

Paul Wood, excerpts from “Realisms and Realities,” in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art between the Wars* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993): 250-333.

Soviet Russia: Realism and the avant-garde

Socialist Realism was a doctrine about figurative art and its relation to society that emerged in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. What it emerged from, however, was a complex debate that ran throughout the 1920s about what was to constitute an appropriate revolutionary art. In this long-running debate, figuration gradually established dominance over tendencies associated with the avant-garde. It is beyond our scope here to survey these avant-garde tendencies in detail. Yet we must establish some brief sense of how they related to realism. The reason for this can be simply put. Conventional approaches to realism that identify it with figuration tend to treat the more abstract types of art associated with the avant-garde as foreign to realism, even as a threat to it. [...] Western theorists of the Modern Movement in art maintained this notion of polarity—that avant-garde art and realist art faced each other antagonistically across an unbridgeable gap. They, however, praised the avant-garde while criticizing “realistic” figurative art as retrograde. Neither side acknowledged that avant-garde art could be a form of, or could at least be illuminated by requirements of, realism. That possibility, which neither of the contending orthodoxies appeared to understand, was perhaps understood by a third, minority tradition.

We will content ourselves here with two examples. Kazimir Malevich wrote of Suprematism, the abstract art movement he pioneered during the First World War, that “Painting is paint and color ... such forms will not be repetitions of living things in life but will themselves be a living thing. A painted surface is a real, living form” (K. Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: the new painterly realism,” pp.129-30). This is compatible with Modernist views about the autonomy of art. Yet note the word “Realism” in the title that Malevich gave to his article, which he published in 1915 to coincide with the first exhibition of Suprematist paintings. His position was essentially a philosophical idealism, in that primary forms discovered by the operation of what he called “intuitive reason”—notably the square—are not secondary to the actual forms of the world but constitute a harmonious equivalent to them. In contrast with the deficient “realism” of figurative painting, which for Malevich is a mere copy of an existing reality whose depth and richness it can never match, the forms of Suprematism exist alongside the forms of nature: “The new painterly realism is a painterly one precisely because it has no realism of mountains, sky, water” (Malevich, p.133).

Malevich persistently referred to his pursuit of a pure plastic art as a quest for a transformed realism - “Cubo-Futurist Realism,” “Transrational Realism,” and later the “new painterly realism” of his Suprematist work. Furthermore, he adapted his practice to the collective ethos of the Revolution when in 1920 in Vitebsk he set up the group UNOVIS (translated as “Union of the New Art” or “Affirmers of the New Art”). UNOVIS supporters applied Suprematist techniques to the demands of the situation - in brochures for conferences, in street decorations and in such designs as a backdrop for a conference. This activity continued to be conceived as part of a “new realism,” as can be seen from a UNOVIS poster issued in November 1920, illustrating a design for a speakers’ rostrum—of the kind referred to as a “Lenin” rostrum, originally designed by Malevich’s student and collaborator, El Lissitzky. Its caption identifies it as an example of the “new realism.” Malevich used a transformed concept of “realism,” a notion that art was its own reality and that only as such (rather than as a pale imitation) could it represent modern experience. This was tantamount to saying that it was the

very autonomy of art that conferred the possibility of “realism upon it, a notion clearly at odds with prescriptions about the need for art to depict visible social reality. This may seem a strange and contradictory idea. It is, however, worth noting both that Malevich held it, and that it is not, despite its rootedness in abstraction and in an autonomy claim, an argument for art-for-art’s-sake. For Malevich, realism—albeit of this unusual and little-understood kind—was a goal worth pursuing, not something to be written off as irrelevant to the art he was making, either in his Suprematist phase or when he later returned to more recognizable subjects.

