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## THE DIALECTICS OF DESTINY<sup>1</sup>

Allow me to begin this paper by recollecting a conversation which took place in the year 1808, in Erfurt, Germany, between Napoleon Bonaparte and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The poet tried to explain to the emperor Voltaire's idea concerning "the tragedy of destiny." Napoleon, however, impatiently insisted: "politics is our destiny."<sup>2</sup> This a rather illuminating conversation: for not only were views exchanged but it also gave rise to a confrontation of two worlds. Over against Goethe's classical world, in which the autonomous individual was subjected to universal "fate," to divine sentence, brutally arose the world of Napoleon wherein metaphysical "fate" gives way to total or totalitarian politics. In his concise pronouncement, Napoleon trivialized "fate" through its materialization. Goethe's words failed to convince Napoleon of the notion of ancient "tragedy," in which the subordinated life of human being is the unknown and irrevocable judgment of the heavens. Napoleon set contemporary tragedy, the tragedy of politics, against ancient "tragedy," he defined the "fate" of contemporary man as governed entirely by earthly-minded though similarly irrevocable verdicts.

Allow me to quote again the French emperor: "politics is our destiny," for these words uncover a dimension in the life of the individual which was entirely new in the history of mankind. Furthermore, this pithy viewpoint could serve as the "motto" of not only this paper, but the whole of modern history as well, in which the lives of millions were determined by the sentences of politics.

In his words to Goethe, Napoleon anticipated a further manoeuvre of European thought regarding human fate effected by the heirs of Hegel and Marx. For these great nineteenth-century philosophers, the "fate" of the world was still "History." As such, history framed the individual's life, the parameters of his freedom and, at the same time, his limitations.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a paper presented at CASVA, Washington D.C., 8 february 1990.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from: A. Wat; Świat na haku i pod kluczem (The Hanged and Locked World), London 1985, pp. 205, 219.

By issuing a judgment on the irreversible form of the future, History imposed on the individual the course of his activity. In his sobriety, to say nothing of his cynicism, Napoleon could be argued to have been a predecessor of Lenin. Where Marx, in what essentially was an idealistic passion, proved that the historical process is manifested in proletarian emancipation, Lenin perceived a more concrete unifier of the process — namely, the party. For Marx, the workers' class was the representative of historical "Truth," for its emancipation was agreeable to "objective" evolution. For Lenin, this representative of historical "Truth" was already the "workers' class avant-garde," that is, the communist party. What remained thus accomplished was the displacement of destiny; the essence of "Fate" was shifted from the locus of universal "History" to the domain of a particular politics, and the metaphysics of historical "Truth" was replaced by the pragmatics of a monopolized expression of truth. It can be debated whether such a line of reasoning was a necessary process, that is to say, whether the Leninist party-oriented interpretation of "History" is a logical consequence of Marx's theory, as Kolakowski insists<sup>3</sup>. Though this dispute is, however, best left to the philosophers, let us, for the purposes of this paper, notice only that this displacement of stress to the side of the absolutization of politics took place.

The comparison of tensions between Napoleon and Goethe, in the above rhetorical parable, and those between Lenin and Marx does not fully uncover the substance of my thesis. Namely, a similar conversation to that which occurred in Erfurt, in 1808, between the poet and the emperor, did not take place between the philosopher and the politician in St. Petersburg, in 1917. In Erfurt, what arose was an unmistakable confrontation of two worlds; the emperor directly opposed the poet with a vision of "Fate" deprived of metaphysics as well as poetry. Lenin's tactic was entirely different, relying not on confrontation but, rather, camouflage. When talking about "History," Lenin was thinking about politics. In contrast to Erfurt, what occurred in St. Petersburg was not a confrontation of language but rather, a recuperation — Lenin, in the language of a philosopher, expressed the thoughts of politician.

This camouflage, or better yet...recuperation, is the key to understanding the intellectual horizons of European intellectuals living at the beginning of the "brave new world," the Russians in particular; and therefore, this recuperation is also the key to understanding the position of the artist living in that time and place, his ideas and strategies, his political commitment and historical responsibilities.

