



# The aesthetic realism of Mikhail Lifshits: art, history and the communist ideal

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**Abstract** The aesthetics of Mikhail Lifshits may be characterised as a quest for *pravda* (truth/justice) in art. The article discusses his assessment of the fate of art in the communist revolution and his view on revolution through the prism of classical art. Pondering the metaphysical foundations of his realist aesthetics, Lifshits offered a naturalistic version of the theory of reflection based on the contradistinction of “big” and “small” being.

**Keywords** Mikhail Lifshits · Marxism · Aesthetics · Realism · Modernism · Communism · Reflection · The ideal · Ontognoseology

## The truth seeker

“Events make philosophers,” Mikhail Lifshits said. He was born in the year of the first Russian revolution, and the October Revolution became the seminal event in the life of the provincial Jewish boy. “It always became clear to me that I am a function or the voice of a certain situation, of certain circumstances,”—he said in an interview in the twilight of his life, having in mind, first of all, the “situation” of the October Revolution and the civil war. “Grandiose events do not pass without leaving their mark. Once he has lived through them, a man... is no longer in a position to change his perspective later” (Lifshits 1988a, 271).

I think, the word “truthseeker” (*pravdoiskatel'*) gives us the most accurate description of Lifshits's life “perspective.” In Russian, the word “*pravda*” combines the meanings “truth” and “justice,” i.e. logical and ethical ideals. Lifshits

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added the third, aesthetic dimension: the *true is beautiful*, and vice versa. To him, portrayal of *real life* is the matter of art and the artist's supreme vocation.

The quest of truth is not a purely intellectual exercise, it is a "continuous drama of life," as Lifshits expressed the idea. It was the Russian October Revolution that became the historical culmination of this drama. Lifshits called himself a "son of the Revolution, who had the opportunity to learn its lessons at firsthand" (Lifshits 1988a, 266). Every revolution begins with the abstract negation of the old, and young Lifshits, as he confessed years after, was captured by the "fantastic enthusiasm of breaking and denial," joining the radical left wing painters at *VKhUTEMAS* (Higher Artistic and Technical Workshop), a stronghold of Leftist revolutionary art, much like Weimar's Bauhaus. However, this enthusiasm did not last for long, a year or two, after which Lifshits developed a strong immunity to *neopathy*, as he called the pursuit of the new, "that disease of a modern philistine."

Like any seeker of truth, Lifshits was in a state of permanent conflict with the mainstream in arts, in philosophy, and in life itself. Criticism of avant-garde art earned him a reputation as an *aesthetic counter-revolutionary* and made it impossible to continue his studies. Lifshits switched to the teaching of philosophy and moved to the Marx and Engels Institute.

At that time he studied German, collected all of Marx's and Engels' judgments about art in the writings, and prepared to publish an anthology designed to prove that the founders of Marxism had their own, genuine aesthetic theory, though no one had ever noticed it before.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, this theory vindicated the classical ideals of Antiquity and the Renaissance. In this way Lifshits acquired allies against which nobody could argue in those years.

Meanwhile, avant-garde art was crushed in the Soviet Union—Stalin began to establish his own socialist pseudo-realism. Lifshits once again found himself in opposition. He had to defend his views in discussions with the creators of the new mythology, whose "arguments resembled the sound of a falling mortar shell—hello from hell." One cannot but marvel at Lifshits's courage: in the years when churches and monasteries were being destroyed, he writes articles and delivers lectures on the realism of ancient Russian icon-painting. It might seem strange that he preferred orthodox icons to canvases of the revolutionary avant-garde. And after that, he would still consider himself a foster child of the October Revolution?

Lifshits expands the scope of this paradox, showing that both fathers of the proletarian revolution, Marx and Lenin, were also notable for their conservative predilections in art. It is a well-known fact that Marx placed Aeschylus and Shakespeare above all contemporary writers. Lenin acknowledged that he did not like nor even understand avant-garde art. How do a revolutionary spirit in politics and a deep-rooted conservatism in art correspond to each other?

In his *Introduction* to the *Grundrisse* Marx had meditated upon the same problem: why is it that Greek art is still "appreciated as a norm and unattainable example," if in a material respect modern civilisation has made such great strides?

<sup>1</sup> "I remember that I submitted a report to the Director of the Institute, suggesting setting up a room for aesthetics, in order to study Marx's and Engels' aesthetic views. My initiative came to nothing. It was received with a certain irony, though kindly enough. Ryazanov did not believe that Marx and Engels had their own system of aesthetic views. However, nobody realised this at that time" (Lifshits 1988a, 278).

