”—the one who is “made to see.” We give the lie to the ideological illusion when we reach this understanding: that the “one” not only sustains, but also “erects” the edifice of Order.

Just as in the parable of the policeman Althusser does not tell us what makes the individual turn around, Kafka does not tell us why the man from the countryside wants so desperately to enter the Law. We are told only that he is “drawn to it” (215); in his dying words, the man himself declares, “Everyone strives to reach the Law” (217). On the basis of these comments, we may tentatively assume that the Law is some kind of ultimate Value, the True as such, or *What-Counts*. In the best of all possible worlds, this value, for which the Law serves as a metaphor, should not only be recognized by each “one” (as indeed it is, according to the parable) but should also return the favor: in it, the value of each “one” should be recognized. The statement made above—that the erection of the Law holds in the regard of the subject—can now be rephrased as a statement of social value: *What-Counts* counts on “ones” for its

¹³⁷ In Žižek: “The notion of the inaccessible, transcendent Absolute makes sense only in so far as the subject’s gaze is already here—in its very notion, the inaccessible Other implies a relation to its own other (the subject)” (91).

subsistence and subsists to the extent to which, in it, these “ones” count for something. Having said this, we can now venture to answer the question passed over in silence by both Althusser and Kafka: the individual is drawn to the Law, so that he may count for something, i.e., ultimately, so that he acquires determinate being (as we call it now, identity). He can have that only through *What-Counts* (as truth/reality), and from nowhere else. But that is also man-made, it is cultural; it does not descend from some transcendental and eternal domain of values, but is (re-)created in the very act in which “I”-being is bestowed. The two are coterminous.

To thus deduce the scene of interpellation and the whole question of ideology from the more primal scene in which (what counts as) truth and reality are produced and from the more fundamental question of cultural being, is not tantamount to giving an ontological blessing to various forms of political subjection (“Since it all happens in pursuit of the True and the Real, then it’s all for the best, amen!”). It simply means that we attain a more comprehensive frame, in which the (re-)production of Order, political and social, can be adjoined to and thought together with cultural production. In the synthesis, these can be seen as one: the production of cultural being, which has, as its inseparable aspects, the production of truth-reality and identity. Having said this, we must immediately turn around and signal that “truth” and “reality” are not to be taken as absolutes. They are, in each cultural world, prefaced by “what counts as,” that is, they belong to the register of “values,” which, for their part, are never absolute. They are, furthermore, values such that, in them, the value of human being is reflected-recognized and, to that extent, measured (for, as I argued, *What-Counts* counts only because through it a multitude of “ones” count for something).

Obviously, this way of looking at things does not preclude the possibility for what is known as a “critique of ideology”; on the contrary, it makes such a critique much more

substantial. This critique can now be, actually, immanent. It does not need to take its standards from somewhere else—as with Althusser, from the domain of “scientific knowledge”—to pronounce a certain enactment as “false.” The distortion that needs to be criticized should be seen as a distortion not of consciousness, but of cultural being, i.e., a distortion of the world we ourselves are always in the act of creating. We shall pronounce the act “false,” or “perverse,” to the extent that the work “one” performs in the act (enactment) satisfies an alienated desire, desire with the appearance of external and independent substantiality.

This, obviously is the case in *The Trial*, where the “obscene Law” (Žižek) enjoys substance in the act whereby it makes the subject wait. “To make him wait and wonder” is what makes up the truth-reality of the Law, the tumescence of its being. When the man from the countryside decides not to go through the open door, that is, by his “Yes, I shall wait,” he in fact “erects” the Law; now, indeed, the Law acquires the reality the doorkeeper describes: a structure with many doors, each guarded by a doorkeeper much more terrible than the preceding one, etc.

This is also the case in Stalinism, whose perverse Law enjoys substance in the act whereby it makes the subject see. “To make her see” is what makes up the truth reality of socialism, the tumescence of its being. Where she shows her “having been made to see,” that is, by her “Yes, I have seen!” or “I have seen indeed,” she “erects” socialism, institutes it as a reality.

We shall now consider how this act, by instituting the reality of socialism, makes up the concrete institution of socialist realism. Appropriately, we will observe this in a concrete scene, with a concrete setting: the First Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE BLIND, THE SEEING, AND THE SHINY

We need to fantasize, we need to study reality in such a way that, on the basis of its laws, our fantasy could create actually possible events [*real'no vozmozhnye sobytiia*], which we do not always see.

K. Chornyi, speech at the
First Congress of Soviet Writers

In our country there are no events that occur by accident.

M. Kirshon, speech at the
First Congress of Soviet Writers

In one of the preliminary and general rehearsals of the dialectic movement, in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel states: “[The] new object contains the nothingness of the first, it is what experience has made of it” (55). The preceding chapter of the present study could serve as something of an illustration to this famous thesis, insofar as in it I pointed to the new object, or field, to which the term “ideology” relates in the work of Althusser. This new object “contains the nothingness of the first,” in the sense that it is instantiated by the negation of what “ideology” had been previously. I expressed this by saying that with Althusser ideology has become non-ideological. In that it is no longer about ideas, ideology is beyond its proper self. Speaking from that beyond, Althusser tells us of a kind of “representation” that touches upon ideas only in the last, non-essential, instance. To remember, it is a representation that no one can “give”; it can only be given. We notice that, along with ideology, “representation” also now refers to a new object. It no longer designates the spontaneous act of forming or expressing ideas, but, rather, to the act in which subjects are “produced” and “acted.”

It is difficult to speculate on what the experience was that “made,” for Althusser, the object of ideology into what we witness it as being in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” But it is easy and, moreover, necessary to say that, in the plane of historical happening, Stalinism is most certainly an integral part of the experience through which both ideology and representation find their beyond by facing the nothingness of their previous being.

How “ideological” is ideology when we consider under this heading all those “ideologically alien elements” targeted by the Stalinist regime, from kulaks and “wreckers,” through Trotskyists and imperialists spies, to “rootless cosmopolitans”? In the totalitarian state, these, as Hannah Arendt has argued (423-25), belong to the category of the “objective enemy”—a peculiar breed of human beings, extant only since the early twentieth century, and distinguished by the fact that their character and subsequent fate is determined irrespectively of whether they actually harbor any feelings or intentions harmful to the regime. Their classification as so many “enemies of the people” proceeds not from what they *think*, but from what they *are*. The alien “ideological” character imputed to them does not concern in any essential sense the *ideas* that they may or may not have. If they show themselves as, in fact, having such harmful ideas, this is seen as a *consequence* and a further, but by no means necessary, demonstration of their being objective enemies, not a prerequisite for being considered such.¹³⁸ By confessing their criminal actions and intentions, they simply inhabit, with their consciousness, the position to which they have been assigned in advance. With the ideas they voice, they sound off to the world around the “tendency” whose carriers they are.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ We could note, in passing, the kinship resemblance between the definition of the objective enemy and the definition of true class consciousness as a system of thought that *could be* thought by individuals, but which, even if it remains unthought by them, is nevertheless theirs, definitive of their essential being.

¹³⁹ “[The objective enemy] is never an individual whose dangerous thoughts must be provoked or whose past justifies suspicion, but a ‘carrier of tendencies’ like the carrier of a disease” (Arendt 424).

The counterfeit and mortifying theatricality of the Moscow show trials has been pointed out in almost every reference to them; but no one, I believe, has pointed out that this sham spectacle rests on a more fundamental “theatricality,” characteristic of Stalinist culture as a whole. Behind the show that served to give some credence to Stalin’s brutal elimination of his enemies, to mobilize the Party’s rank-and-file, and to convince the general population, there lies another show, a “representation” in the sense I suggested in the discussion of Althusser’s article. It is true that the accused were forced to deliver falsified confessions, and, to that extent, we may say that they were made to “play a part.” But this forced acting was made possible by a historical world in which the accused were, from the outset, viewed as beings who, in their deeds and thoughts, are “acted” by the tendency they embodied, by a deep essence, which guided their thoughts and deeds, rather than being first defined by them. This is the primary spectacle that the show trials had to present: not the “ideology” of Kamenev, Zinov'ev, Bukharin, and their associates, supposedly motivating the crimes committed or intended, but their being-acted or being-driven by a force inimical to Soviet power.¹⁴⁰

The accused cooperated only to a point. Many of them recited what they were supposed to say.¹⁴¹ But they, obviously, could not recite it with passion; they could not show convincingly

¹⁴⁰ Consistently throughout the trials, the prosecution sought to establish precisely the *absence* of any consistent ideological program on the part of the various anti-Soviet “blocs” and “centers.” The goal was to demonstrate that any semblance of recognizable ideological position served only to mask what was, at bottom, an unprincipled, organically innate, essentially elemental hostility toward the Soviet Union. Proportionally to the successes of socialist construction—so the official scenario went—it became increasingly difficult for the Trotskyists to hide the bestial face of reaction behind a consistent political program. In the words of one of the accused: “The circle has closed. It is over with the political masquerade, it is over with the shams of oppositions, discussions and platforms. Opposition was superseded by conspiracy against the state; discussions and platforms were superseded by bullets and bombs” (“Last Pleas... Mrachkovsky”). See also Vyshinskii’s violent assault on Piatakov’s suggestion that he and his associates constituted a “political fraction” (446-50).

¹⁴¹ Here is the impression the accused Piatakov left on one of the notable foreign guests in attendance, the German writer Lion Feuchtwanger: “I shall never forget how [he] stood in front of the microphone, a middle-aged man of average build, rather bald, with a reddish, old-fashioned, sparse, pointed beard, and how he lectured. Calmly and at the same time sedulously he explained how he had managed to sabotage the industries under him. He expounded, pointed his finger, gave the impression of a school teacher, a historian giving a lecture on the life and deeds of a man

to those present that they were indeed *driven*. The prosecutor-general, Andrei Vyshinskii, did his best to remedy the spectacle:

Is it *by accident* that Trotskyism became the vanguard of capitalist restoration?

No, *not by accident*, because everything was leading to this from the very beginning. *Not by accident*, because even before the October Revolution Trotsky and his friends were fighting against Lenin and the Leninist party, just as they are now fighting against Stalin and the party of Lenin-Stalin.

Comrade Stalin's *predictions have been fully realized*. Trotskyism *indeed* turned into the central meeting point of all powers inimical to socialism, into a gang of mere bandits, spies, and murderers, who put themselves fully at the disposal of foreign intelligence services, into lackeys of capitalism, into restorers of capitalism in our country.

And here, at the trial, with extraordinary fullness and clarity was revealed just this vile essence of Trotskyism. They came to their disgraceful end because for decades they followed this road, glorifying capitalism, refusing to believe in the successes of socialist construction, in the victory of socialism. This is why they finally arrived at a broad program for capitalist restoration, this is why they decided to begin betraying and selling our motherland. (435; emphasis added)

The (alleged) history of Trotskyism, reaching back to the years before the Revolution, is given (concocted) not in order to strengthen the case against the accused, to give their present crimes a credible background. The goal, rather, is to chart a vector of ineluctable necessity (which I have punctuated by italicizing the symptomatic phrases in the quoted passage). Nothing

who had been dead form many years, named Piatakov, anxious to make everything clear even to the smallest details so that his listeners should understand fully" (125).

occurred by accident,¹⁴² everything happened just as it was supposed to happen, just as it was predicted by comrade Stalin. *It could not but* happen. The show trial is the *show* of this could-not-but (“here, at the trial, with extraordinary fullness and clarity was revealed...”).

No ideological conviction, no matter how firm, how resolutely followed and implemented in action, could travel a road as straightforward and precipitously consequent as the one Vyshinskii draws for his audience. This can only be the trajectory of a tendency, principle, or function, of a devilish automaton that has nothing subjective about it. We are referred to it when the prosecutor-general speaks of the “vile essence of Trotskyism.” From this essence proceed the acts that the accused could-not-but commit; from there they are irresistibly driven to ever greater crimes against the Soviet Union. We should be careful in appreciating the logic of Vyshinskii’s harangue, for it follows a course directly opposite of what we might expect: the indictment does not move from a consideration of the deeds, intentions, and beliefs of the Trotskyists to the characterization of these people as anti-Soviet elements (“they did this, intended that, hence they should be condemned as anti-Soviet”). It is just the other way around: these people are Trotskyists (i.e., in their very essence anti-Soviet), *therefore* they could-not-but do what they did and intend what they intended.

If we now put ourselves, for a moment, in the seats occupied by the jury, we can see from a different angle the shift in the object to which the word “representation” refers. According to the normal legal procedure, the facts, testimonies, and pleas are presented before the jury.

Optimally, these should coalesce into a *representation* of the case in the mind of the jury, that is,

¹⁴² The rhetoric and phraseology of Vyshinskii’s speech are echoed in some of the confessions. The following passage is taken from Kamenev’s last plea: “I ask myself, *is it an accident* that alongside of myself, Zinoviev, Evdokimov, Bakayev and Mrachkovsky are sitting emissaries of foreign secret-police departments, people with false passports, with dubious biographies and undoubted connections with the Gestapo. *No! it is not an accident.* We are sitting here side by side with the agents of foreign secret-police departments because our weapons were the same, because our arms became intertwined before our fate became intertwined here in this dock” (“Last Pleas... Kamenev”; emphasis added).

they should be able to form a clear idea about the circumstances, the character of the accused, the motives for the crimes committed, etc. In short, the evidence and testimonies presented should come together into a consistent “picture.” But this traditional demand for the consistency of legal proof is countered, in the case of the Moscow show trials, by a much superior demand, issuing from the very foundation of Stalinist culture—the demand for thoroughgoing necessity and predictability, for a world in which everything happens just as it was meant to be. The satisfaction of this second, imperious demand proceeds, as I already suggested, by way diametrically opposed to traditional legal procedure. What is supposed to be the legal demonstration of proof passes into a demonstration of the “tendency.”