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<sup>3</sup> L. Kolakowski: *Main Currents of Marxism*, Oxford 1978.

In this essay, I reserve the notion of the "avant-garde" for that artistic position as shaped in that time and place, namely, in Soviet Russia from the October Revolution to the so-called cultural revolution in the late 1920s<sup>4</sup>. I do not want to suggest that this notion can only be defined in the above context, but on the other hand, I am an advocate of its precise definition and limitation rather than its employment in a very wide scope. When all "new art" is labelled "avant-garde", it then becomes uncertain what essentially is "the avant-garde." I would like to, however, leave this discussion aside<sup>5</sup> and recognize that it is in Russia that the avant-garde (understood more so as an artistic attitude rather than an artistic style) achieved the fullest and most expressive forms. To formulate here a further premise — that avant-garde consciousness developed under the strong influences of the leftist tradition and the historical events with World War I as their background, the proletarian revolutions of Eastern and Central Europe, the fall of the "old world" political structure, as well as the violent challenge to the unknown future — then precisely in Russia we find the most extreme manifestations of awakening of avant-garde consciousness.

In order to understand the scale of revolutionary radicalism, on the political as well as the artistic level, the situation in Russia before World War I must be made clear. It was, after all, a backward nation, with a largely feudal social structure, a Byzantine hierarchy of power, lacking industry and modern technology. And yet it was in this country (and we should note, counter to Marx's anticipation) that gigantic leap was taken place, hurdling an entire epoch (at least as far as ideological declarations go); it was precisely in this country where the medieval icon, hanging on a wall in nearly every house, was to be replaced by the modern, abstract painting. At that time, throughout all of Europe, there was felt a certain tangibility to history, a dizzying tempo of social, political and cultural change; and in Russia (where we can observe the lack of a mediating plane between the profound backwardness and the extreme radicalism of slogans) this felt tangibility took a rather shaped character. One could almost "touch" History and, to be sure, it must have been easy to believe in the announcements of revolutionary theorists: that the future is irreversible and, according to their predictions, could be arriving virtually by the hour. In order to understand the psychological situation of the participants of these events, and above all, the avant-garde artists among them, we have to imagine what was progressing before their very

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<sup>4</sup> On the 'cultural revolution' see: *Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-1931*, ed. by S. Fitzpatrick, Bloomington 1978.

<sup>5</sup> See: P. Piotrowski: *L'avant-garde et l'Histoire*, „Ligeia”, Paris (in press).

eyes. This situation was ripe for the absolutization of history and belief in doctrines which proclaimed the concept of "historical necessity," the situation was conducive to the identification of "History" with the "Absolute," for as experienced daily reality seemed to confirm the "objectivism" of historical processes.

The descriptive perspective of the avant-garde world-view employed here can be made more precise by incorporating the notion of "historicism,"<sup>6</sup> which I take from the work of Karl Popper<sup>7</sup>. It must be recognized that Popper was well aware of the simplification made in his books on the philosophy and method of "historicism." He also did not conceal the emotional dimension of his work, nor the need for a standpoint's operation in the face of a crime committed in the name of historicist ideology. Popper dedicated *The Poverty of Historicism* accordingly: "In memory of the countless men and women of all creeds or nations or races who fell victims to the fascist and communist belief in Inexorable Laws of Historical Destiny." Surely such a commitment, understandable and accepted from an ethical viewpoint, is not favorable to a sober and cool-headed analysis. Nevertheless, independent of the need to examine his many controversial views regarding the philosophy of Plato, Hegel and Marx, Popper's trial description of historicist consciousness seems to me a very inspiring idea.