The eminence of ancient art, according to Marx, is a direct expression of those “unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise.” Antiquity is the “historical childhood of humanity.” Every succeeding epoch admires the naïve sincerity of ancient art and strives “to reproduce at a higher stage the truth inherent in the child. Does not the specific character of every epoch, in its natural veracity, come to life again in the child’s nature?”<sup>2</sup>

It clearly follows from this consideration that Marx sees the aim of art, if not its very essence, as expressing, by artistic means, the *truth of life*—the “natural veracity” (*Naturwahrheit*) of a given epoch. This, too, is the credo of Lifshits’s aesthetics. He calls the art that participates in truth *realistic*. The concept of realism in Lifshits is extremely broad. It is not simply one of the historical trends in art. Any *true* art is realist.<sup>3</sup>

Lifshits treats truth in a Hegelian sense as a plenitude, a completeness of being, or as the correspondence of a phenomenon to its own nature. Truth is a perfection, an ideal:

We call somebody a ‘true friend’ or a ‘true patriot,’ meaning that they represent the personification of a certain *perfectio* or ideal, in contrast to false friends and sham patriots (Lifshits 2003, 212–213).

For Lifshits, the classical definition of truth is too abstract. Not just any correspondence of thought to the facts of experience makes a given thought true. The matter is *what these facts are in themselves*. Some facts express the core of a thing, its very nature, other facts are accidental and inessential for the thing; they are introduced from without due to the influence of things having an entirely different nature. True (=realist) art is able to discern and show what is *essential and valuable* in the variety of life’s phenomena.

Lifshits considers the naturalistic literature of the end of nineteenth century as the beginning of the decomposition of true artistic form and as the first step toward Modernism, in spite of his respect for the forefathers of naturalism (Zola, Goncourts, Hauptmann, and others). It was they who committed Adam’s sin in the Eden of art.

Naturalism makes a merit of exactly what was a defect from the standpoint of the former art, namely the absence of higher appraisal, elimination of any sympathy, and antipathy towards the depicted phenomena, the rejection of an internal norm, of separating good from evil, and of beautiful forms from ugly ones. From the viewpoint of naturalism, all these distinctions have become obsolete (Lifshits and Reinhardt 1974, 18, 19).

<sup>2</sup> “Ein Mann kann nicht wieder zum Kinde werden oder er wird kindisch. Aber freut ihn die Naivetät des Kindes nicht, und muß er nicht selbst wieder auf einer höhern Stufe streben, seine Wahrheit zu reproduzieren? Lebt in der Kindernatur nicht in jeder Epoche ihr eigener Charakter in seiner Naturwahrheit auf?” (Marx 1983, 45).

<sup>3</sup> “The term ‘realism’ may be used in a wide sense, as the truth of displaying the actual world in its inherent sensible form; and there is realism as a historical phenomenon, relating to definite literary-artistic currents” (Lifshits 1984c, 380).

Naturalism is an abstract realism, a dead and empty artistic form, having lost its real substance.

In contrast, a fairy tale or icon, for all the irreality of their plots, may have “a deeply real sense,” if they grasp the vital values of human being—if they exactly render the difference between good and evil, the true and the false, the beautiful and the ugly. Realism is not just exactness in depicting the outer world. It is the *true estimation of reality*, expressed in the sensual forms which are derived from reality itself.

A confusion of the beautiful and ugly, and, even more, removal of the border between them, are the typical features of *bad, false art*, however much this art operates with the most real images.

The artist as well as the scientist are called upon to search for the *absolute*. “Despite all the catchwords of our century, absolute beauty exists, just as absolute truth exists,”—the young Lifshits postulated (Lifshits 1984a, 233). He conceives these absolutes as the sums of all relative truths and beautiful images. Lifshits sharply condemned any relativisation of the concepts of truth and beauty. “Relativism is a dialectics for fools.”

Every work of art, even the most abstract, reflects something in reality. The concept of reflection in Lifshits, and generally in Marxism, is a materialistic version of Hegel’s category *Reflexion*. According to Hegel, *Mind* reflects itself in the external, material world, whereas for Marxism it is *Nature* that reflects itself by means of the human mind.<sup>4</sup> Art is one of the forms of this reflection of nature in itself, viz. its reflection in artistic images. An artist, like an actor, must be a “voice” or “herald” of the very nature of things, Lifshits asserts.

I would note that one can say the same about a *scientist*. Hegel wrote that science demands from that mind that it immerse (*versenken*) its freedom in the subject matter and “abstain from interrupting the immanent rhythm of concepts.”<sup>5</sup> The striving of the mind to impose its own selfness on the subject is regarded by Hegel as “vanity, conceit” (*Eitelkeit*). Lifshits rails against Modernism for the same sin.

A loving, honest portrayal of the real world was important for the old art. The personality of the artist receded more or less into the background in the face of his creation, surpassing, in this way, his personal level. In the newest art matters are quite the opposite – what the artist does, is ever more reduced to a pure symbol, to a sign of his personality (Lifshits 1978, 30).

Along the lines of Hegel’s distinction of “bad” and “true” singularity,<sup>6</sup> Lifshits draws out a difference between genuine individuality creating a “new universal” and stupid uniqueness with its “dubious claim to be absolutely new.” In modernistic art, he sees a manifestation of the latter—the cult of pure subjectivity, deliberately breaking all ties with objective reality, with true being.