A second example, referred to in Chapter 2, also suggests the possibility of an interesting relationship, rather than a gulf, between the avant-garde and realism. This example also bears, perhaps more closely, upon [Bertolt] Brecht’s argument mentioned above: as reality changes, ways of representing it must also change. Vladimir Tatlin’s ambitious *Monument to the Third International* may at first sight seem to have little to do with realism. Never actually constructed, it existed as a model about five meters high. It consisted of a double spiral of wooden laths containing in its centre a range of basic forms made from wooden frames covered with paper—a cube, a cylinder, a pyramid and a hemisphere. The fact that the monument proper was meant to be higher than the Eiffel Tower, and the geometric forms glass-walled rooms hosting conferences and other meetings, does not stop the model from looking more like a work of contemporary abstract art than a realistic monument. Yet in 1918 Lenin himself, impelled by the conviction that reality had indeed changed—with the Revolution—commissioned a range of propagandist monuments intended to replace the old images of princes, generals, tsars and so on with images of prominent figures from the socialist tradition. These monuments were obviously intended by Lenin to be “realistic” in a conventional sense. The project failed, however. Partly this was because many of the artists involved had been affected by avant-garde ideas and proceeded to produce distorted (“abstracted”) images that people found offensive. Partly it was because the maquettes, the models, were produced in cheap materials such as plaster and were simply unable to withstand the weather when put on temporary display in their proposed locations.

There was also a deeper problem: the “realistic” statue is by its nature a monument to an individual, whereas the socialist or Communist Revolution, by its nature, was a collective achievement. Thus the form was at odds with the content it was supposed to represent. It seems that Tatlin’s plan for a monument, not to an individual but to an institution, was an attempt to resolve this problem. For the same reason it was not to be made by traditional methods of modeling or carving, and not from traditional materials such as clay or bronze, but “constructed” out of iron and glass. The Revolution, then, was a collective endeavor—a movement of classes and organizations, as distinct from the bourgeois preoccupation with the rounded, self-possessing individual. It was also international in scope. Accordingly, one of the most important decisions taken by the Bolsheviks was to inaugurate a new, Third International, an organization intended to coordinate and spread the Revolution abroad. Tatlin’s plan therefore had a dual aspect; while on the one hand intended as a monument to this new organization as opposed to some individual, it was also an attempt to escape the relative passivity of the role imposed by the traditional form of the “monument.” By attempting to put into practice the principles of a synthesis of painting and sculpture with architecture, thereby intervening in the lived environment rather than standing to one side of it, it was to be not merely a monument to the Third International but its working headquarters—the site of the world Revolution.

Many avant-garde artists sought a role in the revolutionary process, whether that lay in furthering it, as in the Soviet Union, or in helping bring it about, as in Germany. Both Tatlin’s

ambitious project, and the wider conception of an art practice that it embodied became influential models. The tower and its maker seem to have constituted a particularly appropriate modern subject for representations by artists who themselves aspired to a “realist” imagery of the modern. As with Tatlin, the technique used in such images had its origins in avant-garde Cubism. Montage seemed to offer one of the most productive devices for representing the ‘simultaneous’ or “fractured” aspects of modern experience. Such aspects of modernity and technology are evident in a montage by Lissitzky, based on photographs taken during the actual making of the model of the tower. Another example is [Raoul] Hausmann’s *Tatlin at Home*. This formulates its “portrait” of the modern artist through the suggestion of mechanism and calculation rather than instinct and improvisation; and, through the substitution of a photograph of an anonymous “modern man” for Tatlin’s face, conveys his status as part of a collective rather than individualist process.

[...]It is possible to see Tatlin’s tower, like Malevich’s Suprematism, not as remote from artistic realism but as influenced by it. But, it is important to note, this approach sees artistic realism, not as a given, particular quality (such as “likeness”) but as something that needs to be transformed, just as art and reality themselves had changed so profoundly.

Since its inception, the avant-garde had had an uneven relationship with social and political emancipation. Sometimes (in the case of Renoir, for example) it was indifferent. Sometimes it was reactionary—from the Catholic revivalism of Maurice Denis to the more or less explicit Fascism of Marinetti or Wyndham Lewis. That said, a powerful strain of the avant-garde had from the beginning aspired to at least walk in step, and sometimes more than that, with a liberation that went beyond the merely formal or aesthetic; and that strain had usually laid claim to, or had claimed for it, the sobriquet “realist.” As well as figures such as Courbet and Pissarro, this tradition can be seen to include Manet, Degas and, in one view at least, Cubism itself. Despite the undeniable fact that the atomizing forces of capitalist culture have marginalized and privatized art in the modern period, one cannot rid realism of this social dimension and be left with something worthy of the term. That remains the case even if that “dimension” becomes reduced to a process of negation of the correction and refusal of social mystification. It could indeed be that in a culture of mystification, such negation is all that remains.