Let me recall, by way of a short recapitulation, that historicism is the view that assigns an objectivity to historical laws and irreversibility to their processes; it is the conviction that "History," possessing a logic of its very own, determines the fundamental reference point of human activity. History has not only meaning but also a purpose. For in its end is the fulfillment of an ideal, which is embodied in the utopian life. Thusly dependent on "History", the activity of the individual and social groups is determined by "historical necessity". According to this world-view, the rational decisions and activity of the human being primarily depends on, firstly, understanding the course of "historical evolution," as well as secondly, the subordination to that evolution of his goals and modes of activity. In other words, understanding "historical determination" is a 'conditio sine qua non' of rational human activity. In still other words, the meaning of human life depends on the acceptance of utopia as a historical necessity and of the work toward its realization. Any contrary attitude (rejection of utopia and activity against it) would amount to nonsense.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> K. Popper: *The Open Society and its Enemies*, London 1962; K. Popper: *The Poverty of Historicism*, New York 1961

The value of individual's work is thus measured by the criterion of a final purpose. This axiological perspective, defined above, was termed by Popper as "historicist relativism." In *The Open Society* Popper cautions against confusing "historical relativism" with the aforementioned "historicist relativism." If the former is the method of evaluating situations and actions from a certain time according to an "epochal criterion," then the latter involves evaluating human deeds in relation to a "final purpose," in relation to utopia. While "historical relativism" is the obvious tool of every historian; "historicist relativism," however, has essentially an ideological character--it is "a -historical."

To conclude this recapitulation, an individual who is conscious of the shape of the future collaborates with the course of "historical necessity." That awareness provokes his energy and impels him to action. Such work, that is, work on the behalf of utopia's realisation, instituting the historicist meaning of human life, Popper calls "utopian engineering".

Popper also notices a very interesting element of this way of thinking. According to historicist philosophers the future will be "beautiful." The realisation of the utopian ideal is, at the same time, the aspiration to absolute beauty. Politics, which leads to that end is, a composition of the future from the perspective of beauty. Consequently, politics become identified with art. Popper adds: "Politics, to Plato, is the Royal Art. It is an art — not in a metaphorical sense in which we may speak about the art of handling men, or the art of getting things done, but in more literal sense of the word. It is an art of composition, like music, painting, or architecture. The Platonic politician composes cities, for beauty's sake."<sup>8</sup> Popper claims that this tying up of radicalism with aestheticism is a distinctive mark of historicism. This "dream of an aesthetic utopia" is shared by Plato as it is, of course, by Marx.

It appears that avant-garde consciousness was deeply rooted in the historicist way of thinking, characterized above. Not only in its building of utopia, but also in the formulation of its shapes and employed argumentation, we can dig up many elements of historicism. It is not at this time important to bring up the philosophical sources of the avant-garde. These sort of studies are already underway.<sup>9</sup> What matters here is laying out the historicist "mood" of the avant-garde in order to, at

<sup>8</sup> K. Popper: *The Open Society*, op. cit., vol. I, p. 165.

<sup>9</sup> These studies are concentrated particularly on the interpretation of Hegelian tradition of the avant-garde. See among others: J. Baljeu: *The Problem of Reality with Suprematism, Constructivism, Proun, Neoplasticism, and Elementarism*, „Lugano Review" 1965, vol. 1, no 1; J. Baljeu: „The Hegelian Romantic Negation in Modern Plastic Art", „Art International" 1966, vol. 10, no 2; A. Higgins: *Art and Politics in the Russian Revolution*, „Studio International", November 1970, vol. 180, no 927.; A. Michelson, *De Stijl: Its Other Face*., Abstraction and Cacaphony, or What was the Matter with Hegel", „October" 1982,

a later stage, define the framework of its political position as well as the field on which its political strategies can be understood.

Steven Mansbach writes that in the consciousness of the avant-garde artist, "History" ousted "Nature." The modern artist appealed to "History," to its logical processes, as the principle plane for shaping his attitudes. The artist felt himself accountable to History for his work. History assigned the creator the obligation of shaping the "Future." This rejection of "Nature" and affirmation of "History" forced upon the avant-garde artist the necessity of identifying his art-work with utopia. Mansbach stresses the avant-garde's ties to Marx, especially in the area of the "aesthetization of work" in contrast to the "alienation of work."<sup>10</sup> To compose cities, for beauty's sake," and so to realize utopia, which according to historicism has an aesthetic character, was a duty assigned not only to the artist understood as a professional-institutional category but, above all, to the "creative individual," the "disalienated amateur," the "ideal human being."

