# LATE SOVIET CULTURE:
# A PARALLAX FOR POSTMODERNISM

by

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Review of:

Lahusen, Thomas, and Gene Kuperman, eds. _Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika_. Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

[1] In an essay recently published in _October_ (no. 63, Winter 1993), Hal Foster uses a suggestive metaphor for the study of contemporary artistic production--he speaks of "postmodernism in parallax." Foster's astronomical metaphor ("parallax" [from Greek %para-%, "beside, beyond," and %allassein%, "to change"], in astronomy, means "the difference in [position and] direction of a celestial body as measured from two points on the earth") furnishes a possibility of salvaging the discourse on postmodernism from becoming a passing fad (a danger Foster highlights in his essay) by reaching beyond the spatial coordinates in which it has been primarily operating (the industrialized West), that is, by effecting a shift in the position from which it

it offers a "slice" across the many aspects of late Soviet culture (to be exact, Russian Soviet, for the cultural condition of other former Soviet republics is never addressed, with the one possible exception of Evgeny Dobrenko's essay). For the expert, the book has many insights and provocations to offer; a Slavic scholar would find it worth reading cover-to-cover. But the collection could also serve as a very good introduction for a non-Slavicist to Soviet culture at the times of perestroika and glasnost, grounded in the context of some crucial precursory phenomena. Soviet postmodernism has many dissimilarities from its Western cousin; and the essays in this volume both analyze its emergence in terms of the inner logic of the development of Russian culture and contrast it with that of the West.

[5] In their introduction, the editors of the volume note that "it appears today that positions, theories, and ideas become obsolete almost at the moment of their utterance" (v). Indeed, the contributions to _Late Soviet Culture_ have all been written from the position of Soviet Union still intact, if about to collapse. A new, different "Russian postmodernism" is emerging today, and some of the pieces in the collection now have primarily the value of documents for an archeologist of the "Soviet postmodern" of the last years of the old empire. This is especially true of the two opening texts, an optimistic account by the novelist Mikhail Kuraev of the changes brought about by glasnost, and a comment by Boris Kagarlitsky--a rare example of a Russian politician whose program is rooted primarily in the writings of the contemporary Western left--on the re-emergence of the categories of political right and left under perestroika and the particular twists this binarism has taken.

[6] The essays that follow contextualize the discussion of late Soviet culture through a backward glance. Sidney Monas explores a parallel between the Gorbachev era and Russia's "Great Reforms" of the 1860s, which launched the society's rapid modernization, and which, incidentally, brought the terms "glasnost" and "perestroika" into wide circulation for the first time. Monas briefly draws attention to the paradoxical statement of one of Russia's most fascinating and controversial nineteenth-century intellectuals--Petr Chaadaev--that Russia "has no history" and "has contributed nothing but the occupation of space" (37-38), implying that Russia is totally extraneous to the teleological narrative of Western European history. It is left to the reader,

though, to speculate on the possibilities of tying Chaadaev's maxims with Russia's present cultural situation, where, as Mikhail Epstein notes in his contribution to the volume, the temporal sequencing has broken down and cultural artifacts from at least the past two millennia entertain a peculiarly synchronous and spatialized coexistence. Paul Debreczeny's contribution offers an analysis of the formation and functioning of one of Russia's key national myths--that of Pushkin, the nation's poet--up to the outcry caused by the "blasphemous" act of opening the country's first McDonald's on Moscow's Pushkin Square; he avoids, though, discussing the recent literary battles surrounding the Pushkin myth, mostly connected with Andrei Sinyavsky's irreverent book _Strolls with Pushkin_ (the English translation of which was published in 1993 as well).