Proletarian culture

The confrontation between such an avant-garde tradition of realism as a critical device, and a more orthodox sense of realism as a depiction of reality, was leavened by a third idea. This concept performed an important intentional function in cutting across the divide of social realist and avant-garde views. But it was also extensive, spreading beyond the country of origin of the proletarian revolution, having a particular impact in Germany and in a wider sense flavoring the debate internationally. This is the concept of “proletarian culture,” embodied during the revolutionary period in the organization Proletcult. The Proletcult’s basic theoretical proposition was that

All culture of the past might be called bourgeois, that within it—except for natural science and technical skills (and even there with qualifications)—there was nothing worthy of life, and that the proletariat would begin the work of destroying the old culture and creating the new immediately after the revolution.

(A.V. Lunacharsky, Soviet commissar for education and the arts, 1922,
quoted in S. Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* p.92)

The problem here is that the position closest to this “proletarian” rejection of the “bourgeois” past was that of the avant-garde. Figures as diverse as Malevich, Tatlin, their followers Lissitzky and Rodchenko—as well as the circles around the poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, the organizer of LEF (the Left Front of the Arts)—were united in rejecting the methods of past art. Yet Proletcult also condemned the avant-garde itself as “bourgeois,” both for its origins in European artistic culture—however much it might now claim to support the Revolution—and for its notorious incomprehensibility. For Proletcult, first and foremost, proletarian art had to be “clear and understandable to everyone (I. Trainin, 1919, quoted in L. Mally, *Culture of the Future*, pp.145-6). The upshot was a kind of three-cornered fight. The “official” Marxism of the Bolshevik Party leadership was directed against the avant-garde for its bourgeois origins and for the difficulty experienced by most people in comprehending it. But the leadership also criticized Proletcult for rejecting the past, whereas Lenin and Trotsky (just as much as Marx and Engels before them) considered that a Communist art and culture would have to be built upon the achievement of the European bourgeois tradition. Yet the LEF and the Constructivist avant-garde clearly considered themselves to be Marxists, and to be the most appropriate carriers of the revolutionary message in the field of art. For them it was precisely those artistic trends relying on what Nathan Altman called the “pernicious intelligibility” of a traditional figurative realism that were “bourgeois,” that carried the taint of the old order, and that were unfit to serve as models for a revolutionary art.

There is no doubt that this is muddy water. Whatever the difficulties it posed, however, the notion of a “proletarian culture” was an extremely resonant one. Even after the actual organization had withered, the idea lived on in the later twenties and thirties. So if we omit it from the realism debate, we will lose sight of one of the debate’s most important constituents—the implication of realism in art with the social struggle of the working class against the divisions, discriminations and inequalities of the bourgeois societies created by modern capitalism.

Realism and figuration

If the approach to a notion of realism surveyed in the previous subsection had its roots in a Western avant-garde, its principal rival—a resurgent figurative realism—traced its origins to the Russian nineteenth century. This is not to say that there is an insurmountable barrier between these traditions. After all, Marx and Engels—themselves the guarantors of “realism both literary and pictorial within the Communist tradition—rooted their claim powerfully in *French* literature, particularly the novels of Honore de Balzac.

In Russia, Nikolai Chernyshevsky had published *The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality* in the 1850s, and the enormously influential novel *What is to be Done?* in 1863. His ideas about art criticism were matched in art practice when a group broke away from the Petersburg Academy. By 1870 the group had consolidated into the Association of Travelling Art Exhibitions, The Wanderers (Peredvizhniki), dedicated to taking art to the people. One of the central problems that such realism in art took from discussions of realism in literature was that of typicality. For Chernyshevsky and for Engels himself, realist art needed to generalize from the specific motif in hand, and moreover to do so consistently. Thus Engels, in 1888: “Realism to my mind implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances” (letter to Margaret Harkness, in L. Baxandall and S. Morawski, *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art*, p.115).