In the latter, we begin with the “picture” and arrive only at the very end to the evidence and the testimonies. At first, there is the general picture, or representation, of victorious socialism, implying, by necessity, the reciprocal decline of capitalism. This picture needs to be filled; since it is just the scheme of historical necessity at its most schematic, it must draw material in order to be completed. From the second part of the picture, an “essence” emerges, a concretization of the very inevitability of the tendency. The essence is the anti-Soviet pure and simple—degradation as such. Now, the essence needs a “character,” in order to show itself in human-psychological form. This character is none other than the “Trotskyist,” the paramount exemplification of the anti-Soviet person. It contains just what was contained in the essence: undying hostility toward socialism, subterfuge, escalating moral degradation, passing into unprincipled bestiality, etc. For its part, the “character” needs concrete actions, beliefs, and words, through which it will make appearance on the stage of the world; it needs the components constitutive of a “role.” Once all this is put in place, one last thing remains: the role needs to be manned, an actual human being has to appear in it—a body through whom the actions will be

acted, the beliefs believed, and the words spoken; in other words, through whom the picture will come complete, so that everything that *is* will be shown to be *indeed* just what was meant to be.

The Moscow show trials accomplished the staging of this entire “production.” In so doing, they posed, in a distorted and chilling way, the question of whether to “have identity” is not to succeed where the accused could not succeed fully: to accept and inhabit the role into which we are already “cast” and “acted” by the production that is, ultimately, the production of social-cultural being. Because, in this particular case, the question is asked in such a distorted and grotesque way, from a stage that is obviously the stage of violence and monumental forgery, we have the option to look away and not engage with it. But if we doggedly continue to repeat that the trials falsified reality, that the actions, intentions, and, ultimately, characters imputed to the “enemies of the people” were fictitious, we may miss the fact that this fictitiousness refers us, ultimately, to something real. I would like to argue that the show put on during the Moscow show trials presents the flip side of a coin, whose other side is the ongoing “show” through which a multitude of “ones,” for the most part without any overt compulsion, took part in constituting the reality of Stalinist socialism.

To see this other, shinier, side of the coin, let us attend, for the rest of this chapter, to an event ostensibly quite different, yet deeply akin to the one just considered. We do not need to change locations: the House of Trade Unions on Bol'shaia Dmitrovka Street in Moscow, where in March 1938 the last of the show trials took place,¹⁴³ was also the venue of the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, which convened between 17 August and 1 September 1934.

The organization of the congress was decreed by the Party resolution of April 1932, and set in motion almost immediately after it. The preparation took longer than expected, and the

¹⁴³ This was the trial of the so-called “Anti-Soviet Right Trotskyist Bloc.” Among the accused were Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksei Rykov, and the former chief of OGPU/NKVD, Genrikh Iagoda.

opening date had to be moved back on a couple of occasions. The delegates were carefully selected, and selected foreign guests invited. The order of presentation was set in advance. The key speeches and reports had to be approved beforehand by the Organizational Committee; their text was made available to all the delegates. Excursions, concerts, and public festivities accompanied the main event. On the street outside the House of Trade Unions, large crowds of people gathered every day to greet the writers when they entered or exited the building.

This eager, effervescent life was not confined to the outside. It made its way inside. At measured intervals throughout the writers' debates, organized groups of common folk from various walks of life proceeded down the aisle of the magnificent Hall of Columns and ascended the podium. These were the "delegates without membership cards," as Boris Pasternak referred to them: industrial workers, representatives of kolkhoz collectives, young pioneers, soldiers, scientists—"shiny, happy people." All of them had come to greet the unprecedented, luminous assembly, voice their enthusiasm for the epochal event, and testify to the eager attention with which all Soviet people followed the congress' proceedings. Their entrances were more than colorful intermezzos, ceremonial exclamation points in a prosaic text that was, otherwise, about different matters: artistic literature, the method of socialist realism, the organization of the Writers' Union, etc. They were very much part of this text—an essential part, I would argue, without which the text turns into a hieroglyphic. The intrusion of the shiny, happy people is constitutive of the act through which "socialist realism" was produced, and not a sideshow to the deliberations through which, supposedly, socialist realism was "formulated." This was—in a sense that will be elaborated in the following discussion, but which was already foreshadowed in previous chapters—*the show*.

Each such appearance was introduced by the session chair with the words: “Comrades, we have been visited by...” (“Tovarishchi, k nam prishli/priekhali...”). Usually, after saluting the delegates and providing a short biography of the collective he or she was chosen to represent, the speaker proceeded to present a *zakaz* (“order,” “commission”). All of them made, essentially, the same demand: “Show us.”¹⁴⁴ In different voices, the representatives of the people were demanding that they be represented. In the voice of comrade Bratanovskii, speaking on behalf of proletarian authors of technical literature: “Our collective order to you, comrades writers, is: get closer to the industry worker, depicting him not only at the machine, but also showing his fight for acquiring high technical qualification, for absorbing all achievements of world culture [...]” (*Pervyi* 554); as expressed by comrade Nemtsova, a representative of a factory-university (*zavod-vtuz*) named after Stalin: “Give us a woman-hero, not just a shock-worker, but a woman who raises our next generation [...], who combines this exacting, complicated task with the struggle for socialist construction” (366); and as sung by a choir of pioneers from Moscow:

To the writers—an order from the children of the capital:

In your stories we want to be merry,

As we are in camps, gardens, and courtyards.

[.....]

We want to dream of stars and planets,

To invent machines in our fearless minds... (179).

¹⁴⁴ In the words of a distinguished foreign guest, André Malraux: “All delegations, which brought to us, along with their gifts, the human warmth and extraordinary friendship amidst which your literature grows, what did these delegations say?—‘Express us, show us’” (*Pervyi* 286). Similarly, in the speech of Aleksandr Afinogenov: “New people came onto this podium, and they said: ‘Describe us, write about us’” (429).

This was the social commission speaking, commissioning itself. It did not need to be ordered from somewhere else, from “up high.” Life itself, “our reality,” was entering the Hall of Columns and ordering its own representation.

The assembly was genuinely moved. When a kolkhoz farmer carrying a heavy piece of machinery on her shoulders took to the podium, Pasternak was so flustered that he lunged at her, seized the tool, and tried to carry it for her. When the pioneer choir marched through the hall and began singing, Gor'kii could not suppress his tears; many in the audience sobbed with him. Throughout the proceedings, speakers kept reminding the gathering of this or that memorable appearance: “When, yesterday, those children entered the hall, when all those colors, gestures, applause, the sounds of the orchestra, of the trumpets, the flood of light [...]” (206); “Take for example the speech of the kolkhoz worker who greeted us. This absolutely fearless, valiant woman [...]” (232); “Comrades, Otto Iul'evich Schmidt¹⁴⁵ spoke here. He said something seemingly simple, but quite significant [...]” (616); “Comrades, one of the most remarkable moments of this congress was the speech, during the first session, of the Donbass shock-worker Nikita Izotov” (654).

The writers understood and agreed that the business for which they had convened, the business of Soviet literature, of artistic representation in general, of socialist realism, had to do, in the first place, with showing the builders of socialism. Nikolai Pogodin even equated socialist realism with the task of presenting the biographies of these people (388). The call to depict the new heroes was heard from all sides. The Party emissary, Andrei Zhdanov: “Soviet literature

¹⁴⁵ Otto Schmidt was the head of the 1934 northern expedition on board of the icebreaker Cheliuskin. After the steamship was crushed by the icepacks and sunk, 104 members of the crew escaped onto the ice, where they had to survive for two long months. During these desperate times, Schmidt behaved as a true political and moral leader of the group: he organized poetry readings, lectured on philosophy and world politics, and even managed to publish a wall newspaper (!). In April, 1934, the crew was rescued by Soviet airplanes that landed directly onto the ice surface. The seven pilots participating in this unprecedented rescue mission were among the first to be awarded the newly instituted title “Hero of the Soviet Union.” Schmidt received the same honor in 1937.

must be able to show our heroes [...]” (4); Gor'kii: “The main hero of our books should be labor, that is, the human being organized by the processes of labor [...]” (13); comrade Nemtsova: “Give us a hero who lives a full life, give us the kind of hero who is to be found in our socialist construction” (367); Aleksandr Fadeev: “Indubitably, our literature lacks the images of monumental, intelligent, integral characters, the likes of which are promoted in ever greater numbers from the ranks of the working class and the peasantry” (234).

And yet, even as they were urging each other in this way and vouching to fulfill the main social commission, to show in their works the new people of socialism, the writers could not ignore the fact that the social commission itself had “made a showing.” Had the people not appeared in front of the congress? Had they not come from the factories and fields, walked down the aisle, and stood before the assembly? Those that had come, had come not just to speak to the writers about the building of socialism. They had also come to exemplify it. They had taken to the stage in the Hall of Columns and stood there as icons of Soviet life. This too was “showing”—one that did not wait to be shown through the agency of the “delegates with membership cards,” but was showing itself on its own, from within itself.

Once again, after the scene from Panferov’s *Bruski* discussed in Chapter Two, we come upon the duality hidden behind the word “representation,” the duality between *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*, between “depicting” and “standing for,” or “embodying.” On one hand, we have a showing that shows something: the depicted object. It is transitive. The second is a showing as a pure “show.” It does not take us somewhere outside of itself, to a thing that we shall see. It is itself the thing that we shall see. The first showing is satisfied and extinguished when it gets to the object. The second is satisfied when it “gets” to the viewer. Its “object”—for it is not as

intransitive as it seems—is to possess its audience. Nowhere but in this possession does it prove successful *as* a show.

Not nearly everyone in the audience at the First Congress of Soviet Writers understood what was required of them. What were they supposed to do? What was their part in the production that was already under way: the cultural production of socialist realism. And, as a first order of business, how were they to react to the demand of the new people: what were they supposed to do in order to *show* these people? Because, after all, they were writers, members of the intelligentsia, living lives different from those of their potential heroes, many thought that it was a matter of getting closer to the new people, getting to know them more intimately, and depicting them from this intimate distance. As in the years prior to the congress, there were reproaches that echoed the old Russian theme of the intelligentsia's separation from the life of the masses.¹⁴⁶ In response, voices, some of them quite authoritative, prescribed a more involved and diligent study of the object. In his official report on the Statute of the Union of Soviet Writers, Pavel Iudin mandated:

The artist must study reality intently, carefully, and persistently, he must know the new man in detail, in all the particulars, his work, everyday life, soul, personal qualities, how he thinks, how he converses with his comrades, what he thinks about himself, what he sees in his dreams, how he loves and hates, how he cries

¹⁴⁶ “These days, every corner of the Soviet Union is saturated with unusual life—a kind of life that may provide material for a truly universal [literary] theme. Unfortunately, we do not see life, we do not study it sufficiently, and know it very little” (428).

“Our enormous country has been seized, from end to end, by the grandiose processes of building and transforming absolutely all aspects of life. Great discoveries of Soviet science and technology are taking place all around us. There is a serious flaw in our life as writers: we stand quite far from the intellectual life of our country, we still live boring, limited, and insufficiently social lives” (203).

“To study, read, people, the new people, is enormously difficult. [...] I am not only not familiar with the new [Soviet] man—I often *do not know, cannot do, cannot hear*[...]” (426; emphasis in the original).

and rejoices. Without this, the writer cannot become an “engineer of human souls.” (665)

Only for a brief initial moment this statement sounds like an invitation to a diligent empirical study. The moment is gone when we realize that we are in the Soviet Union of the 1930s, the last place in the world where the writer could be advised to be a mere observer of life (and certainly not by Iudin, a Party philosopher and one of the leading interpreters of Marxism during Stalinist times). We may also notice that no empirical acquaintance could possibly get to the depths of intimacy Iudin envisions (“what he sees in his dreams”).

How, then, can one attain this intimacy? How deeply into the thick of reality must one reach, before reality shows its real face? What is that optimal proximity at which the knowledge of reality becomes authentic and lends itself to truthful artistic syntheses? At what point in the asymptotic approach to the presence of “life itself” does one begin to see that presence truthfully, “in detail, in all the particulars”?

One thing is certain, and bears repeating: the desired point is not, as it had been earlier, the point of application of method. Since the first part of this study, since the culture of the 1920s, we have moved beyond this point. The first indication that the attainment of the “real” was no longer the provenance of (professedly) scientific hermeneutic was the controversy, at the beginning of the 1930s, centered on the literary theory of RAPP.

Even as their organization was being dismantled, the leaders of RAPP had continued to insist that the essential characteristic of Soviet literature is its ideologically superior vantage point upon the world: the so-called “dialectical-materialist method.” In preliminary meetings between writers and representatives of the Party’s Central Committee, this platform was rejected and the phrase “socialist realism” proposed (purportedly, by Stalin himself) as a more

appropriate description of the “method” of Soviet literature (Robin 38). This was more than just a scholastic squabble over words. It suggested a profound cultural shift. From now on, there was not going to be a mediatory instance (“vehicle”), through which the truth of reality would emerge from latency and manifest itself. It would do so on its own, out of itself.

This shift was implied in the first published mention of socialist realism, a statement by Ivan Gronskii, the head of the newly-formed Organizational Committee, quoted in the 23 May, 1932, issue of *Literaturnaia gazeta*: “The basic demand that we make on the writer is: write the truth, portray truthfully *our reality, which is in itself dialectic*” (qtd. Robin 39; emphasis added). By this, we should understand that no special apparatus is needed to extract the truth of life, for “our reality” itself makes this truth legible.¹⁴⁷ All that was needed was to “write” what has thus been rendered manifest. The sentence following the one just quoted, comes as an inference: “*Therefore*, the basic method of Soviet literature is the method of socialist realism” (39). In other words, socialist realism is the generalization of this kind of artistic practice for which no method is needed, insofar as it records a truth that has been made explicit already by the movement of life itself.