It is important to recognize the fact, though somewhat tangential to this essay, that this postulate of the "creative amateur" remained in Soviet Russia only a dream, an unrealized ideal. Against this vision, decidedly formulated by Bogdanov and "Proletkult" ideology, Lenin set "avant-garde" theory. In the opinion of the Bolshevik leader, the communist party, i. e. "the workers' class avant-garde," considering the insufficient awareness and level of education of workers, was to take upon itself the duty of realizing their interests, that is, the incorporation into life the purpose of "History," the materialization of utopia. When Lenin realized that the ideological dialogue with the "Proletkult" was transferring into a political conflict, he dissolved Bogdanov's organization by virtue of a Central Committee decree.

The position of radical artistic circles was, in a certain sense, equivocal. At the theoretical level, they accepted Bogdanov's ideological principles but they rejected his conclusions. If for Bogdanov, proletarian culture was to be — in compliance with Marx's principles — verified in 'praxis' and thus the actual and real level of workers's awareness, then the artists saw the necessity of imposing on the workers' class a language of the future, a language compliant with "objective, historical necessity." Against the theory of 'amateur' proletarian culture, the artists set the conception of 'futurism', e. g. the "avant-garde," and so the conception of

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no 22, Fall; L.Krukowski: Hegel, „Progres" and the Avant-Garde, „The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 1986, vol. 44, no 3, Spring.

<sup>10</sup> S.A. Mansbach: Visions of Totality: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Theo Van Doesburg and El Lissitzky, An Arbor 1980, pp. 16-22.

art as ahead of its time, verified by the criterion of a final purpose. The convergence of Lenin's and futurists' conception of the avant-garde (and to stress clearly, on various levels of social practice) was a kind of paradox, for — as we know — Lenin decidedly rejected the artistic consequences of radical art theory.

To illustrate the attitude of "utopian engineering" formulated in the visions of the Russian avant-garde in the 1920 s, I appeal to two conceptions of utopia distinguished by Andrzej Turowski: the "architectonic" and the "productivist."<sup>11</sup> Both conceptions function as if on the same level. They both rely on rejecting the 'easel painting', the autonomous and independent "thing," the "laboratory" experiment. On the other hand, both conceptions also reject "utilitarian utopia," wherein art-work is to be subordinated to its utilized function. Art cannot rely either on the creation of "useless" subject-matter or on the production of objects meeting social demands. The artist, according to "architectonist" and "productivists," is supposed to shape the needs of society, to build the structure of the new society. This is already art, no longer in the traditional sense of the word, but as a creation of new reality. In this light, creators see themselves as "engineers" of the new world, the builders of utopia. This new artistic activity fulfills an active function — it is the creation of the new life rather than an answer to its needs.

One of the classic examples of "architectonic utopia" in revolutionary Russia is the conception of art formulated by El Lissitzky. It was architecture, according to this artist, that was to be the culmination of the artistic process and the beginning of the creation of new reality. In its imposition on people defined by spatial relations, and mathematical research was to shape a new life. The intellectual background of El Lissitzky's vision was, of course, historicism, the conviction to the objectivity of historical processes, the logical consequence of which is to be the realization of utopia. In the shaping of the Russian artist's theory, a certain role was played by the philosophy of Oswald Spengler, who was, at first, an enthusiast of the Bolshevik revolution, and was translated in Russia up until Lenin ordered the prohibition of his work. Somewhat later, in light of Spengler's negative reputation in the milieu of the artistic avant-garde, El Lissitzky eliminated from his writings references to this German philosopher.<sup>12</sup>

The historicist world-view is distinctly visible in one of the fundamental texts written by the artist at the beginning of the 1920 s: *Suprematism*

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<sup>11</sup> A. Turowski: *W kręgu konstruktywizmu* (In the Circle of Constructivism), Warszawa 1979.