<sup>4</sup> The term “nature” is used here in an ultimate sense, including people, human society. “Man is an avant-garde of nature” (Lifshits 2004, 121).

<sup>5</sup> “Sich des eigenen Einfallens in den immanenten Rhythmus der Begriffe entschlagen” (Hegel 1970, 56).

<sup>6</sup> “Schlechte Einzelheit” vs. “wahrhafte Einzelheit, Individualität, wahrhafte Subjektivität”. See: Hegel (1971, 170).

Science and art perform one and the same task, they seek truth. Though, unlike Hegel, Lifshits never considered cognition in artistic images as a lower stage in comparison with logical thought. Both forms of cognition possess equal rights as “moments” of truth—truth being understood as the conformity of a thing’s existence with its essence, i.e. as perfection, or something ideal. Lifshits calls such a truth “substantial,” to distinguish it from “formal” truth as the correspondence between thought and the facts of experience. The word *pravda* refers only to the substantial truth. That is the truth of things themselves, reflected in the human mind.

Aesthetics is called upon to reveal the truth or falseness of a work of art. What is the reality that has found its expression in this or that work—is it genuine and profound, or shallow and “spectral” (*prizrachnyj*), as the classic of Russian literary criticism Belinsky expressed it? Quite often, as Lifshits writes, the subject matter manifests itself to an artist from the side of its petty singularity, lacking a deep connection with reality, and therefore bordering on complete disintegration, on non-being. Meanwhile, its formal side is in order, the artist’s idea is good, the execution is faultless, only one thing is missing—that supreme power which makes the work of art genuine.<sup>7</sup> In Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics this supreme power was called *die Macht*.

Sometimes an artist loses this very power, although all his technical skills remain and are at his free disposal. Thus, Lifshits valued Solzhenitsyn’s first works extremely highly, and recommended *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* for publication with the following remark: “It is something more than literature... It would be a crime to leave this narrative unpublished.” Solzhenitsyn was an outstanding writer, as long as his hand was guided by life itself; but as soon as he began to speak with his own tongue, he became “free and *miserable*,” as Lifshits affirmed (Lifshits 1995, 236).<sup>8</sup>

There is something independent of an artist’s arbitrary will in his creative work. And as long as he speaks, whether deliberately or instinctively, in the name of this objective element, he feels within himself the blessing of this miraculous objective power, and Heaven forbid that he lose it, like Samson lost his hair (Lifshits 1995, 108).

These words of Lifshits are, to all appearance, a paraphrase of Belinsky’s views in his work *A Look at Russian Literature of 1847*. From Belinsky he seems to adopt also the concept of realism as a *sense of truth*. “A philosopher speaks in syllogisms, and a poet speaks in images and pictures, but they are saying the same thing,” Belinsky wrote. The poet, unlike the scientist, gives a true expression to life without reasoning and arguing, he simply *shows*. Often he does not realise how he shows, instinctively perceiving the truth of his time. And once he starts to argue logically, to philosophise,—then

he stumbles, and how he does so!.. And the mighty hero suddenly loses his strength, like Samson after losing his hair, – and he, who had been running

<sup>7</sup> See: Lifshits (2001), 106 (the last, unfinished work of Lifshits).

<sup>8</sup> A few pages in this collection of archival notes contain the most brutal ethical and “sociological” assessments of Solzhenitsyn’s worldview.

ahead of all, is now is dragging himself along among the stragglers, in the crowd of his former enemies (Belinsky 1941, 401).

At all times there have been weak writers who showed not so much reality as themselves, their personal “vision” of the world. The ideology of Modernism turns this imperfection into a virtue,—that is why Lifshits regards modernistic art as false. But that very illness of art reflects the ailing state of the modern world. In the creative work of the best representatives of the avant-garde, this *illness of being* is expressed and refracted through their personal traumas as well as in the distinctive deformations of artistic form. As Lifshits puts it,

[t]he founders of Modernism in the past century were poets and painters of great talent, and they created artworks capable of acting strongly on the mind and senses of their contemporaries, despite the presence in their creative activity of many symptoms of disease, and partly even due to this weakness. It is enough to mention Baudelaire in poetry or Van Gogh in painting. There exists a huge difference between their particular art, which seemed to be hanging over an abyss, and the consequences, with which the possibilities they discovered, were fraught (Lifshits 1988c, 432).

The late modernists transform this illness of art, and of social life itself, into a norm, an example of style, or a standard. Feelings of suffering and weakness are replaced now by the abstract insensibility of cubes and squares and even by a feeling of satisfaction with free “imageless” creativity.

## History

Lifshits’s book *Krizis bezobrazija* (*A Crisis of Shapelessness*, 1968), as Dmitry Gutov aptly remarks, “called into question the whole aesthetic project of Modernity.” The avant-garde criticism of bourgeois normality is nothing other than this very bourgeois principle, just turned inside out and made into an absolute. That is the conclusion reached by Lifshits.