Typicality in art was seen as embodied in the practice of Ilya Repin, notably in his painting of the return of a political prisoner from Siberia. For the critic Vladimir Stasov writing in 1884, *They Did Not Expect Him* was “definitely the chef-d’oeuvre of the entire Russian school,” principally because of the way in which the specific incident set up possibilities for generalization: by establishing a “characteristic type,” it permitted the “expression of profound ideas” (A. Hilton, “The revolutionary theme in Russian Realism,” p.121).

However, with the increasing modernization of Russia in the late nineteenth century, the resulting development of a capitalist middle class, and the concomitant impact of Western ideas (notably, in art, those of the avant-garde), a Wanderers-type realism of committed subject-matter had declined in influence for several decades before the Revolution of 1917. From about 1890 onwards, first Symbolism, and then a succession of avant-garde “-isms,” from Primitivism to Futurism, had dominated artistic debate. But as we have seen, the political revolution released a welter of ideas about culture and society, especially about the class nature of the existing culture and, under the rubric of a “proletarian culture,” an interconnected set of claims about the purpose of art and its accountability to ordinary people. In the revolutionary maelstrom itself, conflicting currents were able to coexist. But the relative stabilization of the situation in the early 1920s with the New Economic Policy saw a re-emergent figurative “realism” in an increasingly strategic position, ideologically as well as materially.

The great virtue of figurative approaches was that they had a reasonably sound basis in tradition. Learning the skills to make pictures was, after all, what artists had always done (something manifestly not the case with nailing together bits of wood, or drawing circles and squares with a ruler and compass as the avant-garde had done). But the trouble with figuration in general was that, despite the continued assertion of its realism, at least in the sense of having resisted avant-gardism or abstraction, it hardly seemed to register the momentous events that were going on all around. A partial exception to this is Boris Kustodiev’s *The Bolshevik* of 1920: he has retained the snowy rooftops and the Lilliputian figures of his earlier work, but through them all is wading a Bolshevik Gulliver, his red flag billowing to the horizon. Some sense of the elasticity of the concept of “realism,” even as it came to be articulated in the 1930s, can be gained from the fact that at the large exhibition of 1933 entitled *Fifteen Years of Art in the USSR*, this far from “realistic depiction was praised for ‘symbolizing the party as the leader, guide, the central force of the revolution’ and representing thereby the correct politics (B. Uitz, quoted in *The Open University, Russian Art and the Revolution*, p.31). It is at most an allegorical solution to the requirement to represent the Revolution, owing more to the conventions of illustration than the tradition of a “realist” art. However memorable an image, neither Kustodiev’s graphics nor the moderately academic survivors of the Wanderers, such as Abram Arkhipov’s *Woman in Red*, offered a long-term solution to the need to provide whatever it was felt the avant-garde wasn’t offering. Newer groups began to emerge in 1921: former pupils of Malevich and Tatlin organized themselves into the New Society of Painters, as well as into a group calling itself Objective Reality. But the significant development came in 1922.

The AKhRR

The catalyst was the forty-seventh Wanderers’ exhibition in January 1922. Out of it arose a new artistic group, The Association of Artists Studying Revolutionary Life. By the opening of their first exhibition—*Pictures by Artists of the Realist Direction in Aid of the Starving*—on International Labor day, 1 May, of the same year, it was renamed The Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR). With various changes such as retitling itself the Association of

Artists of the Revolution (AKhR) in 1928, the organization quickly became the dominant artistic grouping of the decade. Throughout this period it was in a state of open, highly sectarian warfare with the avant-garde—which virtually from the moment of the AKhRR's inception was on the retreat. By the second half of the 1920s AKhRR had attracted direct government support; more traditional realists, notably Arkhipov, Mashkov and Kustodiev, had been drawn into its ranks; it had a youth section, the OMAKhR; it had a publishing house, and from 1929 its own journal, *Art to the Masses*. There were also plans, announced in the “Declaration” accompanying the group’s 1928 exhibition, “to unite the revolutionary artists of all countries in a single organization—INTERNAKhr” (quoted in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, pp.271-2).