In Stalin’s inaugural, semi-legendary, proclamation of socialist realism, reportedly made two weeks earlier, during a meeting with writers at Gor’kii’s apartment, the same logic is articulated also structurally: “*If* an artist truthfully depicts our life, he *cannot but* notice and depict in it that which leads it to socialism. This exactly will be socialist art. This exactly will be socialist realism” (qtd. Ermolaev 145; emphasis added).¹⁴⁸ First comes the world, with its

¹⁴⁷ The question of life’s priority over the “bookish” knowledge of Marxism-Leninism, as a foundational trait in the theory of socialist realism, is treated in Ermolaev 154-57, 164-67.

¹⁴⁸ Panferov has reported a pronouncement by the leader similar to the one quoted above, in which Marxism is substituted for socialist realism, without altering the general conceptual structure: “You must understand that if a writer frequently and honestly reflects the truth of life he *cannot but* arrive at Marxism” (qtd. Ermolaev 167; emphasis added).

immanent truth, then the writer's contact with it, and only in the last instance, following a line of inevitability ("cannot but"), as a consequence or a point of arrival—the so-called "method" of socialist realism. This, of course, is none other than the concatenation discussed in Chapter Two, on the example of a moving story told by Gor'kii, through which the object arrives at the reflection proper to itself in the "stead" of its researchers. At that time, we were considering the general mechanism through which the truth of socialism "works." We are now considering the same mechanism, but with a view to the obligations this truth places upon the author. To phrase the question in accordance with the conceptualization of the cultural act advanced earlier: what does it mean to man this "stead," so that, in it, there would be the "one" who counts as a Soviet author?

It indeed appears that "his burden is light." As we established, no special knowledge or intuition is required of him prior to the encounter with the world. According to the words of the leader, all that is needed is sincerity. The person mirroring Stalin's role within the writers' community, Gor'kii, voiced the same imperative in his keynote address to the congress: "Only one thing is required of the person [in our country]: to be *honest* in his attitude toward the heroic work of creating a classless society" (14; emphasis added). Under ordinary circumstances, we would have no excuse to pause and ponder the meaning of such common phrases as "being honest" or "being sincere." But we are now in quite extraordinary circumstances, which give us reasons to doubt whether the sincerity intended by Stalin and Gor'kii is exactly what we have always understood by this word.

Sincerity, as we know it, presupposes something contained within (feelings, intentions, thoughts, etc.), which is not held in concealment, but is freely released into the open.¹⁴⁹ It is a

¹⁴⁹ It is worth remembering, at this point, that "sincerity," understood exactly in these traditional terms, was to become the slogan word for Thaw culture's attempt to veer off the course set by Stalinist socialist realism.

motion of letting out. But this is not at all what Stalin and Gor'kii had in mind. The sincerity they preached is a letting-in or, even better, letting-through. It is more akin to the eighteenth-century notion of sensibility: one's capacity to be affected by life in its various manifestations, to "resonate" with the meaning-emotion intrinsic to life's events, to be *moved*. In regard to Stalinist culture, we may say, in a preliminary way, that it is a matter of one's capacity to be "moved" (driven) by the truth or, which is the same thing, the "tendency," of "life itself." Rather than letting out a truth that may be held concealed, it is a matter of being affected by a truth that is coming out of concealment. As we now see, the optimal proximity to reality that Iudin and many others required, the proximity of clear artistic vision, is not at all to be measured with the yardstick of some expert knowledge or systematic observation, but by degrees of "sincerity."

When, in the same speech, Gor'kii complained that "we still poorly see reality" (14), he was blaming the predicament precisely on the dearth of such sincerity. The injunction he directed at his audience pivots on a verbal usage on which I would like to elaborate:

For the success of our common work, we must understand, feel [*prochuvstvovat'*], the fact that organized socialist labor in our country, the labor of half-literate workers and the primitive peasantry, has created, in a short period of time, a decade, colossal values...¹⁵⁰ The right evaluation of this fact would show us the cultural-revolutionary force of the teaching that unites the proletariat of the world.

(13)

"Feel," whose proper Russian equivalent is *pochuvstvovat'*, falls a little short of translating *prochuvstvovat'*. The latter denotes a different kind of relation to the object of sentiment. *Pochuvstvovat'* refers us to the moment a feeling is born, when an emotion emerges

¹⁵⁰ An almost identical phraseology is to be found in Bukharin's report to the congress: "We, USSR, are *the apex of the whole world*, the backbone of future humanity. We need to understand, think through, feel through [*prochuvstvovat'*], this [fact]" (498; emphasis in the original).

out of nothingness or ephemerality. It takes as a direct object this very emotion, whatever its name may be (“love,” “resentment,” “sadness,” etc.). By contrast, *prochuvstvovat'*, used in Russian much less frequently, directs us to an object that has nothing ephemeral about it. On the contrary, it is something that predates the exertion of feeling, a solid, pre-existent reality, an antecedent fact. To feel, in the sense of *prochuvstvovat'*, is not so much to experience a particular emotion, as to inhabit with emotion this pre-existent reality.

In the passage just quoted, Gor'kii spells out clearly for those in attendance the reality that needs to be infused with feeling: it is the “fact” of socialist construction. Given that the fact is already a fact, we may ask, what is to be gained from this additional operation? Can it be made more real, more present? Indeed, it can. When one opens up, “sincerely,” to the fact of socialism, a new level is reached. We already know what the qualitatively new moment is, and Gor'kii's words confirm this knowledge: through sincerity, one begins to see “the force of the teaching” on which the entire edifice stands; that is to say, one sees the power of this teaching to become reality; one sees that what was meant to be, *could not but* come to be, and so it is *indeed* coming to be, now and forever, amen!

The preceding is, of course, none other than the dialectic of seen-ness discussed in Chapter Two. Its two principal instances are: first, socialism as a merely empirical reality, as a bare and contingent “it exists”; this pedestrian reality, reality as factuality, is transcended where one sees that what appeared to exist just empirically, to merely be, is actually a coming-to-be of what has been predestined to occur. In the second instance we have the actual reality (*nastoiashchaia deistvitel'nost'*) of Stalinist socialism, its truth. Between the two, there is a mediatory space—the opening where something needs to be done, an opening in need of manning, in order for the truth to emerge. This is the position “where one sees that indeed...”

The manning of this opening produces, along with the sought-after truth, the “ones” of Stalinism, its subjects.

To these moments of the dialectic, rehearsed on earlier occasions, we have now added the chief prerequisite for filling the opening, for being a good “one”—a certain openness of being, the capacity to *prochuvstvovat'* the fact of socialism. To best render what this prerequisite means, the verb, I believe, should be in the passive voice. For, as we saw already, it is the world, not the artist, that has the active part. The former, not the latter, does the showing.

The Soviet dramatist possesses one small advantage, he is relieved of one small worry: he does not need to look for a hero. There is no need for him to light his torch and search in the secret nooks of life for man, the new man—the hero of our epoch.

The epoch came to his rescue. The secret of life stands *revealed*, *grandiloquently clear*. The hero is everywhere. (*Pervyi* 459; emphasis added)

The Soviet author does not need to light his torch and illuminate reality because reality is now itself the light of revelation: it is *beaming*. Shining this light more powerfully than anything else are the shiny, happy people, the heroes of socialism. Some of the writers speaking from the congress' rostrum testified to having been nearly blinded:

I want to look in the eyes of Soviet poetry's tomorrow. I want to look into the eyes of truth. This is very difficult. This is how great our time is, this is how *starkly bright and fierce* [*iarka i iarostna*] this truth is. This truth is what gave birth to us. (540; emphasis added)

[We ...] proved to be unprepared for a full-blooded poetic perception of the grandiose complexity and *blinding* simplicity of the reality that has come to be [*nastupivshei deistvitel'nosti*]. (537; emphasis added)

To be a Soviet writer means to be in possession of such *blinding* [*oslepitel'nyi*] material, the likes of which was not available to any writer, in any country or historical period. (278; emphasis added)

Because the light is already here, with us, all one needs to do is throw one's torch away and "let the light shine through." The imperative of sincerity, translated into the scopic register, requires that one open one's being to a point where it becomes translucent, porous, in relation to the light, so that it can "transmit" it without distortion or attenuation (as I pointed out earlier, what beams needs a transmitter). The verb that best describes this unusual operation is a synonym of *prochuvstvovat'*, only in the passive: *proniknut'sia*. It is one of those instances that showcase the charming subtleties of expression possible in Russian. The root verb, *proniknut'*, translates easily and quite accurately as "penetrate." But after it comes the reflexive particle, which changes everything. The semantic result is not "penetrating oneself," or "letting oneself be penetrated," or just "being penetrated." It is: through one's own activity to render oneself penetrable, to bring about the permeation of one's own being by something initially external (an emotion, the consciousness of something; respectively, *proniknut'sia chuvstvom...*, *proniknut'sia soznaniem o...*).

In this single word, I believe, we have a succinct answer to the question posed earlier: how is the Soviet author to achieve the intimate knowledge required for a proper representation of socialist reality and its exemplary inhabitants? The key to such intimacy lies in a particular position that the two partners—the author and the raw, unprocessed, reality—must assume. The

roles are reversed from the relation implied in the very name “author”: his role of actively manipulating the “material,” shaping it into a creation onto which he may place the seal of master and originator. We traced the beginnings of this reversal through the artistic theories of the 1920s. We can now witness its completion. He who by virtue of a cultural anachronism still calls himself author must now assume a position vis-à-vis the material such that he opens himself to the stealthy thrust of “life-itself”—a surrender in which his being will be possessed to the core. What was seen, in the previous cultural frame, as an immanent organization, principle, tectonic, etc., has now acquired the activity of an invasive force, which manifests itself exactly where it takes possession of the human subject. In that it “acts” him, this force proves to be real, enjoys presence.

If one is, indeed, possessed by this force, one sees clearly. Conversely, the inability to see should be attributed to a certain obdurateness of being and, ultimately, to “foreignness.” The distance between these two states of existence was covered in the emotional speech of the young writer Aleksandr Avdeenko. An abandoned child, he had had a difficult early life, riddled with violence, crime, and imprisonment. He was speaking of this past when he admitted: “My life was such that I looked at people and *did not see them*” (243; emphasis added). He interrupted abruptly the story about his past to refer to the moment when the pioneer choir had taken to the podium; it was as if his former, low life continued all the way to that memorable entrance and was terminated only by it: “We lived by the day, by the hour. But in that moment when the pioneers appeared on the congress’ podium, I felt a tremendous desire to live. And my thoughts ran not by decades, but by centuries. [...] Then, in front of me, the future *flashed, revealed itself [blesnulo, raskrylos’]*” (243; emphasis added). However, in the lobby, during the intermission, as Avdeenko was looking to share his enthusiasm with his colleagues, he was taken aback: “But

many of the writers were not shaken by the pioneers' demonstration. That was an offensive indifference. Indifference is the most terrifying thing" (243).

Avdeenko remembered a previous occasion on which he had been offended by the indifference of his colleagues. His mentor, Gor'kii, had told him of a new kind of blade that a Soviet scientist had invented: a blade that cannot be blunted, only sharpened. "He [Gor'kii] drew an entire picture of what awaits our economy and our life as a consequence of this invention. He became impassioned. I do not know whether he had ever been as happy or excited as in that moment" (243). When, afterward, Avdeenko asked other writers about the blade, it turned out that no one had heard of it; not only that: they were not even interested in learning about it (243). Gor'kii is the antipode of this obtuse nature:

Aleksei Maksimovich harbors a special hatred toward indifference. He has the ability to feel life [*umeet chuvstvovat' zhizn'*]. Once he was telling me that in our country labor is beginning to turn into art. He proved it with facts, examples. I left Gor'kii's house shaken by his passionate attitude toward life. It was uncomfortable for me to walk down the street: I thought that people would stop me and start asking me questions.

I felt that I had become smarter, as if I had read a dozen good books. I wanted to speak, live, dream just as wisely and profoundly, as he, Aleksei Maksimovich. No other writer has shaken me in such a way, from others I have not heard such speeches.

We lack this voracity toward life. We are either unwilling or unable to be voracious toward life's manifestations. (243)

What reads as a sickeningly syrupy profession of feelings, passing into a plea for sensitivity, is, in essence, really about something else. The ability to be moved by life, which Gor'kii exemplifies and which his protégé is happy to evidence as well as to eulogize, is a matter of emotion only because it is, first and foremost, a matter of belonging. Gor'kii sees better and farther because he feels deeper; but he feels deeper because he is organically rooted in Soviet reality. He does not even need to do what every other writer is urged to do: *proniknut'sia*. As it is, his being is already permeated by the tendency characteristic of socialist life. He is moved emotionally by life's "manifestations" because, in a deeper sense, he is driven by the driving force of this very life: *driven to see*.

What is it that Gor'kii sees from his privileged position? According to Avdeenko, Aleksei Maksimovich is able to "dream wisely and profoundly." He sees, for example, what will happen as a result of the new invention; he sees the future in which labor will become a creative endeavor. This "dreamy" futurist vision had a well-known name: revolutionary romanticism.¹⁵¹ It was only fitting that Gor'kii possessed the capacity for it to the extreme, for he was also its foremost exponent. In his keynote address at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, which, along with Zhdanov's speech, remains a *locus classicus* for the doctrine of revolutionary romanticism, he envisioned an epic style that would be supremely realistic precisely because it is also mythical. Myth, Gor'kii reasoned, is something imagined, invented. But if the invention provides a genuine synthesis and expression of what is actually present, then it is realistic (10). Revolutionary romanticism was just this paradoxical coalescence of the mythical and the realistic, which begins with available experience and, "following the logic of a hypothesis," arrives at the portrayal of the "desired and the possible" (10).