His train of thought is very similar to the criticism of “crude communism” in the young Marx’s manuscripts of 1844. Such a communism, with its abstract negation of private property, is actually nothing else but “universal private property” (*das allgemeine Privateigentum*), where, according to Marx, “the entire world of wealth, i.e. of man’s objective essence, passes from exclusive marriage with a private owner to universal prostitution with all society.”<sup>9</sup>

In modernist art we see the very same abstract negation of the “capital” of artistic forms, accumulated by classical art, and the equalisation of the rights of all forms of the creative self-expression of personality (the “universal prostitution” of artistic style). *Modernism is a “crude communism” in the world of aesthetics.*

<sup>9</sup> “So tritt die ganze Welt des Reichtums, d.h. des gegenständlichen Wesens des Menschen, aus dem Verhältnis der exklusiven Ehe mit dem Privateigentümer in das Verhältnis der universellen Prostitution mit der Gemeinschaft” (Marx 1974, 45).

There is no such formulation in Lifshits's works though. The philosopher himself describes the blood relationship of avant-garde art with the spontaneous communist movement by means of the category "naked abstraction," adopted from Edmund Burke.<sup>10</sup> Both modernism and spontaneous, levelling communism are set in motion by the energy of the "naked negation of the past," of the historically established status quo. That is why their ideals appear to be at variance with reality.

The abstract revolutionary frame of mind... even in its best, fanatically honest and sincere versions, preserves an abstract opposition of the ideal and reality. But the opposition of the ideal and reality is alien or, so to say, contradicted to the world of the aesthetic, to the artistic world. Such revolutionariness (including the levelling communism which is bourgeois in its objective content) is characterised by antipathy??? to the beautiful. At this stage, revolution and revolutionary struggle are in conflict with the world of art and poetry, with the entire aesthetic tradition (Lifshits 1988a, 301).

Being a result of the invasion of the negative, the abstract revolutionary frame of mind into the world of art, Modernism marks a full break of the ideal with reality—the falsehood (*nepravda*). In this sense, Modernism is an art turned inside out, the "anti-art" (Lifshits), or, to use Marx's term, the "inverted form" (*verwandelte Form*) of man's aesthetic consciousness. The communist ideal of Marx demands a "sublation" (*Aufhebung*) or "appropriation" (*Aneignung*) of all the actual wealth of culture, having been accumulated in the form of private property.

In his letter *To an Old Comrade* Alexander Herzen insisted on the necessity to preserve the cultural heritage of humanity when the revolution comes. Lifshits was fond of repeating the words of Herzen: revolution must become a "force that stores," and not only be a "sword that slashes," as the anarchist Bakunin wished to see. Striking a blow to the old world, the revolution must save all that deserves to be saved, and moreover, to cherish with care all that "does not hinder, the manifold and distinctive. Woe betide the revolution if it is poor-minded and wasted with artistic sense," Herzen exclaims (1986, 536), as if he anticipated the coming era of ultra-revolutionary *bezobrazie*.<sup>11</sup>

In the eyes of Lifshits, the October Revolution amounted to a collision of Bakunin's "passion for demolition" and Herzen's "force that stores." Such a psychological and aesthetic view of history has little to do with the materialist conception of history. Lifshits sees in history a drama of ideals and passions, without going into analysis of the productive relations and making no attempt to deduce forms of social consciousness from the conditions of economic life, in the spirit of Marx's analysis of the "commodity fetishism." In Lifshits's works we find, at most, appeals to "real life," "practice," "social being" plus references to "class

<sup>10</sup> Apparently, from here: "But I cannot stand forward and give praise or blame to anything which relates to human actions, and human concerns, on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction" (Burke 2005, 8).

<sup>11</sup> The word *bezobraznyj* in Russian means "ugly," "shameful," and etymologically—"shapeless" (*bezobrazie* is an Old Slavonic calque for Greek *aschēmon*). Lifshits uses this ambiguity in the title of his book on Modernism *Krizis bezobrazija*.

roots” of certain ideas, including the phenomenon of modernism. Here is a typical example:

Bourgeois thought builds its anti-worlds, according to the general law that makes it seek safety not in a system of positive values, but in the idea of destruction, in the Herostratus complex. Modernism is precisely the form of artistic consciousness that belongs to a new stage in the history of bourgeois society, the stage of its decline (Lifshits 1988b, 441).

In Lifshits’s writings, however, one cannot find any sound analysis of that new stage. And lacking concrete scientific research into people’s material life, their productive forces and productive relations, Marxism is degraded to a sheer ideology.