To a significant extent AKhRR also set the tone for what was eventually to become Socialist Realism, the official doctrine outside of which art did not get made from 1934 onwards. At the heart of AKhRR’s burgeoning artistic empire, however, lies something of a vacuum; yet paradoxically it may be just in this vagueness that the potency lay. For despite the rhetoric, nothing precise in terms of doctrine was enunciated. In marked contrast to the quite detailed attempts of the avant-garde to engage in a debate of technical concerns and priorities, AKhRR’s formulation amounted to little more than a slogan. The brief “Declaration” of summer 1922 accompanying the AKhRR’s second exhibition of Studies, Sketches, Drawings and Graphics from the Life and Customs of the Workers” and Peasants” Red Army, argued that:

We will depict the present day: the life of the Red Army, the workers, the peasants, the revolutionaries, and the heroes of labor. We will provide a true picture of events and not abstract concoctions discrediting our Revolution in the face of the international proletariat [...] The day of revolution, the moment of revolution, is the day of heroism, the moment of heroism, and now we must reveal our artistic experiences in the monumental forms of the style of heroic realism.

(AKhRR, “Declaration,” 1922, pp.266-7)

Only a few further clues are given: heroic realism is to be achieved “artistically and documentarily;” it is “content” that is the ‘sign of truth in a work of art;” crucially, and in direct contrast to the avant-garde, “heroic realism” is seen as a product of “acknowledging continuity in art” as well as “basing ourselves on the contemporary world view.” The “contemporary world view” is a coded reference to Marxism. Yet many Constructivists would also have claimed that they were Marxists. AKhRR’s remaining points about “documentation,” “content” and “continuity” are a set of dicta that partly refurbish the figurative tradition of the nineteenth century. The stated aim of AKhRR, and of other emergent “realist” groups that it absorbed, was for art “to become social”—again, in principle, hardly at odds with the Left. The difference arises with how this is to be achieved—by focusing on “the content or subject-matter of art” (declaration by the group Objective Reality, quoted in C. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.185).

This is in fact a crucial slippage, and may well constitute the fault line, so to speak, that has divided “figurative and “Modernist” conceptions of realism—with incalculable consequences. The equation of “content” with ‘subject-matter’ has the effect of condemning work lacking manifest subject-matter, which is to say most of the work of the avant-garde, to the status of something that has no content. Apparently “contentless,” abstract work is reduced to the status of meaningless pattern or decoration. “Decoration” is itself a complex issue, but the AKhRR and others are accusing “abstract” art of failing to address real issues in social life, and

instead merely adorning the lives of those sections of society that had the leisure and privilege to indulge in contemplation of the aesthetic. By equating content and subject-matter, they rule out the very possibility of an “abstract” work performing a critical function, of having a critical content. The idea that an avant-garde practice may be striving in difficult and transformed conditions of modernity to obtain an adequately “modern” purchase on that modernity, simply becomes void of meaning. (“How could it? It lacks content. It isn’t “about” anything.”)

AKhRR, then, is not so much saying that artists should follow a particular style, as adopting a general orientation. And this orientation was fuelled by a mixture of impatience and fear - impatience with the avant-garde’s seemingly endless theoretical debate, and fear of isolation from the wider processes of social revolution. These attitudes went hand in hand with a disposition to ‘serve,’ to volunteer art (represented by themselves) to perform its “rightful” social tasks in that developing revolutionary process. Such a disposition, quite correctly in its own terms it should be said, was not shy of maneuvering itself alongside the powers that be. This is not meant as a harsh judgment with the benefit of hindsight: the dominant social ideology was one of pulling together to build the new society, and “the powers that be” were generally admired as well as respected. The point is, rather, that politicians tend to value art for what it can achieve in political and social terms; and the new groups were willing to let their work be limited by this instrumentality masquerading as a genuine social demand rather than risk unpopularity by addressing the technical problems that followed from recognizing art as a medium. For them, art was a relatively transparent achievement, a given set of skills and techniques applicable to this or that end. What had changed was the end. The avant-garde perception about the materiality of representations, the production in the representation of that which is represented, essays at its best a dialectic of means and ends; of form and content; ultimately of art and politics. With the new figurative “realism,” the traffic is all one-way.