¹⁵¹ Zhdanov's oft-quoted pronouncement described revolutionary romanticism as a "combination of the most austere, most practical work with the greatest heroics and grandest perspectives" (4).

Much maligned in Western and post-Soviet Russian scholarship for having sanctioned illusionist “varnishing of reality,” the theory of revolutionary romanticism certainly cannot be accused of this one “sin”: that it appealed to the power of the writer’s imagination. It was, primarily, an appeal to belonging. About it we should say what was already said about socialist realism: this was not a certain method or style of “approaching reality,” of manipulating the raw data of experience. After all, as one speaker asserted, “the style of artistic work cannot be anything other than the style of life [*stil' zhizni*]” (382). To be “romantic,” then, did not mean to fantasize about the bright future after diligently reading Lenin and Marx, but to be organically one with the Soviet “style” of life—a life that was in itself a sort of a dream machine, inasmuch as in it the (foreseen) dreams of historical humanity were being fulfilled. Since Gor'kii *was* one with this device, he was naturally “moved” by it and, hence, just as naturally, the visions of the future appeared before his eyes.

Those for whom such natural belonging could not be assumed were in danger of succumbing to “naturalism”—the lifeless registration of what is merely there. Along with the second deadly sin of Stalinist culture, “formalism,” the naturalistic copying of reality was to be viewed as a sure sign of the artist’s severed connection with the fullness of Soviet life. To the lifeless exactitude of the copy was opposed the full-blooded truth of the “invention”: “Our work is not a mere imitation, an exact registration, but an invention that emerges from the *closest and most intense connection to reality*, a reality that gives rise to the possibility of being that could give dramatic works the character of a prediction, a foretelling, a prospective plan” (*Pervyi* 460; emphasis added). Decoding playwright Aleksei Faiko’s awkwardly phrased pronouncement, we come to realize, first, that to him “invention” does not mean some unencumbered flight of the imagination. The flight is very much restrained in that it aims, optimally, at an objective

prognosis—an advance knowledge of what *cannot but* take place. Second, we see that the act of prognostication does not begin with the subject, the author. It begins with the “reality” that engenders a unique “possibility of being.” The (socio-historical) being in question possesses the unique ability to lay bare and render manifest. Only to the extent to which the writer is part of this being, it imparts to his works the “character of a prediction,” etc., etc. In that case, in his writing, this being would prognosticate.

Criticizing along similar lines the inability of some writers to provide powerful artistic expressions of the world in which they lived, Faiko’s colleague, Vladimir Kirshon, attributed the problem to a disorientation characteristic of the present day. Life was changing swiftly and dramatically; what was current yesterday was found to be obsolete today; new phenomena sprung up incessantly from the fabric of Soviet reality. For many writers, the impression was overwhelming; “they wander through [life’s] events like blind people” (405). As a defense strategy against the onrush of this rich and powerful life, which strikes them as chaotic, they take to the path of naturalism: “photographing the present reality, they want to hide behind the photographic depiction their attitude toward this reality” (405). To these people, who covered up their blindness with the exactitude of the copy, Kirshon gave this assurance:

What takes place in our country is *not chaos, not an accumulation of random occurrences*, no—this is an expression of the internal laws of historical development, which lie at the foundation of events, the laws of scientific Marxism, which are embodied in tactics and strategy—our Party’s general plan.

As it is being implemented, this plan itself becomes a historical factor. On the basis of the Party line in the execution of this extraordinary historical plan,

there take place not just foreseen processes of the socialist transformation of life, but also ones that have been elicited and organized by our Party.

In our country *there are no events that occur by accident*. There is diversity in the unity of a single line.

The task of the writer is, first and foremost, to *feel this line organically*. (405; emphasis added)

This is an opportune moment to recall the words of Trotsky quoted earlier in this study, which, similarly, sought to dispel the seeming chaos of historical happening with an assurance that pointed confidently to the “iron formulas” of “revolutionary algebra.”¹⁵² At first glance, the two statements seem to be articulating the same meaning. In fact, the difference between what they say is radical, paradigmatic, marking the distinction between two different cultures.

Trotsky’s statement says, essentially, “I am through what I know”: the method of historical materialism gives us knowledge of the intractable laws of historical development, turning the apparent chaos into an ordered picture; as a revolutionary, I am guided by this picture, etc. Stalinist culture speaks differently, as a matter of fact, in reverse: “I know through what I am.” Such is the logic underlying the quoted passage: if you were to be truly Soviet, you would feel organically the immanent tendency of our life, and, hence, be able to behold the picture of perfect order and unswerving direction through the apparent chaos of events and phenomena.

But this means that the theatrical stage, the page, and the canvass have to somehow become isotopic with the podium in the Hall of Columns, which, for its part, is isotopic with the stage on which life does its own showing. Expressed differently, the motion of painting or writing must become absolutely unassertive, ephemeral, so that it can easily be “moved” by the grand gesture of self-revelatory life. Is not this the implication we should read in statements like

¹⁵² See p. 220.

this one, made by Gronskaa a couple of months before the Congress: “The direction of historical development, the outcome of the struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, is now *drawing itself out* [vyrisovyvaetsia] sufficiently clearly before the artist” (212; emphasis added)? The “drawing” mentioned here is not an artistic activity proper. It is, rather, the drawing of that absolutely straightforward and determinate line of which Kirshon speaks, the line that lets no event fall out of line with necessity and inevitability. It takes place on a surface that we, usually, do not consider contiguous with the surface on which the artist draws. And yet, the peculiarity of socialist realism, as a cultural practice, consists precisely in the attempt to splice these two surfaces together, as if they were one. The first kind of drawing, the drawing that depicts, is made a function of the second—the drawing that gives direct embodiment, manifests, and fulfills. Any line of depiction must issue forth from that other line, which the author is advised to feel organically.

This is the extent to which, with socialist realism, we find ourselves beyond the traditional understanding of representation. This is also the extent to which we find ourselves outside the notion of authorship. We now see that to be a Soviet author—changing only slightly Stalin’s previously quoted definition—means to have depicted truthfully; but this means to have seen, which—and here the contradiction is already apparent—means to have been penetrated and possessed by the force of socialism, and thus, to have been *made to see*.

This force counts as real or, as I previously phrased it, enjoys erection, to the extent to which “one,” in our case, the Soviet writer, proves amenable to it. Both words, “prove” and “amenable,” require additional elaboration. The former is meant to resonate with the peculiar logic of proof operative at the Moscow show trials. As noted, the court sought not so much to prove the guilt of the accused, as to demonstrate the workings of a “tendency” (in fact, the

former proof was subsumed by the latter). Ideally, the accused would have been able to show themselves, in their words and behavior, as being irresistibly driven by this inexorable tendency. Similarly, at the Writer's Congress, the writers had to show that they were, indeed, those who they were supposed to be—beings irresistibly driven to clarity by a force that possessed them to the core, but which was, nevertheless, distinct from them.

In the concrete setting of the Hall of Columns, this force was acting concretely as the force of exhibition. On the podium, right *before* the writers, it was demonstrating in concrete human forms that socialism had, indeed, become reality, since it was, indeed, producing a new breed of man, a new attitude toward labor, new forms of ethics, etc. And so, in this performance, everything happened just as Gronskii's words had described it: "drawing itself out sufficiently clearly *before* the artist" was the "direction of historical development." In saying that writers had to prove "amenable" to this force of exhibition, I mean, quite literally: to be able to adopt a disposition of elated resignation analogous to an "Amen!" Since it was the force, and not the artist, who did the essential showing, for the latter there was little left to do than show that his being is not opaque to the show that showed. Verbalized, his attitude had to be something like this: "Yes, now I see! Indeed, it has come to pass *before* me! And so, I let it be just as it was meant to be; I let it draw itself out and present itself just as it has been drawn in heaven.

Amen!"¹⁵³

This disposition was captured effectively in Pasternak's words that serve as an epigraph to this study: "Proletarian dictatorship is not enough to influence culture. For this, a true figural hegemony [*plasticheskoe gosподstvo*] is needed: a hegemony that would speak through me without my knowing it and even against my will. I do not feel this" (qtd. *Pervyi* 175). There is

¹⁵³ Our heaven refers, of course, to the celestial heights in which the objectivity of the Marxist-Leninist "scientific" analysis is re-inscribed as the effective force of destiny that rules Soviet society.

no doubt that the hegemony to which Pasternak wished to be subjected is homologous with the force of socialism as a force of concrete and true showing. And his desire for a “ventriloquized” expression, unconscious and unwilling, gives us a variation on the desire to be unconditionally driven to see. We are also reminded of the psalmic refrain, “Into your hands [...] I commend my spirit,” in which redemption also blends seamlessly with surrender. The “Amen!” implied in both utterances could be imagined as a certain letting-go whereby one’s ontological density decreases, a self-induced ephemeralization of one’s being, so it can be “moved” more easily by the force of truth (“For You shall redeem me, Lord of truth”).

Pasternak made the pronouncement in 1925, during the NEP period, but he was reminded of it during the congress by one of the speakers, A. Lezhnev. The main theme of Lezhnev’s speech was the theme discussed in Chapter Two: the radical conversion of the old intelligentsia in the years of Stalin’s cultural revolution. The transformation, he argued, consisted not in the writers’ mere acceptance of the new social order, but, much more substantially, in their changed worldview (177). The latter he attributed precisely to the realization of Pasternak’s “real figural hegemony” (176). When it came time for him to speak, Pasternak, in his own words, supported Lezhnev’s conviction. The power for which he had been waiting in vain in 1925, the one that bypasses the consciousness and will of the author on its way to an artistic articulation, was finally making itself felt; its effects were palpable even within the official enclosures of the Hall of Columns. One of these effects was the birth of a new poetic language:

For twelve days we were have been united by the dizzying bliss of the fact that this high poetic language was being born on its own in our conversation with our present day, with the present day of people who had cut off the anchor of private

property and were freely soaring, floating, whirling, in the space of the biographically conceivable. [...]

The poetic language of which I reminded you sounded the loudest in the speeches of the people with the most decisive vote: the delegates without membership cards, the members of the delegations that had come to visit us. In all these cases, the poetic language reached such power, that it forced apart the bounds of reality and transported us to that realm of the possible, which in the socialist world is also the realm of the necessary. (549)

This realm is, of course, the provenance of the aforementioned revolutionary romanticism. We need to emphasize here again the way in which it is reached: by a “transport” that, unlike in Romanticism proper, does not begin with an interior ecstasy, before extending into a poetic presentation of an external world. This one begins with the self-presentation of an objectively existing world, which through the pure power of this suddenly manifest presence takes possession of the poet and transports him into an eye-opening vision of the “possible, [...] which is also [...] the necessary.”

Pasternak went on to sketch briefly but passionately a new understanding of poetry and poetic practice:

What is poetry, comrades, if such is its birth before our eyes? Poetry is prose: prose not in the sense of someone’s collected prose works, but prose itself, the voice of prose, prose in action, not in paraphrase. Poetry is the language of the organic fact, i.e., the fact that has living consequences. [...] Poetry is nothing but this: pure prose in its transferable intensity [*v perevodnoi napriazhennosti*]. (549)

socialist-realist texts will be produced follows the dialectic of seen-ness, which was rehearsed by analogy with the exhibitionistic scene. The analogy can now be extended, so that it comes full circle: the moment in which the penis is reflected in the “eyes wide open,” the moment enabling its erection, is analogous to the moment in which the “prose” of reality turns into poetry. It seems that this is a “natural,” immanent process, which does not need the presence of the writer. It seems that the words that “sound like a poem” do so out of themselves and by themselves, and that the writers sitting in the audience are nothing but audience. What good could they possibly do when faced with a life that spontaneously turns into poetry?¹⁵⁵

However, even a life that spontaneously turns into poetry still needs an external “turning point.” In the exhibitionistic act, this external point of reflection is the passer-by. In the cultural act of socialist realism, this external point of reflection is the artist. Expressed more accurately, in the proper order of realization: he shall be a Soviet artist who comes to the point *in front of which* the organic fact of life shall bare itself. In other words, first comes the open “stead,” where the laying-bare awaits its satisfaction, and only then—the “one” who comes and actually stands there. The “one” is what comes out (figures out) of manning that opening.

At the congress, this topological arrangement was realized as follows: there was, on one side, the procession of triumphant and radiant life; across from it, corresponding generally to the place from which the audience was watching this show, was the place where the Soviet writer was supposed to appear and stand as just such a “one.” This moment would come—speaking here conceptually and figuratively, rather than referentially and literally—when someone stood up and, from that spot, said something along the lines of “Yes, *now* I see, indeed.” As we saw, Avdeenko made this proclamation almost literally. This was also the essence of Pasternak’s

¹⁵⁵ This impression was captured in Vladimir Ermilov’s frequently quoted equation, “The beautiful is our life” (“Prekrasone—eto nasha zhizn”).

speech and the overarching thesis of Lezhnev's, as the latter chronicled the short biography of the Soviet writer. This is also what we should read in the following words of Babel: "The first scaffolding is being removed from the edifice of socialism. *Even the most shortsighted can now see the outlines of this edifice*, its beauty. And we are all witnesses of the fact that our entire country has been enraptured by a powerful feeling of sheer physical happiness" (279; emphasis added). But nowhere was this onset of vision expressed more engagingly than in Iurii Olesha's highly crafted oratory, which, in the general agreement of those present, provided the dramatic and rhetorical climax of the Congress' proceedings.