It is not that Lifshits said absolutely nothing about material being. In one of his works there is even a paragraph “Economics of painting.” We find there passages concerning “man’s submission to his own machinery,” a few lines about “dissolving any concrete activities in abstract labour, as is the nature of capitalism,” considerations on simulation, speculation, etc. (Lifshits and Reinhardt 1968, 162–170). Lifshits uses these hackneyed plots and symptoms of the “decline” of capitalism as premises for his syllogism concerning the crisis of modernism. But in his discussion of *Soviet* art, even that feeble semblance of the materialist conception of history disappears without a trace.

In *The Wind of History* Lifshits defends “the aesthetic point of view” from which history appears like a practical implementation of higher ideas, in particular the ideas of communism and revolution. Thus, the Platonic ideal of “directly communal order,” for which “there were no real conditions” (!) in ancient times, appeared as a “historical force” that survived the centuries. Hence the conclusion:

An idea can be timely and morally necessary, despite the fact that its implementation in practice is impossible or unrecognizably far from our assumptions (Lifshits 1984d, 297).

For Marx, of course, history is not at all the practical implementation of our ideas. On the contrary, ideas are only more or less clear expressions of certain material productive relations. Ideas, for which there are no real conditions, are nowhere found in the real world.

The characteristic way of thought, and even literary style, of the Russian revolutionary democrat is concealed under the surface layer of Marxism. Lifshits is the direct heir of Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, and Herzen.

The special favour directed to the thinkers of that circle is noticeable at every step. Lifshits breaks the direct ban by Marx: “I do not want to figure alongside Herzen, never and nowhere;”<sup>12</sup> moreover, he represents Herzen as a peculiar Russian prototype of Marx, writing off their longstanding feud as an effect of mutual misunderstanding, which Lifshits regards as “a tragedy, not a conviction.”

Herzen, like Lifshits himself, did not engage in concrete economic studies. His socialism was a pure philosophical theory. Perhaps, that was why Marx called

<sup>12</sup> “Ich mit Herzen nirgendwo und niemals zusammen figurieren will” (Marx 1963, 434).



Herzen a “socialist-dilettante.” Marx gave similar estimates of the German “true socialists” who turned socialism into philosophical fiction. And in my opinion, Lifshits belongs to the same “dilettantish” revolutionary democratic tradition. His times, however, were different. Soviet Marxism degenerated into the vulgar ideology against the background of which Lifshits’s writings appeared as an unattainable peak of Marxist thought. And as concerns style, they had no rivals indeed...

Lifshits takes Pushkin’s words as a motto for understanding the history of revolution: “To realise the necessity and to forgive it in my heart.” Repeating these words over and over, Lifshits is ready to understand and forgive his mother-revolution for almost anything, including the blood, lies, and horrors of Stalinism. He is convinced that the course the revolution took was not a mistake. There was no alternative, in fact.

There is a deep reason, not a mistake, not simply somebody’s villainous plan, but the painful, contradictory march of history, an awareness of the lack of an alternative. ... The further growth of the country could be brought about only in a terrible, irrational, barbaric way in which great enthusiasm and dark energy were intertwined (Lifshits 1995, 233).

Note that Lifshits regards the Stalin era as the *further rise*, and even more—as the “great step into the future” (Lifshits 2012, 91). His editor and archivist Viktor Arslanov makes a blunder when he attributes to Lifshits the assessment of 1930s as “Stalin’s Thermidor”<sup>13</sup> (Arslanov himself shares this assessment with Trotsky). According to Lifshits, the historical analogues for Stalin’s “revolution from above” (a term borrowed from Engels) are “the plebiscite empire of Louis Bonaparte and Bismarck’s Caesarism.” That was exactly the *social revolution*, and not a counter-revolution, not a Thermidor.<sup>14</sup>

The deity of revolution could not escape Golgotha: ecce Homo, crucify Him! Hunger, terror, and oceans of lies—History makes people pay that cruel price for the coming flourishing of the human personality.

The formation of a fully developed and complete individual is a contradictory historical process. The age of ‘antagonism of forces’ is a necessary and lengthy transitional stage full of all sorts of irregularities and recurrences. The rise of the human personality is achieved at the cost of much cruelty (Lifshits 1984b, 391).

Well, where is it now—that new, higher type of personality? It has turned out to be a myth. In fact, millions of living human beings were sacrificed to the “higher interests” of *state*, the “superpower” Soviet Union. And its own rise has appeared to be very short-lived...

As we can see, Lifshits absolves the communist revolution from sins of lying and barbarism. He generously forgives them as a necessary evil. Nothing can be done,

<sup>13</sup> See: Arslanov 2010, 338–366. In the same volume, another author considers Stalin’s terror as a “perverse effect” of the revolution (Pavlov 2010, 398).

<sup>14</sup> For details, see: Maidansky (2015, 209–220).

he says. Such is the *irrational logic* of history—“forgive it in our hearts.” But when it comes to art, he does not tolerate lies. He demands from artists that they express the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. He permits no assumption that modernism is also a necessary, and therefore a justifiable, “transitional stage” in the development of art—that such is the “cruel cost” of releasing the creative powers of human masses. With this, degradation of the high classics appears to be inevitable, just as the communist movement begins by levelling and humiliating the human personality (as was demonstrated by the history of proletarian revolutions, starting with the October revolution).