<sup>12</sup> See: P. Nisbet: *An Introduction to El Lissitzky: El. Lissitzky 1890-1941*, Harvard University Art Museum, Cambridge MA.1987, p. 29.

*in World Reconstruction*. Therein, the artist presents, in a fairly general sketch, a conception of the development of art as bound to social progress: from ancient creativity describing reality, through the revolution of cubism and futurism, to the crowing of this process--suprematism. El Lissitzky concludes: "After the Old Testament there came the New--after the New the Communist--and after the Communist there follows finally the Testament of Suprematism."<sup>13</sup>

In "Proun", another program-text of EL Lissitzky, this vision is concretized. In its original version, the text begins by citing the writings of Spengler and Malevich; citations which were removed in later version published in Holland.<sup>14</sup> These manipulations of references are, however, not significant here. Moreover, the importance of each citation is very different: Spengler's influence appears to be rather superficial, whereas Malevich's influence, particularly his "architectons," on the thought of El Lissitzky cannot be over-rated. According to the artist, "Proun" is "the station on the road towards constructing a new form," it is the elaboration on a two-dimensional plane, of spatial three-dimensional structures. Painting experienced its end. At that present stage, however, painting merely fulfilled an instrumental function--it prepares art for the great task of reconstructing the world, this task to be achieved by architecture.

The productivists formulated a considerably more radical attitude. Confirmed by Taraboukin's impossibility of further development of painting, the reaching of 'critical point' by "easel painting,"<sup>15</sup> opened before the artist entirely new perspectives for defining their role in society. Any further artistic creativity was to be already impossible. „Art," like all historical products and creations, reached its limit, as did a certain stage of social progress, to which „art" was the historical counterpart. The new reality required 'self-expression' in entirely different categories, in an entirely different paradigm. This new artistic activity was not even dadaist „anti-art," just like communism was not only 'anticapitalism'; it was something different and new, yet — at the same time — both communism and productivism became the necessary result of historical processes. Rodchenko's monochromatic paintings and Taraboukin's observation formulated on their basis, thus, opened the road to very radical expressions.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted from: S. Lissitzky-Kuppers: *El Lissitzky. Life, Letters, Texts*, London 1968, p. 330

<sup>14</sup> See: El Lissitzky, *Galerie Gmurzynska, Koln 1976*, p. 60; and S. Lissitzky-Kuppers ..., *op. cit.*, 342; see also: P. Nisbet ... *op. cit.*

<sup>15</sup> N. Taraboukin: *Le dernier tableau. Du chevalet a la machine. Pour une theorie de la peinture, ecrits presentes par A. Nakov*, Paris 1980, pp. 41-43.



*The Program of the Productivist Group*, written by Rodchenko and Stepanova, confirmed the convergence of constructivist works with the goals of communism and with the theory of historical materialism. They intended to create the framework of communist culture by so called „intellectual production.” In practice, this was to manifest itself through activity of productivists in print, the organizing of propagandist exhibitions, and the planning of a development of industry and social life. Their slogans proclaimed: „Down with art (...) Art is lie. Down with guarding the traditions of art. Long live the constructivist technician (...) The collective art of the present is constructive life.”<sup>16</sup>

Yet, one of the most extreme manifestations of historicism and drastic examples of formulating the task of shaping the world according to a „final purpose,” is the small brochure written by Aleksei Gan, titled „Constructivism.” The author predicts, in accordance with the laws of historical evolution, the total victory of materialism over spiritualism. Against „art” understood as a spiritual activity bound up with „theology, metaphysics and mysticism,” Gan sets the „genuine” value of communism. He writes that „art” (characterized in this way) is „reactionary” and „counter-revolutionary.” Gan concludes further: „Death to art. It arose naturally, developed naturally and disappeared naturally (...). Art is finished. It has no place in the human labor apparatus. Labor, technology, organization.”<sup>17</sup>

The question that would like to raise here is that of the consequence of adopting a historicist world-view, the consequence of identifying the avant-garde’s ideology with the more or less defined vision of communism, as well as, the consequence for Russian artists of making use of the language and phraseology of the bolshevik revolution.