Olesha narrated the story of his personal transformation, which sounded more like a story of religious conversion, cast in terms of blindness and sight. It began with the publication, in 1927, of his novella *Envy* [*Zavist'*], which the proletarian wing had met with harsh criticism, mostly on account of the main hero, Nikolai Kavalerov. An unmistakable descendant of Dostoevsky's underground man, Kavalerov exemplified the bystander of the revolution, resentful of the ethical vigor, psychological integrity, and bristling vivacity of the new social world. In him, the proletarian critics saw a reactionary creation, a reflection of Olesha's own personality; Kavalerov looked at the world with the eyes of his creator (or rather, as we shall see shortly, his creator looked at the world with the eyes of his hero). Fully conscious of the autobiographical connection, Olesha was that much more hurt to hear his hero being called "a lowlife and a nonentity" (235). To his mind, *Envy* was where his artistic vision had been at its clearest and richest; but lo, what he considered to be clarity and richness had turned out to be blindness and misery. At this point, the story acquires the distinct tone of a parable. In the parable, Olesha imagines himself as a beggar: "There I am, superfluous, vulgar, and insignificant. [...] I am standing on the steps in a pharmacy, I beg for handouts, and my name is 'writer'" (235). The

beggar-writer roams the countryside for years, until one day he finds himself in an open field on a bright, crisp morning. At the edge of the field, near a forest, stands an old, crumbling wall. In it, there is an opening, an arched doorway: “I look through it and see unusual greenery... Maybe goats walk here. I step over the threshold and enter; then I look at myself and see that this is youth: youth has returned” (235).

What is the meaning of this miracle? Whence youth, all of a sudden? And what is this magic threshold that the beggar crosses? The speaker himself provided keys to understanding the allegory. Harkening to the words of his critics, Olesha had “taken it personally”; he had thought that the distorted vision is *his*, that it was somehow innate in his being. Hence, the self-image of a worthless lowlife, which tormented him for years. The miraculous transformation corresponds to the moment the writer finally understood that the problem is not in him: “I understood that it is not about me, but about the world around me” (235). Everything changes when he realizes that he is not the one who generates the image of the world; he is just the site of seeing. Representations, images, come from the “world around” and enter him. Kavalero had been one such image, a visitor from a former, “distorted” world, who had taken possession of his author’s self. But a new world is already in the making: “All this time the country was getting younger. There are already youths of seventeen in whose minds there is nothing of the old world” (236). All the writer has to do is *proniknut'sia*—he must open himself up to these beings and the being that has given birth to them:

I was peeking through the magic arc, but could not understand the most important thing: I could not understand that I believe in the youth of the country, that it is not my youth I want to bring back, but to see the youth of the country, i.e., of the new people. *Now I see them.* [...] This is how the miracle happened of which I

had dreamt while looking through the magic arc. This is how youth came back to me. (236; emphasis added)

The magic arc of Olesha's allegory, then, is not unlike the line that separates the audience from the podium in the Hall of Columns. It is the imaginary membrane of the world through which one passes in order to cease "representing" and begin the movement of showing wherein it is he who is being shown the way. On this side of the arc, the writer sees from within himself, "subjectively." On the other side, he sees, so to speak, "from without," he sees because he partakes of seen-ness—the general stuff from which the cultural world of Stalinism is made, through which it beams. The symbolic moment of going through the doorway is none other than the moment of this partaking: the writer takes the part allotted to him in the production of clarity, which, in a broader sense, is the cultural production called "socialist realism."

Because this is how the act of socialist realism unfolds, we cannot fail to notice that manning is prior to "man" (in our case, the Soviet man). Stalinist culture makes this explicit, lays it bare for us, when it stipulates, in a paradoxical fashion: "If you were one of us, truly Soviet, then you would see that indeed..." In this stipulation, voiced not by this or that particular person or institution, but, implicitly, by Stalinism as a whole, we find a particular instantiation of the call that calls to truth, while also calling to identity: what I designated as mattering. And yet, it is a highly peculiar instantiation, which puts the proverbial cart in front of the horse. At least since Descartes' "Cogito ergo sum," we are used to the concatenation in which doing precedes being. It is customary for us to think that it is through doing that we determine our being. And when Marx proclaimed that being determines consciousness, he did not in the least seek to invert this concatenation, but, rather, to transpose it onto a different plane from the one instituted by

Descartes and broadened by German idealism. Marx gave priority to one kind of doing (material activity) over another (thinking), but foundational to his endeavor was still the idea that man makes and remakes his image, even if this creative power has existed, for most of man's history, in the unrecognizable, alienated form of external objectivity.

In the cultural world that saw itself as the living fulfillment of Marx's anticipations, it became possible to invert the order and place being before doing. Here doings are manifestations of axiomatic "tendencies." Deeds are where being eventually registers, rather than where it is first shaped. Real-life actions are credited with no more than the ability to "act out" what is contained, originally and exhaustively, in the definition of being. Because it is not first defined by actual doing, being appears as an empty slot, a role that awaits an actor who will man it, so that it can play itself out. Consider the following passage from an article in the journal *Bolshevik*: "Shock workers unmask attempts by pseudo-shock workers [*lzheudarniki*] to over-fulfill the norm at the expense of quality" (Rubinshtein 62). For a moment, we might think that the sentence refers to the witnessed actions of real people. The illusion is dispelled by subsequent passages like this one: "The kolkhoz farmer, having become a shock-worker, *cannot be indifferent* toward the problems in his brigade, in the kolkhoz as a whole. Shock work, *by its very essence*, eliminates this indifference inherited from the [period of] fragmented private farming" (63; emphasis added). Here we have the (ideal) character of the shock worker, *as presupposed* by the essence of socialist labor, and not a description of some actually existing state of affairs. The present tense in which "shock workers unmask attempts" is a uniquely Soviet temporality wherein the empty slot of being acts and enjoys presence independently of any living bodies that may serve to fill it. It is the temporality proper to the existence mandated by the implacable *cannot-but*.

An identical kind of existence is mandated to the Soviet writer. Like the shock worker who cannot but care for socialist property, the writer, because he is Soviet, cannot but see.¹⁵⁶ For those who come to stand in this open stead, the task of writing takes on a characteristic, tantalizing duality. As it portrays, writing must demonstrate. The legibility of the word and the created world must be, at the same time, the legibility of proof. For in the completed text it will be read whether the person writing is truly one of us. And so, with its proper motion of showing a world, of giving a picture, representation must strive to fill out the picture into which it has been inserted beforehand, by which it has been axiomatically presupposed.

¹⁵⁶ In the same journal, several issues later, we find the following passage, whose resonance with the just-quoted characterization of shock workers is difficult to miss: “Our Soviet writer, describing conscientiously, artistically truthfully, the real relations between classes and people in the USSR, *cannot possibly* come into contradiction with his own sympathies, provided he is not a conscious or unconscious agent of the remnants of liquidated capitalist elements” (Kantor 90-91; emphasis added). The idea that one can be an unconscious agent of capitalism should not sound too paradoxical; such possibility was accounted for in the definition of the objective enemy discussed earlier. From here, by conceptual symmetry, there arises the intriguing possibility that one could also be an unconscious devotee of socialism.

CHAPTER FIVE: LIFE HAPPENS

“The steps of a good man are ordered by God, and he delighteth in his way.”

Psalms 37: 23

In the previous chapter, I presented the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers as a complex performance in which it is shown that the agents of representation, that is, these very Soviet writers, are not really agents, but rather pieces in a larger show, wherein they are “moved” by the force of self-revelatory immanence. And yet, I take it as understood that the case of the author is an instance in the broader problematic of subjecthood; and that the motion of being moved to vision is an instance of a more general movement that reaches beyond the sphere of artistic work. On the following pages, I would like to extend the argument, no matter how tentatively, into this broader thematic.

I will advance my thesis by analyzing one of the most remarkable epic narratives of Stalinism: the film *The Vow* [Kliatva] of 1946, directed by Mikhail Chiaureli (1894-1974), who collaborated on the script with writer Petr Pavlenko (1899-1951). I contend that the film shows, from the movie screen, the same thing the Congress showed: that agency does not issue forth originally from the action of subjects, but only “registers” in them. Yet the stage on which *The Vow* makes this apparent is the grand stage of Soviet history. And the cultural act, which appeared so far in the limited perspective of writing, is given in Chiaureli and Pavlenko’s story in the generalized form of any human “doing.” If the Writers’ Congress stages the “making of

the Soviet writer,” *The Vow* stages the making of the Soviet subject in a cinematic fantasy whose generic territory encompasses both the modern historical epic and the fairy tale. Stalin’s central and functionally unique role in the plot will provide me with an opportunity to address in a sketchy, but I hope suggestive, theorization the phenomenon known under the misnomer “cult of personality.”

The Vow is one of four films by Chiaureli chronicling the life and heroic deeds of the Leader. The other three in the series are: *The Great Dawn* [Velikoe Zarevo; 1938], *The Fall of Berlin* [Padenie Berlina; 1949], and *The Unforgettable 1919* [Nezabyvaemyi 1919; 1951]. They all can be classified under the peculiarly Soviet genre category of the “historico-revolutionary film” (*istoriko-revoliutsionnyi fil'm*), in its typically Stalinist variation characterized by the all-decisive participation of the political and military leadership of the country in the epic events unfolding on the screen. The four films also share a main narrative device: the biographic journey of an ordinary hero adjoins and then follows Stalin’s path for a certain stretch of climactic historical time.¹⁵⁷ But it is in *The Vow* and, to some extent, in *The Fall of Berlin*—the two scripts written by the team of Chiaureli and Pavlenko¹⁵⁸—that this device is radicalized, attaining a new structural quality and introducing a new level of meaning. This new structural quality and level of meaning will be the focus of my analysis.

The Vow opens on a stormy winter day in early January, 1924. It is just days before Lenin’s death (21 January, 1924). At the beginning of the story, however, we are far from Moscow and from the grand stage of political history. We are on the banks of the Volga, in the

¹⁵⁷ *The Great Dawn* is set on the eve of the October Revolution, during the last days of Russia’s participation in World War I. Next in the chronological sequence is *The Unforgettable 1919*, which follows Stalin through the years of the Civil War, focusing particularly on his leadership during the defense of Petrograd. Broadest in its historical scope, *The Vow* covers the years from 1924 to 1945. *The Fall of Berlin* mythologizes the Leader’s role in the Great Patriotic War of 1941-1945.

¹⁵⁸ Chiaureli’s screenwriting partner for *The Great Dawn* was Georgii Tsagareli, while on *The Unforgettable 1919* he collaborated with Vsevolod Vyshinskii (on whose original play the script was based) and Aleksandr Filimonov.

little provincial town of Tsaritsyn, and in the company of “little,” common people. Stepan, an old Bolshevik, is returning home from a trip to the countryside, where he has been investigating the crimes committed by kulaks sabotaging the organization of kolkhoz collectives. As he is walking through the snowy fields outside Tsaritsyn with his daughter, Ol'ga, Stepan tells her that it was on this very field that in 1919 he and Comrade Stalin fought against the Whites. His reminiscences are interrupted by an ambush: the kulak “elements” Stepan has been prosecuting have come to take their revenge. He falls on the very field where in 1919 he and Comrade Stalin... It is a desolate spot, covered with snow and swept by stormy winds. It is a blank spot, seemingly.

Back in town, Stepan's family home is the scene of a heated debate on the current political situation in the country. His younger son, Sergei, a student and devout follower of Lenin and Stalin, is arguing with his friend, Anatolii, whose stereotypically Jewish features betray his alien nature even before he begins praising Trotsky and Bukharin; moderating the shouting match that soon ensues is the older son, Aleksandr, an unemployed and politically uncommitted engineer, who devotes his ample free time to drawing blueprints of buildings that will never be built. At this point, having just witnessed Stepan's tragic end, we could be tempted to anticipate a typical unfolding of the subsequent story, with the younger, more “conscious” son, taking over the main role in the film by also taking over the symbolic place vacated by his father. If such is the case, our anticipations would prove wrong. One of the biggest surprises the film has in store for us concerns precisely the category of “hero” and the qualifications it presupposes. As we will learn in the further unfolding of the story, being conscious is not among these qualifications.

While Sergei's role in the film will be hardly more than episodic, the spotlight of a main character will fall on his mother, Varvara. At the moment we meet her, she is a no-one: a simple housewife, completely absorbed in the prose of her quotidian life, completely oblivious to any concern that goes beyond this parochial realm. While the young men are arguing about politics, their mother is—where else?—in the kitchen, fretting about the return of her husband and paying not the least attention to the discussion. From the next scene, however, her status will change suddenly. Ol'ga rushes in and delivers the tragic news. The family rushes out to find Stepan expiring on the sledge that has brought him home for the last time. In a last dying effort, he hands Varvara a letter and instructs her to deliver it personally to Lenin. Chiaureli does not tell us what is in the letter, not yet. At the moment, this is a white sheet of paper, a blank spot.

We will find out what is in the letter only when, having reached Gorki—Lenin's residence during the last stage of his illness—Varvara finds herself amidst a group of modern-day pilgrims, representatives of various Soviet nationalities, who, like herself, have come to visit Lenin and report to him their grievances.¹⁵⁹ As she reads to them Stepan's letter, we discover that it is a description of the various kulak crimes of which Stepan has been informed during his last trip. At the same time, we begin to discover something different, something unexpected and quite miraculous: as Varvara reads, the people who have gathered around her start to recognize, in her words, the stories each of them has come to tell. The events described in the letter she carries are identical with the events the pilgrims carry indelibly in their minds. This is the first of several instances in the film when miracles spring from (seemingly) blank spots.