[7] The next cluster of essays in the volume deals with the totalitarian culture and mindset of Stalin's Soviet Union. Renata Gal'tseva and Irina Rodnyanskaya consider it in the light of the twentieth century's great dystopian texts (Russian as well as foreign)--which also reached Russia post factum, in the 1980s, and propose the individual human being as the obstacle that triggers the breakdown of utopian/totalitarian projects, consistently engaged in attempts at effacing the individual. Maya Turovskaya analyzes the role of cinema as a cultural institution under Stalin. Her focus is not as much on the dramatic history of the regime's brutal control over the cinematic production, but on moviegoing as a practice **"within the context of a general shortage of entertainment"** (95, Turovskaya's emphasis). She compares the situation in the Soviet Union to the similar, but much more shrewd cultural policy of Nazi Germany: while in the Soviet Union the regime adopted "a homogeneous model of a propagandistic (didactic), quasi-popular cinema" (105), in Germany it combined the production of ideologized blockbusters with more or less mindless entertainment. One of the fascinating facts not much known in the West is that the German-made films of the latter category fulfilled their "safety valve" function in both regimes: the Soviet "generation of victors" throughout the 1940s was actively consuming "trophy" films like the German 1944 musical _Die Frau meine Traume_, whose star Marika Roekk became a cult figure. Turovskaya ends her essay with a coda on the stratification of cultural tastes in the late empire, with the state, the masses, and the intellectuals favoring completely different products. She stops short, though, from considering the "perverse"

practices of the younger generation, when totalitarian classics are consumed as the material for simulacric "remakes."

[8] The next two essays in the book focus on the production end of the stalinist cultural machine. Evgeny Dobrenko offers a generic study of the literature of "the Zhdanov era" (1945-1953)--an era which "classic" literary histories refer to as a "desolate scene" and a "monotonous plain," and which the more recent revisionist texts, such as Boris Groys's _The Total Art of Stalinism_ (1992), view as a peculiarly postmodern phenomenon %avant la lettre%. Dobrenko turns his attention away from judgments of taste to the study of the cultural (more narrowly--literary) model itself. This period of socialist realism's "established existence" is, he underscores, the primary target of the subversive projects of the Soviet postmodern (which he refers to as "the Russian post-avant-garde" 109), and as such it requires close scrutiny. It is situated, he postulates, in the "zero time" of catastrophe, when there is something before the event (in this case, the regime's violent suppression of independent thinking) and something after the event, while the event itself seems to be missing. What we face in this case, according to Dobrenko, is a "system of mytho-production and recoding of reality in the direction necessary for power" (110), a static system which "by its nature is incapable of self-development and reacts only to external impulses" (111-12), conducted through criticism which "did not serve as a self-regulator, but rather as both the means and the object of various external manipulations" (112). An analysis of this cultural machine, Dobrenko believes, can enable us to discern the "fundamental lexicon" of totalitarianism. He offers insightful and witty readings of samples of its formulaic products, especially its quasi-utopian idylls of collective farm prosperity and workers' consciencious attitude, populated not with human beings but with functions, with "cogs and wheels" of the totalitarian system--whose crumbling monuments are still with us. Dobrenko's general analysis is supplemented by Thomas Lahusen's case study of a particular Zhdanovite novel--Vasily Azhaev's _Far from Moscow_, a powerful illustration of the functioning of this cultural machine. This text showcases the construction of an oil pipeline in the Russian Far East shortly after the German invasion of the Soviet Union, presented as an example of everyday heroism and devotion to the nation. The amazing "secret lining" of the book is that its author was an ex-labor camp

prisoner, and that it contains clues by which the pipeline can be identified as an actual construction project of 1941-42, but one which was carried out by prison labor. The history of the text itself is also peculiar, for it underwent continuous rewriting and retouching through its many editions during the author's lifetime, adjusting to the current ideological demand, while clandestinely Azhaev was writing another novel, _The Boxcar_, in which he was trying candidly to portray the tragedy of stalinist terror: a macabre, Orwellian example of "doublethink."