It must be noted that most circles of intelligentsia and the artists among them identified with the bolshevik ‘coup d’etat’ with great reservation. Even writers, including Gorky, who were later closely tied to the party, were not, at first convicted to the October Revolution. Sympathy was encouraged neither by communist practice, which from the start was driven to extend control over all areas of public life, nor by the executor of its relations to cultural circles, namely Lunacharsky and his Commissariat of Enlightenment.<sup>18</sup> I recall here: the censorship of performances at theaters and of films, the controversy surrounding

<sup>16</sup> Quoted from: *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. by S. Bann, New York 1974, p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Quoted from: *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde. Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934*, ed. by J. Bowlt, New York 1988, pp. 221, 223.

<sup>18</sup> See: S. Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Cambridge 1970; *Art, Society, Revolution, Russia 1917-1921*, ed. by N.A. Nilsson, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in Russian Literature, Stockholm 1979.

the formation of independent artists' unions, the nationalization of publishing houses and film ateliers as well as the subordination of their control to the government, the frontal propaganda attack on the intelligentsia as a bourgeois-reactionary element tied to counter-revolutionary forces. I also recall here the repressive steps taken by the new establishment toward a political character 'par excellence:' including the decree to the press prohibiting the appearance of opposition newspapers, the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, the institutional and physical liquidation of all political parties and its leaders (except the communist party of course) and as the result of the above, the establishing of the Bolshevik monopoly of power, the restricting of the role of the Workers Councils and finally the quelling of the Kronstadt uprising and the daily terror of the all-powerful Cheka.

The only group that quickly broke the surrounding silence of Bolsheviks, and that was despite the initial caution taken by certain creators (for example Mayakovsky<sup>19</sup>), was naturally those artists widely understood as futurists. In the October Revolution, these artists recognized their own 'futurist' revolution. Their alliance with the 'nouveau regime' thus seemed natural. It was to be an alliance of the artistic left with the political left. These artists were convinced that they alone were the authors of the 'real revolution', while 'October coup d'etat' was merely the continuation of their work. This alliance, of course, had the character of an extorted 'consensus'. It functioned in spite of reluctant party leaders, with Lenin at their front, in the face of futurist aesthetics; and what is more, in spite of an objection to futurists' artistic practices held by Lunacharsky, who would more readily see himself surrounded by the so-called proletarian writers than the avant-garde. The Commissar, however, had no choice — the „leftist” creators were the only ones who revealed full enthusiasm toward collaboration. Lunacharsky realized that the aggressive and intolerant manifestations of the avant-garde, through a certain „dictatorship by minority,” discouraged potential new collaborators, thus making impossible for him the expansion of control over the wider area of artists' milieu.

The avant-garde strategy for functioning in the new reality is reminiscent, to a certain extent, of the communists' strategy. It relied on the monopolization of the artistic life and the discrediting of opponents. There is the well known mastering by these artists of key-positions in the cultural life of Soviet Russia, the complete taking possession of the Art Department (IZO) at the Commissariat of Enlightenment, the trial

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<sup>19</sup> B. Jangfeldt: „Russian Futurism 1917-1919,” *Art, Society, Revolution ...*, op. cit., pp. 121 ff.

imposition on society of their own vision of culture, namely utopia, as well as the violent attacks on their adversaries, both actual and assumed, using a vocabulary of Soviet anti-intelligentsia propaganda. The above cited Aleksei Gan writes: „It is only the proletariat with its sound Marxist materialism that does not follow them, but for all that, the vast masses do: the intellectuals, agnostics, spiritualists, mystics, empiriocritics, eclectics, and other podagrics and paralytics.”<sup>20</sup>