The pilgrims soon learn the sad news: Lenin is dead. As they make their way to Moscow, we are offered a glimpse behind the scenes of the Soviet political theater. While

¹⁵⁹ Apart from the association with pilgrimage, the episode is modeled, quite consciously, I believe, on the traditional image of the Russian peasant appearing before the Tsar Himself as a last resort in the pursuit of social justice.

Kamenev and Bukharin are scheming, Stalin is taking a pensive stroll through the park in Gorki. In a moment of unbearable sublimity and inimitable statuesque sentimentality, he comes to a lonely park bench, the mere sight of which brings back to his mind the haloed image of Lenin. This—as every Soviet viewer is supposed to know—is the same bench on which Lenin and Stalin are shown seated in a famous photograph of 1922.¹⁶⁰ We now see it covered with a thick cover of white snow. It is another desolate place, a blank spot.

Several scenes later, this private sublimity has its public, and no less sublime, outpouring: on Red Square Stalin pronounces the Vow. He swears to fulfill Lenin's symbolic will. The multitude gathered in the square instantly recognizes the man speaking in the distance (without a megaphone), just as they instinctively sense the sacred charge of the moment. Thousands of hands holding Party membership cards go up and thousands of voices second Stalin's each time he pronounces solemnly "We swear!" As if the sacramental public spectacle were not enough to convince us that Stalin has the mandate of the people as Lenin's true heir, the scene is capped off by a final, blatantly tautological gesture: the enormous crowd parts, giving way to Varvara, who approaches Stalin and hands him the letter from her husband. Intended for Lenin, it reaches, quite "naturally," his rightful successor. By the time it does, it has ceased being the letter of a single person, from a single place: miraculously collected on this white piece of paper are now the voices of all Soviet people and places.

Participants in the public ritual, along with all the rest, have been our pilgrims: Varvara (who has made it an explicit point to swear on behalf of her entire family, as if knowing in advance the beneficial effects this will produce in the future), the Ukrainian Baklan, the

¹⁶⁰ This massively reproduced photograph remains the only visual evidence hinting at any kind of close personal relationship between Lenin and Stalin. Needless to say, it was heavily exploited for purposes of propaganda throughout the Stalinist period.

Georgian Georgii, and the Uzbek Turgunbaev. This miniature model of Soviet society¹⁶¹ is bound together—as the authoritative voice of *Pravda* remarked soon after the film’s release (“Kliatva” 3)—by the binding power of the vow. By the same power they are elevated in status: in the short course of a few years, which the film traverses almost instantaneously, we see them promoted to the ranks of *znatnye liudi*, the aristocracy of Stalinist socialism—those very beings I called earlier “shiny, happy people.” Of course, by these credentials, they also figure as the main characters in the film narrative.

There is no motivating transition between these two states of existence. Varvara and her children, Baklan, Georgii, and Turgunbaev, each move from zero to hero without really accomplishing anything special. The transformation is really not their doing. As a matter of fact, the doing comes after. First comes being, in this case, *being there*. Our heroes’ “elevation” happens not through their knowledge, abilities, even less accomplishments: it happens through the mere fact that they all have been there, on Red Square, at the time of Stalin’s vow.

That this is indeed the case is shown to us in a small episode inserted within the larger scene of the vow. The camera enters into the crowd to find Turgunbaev, who is visibly disconcerted. While all the hands around him go up, his stays down. To the puzzled Baklan he explains: “I don’t know what it is. I feel strength, and then it’s gone...” He, an illiterate peasant without a Party card, feels unworthy of the great scene at which he is present. To this his companion responds by drawing a striking verbal image: “Take the vow! Let us all take it: you, and I, and everybody else. *You have nowhere to fall*” (“Tebe i upast’ nekuda”).

Turgunbaev knows what makes him weak, but he does not know what makes him strong. The latter “something” is some mysterious, invigorating force that supports and uplifts him, so

¹⁶¹ Chiaureli and Pavlenko will redeploy the formula in *The Fall of Berlin*, where we meet a multinational family of Red-Army soldiers fronted by the Russian, Ivan.

that there is nowhere for him to fall; it is strangely reminiscent of those angelic hands that would not allow the Son to fall and dash His foot against a stone (Luke 4.11). Just as miraculously, the illiterate Turgunbaev will be uplifted to a place of distinction in Soviet society. But for this to happen, he must first raise his hand. This he must do not *out* of his convictions and knowledge, i.e., not *out* of his consciousness. All his consciousness can tell him at this moment is that he is an insignificant, illiterate peasant, with little or no awareness of even the basic tenets of Marxism-Leninism. But, as we ascertained already, first with the example of the Institute employees, then with the example of writers, this fact matters very little in Stalinist culture. Consciousness is subsequent. It belongs to the dimension of the effect. First comes the gesture of partaking, or belonging. And so, Turgunbaev raises his hand, and pronounces, together with the rest, “We swear.” The gesture can be called “somnambolic” because it is not guided by prior knowledge and will. Quite in reverse: knowledge and will first spring *from* it. Only after—and as a direct result of—his taking the vow, will Turgunbaev become a conscious builder of socialism. All takes place in the paradoxical sequence specified in Pascal’s prescription: “Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe.”¹⁶²

We see how belief is born out of somnambolic motions in the extended episode showing the construction of the Stalingrad tractor plant—itsself part of the epic saga of Stalin’s Five-Year Plans. Initially, the central figure here is Varvara’s older son, Aleksandr. And, let it be said in advance, his centrality is in proportion to his un-consciousness. The grandiose project furnishes him with a long-awaited opportunity to transfer his engineering visions from the walls of his room, where they have been hanging as mere drawings on paper, to the world outside. But at first, like Turgunbaev, Aleksandr is of little faith. When he hears of the plans to build the

¹⁶² See p. 182. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (36-40) Slavoj Žižek has revisited this paradoxical *topos* of faith and used it as a support for a persuasive rethinking of ideology in the direction first indicated by Althusser.

enormous plant on the bank of the Volga, he explodes: “Where?! On these marshes?!” The film cuts promptly to a shot of Stalin standing on the very same bank, pointing to these very same marshes, and confidently instructing the architects and engineers surrounding him that construction should indeed commence on this spot. One of the group, Aleksandr listens carefully to the Leader’s words but continues not to understand: “Still, why on *this* spot?!”

The enigma so impenetrable for the cerebral engineer is solved quickly in the simple words of a simple man. Varvara’s brother, Ermilov, the figure of comic relief in the film, spells out what every more or less attentive viewer has realized already: that this empty spot, seemingly unfit for any constructive erection, is the same spot where Stalin defeated the Whites in 1919; moreover, it is a place marked with the historical presence of Ivan IV, Stepan Razin, and Emelian Pugachev; in short, it is a sacred place.

We see Aleksandr next when construction is already under way. He does not appear to have been fully possessed by faith, not yet. But, by now, this has ceased to matter. What is important is that he is there, he is standing in that spot. His motto now is: “We must work, not wonder!” (“Rabotat’ nado, a ne udivliat’sia!”). The meaning can be translated, or extended, as “We must work, instead of analyzing.” The only one who still analyzes is Anatolii. Rational analysis is the meta-position, which here means: the position of those who do not belong. Because they do not belong, they can never believe. And so, even as he half-heartedly participates in the construction work, Anatolii continues to mumble that the project is nothing but a crazy fantasy, and that the Party leadership has lost touch with reality (when the plant is nearly completed, we will see him setting fire to one of the facilities; driven by his alien nature, he has found himself, quite naturally, in the ranks of the “wreckers”).

If we agree that human labor consists of more than the menial operations performed, that it is not, in other words, only physical, but always also symbolic, permeated with meaning (whether or not consciously accessible to those who labor), let us ask about the labor through which the Stalingrad tractor plant is erected in the film. What does this kind of work involve? Beyond the film plot, the question aims, of course, at the general plot through which the cultural act of Stalinism unfolds, giving rise to the erection called “socialism.” Taking Aleksandr as our model (but remembering also the episode with Turgunbaev), we should describe this work as follows: to happen to be in the *right* spot and, when there, to *let go*; to labor in such a way that the effort produces material results just as it induces a self-forgetfulness of sorts, an abandon. In this effort, one abandons, first of all, the possibility of grasping things in advance, as well as the possibility that one’s actions should be guided by such a preliminary grasp. Having let go, one can now be “moved,” driven by the power that dormantly subtends the empty spot, which is also the right spot. Through its agency, the seemingly fantastic project is fulfilled and the erection happens.

Through the same power, human life also “happens.” If the film shows one thing clearly, and absolutely consciously, it is this: that one cannot author one’s own deeds and, consequently, one’s being. They happen *to* him, and may even surprise him at times (and there is nothing surprising about this: after all, socialism is supposed to bring out what is best in being human, meaning—previously untapped, slumbering potentials; thus, there appears the possibility that each Soviet person could be caught unawares by the deeds socialism elicits from the depths of this person’s own humanity). Like Varvara, like Turgunbaev, really, like all other “heroes” in the film, Aleksandr begins as no-one and becomes “someone” through achievements that are not really his. Since this is the same mechanism we observed in previous chapters, we can reiterate

the earlier formula: in his stead the heroic work of socialist construction is being done. The stark appeal of Pavlenko and Chiaureli's cinematic narrative comes from the fact that in it we see "in plain view" what I previously elaborated only as an abstract, theoretical, proposition: we see the "stead," the place where one is supposed to be standing, being demonstratively empty, separate from, and antecedent to anyone who may actually come to stand there. In this particular episode, it is a construction site. More broadly, it is the entire area of Stalingrad, the former Tsaritsyn. Most broadly, it is the place where socialism is being built: the land of the Soviets.

After the tractor plant is completed (and survives the demonic schemes of the saboteurs), we leave Stalingrad for a while, with the complete confidence, instilled in us by now, that we shall be given the opportunity to revisit. For the film has already established the pattern of "eternal return" to this spot. And surely enough—World War II begins, both in order to fulfill Stalin's prediction of a day when the Soviet Union would have to be defended against enemy attack and in order for us to witness for one last, and climactic, time the power of the sacred place. We return to Stalingrad, and see it once more as a desolate spot: this time because the months of incessant fighting have turned it into a ghost town. We find here, once again, Varvara (she is now in charge of an orphanage), Aleksandr, and his wife, Kseniia. Aleksandr is captured and executed by the Germans, but, as everyone knows, the empty spot is once again victorious in the battle that effectively decides the fate of Hitler's eastern campaign. Varvara takes one final walk before the ranks of victorious Red-Army soldiers shouting "Hurrah!" Through a cut, the walk takes her to the very heart of the Kremlin, where the Father of all Soviet people greets her as his symbolic partner.

The agency that brings Varvara to this symbolic apex is—with a nod in the direction of Lacan—the agency of the letter.¹⁶³ She comes onto the stage of the narrative because she carries a letter. But if we consider the situation more carefully, it is really the letter that carries her. It is a sheet of paper, of whose contents she is initially unaware. More importantly, even when she becomes aware of them, the significance of what is written in the letter remains outside her conscious grasp. How could she know that the letter will mysteriously absorb and express in a single voice the grievances of the whole Soviet Union of the NEP years? Varvara knows that she and the letter come from Tsaritsyn, but how could she possibly know that Tsaritsyn will turn out to be the *right* place, and that the word hailing from there will turn out to be the fullest, most meaningful Word? How could she anticipate that this Word, capitally swollen by the unanimous recognition of all Soviet people, will exceed its intended function of informing and take on the function of a popular mandate legitimizing the political succession in the Kremlin? Of all this, Varvara remains unaware. These happenings outrun her consciousness. They come to pass *before* her, that is, ahead of her cognizance and will, and, as they do, they direct her (subsequent) steps—they carry her.

Varvara's personal, biographical story is advanced by another, bigger, story that passes covertly underneath. The former is "hitched" to the latter and, hence, as the latter unfolds, it "moves" the former along. This mechanism accounts for the fact that Varvara's life "happens," that is—it comes to her from somewhere else. At first, she happens to be the wife of Stepan, who happens to have fought alongside Stalin during the Civil War; as Stepan happens to die on

¹⁶³ I am alluding both to the classic essay "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason since Freud" (delivered first as a lecture in the Sorbonne on 9 May, 1957) and to Lacan's famous reading of Edgar Allan Poe's "Purloined Letter" in his seminar of 1954-1955, hosted by Société Française de Psychanalyse (see *Seminar* 191-205). In both texts Lacan emphasizes the independent and determinative workings of signification, the preponderance of its "material" aspect (the "letter," the signifier) over its "ideal" counterpart (the intended meaning, the signified).

the very site of Stalin's past exploits, Varvara happens to be chosen as a messenger (although her younger son would have been a more understandable choice); Lenin dies just when Varvara happens to be in Moscow; etc. This logic is carried out with impeccable consistency in the film—not just in relation to Varvara, but in relation to all shiny, happy people. With reference to all of them and to Stalinist culture as a whole we can advance the following semantic equivalence: “to be” means “to happen to be.”