[9] In the next contribution to the volume, Michael Holquist draws attention to a survivor of stalinism who has became particularly influential in literary and cultural studies--Mikhail Bakhtin. Holquist begins by cautioning against the tendency of treating Bakhtin "as if his utterances were a mere writing, as if he were simply one more name in the deracinated %ecriture% of current metacriticism," of treating him as "a stateless thinker" (155). Holquist situates Bakhtin within the Russian critical tradition, providing a lucid summary account of Russian nineteenth-century debates on aesthetics and the nature and social role of literature and of their evolutionary connection with the work of Bakhtin's contemporaries, the Formalists. In dwelling on Bakhtin's critical dialogue with the Formalists in his 1920s writings, Holquist notes that while the latter insisted on literature's autonomy and on the study of its inner logic, Bakhtin, "like the radical critics of the 1860s, [was] obsessed by the problem of how art can be related to life" (166). He believes that for Bakhtin, there exists "a connection between the two in a material poetics that takes a form of a body-based systematics" (166). Holquist further explores the role of the body in Bakhtin's texts, noting his interest in biology (which, among others, provided him the term "chronotope"). He disagrees with Ken Hirschkop, who sees "mechanical physics" as a major influence on Bakhtin. "What matters about bodies for Bakhtin," writes Holquist, "is not only that they are there, but that they are alive" (170). It is not a particular biological model that attracts Bakhtin: his work is pervaded with what Holquist calls "biological thinking" (171). The body is important for Bakhtin's work, as Holquist notes, also because of his acute realization of his own corporeality: his suffering from osteomyelitis, which led to an amputation of one of his legs, and his arrest and exile in the 1930s (167). This emphasis connects Holquist's essay with another recent work

on Bakhtin and the body, Mikhail Ryklin's brilliant "Bodies of Terror" (published in English in _New Literary History_, vol. 24, no. 1 [Winter 1993]), in which he dubs the Rabelais book an "autotherapeutic text," a "codified drama of a representative of Russian intelligentsia who found himself in the 'unthinkable' situation of terror and expansion of the collective corporeality that assumed a dominating function" (Ryklin, _Terrorologiki_ [1992], p. 34, my translation).

[10] The contribution by Valery Leibin is an excursus into the brief history of psychoanalytic study in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and its later brutal suppression. By contrast, Valery Podoroga's essay is a post-Deleuzian reading of the key texts of one of the leading Russian modernists, Andrei Platonov (whose major works were published only recently, first abroad and then in Russia, and who is still relatively unknown in the West, partly because of the difficulty of translating his peculiar language). Podoroga begins by drawing attention to a peculiar statement from Platonov's novel _Chevengur_ (written 1927-1930): "within the person there lives a little spectator: he participates in neither actions nor suffering--he is always cool and unchanging. His function is to see and to be a witness, yet he is without the right of voice in the person's life, and it is not known why this solitary presence exists. This corner of the person's consciousness is lit day and night, like the porter's room in a large building." Platonov names this spectator/observer "the dead brother" and "the eunuch of the human soul" (187-188). This observer, writes Podoroga, guides the reader through Platonov's texts, creating "a special field of textual meanings--of negative bodily signs" (190). It registers only the external signs of events (which fact can be interpreted with the help of the opposition between the seeing eye and the knowing eye, advanced by the Russian avant-garde artist Pavel Filonov [199]). Podoroga quotes another startling passage from _Chevengur_, in which the protagonist feels that the material objects surrounding him suddenly start penetrating his body, even to the point that he fears his skin will burst open: a depiction of the clinical experience of schizophrenia, the result of the loss of the connection between subjectivity and the bodily image itself. To read Platonov, he postulates, is to feel this shift of the boundary between the inner and the outer, and desire in this externalized form is indissolubly connected with death. The relationship of time and space is also

transformed: the text expresses the "beginning of the end of time"; "freed from human time (history), space acquires maximal dynamics--its grows through the defiguration of the world" (196). Podoroga draws parallels between the role of the eye in Platonov and in Gogol and Vertov, developing the notion of a "disembodied eye" (201-208). He asserts again that the "eunuch of he soul" is "a schizo-eye: he sees in this way for he is unable to see in any other way--and what he sees is monstrous precisely because his vision is natural, lacking elements of coercion or rationality" (210). Podoroga's insightful analysis of Platonov's texts offers another entry into the system of coordinates of the Soviet postmodern: there is something acutely contemporary in his narratives of schizophrenic disjunction, aggressive spatiality, and transformative language.