Presumably one reason why Western art historians have paid relatively little attention to AKhRR is that—in addition to feeling moral distaste for it, because of its absolute commitment to a social task rather than to the defense of art’s aesthetic autonomy—they have also seen it as intellectually or theoretically simplistic. Yet although AKhRR’s declarations are by no means as complex as those of, say, UNOVIS or the Constructivists, they do offer some theoretical interest as well as leaving room for a measure of diversity in practice. This can be seen at its simplest in the range of types of subject dealt with. Not all were overtly heroic: Mashkov’s *Still-life with Samovar* of c.1919 is an example. Another still-life by Mashkov, however, was exhibited in AKhRR’s 1925 exhibition *Revolution, Everyday Life and Labor* under the more “heroic” title *Moscow Victuals*. Less immediately apparent, but equally significant, was a certain latitude in technique. Again, there is nothing on the scale of the avant-garde’s technical experimentation, but neither was there the imposition of complete homogeneity. For example, Giorgy Ryazhsky’s *The Chairwoman* of 1928 obviously sets out to evoke sensations of heroism and seriousness of purpose. A large part of this is due to the composition, with the figure placed against an empty ground, and angled as if she were the sole focus of attention for a spectator who is placed as if in the front row of the meeting that the female party orator is addressing. The technique used is itself relatively free. The resulting surface is both appropriate to the actual fur of the coat and expressive of a certain activity and mobility—a kind of functionality in the paint echoing the open-necked shirt and bobbed hairstyle in the subject. This can be contrasted with the use of a more “photographic” technique, as in Yevgeny Katzman’s *The Kaliazin Lacemakers*. Here the finish both establishes the individual figures (allowing psychological inquiry by the spectator) and also, because of its equal distribution across the whole of the picture, contributes to

emphasizing them as typical - working women, of different ages. These collective portraits, the female figures of the lacemakers as well as Katzman's male Communists listening at a meeting, deploy a highly wrought academic technique producing an effect of stasis that emphasizes the desired physical and moral solidity and plainness sought in the Type. "Heroic realism," it seems, is not the prerogative of one technique but can function as a practice across the middle ground of an academically heightened naturalism or a restrained expressiveness.

It goes almost without saying that AKhRR condemned the avant-garde for refusing to stay within the traditional norms of technical skill. Their attack was also aimed, however, at its theory. They contrasted the "analysis of the avant-garde with their own quest for a 'synthetic form:'" it is this that they called "heroic realism." It is important to note that, when AKhRR rejected the avant-garde's focus on form, and asserted that subject-matter should instead have priority, it was not that they did not care about the relation of form and content. Nor, when they said that realist art must have "continuity" with its nineteenth-century antecedents, were they implying that there is an eternal form that can be merely applied to the appropriate subject-matter. The skills are constant, but the forms that they will be used to produce have to be developed. The AKhRR position, rather than merely failing to see the avant-garde point about the mediation of form, in fact inverts it. The AKhRR do seek "the unity of form and content in art." But their argument is the other way round: the correct form will be determined by the subject-matter. This subject-matter is the life of the Revolution, and the new thematics will both (a) dispense with old "fractured" forms, ascribed to "the masters of the French school," their "frayed lost forms and lacerated color," and (b) organize a "new color," 'synthetic form" and "compositional structure" (AKhRR, *The Immediate Tasks of AKhRR*, pp.268-71). Far from form and content becoming disconnected by AKhRR's refusal of the avant-garde's thinking of that relation, "artistically perfect realistic form is seen as being, or needing to be, "organically engendered" by the "profound content" of the work (AKhR, "Declaration," 1928, p.272). Characteristic terms used to evoke "heroic realism" are 'severe,' "power," 'strong,' "precise—as well, of course, as "heroic" itself. These do not, as they stand, prescribe a style in detail. None the less, by reiterating such terms within a nexus of military metaphors common in the writing of the time, they do appear to set up guidelines for notions of Typicality and Generalization.