As far as narrative is concerned, this logic reminds us of times long past. Similarly structured plots are to be found in the tragedies and mythic tales of classical antiquity. There as well, the hero's life is hitched to a larger, more essential story, which he either knows not at all or, as with Oedipus, fatefully misconstrues. Archaic but indelible familial memory has marked the landscape of the hero's journey and specifies its precipitous course, visibly for us, but unbeknownst to him. It is his “fate.” Although significantly modified, this type of narrative persisted in the hagiographic literature of the Middle Ages, where fate is to be found in the predetermined path that leads the righteous to their true Father. But the modern period begins exactly where this circuitous route—from the pre-inscription of a mythic proto-story to its re-inscription and reaffirmation through the fate of a particular “one”—is no longer capable of delineating the meaning of human experience. The first great narrative of the new era, the biography of a lunatic knight errant, presents us with a desperate desire for the signs of predestination and a pathetic effort to tease these signs out of the barren landscape of a decidedly post-mythic land. Precisely because of its failure, Don Quixote's quest shows the only road that the hero can now take: because destiny is not predestined (in either scriptures of faith or books of chivalry), it must be constructed out of the hero's own inwardness.

The possibility of providing a destiny for oneself is, from the beginning of this new beginning, coextensive with the power of giving oneself representations. Although in Cervantez this power is equated with madness—since all it gives are misleading apparitions—eventually it will become normative. In *Hamlet* already, madness springs not from the wanton self-giving of (illusory) representations, but precisely from the impossibility of doing so: the ghost that appears at the beginning is an apparition that Hamlet has not given to himself from within himself; and as much as he would like to believe that this is all an illusion, he cannot: like the sacred Father of medieval Christianity, the royal Danish father has bestowed absolutely binding destiny upon his child. But this is now an unnatural, unexpected, and unwanted gift. Since it cannot be refused, its acceptance brings derangement.

The Vow returns us to that earlier moment when the hero's steps were still "ordered by God," who "delighteth in his way." What makes God so happy? Certainly, the fact that the hero is a good man, i.e., a good subject, who walks the way pointed out by his master. We can easily relate to a divinity that rejoices for subjects who have freely chosen to follow the steps to the True. However, in our context, which is Stalinist culture, there is pleasure to be had precisely insofar as subjects *do not* choose their steps, but, rather, execute them in a somnambulant fashion. Much more than the conscious recognition by its subjects, this divinity enjoys the unconditional hegemony whereby they are driven to do what they do and be what they are. It delights in their "creaturely" nature. For the more unconsciously their being unfolds, the more emphatically it manifests and affirms the creation whose creatures they are, the order by which their steps have been ordered. Precisely in the spot where it catches the subject unawares, this order shows itself as most actual.

We have an accessible reference point for understanding such a libido: *Oedipus Rex*. The deities presiding over Oedipus's fate are satisfied to see the prophecy fulfilled, but the real enjoyment comes from the hero's wriggling: the hopeless effort to evade destiny, an effort whose every motion only con-firms the firmness of the grip. With every conscious step toward escape, Oedipus unconsciously realizes what was meant to be. The same extended act through which he shows himself as a pathetic plaything of predestination, arouses, at each stage and ultimately, the ancient story of familial sin. By the same token, the act arouses the power through which this sin is being punished, instantiating it as the Power that be.

Keeping this famous archetype in mind, let us ask what is being aroused in the act that we watch unfold in the narrative space of *The Vow*? Enough has been said so far to make the terms of the question less flippant than they may seem. The sexual rhetoric is there to suggest that, even on the scale of socio-cultural formations, we are still dealing with desire (which appears in the twin shape of an impersonal "needing" and the personal desire for being "part"). But, as I am seeking to co-articulate this problematic with the theme of creation, of building, giving shape, institutionalizing, terms like "arousal" and "erection" acquire a two-dimensional significance (and, so I shall hope, evade the charge of frivolity). As before, we are asking about the figure of order (truth) that figures out, or is constituted, in the same motion in which "one" comes to count for something. And so: what is aroused in *The Vow*?

The easy answer is: "Stalin." And as long as we understand what "Stalin" stands for, this would be also the right answer.

In *The Vow*, unlike in the other Chiaureli films in the cinematic tetralogy devoted to the Leader, Stalin appears in two distinct hypostases. On the one hand, he is there "in the flesh," as an actual living person; although, of course, not by any means an ordinary person. He is just as

Nikita Khrushchev will describe him later, in his secret speech to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party: “a superman possessing supernatural characteristics, akin to those of a god. Such a man [...] knows everything, sees everything, thinks for everyone, can do anything, is infallible in his behavior.” This image is familiar. We find it, essentially, in every film or text of the period in which the Leader makes an appearance.

On the other hand, however—and this is where Pavlenko and Chiaureli’s mythography becomes truly radical—the Leader exists as a trace: a proto-story that has been inscribed in the diegetic landscape, creating in it a patch of sacred space—Stalingrad. The whole point of there being a trace is that it should be retraced: ordinary heroes are made to retread the ground once trodden by Stalin. As they do, they arouse the sacred charge suffusing the seemingly empty spot and experience its miraculous effects.¹⁶⁴ Having become “conductors” of this charge, our heroes begin to “shine.” Another way of describing the same occurrence is: through the agency of the sacred trace, their lives “happen.”

Given that “Stalin” is the name for two quite different things—a living person (even if a superman) and a trace circumscribing an empty spot—it would be prudent to inquire which thing deserves the priority of consideration? Which of the two is the essential, authentic referent of “Stalin,” the one we need to foreground in order to authentically understand the phenomenon called “Stalinism”?

If we go by a straightforward logic, we must conclude: first comes the person who leaves the trace, then comes the trace left by him (Stalin comes along, defeats the Whites; from that point on, the place of his exploits is marked as a “sacred” one). Following the same logic, only

¹⁶⁴ An identical logic is found at work in the ritualistic traditions of many indigenous cultures. Particular places within the tribal territory are associated with the archetypal journey of the ancestor (cultural hero). This trajectory is retraced and the places revisited during holiday celebrations, when specific rituals serve to evoke the memory of mythic times, as they also evoke, for quite “practical” purposes, the energy of the ancestral loci. See, for example, Durkheim 330-40.

this time in the direction of opprobrium rather than adulation, subsequent Soviet historiography was to script the historical and cultural trauma of Stalinism: as the trace (scar!) left by a particular human being, named “Stalin.” The phrase “cult of personality,” first used in Khrushchev’s secret speech, sloganizes this type of understanding, in which much of cold-war Western historiography is also complicit.

Without disputing the fact that the Leader’s personality left a significant imprint on policies in virtually every sphere of Soviet life, including the artistic (one thinks first of the film industry, which produced Stalin’s favorite art and was, to that extent, most consistently influenced by his tastes), I see this fact as belonging to a secondary, derivative dimension. The excessively inflated importance of one person’s word should be treated as a consequence of the place this person has come to occupy. The place, for its part, should be treated within a fundamental understanding of the power that constitutes Stalinist Soviet culture.

We are familiar with the power in question. It is the power of cannot-but, of the meant-to-be, of pure fulfillment. And there is probably no text from the Stalinist period that showcases it more vividly than *The Vow*. After all, it is the story of a vow. And a vow, as we know, is something that must be fulfilled. This, really, is the main movement of the narrative: from the word given to making it happen, from the course charted to its execution, from the delineation of an empty space to the erection that comes to stand there. For all these ful-fill-ments, “Stalin” is just as much the name of the heroic leader whom we watch in action on the grand stage of history, the personage through whose wisdom and will everything is accomplished, as it is the name of a mysterious agency guaranteeing in advance that everything will be so *indeed*.

The distinct character of Stalinist culture resides in the fact that this power of making things happen is abstracted from the doings of people and the making of things. Whether it is

verbalized and made sense of as the “energy of the proletariat,” the “power of socialism,” the “leading tendency of our life,” or the “general line of our development,” it is thought and lived as a separate entity.¹⁶⁵ Not only that: people’s deeds count as such only to the extent to which they exhibit the workings of this power. But this really means: only to the extent to which they show themselves as the creatures whose actions come to them from somewhere else, whose life, datively, happens *to* them. The work of “representing” (*Darstellung*) should be considered as a particular instance of this general situation. In this particular “deed,” as in others, the possibility of counting as “one” is antinomic to the meaning of autonomous accomplishment and, hence, to the possibility of genuine authorship.

¹⁶⁵ For a further elaboration of this thesis, see Conclusion.

CONCLUSION: THE MANA OF STALINISM

A fair number of the speakers at the First Congress of Soviet Writers tried to capture in words the unique characteristic distinguishing the world in which they happened to live, its peculiar “truth” or “reality.” Some, as we have seen, spoke of it in terms of a line—the unbending “general line” (*general'naia liniia*) that led Soviet society forward. Others—in terms of a “tendency.” Still others defined it as *partiinost'*, a party spirit or principle, which could be felt even in mere breathing.¹⁶⁶ Or could it be that its name was simply “heroism”? There were those, like Aleksandr Fadeev, who preferred a more dynamic idiom and called it (as Gor'kii had done in the article referenced earlier)¹⁶⁷ as the “force of socialism” (233). Erenburg said that the truth of the present day is easy to feel but difficult to define: “like the blueness of the colorless sky, like the sound of a quiet August midday” (182). Finally, there was one Iu. Iuzovskii, who found it necessary to invent a new chemical substance in order to describe this quality. Like many of his colleagues had done, he pointed to the space, both imaginary and real, which began where the audience of writers ended, the space *before them*:

But comrades, you need to take a step higher [...]. You see: before you stands the resplendent society of real people [*nastoiashchie liudi*], people like Stalin,

¹⁶⁶ From the speech of B. S. Romashov: “In our country the very air is saturated with *partiinost'*, and he who does not breathe this air does not breathe fully. We have in mind not just the formal membership in the Party. We have in mind the special feeling of vital interests, the nearness of the wished-for goal, the happiness of labor, the simplicity and profundity of human communication, the reality of tomorrow’s day in the present one” (427).

¹⁶⁷ See pp. 152-53.

Molokov, Schmidt, Frankfurt, Vinter, the kolkhoz worker Smirnova; I am not talking about [their] degree of genius; I am talking about the molecules of the socialist principle, the molecules of “stalinite,” which are to be found in them (467).

From the protean indefinability noted by Erenburg to the metallic consistency formulated by Iuzovskii something palpably hardens, takes shape, figures out of the indeterminate and into a separate existence. Eventually, we come to witness a modern instance of what anthropology has known after Robert H. Codrington’s 1891 description of native Melanesian customs under the name *mana*: a mystical element that mediates the collective’s total being. Whether, in the present case, we call it “stalinite” or any of the other names proposed, it is more or less the same thing: a common thing, something shared, an imaginary substance that allows a culture’s ontological content to be apportioned and distributed (“imaginary”—to reaffirm an earlier insistence—does not mean vapoiously fictional and, thus, inconsequential). The advantage afforded by Iuzovskii’s neologism is that it allows us to visualize more easily this Stalinist *mana* as what it is actually: a currency, a carrier of value. “Stalinite” is the material from which this currency is “minted.” It has been established already that it is a shiny substance. It has also been established that, like any currency, it is distributed unevenly: some have more of it—some “people like Stalin, Molokov, Schmidt, Frankfurt, Vinter, the kolkhoz worker Smirnova,” which is exactly what makes them the shiny, happy people that they are. Others, like the writers Iuzovskii is addressing, are enjoined to step forward and partake of what they are lacking. When they do, they will “count for something.” For what? We have finally given it a name: stalinite is that very “something” *for which* the many count as “ones.” It is the substance in which their value is fixed. But still, what is it?

Is it not simply an imaginary extract of Stalin's haloed being, given that it is, quite obviously, christened with a verbal extract of his name? The argument at the end of the last chapter allows me to assert without much ado: it is just the other way around. Despite the fact that it takes its name from the person, stalinite takes precedence over Stalin. The latter simply is perceived to have (inordinately) "more of it" than other people but, principally, he, like them, is determined by, rather than determinative of, the ultimate social value that is being distributed. Žižek makes a similar point by considering two opposite mechanisms of nicknaming:

Let us take two individuals [...]: Charles 'Lucky' Luciano and Iosif Vissarionovich Dzhugashvili "Stalin." In the first case the nickname tends to replace the first name (we usually speak simply of "Lucky Luciano"), while in the second it regularly replaces the family name ("Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin"). In the first case the nickname alludes to some extraordinary event which has marked the individual (Charles Luciano was "lucky" to have survived the savage torture of his gangster enemies)—it alludes, that is, to a positive descriptive feature which fascinates us; it marks something that sticks out on the individual, something that offers itself to our gaze, something seen, not the point from which we observe the individual.

However, in the case of Iosif Vissarionovich, it would be entirely erroneous to conclude [...] that "Stalin" (Russian for "[made] of steel") alludes to some steely, inexorable characteristic of Stalin himself: what is really steely are the laws of the historical progress, the iron necessity of the disintegration of capitalism and of the passage to socialism in the name of which Stalin, this empirical individual, is acting [...]. (*Sublime* 108)

Looking at it from this perspective we should say that the person Stalin is a function of his nickname, insofar as, before being given to the individual, the nickname already alludes to the “sublime” substance that mediates the social whole.

It could well be that every culture, if we just looked closer, could be found to possess something of this sort, in a more or less explicit form, its own particular *mana*. This is where people’s total effort of making a world for themselves receives the properties of a solid. Subsequently, it may be vested in the more definite shape of an idol, god, monuments, institutions, or a short, swarthy Georgian with a moustache. In these figures, the substance may find its privileged embodiment, but not its source. And the primary goal of cultural analysis—if it is to be deserving of its name—is to analyze the way back to the authentic source. It must “liquefy” the figure’s appearance of solidity and trace it to its original state.