[11] The next essay, by Helena Goscilo, sheds light on another important aspect of the Soviet postmodern--the renewed importance of underrepresented social groups, most especially women. She addresses the paradoxical situation of the unprecedented prominence of women in all spheres of Russian culture and their unabashed critical depictions of their situation, combined with frequent hostility to Western feminist theory and essentialist conflation of socially constructed gender roles with biological sex. Goscilo provides an informative summary of the institutionalized concepts of gender in Soviet society (the area where, perhaps more than anywhere else, Stalinist propaganda has been truly successful) and the status of feminism within that structure. She stresses the reemergence of the women's movement in the years of glasnost, and then considers in some detail the work of three influential contemporary women writers, Tatyana Tolstaya, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, and Valeriya Narbikova, "the subversive trio" (244). These three women's texts are very different from one other: Petrushevskaya's works, frequently first-person narratives, are powerful explorations of human vulnerability in contemporary society, and impart a flavor reminiscent of gloomy naturalism; Tolstaya is a master stylist with a keen eye for "tasty" tropes who constantly engages in language play, parody, and subversion of stereotypes; finally, Narbikova produces texts that meditate on the nature of language itself, playing with cliches, producing sequences of paradoxical associations and ambivalent references, and employing a wordy, repetitive, fragile style reminiscent, in certain respects, of Gertrude Stein. Narbikova's texts also extensively--if euphemistically--depict bodily experiences

(including sexual acts, which prompted Russian critics to quickly--and wrongly--name her a writer of erotica). One is invited to conclude that the critique of established paradigms of representation that is marshalled in these women's texts also enables a critique of the institutions of gender and sexuality, which serves as yet another point of contact with Western postmodernist cultural practices.

[12] The next two essays in the volume directly engage the notion of a Soviet postmodernism. Mikhail Epstein's contribution, "After the Future," is one of the key paratexts of Soviet postmodernism, one of the most significant attempts to date to theorize the late Soviet cultural situation, a part manifesto, part analysis. In the first part of the essay he perceptively registers the symptoms of a paradigmatic shift in cultural consciousness effected by the end of the 1980s. "Suddenly it became evident that communism had been accomplished in our country," writes Epstein, "the end has already arrived" (257). The metanarrative of "progressive development of the mature socialism" was no more. The cultural practices of the epoch are realized in the "post-," rather than "anti-" genre: "post-utopia, post-communism, post-history" (259). This is the "last" literature, "not because of the moment of its appearance, but because of its . . . essential 'beyondness'" (258); it is the literature which, "like Proteus . . . is capable of almost anything; like Narcissus, it desires only itself" (259). The character of a "superfluous man" of the Russian nineteenth-century classics is supplanted by an entire world that has become superfluous. The writers of the younger generation stand outside the polarization of "city" vs. "village" literature, of "Westernizers" and "liberals" vs. "populists" and "men of the soil." "While they are personally committed to liberal values," writes Epstein, they "nonetheless see almost nothing in those values that could inspire them and which they could serve with their work" (268). Instead of ideological divisions Epstein registers differentiations of style. One group, whom he calls "meta-realists," focuses on the intensity of perceptive emotion or metaphysical transcendence. Another, the conceptualists, engages in a demonstration of the essential emptiness of linguistic signs by exploring the language itself in their simulacric reproductions of socialist realist and nineteenth-century "realist" classics, or of the linguistic environment of a Soviet "everyman." Between the extremes of these two groups stand the writers engaged in ironic games of allusions in

the polymorphous chronotopes of their texts, where "the vulgar stereotypes of Soviet everyday life suddenly become the depths and merge with projections of other epochs into an ample mythopoetic polyglossia" (267).