It must be realized that this type of strategy and phraseology was used in a particular social and political context, in Russia under the Bolshevik regime. Nationalization of the channels of publications, along with the shortage of paper and other materials needed for the normal functioning of culture, not to mention the censorship, made easy self-expression impossible for everybody.<sup>21</sup> It is self-evident then, that in the more privileged position were those artists and writers who situated themselves closer to the distributor of deficient articles, and so closer to political power. The feeling of intolerance was so strong that Sergei Tretyakov refused to discuss with Alfred Barr (who visited Moscow in 1927-1928) the works of Malevich, Pevsner and Altman, stressing that the productivist Rodchenko is a considerably much more interesting artist.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, I am far from demonizing the avant-garde's influence on the totalitarian atmosphere in Russia. Particularly at the time of NEP, that atmosphere was relatively free, from which radical productivists profited as much as socialist realists, and these movements — it is worth noticing — developed simultaneously in Soviet Russia.<sup>23</sup> But it was precisely the NEP that became the subject of violent criticism by the avant-garde for its restoration of bourgeois economic and cultural models as well as its desertion of the doctrinal purity of communism. The model closest to the avant-garde was moreso „war communism” than the ‘reactionary’ idea of the NEP.

At this point, from the rejection by the Stalinist ‘cultural revolution’ of the NEP's ideology, and through an appeal to the heroic slogans of „war communism”, there exists the possibility of explaining the role of avant-garde artists in the propaganda of the First Five Year Plan.

Employed by Stalin the Revolution's rhetoric enabled for these artists a self-identification in the new political situation. El Lissitzky collaborated with the propagandist magazine, *USSR in Construction*, and also created posters and books which glorified Soviet reality and Soviet institutions (for example, the Red Army). In order to meet the needs of

<sup>20</sup> Russian Art of the Avant-Garde ..., op. cit., p. 218.

<sup>21</sup> See: Art, Society, Revolution ..., op. cit.

<sup>22</sup> A. H. Barr Jr.: Russian Diary, 1927-1922., October,” no 7, Winter, p.15, 1978.

<sup>23</sup> J. E. Bowlt, „Afterword,” „October,” no 7, Winter, p. 52, 1978.

the Stalinist regime, such posters were also created by Stepanova and Rodchenko. Moreover, Rodchenko is also the author of a series of heroic photographs devoted to the construction of the White Sea Canal (one of the largest burial grounds of humanity), which he observed as an artist-in-residence in 1931.<sup>24</sup>

Stalin's rhetorical manipulations explain, though it's clear that they do not justify, the aesthetization of the regime achieved by avant-garde artists. After all, these manipulations do not even fully explain this phenomenon. For the problem of these artists' responsibility does not begin in the year 1928. The First Five Year Plan was not the introduction of terror, but its escalation. Terror in the political reality of Soviet Russia was constituted alongside the October Revolution and justified by its goals. It is necessary to begin the discussion of the artist's ethical responsibility with the year 1917. The question posed by the writer Stefan Żeromski: whether „the poets of modern Russia do not see, or whether they pretend not to see, the horrible bloodshed inflicted by the followers of one doctrine upon the followers of a different doctrine,”<sup>25</sup> is the key, though naively formulated question. It unveils the moral issue not only in relation to the poet and artists, but to the individual in general, as well as the person functioning publicly in particular; this question does not, however, fully disclose the problem.

Revolutionary terror, after all, cannot be „invisible.” It makes sense only when it is manifested in, as well as, identified with a definite political force which in this way exerts pressure on its enemies, actual and potential. Accordingly, Żeromski's question remained steered as if in an improper direction. The question: to know or not to know — is subject-less. The fundamental question, which should not have the character of judgement but is an attempt at historical clarification of the artist's moral standpoint, concerns the philosophical, and specifically ethical, sphere that justified the adopting of such a position.

One of the few attempted responses to this question was formulated by Robert Williams. He writes: „The Russian artists who turned their art to political use must also bear some responsibility for the destruction of art and life by Russian Revolution in its later years. For their shared belief in artistic and revolutionary immortality helped provide the techniques and the philosophy that would support the right of the revolution to crush its enemies, including themselves. By declaring the revolution a kind of victory over death through secular perfection and collective

<sup>24</sup> B.H.D. Buchloh: *From Faktura to Factography, October. The First Decade, 1976-1986*, ed. by A. Michelson, R. Krauss, D. Crimp, J. Copjec, Cambridge, MA, 19, p. 111.