Marx considered crude, levelling communism as a “necessary moment of human emancipation and redemption,” and as a “necessary form and energetic principle of the immediate future,” but he also made the reservation that “as such [crude] communism is not an aim of human development, a form of human society.”<sup>15</sup> I think, the same should be said about Modernism. It is an equally false or, in Marx’s terms, alienated and inverted form of the emancipation of artistic activity, but it is a *historically indispensable* moment along the way of turning art into a personal property of every individual.

The mission of modernist art can be expressed by paraphrasing Marx’s famous thesis: the artists have only *portrayed* the world in various ways, the point however is to *change* it. Art will penetrate into everyday life, involving each and every person in artistic creation, diffusing high and popular culture.

“Art has renounced itself and wishes to be life itself,” Lifshits comments, sarcastically adding that in practice “all these strange constructions made of iron, glass, and wood were directly related not to the real needs of living people, but to the afterlife history of painting” (Lifshits 1979, 26–27).

And what about the earthly history of revolution? Modernism and Stalinism are set in motion by the same “dark energy” of negation. But if Stalin, in Lifshits’s opinion, has brought about “the rise of the country”, although by terrible and barbaric means, then modernism was a sheer regress and degradation of mind. A certain reactionary philosophy has taken place of the slain art, and nothing more.

It is the philosophy expressing the domination of force and fact over clear thought and poetic contemplation of the world. The brutal breaking of real forms means the eruption of blind, malicious will. It is the revenge of the slave, his imaginary liberation from the yoke of necessity, a simple outlet (Lifshits 1978, 52).

This description perfectly characterises the initial impulse of all proletarian revolutions, too. The beautiful dream of *pravda* never comes true, but the “revenge of the slave” and the “breaking of real forms” actually occur. Somewhat later the broken social forms are restored in a surrealistically warped or hypertrophied form (e.g. the socialist market or the Gulag). And in art, Modernism very soon gives way to pseudo-realism, the “false restoration of the real forms” (Lifshits).

<sup>15</sup> “Der Kommunismus ist die notwendige Gestalt und das energische Prinzip der nächsten Zukunft, aber der Kommunismus ist nicht als solcher das Ziel der menschlichen Entwicklung—die Gestalt der menschlichen Gesellschaft.” (Marx 1974, 546).

Following Stalin's death, as soon as Lifshits was permitted to publish, his pamphlet appears in *Novy Mir* journal in which he attacks Marietta Shaginian, the author of *Leniniana* and Stalin Prize Laureate. Here Lifshits shows that the pseudo-realism of the Stalin era, with its binary oppositions and atmosphere of epic delight, dwells in the same "land of myth" as modernism. They are linked by "an exaggerated idea of the possibilities of the human will" and "the humiliation of the past for the sake of present and future" (Lifshits 1954, 206–231).

Lifshits's pamphlet caused a flurry of polar emotions. The author was on the verge of being expelled from the Communist Party.

But even more scandalous were his attacks against Modernism in the sixties. At those times any criticism of the avant-garde art was interpreted as a resurrection of Stalinism. The Soviet liberal *intelligentsia* unanimously condemned Lifshits. He carefully put the articles by his critics into a folder labelled "Chorus of the unhatched chicks."

An article "Why am I not a Modernist?" was written in 1963 for the journal *Estetika* (Prague), and in Russian it was published only in the Autumn of 1966 in *Literary Gazette*. Lifshits characterises Modernism as the "Gospel of a new barbarism." At the heart of modernistic art, he writes, are "a cult of force and a taste for demolition," and its main, final aim is to "squash the worm of consciousness" in order to prepare the audience for appearance of a Saviour—some "Father of Peoples" or another political Messiah. "In short, it is the art of the crowd, conducted by means of suggestion, capable of running after the chariot of Caesar" (Lifshits 1978, 52).

This neo-mythology is opposed to the logic of things themselves—*realism*. With the latter, reality is an acting subject, and thought is just an ideal function of reality, an expression and reflection of reality in itself and by itself. Genuine art, on the contrary, must *clarify consciousness*, expressing the real world in its own real forms, as Lifshits insists. "Lacking sensually perceived forms, our world is a dead abstraction" (Lifshits 1985, 18). He makes the reservation that he appreciates "sultry Matisse, tender Modigliani, and morose Picasso," but, historically, the very trend they embody does great harm to art. Instead of truth about life, Modernism *invents a myth*, thereby lying to people, and dimming the mind.

Among the modernists there occur persons of exceptional inner purity, martyrs, even heroes. In a word, there occur good modernists, but there is no good Modernism (Lifshits 1978, 44–45).