A further key notion in this realist aesthetic—and, once again, one that was not peculiar to AKhRR but featured prominently in avant-garde debate—is "organization." The term "organization" refers to two things. First, it concerns the function of a work in "organizing" the ideas of its viewers, the "creation of an art that will have the honor of shaping and organizing the psychology of the generations to come" (AKhRR, *The Immediate Tasks of AKhRR*, p.270). Secondly, it concerns the constitution of the works themselves, how they "organize" forms in accord with the new revolutionary reality. Precisely how AKhRR's forms are meant to "organically" express the new reality isn't specified; what there is instead is a rhetoric of "power" and 'strength,' "authenticity" and 'seriousness,' rooted in traditional painterly competence. None the less it would not quite do justice to their argument to say that all is then left hanging at the level of analogy. A crucial shift does happen. It is one that the avant-garde would reject, but there is a sense in which it secures the relation of new "content" to "form." The attributes that AKhRR regards so highly—strength, typicality and so on—are ascribed to the subjects, whose depiction is achieved by means of traditional competences. These traditional competences are used to evoke "deep" space, deep in both the physical and psychological senses so that the spectator can imaginatively enter the pictorial space and construct a narrative from the cues provided.

The key difference, and this is what constitutes AKhRR's "new unity," is that instead of having the psychologically believable individuals of a bourgeois social situation, with their particular actions and attributes, we now have more collective subjects—the "mass," the "people," "workers, and so on. Thus the development of skills to produce a convincing illusion is not seen as historically contingent and specific (as it was by the avant-garde) but as an achieved given in the history of art. That is to say, for the avant-garde, illusion was a thing of the past, a coin in which a modern art simply could not trade if it were to have any claim to realism. For AKhRR, by contrast, the mastery of such traditional skills and competencies was not transient, or outmoded: it was what being an artist meant. Failure to deploy these skills amounts to either incompetence or bad faith. So far this is a traditional Academic "realist" response. But for AKhRR, on the basis of the deployment of these skills, a new range of psychological (or, strictly, non-psychological—more 'socio-'logical) attributes is to be evoked, deemed more appropriate to the collective subject in a revolutionary or post-revolutionary situation. This, it seems, is what distinguishes "heroic" realism from bourgeois, not to say Academic, realism, and it is this aspect that was to be developed into Socialist Realism in the 1930s.

A comparison

To illustrate these points, it will be useful to compare two portrayals of Lenin - one from the avant-garde, one from AKhR. Gustav Klutssis's montage, *The Electrification of the Entire Country*, was constructed in 1920. It shows a photograph of Lenin dressed in ordinary clothes and wearing a flat cap striding purposefully forward and—presumably the direction is deliberate—towards the left. His figure is, however, detached from its background and placed against a new one, relative to which his figure becomes monumental. The background is produced by using modern technical drawing equipment, and shows a modern building and a predominantly diagonal array of straight lines and a circle that hovers somewhere between a Suprematist painting and a technical representation of a sphere. This part of the composition is developed from Klutssis's Suprematist montage of the previous year, *The Dynamic City*, which in turn derived from a completely abstract Suprematist painting of the same title. In the Lenin montage, it is open to conjecture whether the diagonal array is an abstract design, a quasi-architectural road plan of some sort, or a metaphor for the globe itself. Whatever, its diagonal composition ensures a certain dynamism. Small figures are positioned in this "modern landscape," and the large Lenin figure appears to be holding more of it—buildings and a pylon of some kind. Across the top of these items is a slogan.

This verbal description imposes too much continuity on the image: the point of the montage is to produce an impact precisely out of the fact that it is not seamless, and that it disrupts a continuous spatial illusion, thereby interrupting the semantic flow too. The slogan is from the campaign just announced by Lenin: "To build socialism requires soviets plus electrification" (i.e. workers' control of production and new technology). The montage attempts to embody this leap between two spheres in the dynamics of its own structure by using, so to speak, its new technology. The ambiguities in the image leave its precise meaning open: they leave the spectator with some work to do. Moreover, by its contemporaneity (of both form and content) it constitutes itself as an intervention into the campaign - to be, to use the language of the time, an "organizer" of it.