<sup>25</sup> S. Żeromski: *Pisma Polityczne (The Political Writings)*, London 1988, pp. 57-58.

glorification, and themselves immortal as artistic innovators, they helped make personal death acceptable in a world without religious faith. Personal death in the name of revolution, they seemed to imply, would assure immortality for the individual."<sup>26</sup>

Williams stresses above all the consequences of the decision to politicize art. One such consequence was to be — according to Williams — the sowing of seeds of destruction of the ideals of the artist as much as the revolution, brought about by Stalinist reality. He perceived a certain logic to the revolution, an inherent self-destructive mechanism.

To generalize Williams' observations, it can be said that the problem of artist's responsibility lies not only in the politicization of art itself, but rather in the absolutization of that gesture; in other words, not in art's relation to concrete political goals, but in a relation towards a 'final purpose', thus, in a historicization of the artistic attitude.

The adoption of „historicist relativism," I submit, established the basis of self-justification for the participants in the revolution. Obviously, there is a fundamental difference between the responsibility for the creation of the political events 'par excellence' and the responsibility for their aesthetization, or said more strongly, the cooperation with the revolution. Applying the same moral criteria to productivist attitudes as to the deeds of Lenin, Trotsky or Dzierzynsky, would constitute a serious and dangerous (totalitarian as a matter of fact) misuse. This is not at all what is at stake. I repeat with the emphasis — what matters here is not the delivery of judgements; but rather, understanding the situation of the artist living „in destitute time," and showing a theoretical sphere capable of establishing the ethical self-identification of the artist functioning in and co-creating such a „destitute" time.

A fundamental difficulty, however, with the ethical perspective of art history formulated above, is the grasping of the relation between the public, political responsibility of the artist and his work, and his aesthetic responsibility. This by no means is to reject the importance and worth of the avant-garde in the history of culture. For the value of the avant-garde's creativity is indubitable. What is more, one can argue the conviction that this „great experiment" arose precisely as a result of the commitment to the adoption of the historicist attitude and utopia. This does not mean that, in revolutionary Russia, there did not emerge an alternative attitude, which could be called the attitude of „power of taste;" one in which, the contradiction, suggested above, was eliminated. Such poets as Akhmatova or Mandelstam, believed that the defense of

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<sup>26</sup> R.C. Williams, *Artists in Revolution. Portraits of the Russian Avant-Garde, 1905-1925*. Bloomington 1977, p. 21.

pure artistic values, the defence of lyricism against the historicist instrumentalization of art, allowed them to preserve integrity. Yet, pointing out alternatives does not remove this issue, but rather, displays it more prominently.

If Williams' remark on the logical mechanism internal to revolutionary art is to the point, then it seems to me that the key to the method of describing the ethical-artistic plexus of the problem discussed in this paper is in fact the notion of, „tragedy,” in the literal, primary understanding of the word, namely, as a 'fatal' necessity. In this light, ethical doubtfulness and artistic attainment are not opposites, but rather mutually self-fulfilling phenomena conditioned as a pair. Consequently, it does mean that in the work of such artists as Rodchenko, or El Lissitzky, which can be called the „great experiment,” was inscribed 'in statu nascendi' a moral ambiguity. This sets a necessary price, which such artists paid for the greatness of their work. Though they may have wanted that „History” to be their destiny, the history of the late '20s and the early '30s shows, that politics became their destiny. If we want to understand the „great experiment” not only in terms of pure art, not only in terms of its consequences in history of modern art, but rather in terms of its proper historical context, we have to recognize the aforementioned ambiguity; we have to realize the political and moral plexus which constituted the attitude of the avant-garde. The ethical dimension of Russian art of the 1920s is the essential question in the history of the „great experiment”.