In my opinion, Lifshits did not understand or, maybe, could not accept the fact that Soviet socialism is a typically modernist project of world history. That was a dictatorship of the mightiest of abstractions—the State. Political revolutions, like Modernism, are characterised by "the cult of force and the taste for demolition", and revolutionary heroes, like pioneers of the avant-garde, differ sharply from their successors.

Lifshits struggled, with all his might and main, to separate the avant-garde art from the revolution. His modern follower Dmitry Gutov perfectly shows that, concluding that Modernism is "the opium of the intellectuals," an illusory

alternative to revolution—“the expression of real squalor of the capitalist world and the protest against this squalor” (Gutov 2007, 140).

But what if the *revolution itself* has appeared as, in fact, nothing more than a pure illusion of abolition of capitalism, private property, exploitation of labour, etc.? If so, then Marxists, including Lifshits and Gutov, exactly like Modernists, take an illusion for the “truth of life”...

As Boris Groys shows, communism and avant-garde tried to solve one and the same task—to form a new type of man-creator and the new society that plans and paints itself with a clean slate.

That will to radical artificiality places Soviet communist project into the artistic context. As its initiators expected, the Russian proletariat would be freed from alienating labour, which it is forced to deal with in terms of capitalist exploitation, and become a collective artist, creating the new world and, at the same time, creating itself as a work of art (Groys 2013, 8–9).

Of course, that was a utopian project. As was Lifshits’s hope that the October Revolution would launch a “new Renaissance, the speedy confluence of artistically developed culture with the profound popular movement, proceeding from below” (Lifshits 1988a, 276). His expectations were not met. Nothing like the communist Renaissance ever took place in a Soviet country, nor anywhere else in the world. Against the background of triumphant modernism and pseudo-realism, even mass culture seems to late Lifshits “not so stupid” and, in any case, the least of all the evils that have befallen the art of our epoch. But even then the philosopher had not lost his faith in and love of mother-revolution. He just sadly noted her inscrutable ways:

Yet I had to go through some disappointment in my own illusions, but with no bitter poison of scepticism. On the contrary, it was precisely the loss of illusions, that is, gaining a deeper faith, a stronger belief that, to achieve the goal, which was the centre of all my spiritual life, history has taken a very complex and distant turn, and there remains much time at its disposal (Lifshits 1988a, 276).

## Reflection

In the last years of his life, Lifshits designed an original metaphysical conception that he named “materialist ontognoseology.” It is a kind of aesthetic interpretation of the old materialist theory of reflection. Proponents of the latter linked the term “reflection” to the psyche, seeking out proto-psychical and quasi-mental phenomena in nature. Lifshits imparts to this term an entirely different “cosmic sense.” Reflection is a way of turning the abstract into the concrete, or converting an indefinite universality, “diffused” in nature, into “actual universality.”<sup>16</sup> The latter

<sup>16</sup> “Reflection in general, in the objective sense of the word, as a reproduction. Reproduction has a cosmic sense, for in such a way the diffused universality is turning into the actual one” (Lifshits 2010, 25).

is a *holistic, individual, self-sufficient expression of the universal forms of being*: for example, a landscape as a concentration and actualisation of “dormant elements of nature”; the living organism as a representative of its species and of life as infinite; personality as a concrete expression of sociality.

“Ontognoseological” understanding of the category of reflection has very little in common with the sensualist interpretation of the reflection principle in the works of Plekhanov and Lenin.<sup>17</sup> Lifshits also relies on the postulate that nature reflects itself, but his particular interpretation of this reflection is much more subtle, if not to say sophisticated. In his unfinished, posthumously published manuscript *Dialogue with Evald Ilyenkov* we find the most detailed account of the foundations of ontognoseology.

Lifshits suggests that talk of consciousness should start with an analysis of being, because consciousness is a “self-reflection” of being, the “inner side” of some material process. If we could understand that process, then we expose the nature of consciousness. The pivotal point of Lifshits’s ontognoseology is the distinction of the infinite and the finite, the integral and the partial, or the “big” and the “small” being of Nature-matter. Consciousness arises at the boundary between these two modes of being, as their “differential” or the “true middle” (*die wahre Mitte*, or Aristotle’s *mesotês*). Consciousness is the *highest* form of reflection of the infinite within the finite. The ultimate task of consciousness is to “disclose the absolute content of reality,” to manifest of the objective truth of being.

The absolute truth is the content of people’s subjective life in art, as well as in other areas of their activities, not excluding the most practical ones. The historical movement and class struggle in their entirety are performed within the limits of its magnetic field, if we can speak of limits where life discloses its infinite aspects (Lifshits 1985, 259).

Analysing any given phenomenon of consciousness, including works of art, or even the entire artistic currents, the first step is to figure out which mode of being is expressed in it. Is it a “voice” of infinite and eternal reality (“the ideal,” in Lifshits’s terms) or of particular facts and circumstances of our “small” being. Lifshits assigns to the latter not only the physiology of the body with its natural needs and cerebral neurodynamics, but the material conditions of social life, too.