[13] The middle part of Epstein's essay is the most disputable and is strangely dissonant with his other arguments. In it, he moves to argue that "nothing is new under the sun," and attempts to construct "a periodic table of the elements of Russian literature" (268; the table itself is on pp. 276-277). He singles out three cycles that Russian literature has undergone since the eighteenth century, each consisting of four phases, the "social," the "moral," the "religious," and the "aesthetic." Within this table, contemporary writers just occupy the final phases of the third cycle, to be succeeded by a fourth. The entire model is crudely reductionist, with each writer or movement assigned a set of tags carrying one-word definitions; and the sequencing is forced as well, often at odds with actual chronology. Paradoxically, Epstein then proceeds, in the final part of the essay, to stress the breakdown of temporal sequencing within the contemporary Russian cultural situation, where the postmodernists operate simultaneously with Solzhenitsyn, Joyce, Chaadaev, and the four evangelists (275). He emphasizes the retrospective orientation of contemporary writing, which he dubs "rear-guard" (278). The post-apocalyptically oriented literature is frequently nothing but a flow of writing, a stream that can be entered at any random point. Epstein notes that metonymy is the privileged principle of organization in the syntagmatic chains of associations of these texts, the primary examples coming from Valeriya Narbikova's writings. Metonymy, though, seems merely to stand for simplicity for Epstein, while it might be productive to consider these texts in the light of theories of feminine writing, in which, as Luce Irigaray has suggested, metonymy is the leading structuring trope.

[14] Epstein concludes his essay with reflections on the relationship between the Russian "post-future" and Western postmodernism. He emphatically asserts the legitimacy of talking about a Russian postmodernism (even taking into consideration the aborted history of modernism in Russia), noting the domination of simulacra, the "propensity for quotation," and the deconstructive impulse as the defining features of contemporary Russian texts (284-285). Late capitalism, he believes, is only one possible ground for emergence of a postmodern culture. The difference between

the Russian/Soviet and Western civilizations, according to Epstein, is that the first is "logocentric" ("linguacentric" would, I believe, be more correct here), while the latter privileges "the silent values of gold and [iconic] representation" (287). The Soviet Union was a society of voracious consumption of utopian narratives and ideological signs, and its "post-future" is for Epstein "perhaps the most radical of all existing variants of postmodernism" (287).

[15] The essay by Katerina Clark that comes next in the volume problematizes Epstein's model of the history of Russian literature. The focus of Clark's argument is the Russians' propensity for tripartite historical paradigms, where the current situation is interpreted through analogies with two previous ones (e.g. Hellenic Greece, French Revolution, 1917). This is the cause for Clark's skepticism: "while we can see no lack of evidence," she writes, "of the ways in the late eighties writers began deconstructing the long-standing official genealogies for 1917, we should be wary of seizing upon even the most radical versions of this as an evidence that Soviet literary sensibility had at long last become 'postmodernist.'" Although "gestures in this direction have been made," contemporary Russian writers, for Clark, "are not postmodernists," for "in "their" texts, not all narratives are equal; inter alia, the Hegelian story of the progress of Geist is privileged" (304, Clark's emphasis). Epstein's "periodic table" can serve as supporting evidence for Clark's claim "what we saw in the late eighties was business conducted largely as usual" (304): the Hegelian underpinnings of his model are obvious. However, his arguments in the other parts of his essay offer a challenge to Clark's "de-postmodernizing" of contemporary Russian literature, especially since the writers Clark reads in her essay operate within more traditional aesthetic paradigms than does someone like Narbikova or the conceptualists.

[16] _Late Soviet Culture_ ends with a coda in the form of Donald Raleigh's eyewitness account of the active breakdown of the Soviet machine during and immediately after the August 1991 events. Raleigh is optimistic; he sees a potential for Russia to break the chains tying it to the past. The sincere optimism of his and Kuraev's contributions may seem at odds with the situation of deepening crisis the post-Soviet states have been experiencing, in culture no less than in economy. But behind the troubled picture of today's former Soviet Union

it is possible to perceive the first sprouts of a new society. Does it mean that a new coil of the Hegelian spiral, envisioned by Epstein and Clark, is about to begin? Perhaps so. We should recall that even in Lyotard's rather bleak _Postmodern Condition_, the postmodern crisis of metanarratives serves as a ground to "sketch the outline of a politics that would respect both the desire for justice and the desire for the unknown."

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