Asking, in principle, what this original state might look like, I proposed that we think of it as a certain “state of affairs.” Then I proceeded to develop the proposition into a basic theoretical understanding of the cultural act, suggesting that the primary state of affairs is the intercourse of mattering and manning *out* of which truth-reality and identity-belonging take place. This is where and how *mana* is made. This is also where and how people are made as concrete members of [X], as “ones.” And yet, for the most part, the picture we see in the realm of culture is completely different. Rather than the primary relationship of mattering and manning, in which human desire (or, better, “desirousness”) is inextricably united to the possibility of (or, from the other side of the same coin, the void in) truth, we see “men” in an external relationship to some sublime “matter.” The latter appears not as something made, but as something given. And, as given, it is something of which subsequently men may partake.

Within this general understanding, the case of the Stalinist *mana* is quite special. The grand historical mission of Soviet society was to create, at the hither end of history, a world in which man will finally be reunited to his own creation; where this creation, existing for so long in the unrecognizable forms of alien objecthood, will finally reflect back to man his authentic image, so that he may recognize himself in what he does and know himself in the dignity of a first and last Creator. We now know that something completely different took place. This sublime truth of man's historical existence formulated by Marxism became internally alienated from itself. Its content was eclipsed by its form; its ground proved weightier than the living thing it grounded. The vacuous, "stupid" movement of predictive necessity was abstracted from and triumphed over the concrete existence that this necessity was to bring about. Rather than a matter of dignified human labor, emancipation, and spiritual enrichment, Stalinist socialism—at its deepest foundation—showed itself to be a matter of certainty. In this sense, the briefest definition of stalinite would be just this: certainty in the form of matter, a reification of the empty cannot-but.

This is how Arendt understands the process of formalization taking place within totalitarian cultures:

What distinguished these new totalitarian ideologists [Stalin and Hitler] from their predecessors was that it was no longer primarily the "idea" of the ideology—the struggle of classes and the exploitation of the workers or the struggle of races and the care for the Germanic peoples—which appealed to them, but the logical process which could be developed from it. According to Stalin, neither the idea nor the oratory but "the irresistible force of logic thoroughly overpowered [Lenin's] audience." The power, which Marx thought was born when the idea

seized the masses, was discovered to reside, not in the idea itself, but in its logical process which “like a mighty tentacle seizes you on all sides as in a vise and from whose grip you are powerless to tear yourself away; you must either surrender or make up your mind to utter defeat.”¹⁶⁸ Only when the realization of the ideological aims, the classless society or the master race, was at stake, could this force show itself. In the process of realization, the original substance upon which the ideologies based themselves as long as they had to appeal to the masses—the exploitation of the workers or the national aspirations of Germany—is gradually lost, devoured as it were by the process itself [...]. It is in the nature of ideological politics—and is not simply a betrayal committed for the sake of self-interest or lust for power—that the real content of the ideology (the working class or the Germanic peoples), which originally had brought about the “idea” (the struggle of classes as the law of history or the struggle of races as the law of nature), is devoured by the logic with which the idea is carried out. (472)

This lengthy passage illustrates perfectly how inadequate it is to discuss totalitarianism in terms of an ideological movement. Everything takes place in the realm of ideas. Ideas first have content, through which they “appeal to the masses” and keep them under an illusory spell. When the masses are recruited for the ideological project, ideas begin mysteriously to lose their content, retaining only the bare contours of logic. At this point, we must assume, the masses are already caught in the vicious mechanism, which makes it irrelevant whether they believe in the “beautiful lies” or not. We are told that logical formalism is somehow inherent in totalitarian dictatorships, but we are never told how such a feature comes into existence. In one moment, we

¹⁶⁸ The quotation comes from Stalin’s speech of January 28, 1924, delivered on the occasion of Lenin’s death at a memorial meeting of the Kremlin Military School. The statement belongs not to Stalin, but to a delegate at the Bolshevik conference in Tammerfors, Finland (1905), whom Stalin is quoting.

are made to think that this formalism is hardly more than the private obsession of individuals like Stalin and Hitler, an idiosyncrasy that then spreads through the “movement” on the wings of the leader’s charisma. In the next moment, however, the evacuation of content is spoken of as an immanent development of the curious entity called “ideological politics.” Having triumphed and installed itself in power, the politics in question resorts to war and terror in order to implement not so much the idea, as its iron “logicality.” Since the gigantic and bloody undertaking is not driven by self-interest or lust for power—one of Arendt’s most astute observations—nor by the willing support of the people, we are left to ponder a strange metaphysical region in which schematic rationality exists as a self-generated and self-sustained Power, before descending upon human history and turning it into a landscape of carnage, fear, and moral debasement .¹⁶⁹

The alternative to this metaphysics of logicality is to recognize that the abstraction of the form of necessity from any concrete content accomplished in totalitarian cultures is more than an ideal, ratiocinative moment. This abstraction is real: it is an actual movement, whose field is not just the minds of “isolated men,” but the cultural-historical being of the Western world. It is something concretely “made” in the cultural process. This is none other than the “making” we have been following all along, the cultural production that has as one of its final products the hardened stuff of stalinite.

A possibly traumatic thought waits for us behind this recognition, making it that much more tempting to turn away from it and seek to repress it. For where we take seriously what

¹⁶⁹ On the following page, Arendt goes so far as to suggest that logicality is the intellectual equivalent of totalitarian terror (!): “The tyranny of logicality begins with the mind’s submission to logic as a never-ending process, on which man relies in order to engender his thoughts. By this submission, he surrenders his inner freedom as he surrenders his freedom of movement when he bows down to an outward tyranny. [...] The compulsion of total terror on one side, which, with its iron band, presses masses of isolated men together *and* supports them in a world which has become a wilderness for them, and the self-coercive force of logical deduction on the other, which prepares each individual in his lonely isolation against all others, correspond to each other and need each other in order to set the terror-ruled movement into motion and keep it moving. Just as terror, even in its pre-total, merely tyrannical form ruins all relationships between men, so the self-compulsion of ideological thinking ruins all relationships with reality” (473-74; emphasis in the original).

Stalinism shows us—the image of historical truth as the empty enclosure of certainty—we are in danger of finding something out about human being. If we admit that this was not the work of despots obsessed with logical consistency, but of many people—not maniacs, not degenerates, not creatures trembling for their lives, but just people—we might ask whether human being is not the very emptiness that fills out and sustains the enclosure. If we take seriously what we discover in the various rituals of Stalinist culture—that “reality” is subordinate to the enacted certainty of a meant-to-be “realization” or “fulfillment”—we might also question the correlative term of this reality: human identity, selfhood. What if these, likewise, do not presuppose any determinate content available in advance, but are, rather, the precarious after-effects of an initially blind motion of surrender? What if the self’s existential “fulfillment” or “realization” has nothing to do with the controlled cultivation and manifestation of some primary potential and is more in the nature of a spontaneous “spilling” by which a pre-existent blank spot gets filled?¹⁷⁰

The real trauma of Stalinism is not, as Arendt impresses upon us in several dramatic passages, that people could be made to say and do anything in the face of never-before-seen forms of terror. This is a tragedy to which we can still relate. Much more disturbing is to think that people could say and do anything without any terror whatsoever. When one reads Feuchtwagner’s description of Piatakov’s confession,¹⁷¹ the chilling sensation comes not from the fact that here we have a human being whose body and spirit has been broken in the torture chambers of KGB. This was most probably the case, but something quite different strikes us: the

¹⁷⁰ The last questions could be asked with equal relevance, if in a less dramatic tone, from the territory of contemporary Western capitalism, where “self-realization” has become hardly more than a vacuous marketing slogan of a world in which the human endeavor is cut up and pre-formatted into discreet “fields,” “careers,” and “positions.” On this territory, to “realize oneself” means to fill one of these compartmentalized vacancies and execute with unique personal diligence and “creativity” the actions through which the “work” works you. Could it be that rationalization in the service of economic efficiency is the Western counterpart to the totalitarian formalization in the service of symbolic efficiency?

¹⁷¹ See note 141.

conviction, even ambition, with which Piatakov presents his case, his almost pedantic attitude. There is some quiet madness here for which words have not been found yet, whose tone is nothing like the shudder of physical perdition or the desperate cry in the face of the absurd. For a second we begin to suspect that no physical manipulation, no matter how terrible, can produce such a state. And even if the second is brief, we may wonder: what if Piatakov was less concerned with saving his life and much more invested in stitching as tightly as possible the fabric of criminal causality (regardless of the fact that the criminal was no one but himself), so that everything would have its proper explanation and fit neatly with the rest? It is impossible to answer this question. But I also find it impossible to pretend it was never suggested.

Whatever may be the reasons behind the impression Piatakov created, Stalinism forces us to ask: is human being, in its primordial definition, not just this function of stitching—the holding-together that vanishes in the folds of an implemented order of things (no matter how precarious this order may be)? And, if so, could it be that the self-images convincing us of our substantiality are just the evanescent (and posterior) appearances of this fundamental disappearance? What if the so-called “human subject” refers not at all to the author, the artist who “creates” the picture, but rather to that which, from out of the picture’s own surface (i.e., from within the dimension of the object), gives consistency to the picture?

On a couple of occasions already I referred to Descartes’s famous formula. Since the signal word “certainty” has reappeared, it is only fitting that the formula be re-invoked for one last time here, at the end of this study. Let us say, in very simple terms, that, sitting by the fireplace one day and haunted by the demons of doubt, Descartes wanted to convince himself that he genuinely exists, that he *is*. Let us also say, that he managed to convince himself by concluding: “If I doubt, I *cannot but be*.” This much we know. The debate is ongoing, however,

on what was more important to Descartes: that he *be*, or that he be *convinced*? What is the relationship between being and certainty, between “I am” and the “cannot-but”? Is certainty only a moment provisional to being, which, once attained, lets a now self-assured being take care of more important things (studying nature, for example). Or is it just the other way around: that *sum* is nothing but certainty rolled up into (a seeming) presence, the substantive *sum*-mation of the *ratio*’s very motion? What is primary here: substance or substantiation? Even if it is conceded that on that particular evening Descartes was more concerned with the latter, we can still hold that, in principle, the security he sought is just the beginning, the foundation for what comes later. And what comes later, of course, is concrete content: the determinate thoughts through which this being, now that he has thought himself into certainty of himself, will know the world. If we believe that this is indeed the case, we may pass lightly over the startling fact that the self designated by *sum* is rather abstract; it is not a concrete, existing individual; it is simply a figure of certainty.¹⁷² We could maintain that this twilight hour when Descartes had abstracted himself from his body, armchair, and fireplace, from everything existent, so that thinking may apprehend itself thinking, is just that: a brief “abstract” moment, which serves only to return him more confident to the fullness of concrete existence. But could it be, in reverse, that the human being, so concretely seated in the armchair in front of the fireplace, is actually abstract in relation to the movement in which certainty is generated?

From the opposite end of the modern period, and in a realm quite different from that of philosophical reflection, Stalinism asks us to consider the latter possibility. In this realm, as I have argued, the concrete human being encounters his/her own *sum*—in the specific socio-historical variation of *sum Sovieticus*—as an empty stead within the production of “socialism,”

¹⁷² In Hegel’s commentary on the *Meditations*: “‘I’ has [...] significance here as thought and not as individuality of self-consciousness” (227). And a bit further: “‘I’ is just certainty itself [...]” (232)

which is, first and foremost, the reification of necessity and the production of certainty. The concrete thoughts and deeds of this human being can “count” only to the extent to which they show themselves to be the out-comes of a necessary becoming and, thus—the concrete reaffirmations of certainty. But this means: human being gets its content from the in-itself-empty movement of cannot-but. Continuing this line of thought, we can give a more comprehensive formulation of the Stalinist *mana*: stalinite is the object in which socio-historical being shows itself as produced by its own form of necessity; it is where substantiation wraps itself in its motion and comes to count as the ultimate substance.

Although not philosophical, a certain type of reflection is at work here as well. It does not occur, strictly speaking, in the mind, but outside, in social space. Its mechanism can be grasped on the example of the shaman’s behavior.¹⁷³ When he enters his ecstatic state, the shaman implements practically a kind of “reflection.” The possession he exhibits demonstrates not only that he is a real shaman, but also—and this is the more important part—that the spirits are still with the tribe. This fact, which is constitutive of the social union, is “reflected” in the performance. It is there, in the open. It shows. Its “factuality” or, simply, reality, is established in the same “happening” in which the identity of the shaman as shaman is also established. These are the collateral products of a single act. The same type of reflection is implemented in the act that defines Stalinist culture. As I have argued, it too centers on a peculiar form of possession. The subject must show himself as being-driven (in fact, this is what would make him a subject, what would make him count). The act “reflects” the fact that the laws of history are still “behind us” (*za nami*), and—an important qualification—not so much their content, as their pure form as laws: their “lawfulness,” that is, predictability, device-like automatism, efficiency as such.

¹⁷³ For what remains the best study of shamanism to date, see Eliade.

Where is this reflection directed? Wherein does it reflect? Whose eyes does the show satisfy? Memories or old reels of the lavish public spectacles of official Soviet culture remind us that there are always luminary guests in attendance. From a tribune, sometimes especially erected for the occasion, they observe the festivities and wave to the participants. Such events were appropriately called “demonstrations” (*demonstratsii*) or “manifestations” (*manifestatsii*), for they demonstrated the plenitude resulting from history’s ongoing self-fulfillment (of which the over-fulfillments of production norms and Five-Year Plans were only an “epiphenomenal” extension). From this well-familiar arrangement, we might conclude that the show is produced for the eyes of power. But this would be a hasty conclusion, overlooking the fact that the show *is* the production of power. As with the shaman’s ecstasy, the act is what “materializes” the presence of the sublime (even if it appears that it only provides evidence of the sublime’s eternal existence). The elevated structure on which the representatives of power are standing, seemingly erected before the demonstration began, is in fact erected in it.

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