Consciousness, entirely conditioned by “small” empirical being—so to say, taken captive by its own body and by society—is bad, false, blind consciousness. The classics of Marxism called this kind of consciousness “ideology,” and Herzen described it as “historical ravings.” Being in fact “a simple epiphenomenon, a subjective experience of certain objective forces, blindly operating behind our backs” (Lifshits 2003, 92), it is accompanied by a pathologically acute feeling of one’s own freedom, of the independence of the conscious person from the outside world.

Subjectivist philosophy is a non-critical self-reflection of that false consciousness. In this way its epiphenomenal status is set up for the true nature of

<sup>17</sup> “... It is logical to suppose that the whole matter possesses a quality essentially kindred to sensation, viz. the quality of reflection” (Lenin 1968, 91).

consciousness, and the “small” being is perceived as the only available object of consciousness. Vulgar Marxism, discovering the selfish “class interests” in symphonies and poems, is smitten by the same blindness to the eternal, “big” being.

But where has man to seek for that coveted “big” being? We do not need to transcend into another world, Lifshits answers. The small being *reflects* the big being in a particular way, the infinite expresses itself in the finite. Hence, the task of consciousness is to seek, within the field of our “small” being, events and situations that are “charged by universality.” Granting his voice to these concrete, individualised universalities, listening and giving utterance to “the confession of the world,” man turns his consciousness into the mirror of objective reality:

To think means to make the object of thought think in us. To act freely is to be the subject of a greater reality beyond us, almost to stand apart from one’s own self, not feeling oneself bound up with one’s own small being, with one’s flickering existential... Only relying on this broader reality, can one cross the threshold of blindness, which is imposed on us by our empirical being (Lifshits, n.d.).

These lines bear a distinctly Spinozist note: freedom is the immersion of thought and action into the infinite reality, into the very nature of things. Reason has no “selfish” logic, it is as universal as nature itself. The full description of reason would be equivalent to building a model of the universe, which is the object of thought. In this sense, thought is the attribute of nature, and not simply one of its modes.

But in resolving the mind–body problem, Lifshits’s ontogeneseology openly broke with Spinozism, aligning rather with La Mettrie and other materialist “writers of the eighteenth century who developed the theme of a *causal link between body and mind*” (Lifshits 2003, 123). In Spinoza, brain and conscious mind are two different modes of being of one and the same thing—a man. According to Lifshits, consciousness is a “product of the brain,” the form in which brain “is experiencing for itself” its own process of reflection of the external world.<sup>18</sup>

This statement is a cornerstone of the “contemplative materialism” (*der anschauende Materialismus*), which Marx criticised in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Lifshits seems not in the least embarrassed by that. He is trying to spread the “brain” explanation of consciousness across the world of human culture and, thus, to give battle to the cultural-historical theory on its own territory. According to that theory, defended by philosopher Evald Il’enkov and his associates—the psychologists of Lev Vygotsky’s school—consciousness is a form of active communication between man and man by means of tools and objects of labour. Consciousness is a function of culture, not of nature. The genuine substance and subject of consciousness is not an organic human body with all its neurons, but the artificial body of culture.

To Lifshits, on the contrary, material culture is “as if an extension of brain by means of inorganic appendages” (Lifshits 2003, 273). This cultural “mediastinum,” rising up between consciousness and nature, on the one hand, enlightens

<sup>18</sup> See: Lifshits (2003, 271).

consciousness, extending its independence from the natural ground, but on the other hand it obscures consciousness by myths and other cultural stereotypes.

It is a terrible thing – the bureaucracy of culture, from Egyptian hieroglyphic writing and the clerical wisdom of Sumerian scribes to the ‘ink culture’, which Herder complained of, and necrotic stamps of media in later times (Lifshits 2003, 274–275).

Modernism also refers to the category of “terrible things” of culture. Abstract art replaces reality with myths and tightly closes our consciousness within the “small being.” For this reason, Lifshits refuses to consider Modernism as an ideal.

Criticizing the “fetishism of culture,” Lifshits keeps in mind Marx’s communist ideal. Communism is defined by Lifshits as “an ideal society, corresponding to its concept, as opposed to perverse relationships of the world of commodities” (Lifshits 2003, 278). As soon as such a “crystal clear form” of social relations among people will emerge, the bureaucracy of culture will disappear forever. Every mythology will vanish like smoke, abstract art will go into oblivion, and realism will finally prevail.

In general, Lifshits’s ontognoseology can be described as the attempt to resurrect naturalist ideas, traced to French enlighteners and Russian revolutionary democrats, on Marxist soil. The project was left unfinished, but its main lines are visible clearly enough. The search for higher truth, *Naturwahrheit*, was the soul, the driving force of Lifshits’ work. In this respect, he was one of the staunchest and more talented defenders of classical art and philosophy through the most difficult times of their history.

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