The AKhR artist Isaak Brodsky painted *Lenin at the Smolny* in 1930. It is pertinent to ask what this representation "organizes," and how it does so. There are two immediate differences from the Klutssis: first, the event depicted is not contemporary with its depiction; second, the

illusion is sustained and seamless over its whole surface. The entire picture, which is large (around life-size), is intended to present a powerful unified image. In this it succeeds dramatically. The image of Lenin is a specific one—both historically and in terms of the meanings it evokes. A contemporary Russian observer would have known without thinking that the Smolny Institute was the disused seminary taken over by Bolsheviks to co-ordinate the October Revolution in 1917. As such the place was a hive of activity, with meetings constantly in session, armed workers and soldiers milling about, delegations arguing, reporting and discussing, and leaders such as Lenin and Trotsky working around the clock, catching a rest here and there on a couch as the opportunity presented itself. Brodsky depicts the bare rooms, the rudimentary furniture, the dust covers, but he does not depict the babel. Instead, what is produced through the muted colors and the large, evenly distributed masses is a static image of quiet and calm. Lenin, again in ordinary, even shabby, clothes that look as if they might have been slept in (which we may suppose they had), is jotting down some notes out of a newspaper in a few moments before going on to address yet another meeting. The viewer passes so to speak straight through the surface of the painting to construct a narrative around its depicted elements, and the preferred reading is quite clear. No incongruity or ambivalence, spatial or semantic, is permitted. The message is simple, unitary and—to a contemporary viewer—clear, confirming and pleasurable. The effect is of an unpretentious bit of work getting done. Yet it is no ordinary work. In the context supplied by the viewer, Lenin is the working man, making the workers’ revolution, quintessentially the calm at the center of the storm. These Ten Days may have shaken the world, but the implication is that they didn’t shake Lenin: the revolution is in safe hands.

This is fine as far as it goes. Any socialist is likely to find this image powerful. The point is, what is it organizing in 1930? The year 1930 is the middle of the first Five-Year Plan; Lenin has been dead for six years; Leon Trotsky is in exile; the Stalinist bureaucracy is in control; and the propaganda machine is at full bore, advertising the headlong drive to collectivization of agriculture and heavy industrialization, on the altar of which any vestige of workplace democracy has been sacrificed. In short, a second revolution is in progress—the revolution to establish Socialism in One Country, the revolution that for some historians is effectively counter-revolution, the burial of 1917 and the beginning of the bureaucratic monolith that persisted at least until the perestroika of the late 1980s. Lenin by this time had been mummified and put on display, and was in the process of being converted into the infallible, god-like figure whose prestige would bestow validity on his successor Stalin—as a variety of images over the following years testify. In essence, then, the “organizational” work of Brodsky’s painting is to enlist the prestige of Lenin and the October Revolution of 1917 behind Stalin and the emerging state power.

It is the construction of this kind of powerfully convergent reading to which the AKhRR’s heroic realism aspires, and which was shortly to be developed into the fully-fledged doctrine of Socialist Realism. It should, however, be added that photomontage itself became increasingly devoted to such unified messages in the thirties—not least in the hands of Klutsis. There is nothing about photomontage that in principle prevents it from serving a propaganda end or makes it always a device of critical realism, just as there is nothing in painting per se that disqualifies it from a critical role or lays it uniquely open to totalitarian exploitation.

[...]

Socialist Realism: the 1934 Congress and after

Socialist Realism was enunciated at the First Congress of Soviet Writers held in Moscow in August 1934 (H.G. Scott, *Problems of Soviet Literature*). Over 600 delegates attended, including about 40 from abroad; and in 26 sessions no fewer than 300 contributions were made. And yet it would appear there was no significant disagreement. The implication is that the Congress rubber-stamped perspectives that had already been decided. Indeed they had. All the warring groups, proletarians and vanguardists alike, had been dissolved in 1932 and a single Artists' Union set up—which artists wishing to practice in the Soviet Union had to join. It is said that the policy itself was decided at secret meetings held in Maxim Gorky's flat in Moscow in October 1932 when an invited group of politicians and intellectuals argued over a name for the new kind of art. That this art would be "realist" was not in dispute. Some, however, wanted it to be "monumental;" some "heroic;" and some, still, "proletarian." One figure in particular, however, kept insisting that it be "socialist." This figure was Stalin. "Socialist Realism" it was.

One thing Socialist Realism did—as indeed Stalinism as a whole did—was to enlist Lenin. In 1905 Lenin had written a pamphlet called "Party organization and party literature" in which he enunciated the principle of *partiinost* (C.V. James, *Soviet Socialist Realism*). This is an untranslatable Russian term embodying the proposition that "Literature must become a component of organized, planned and integrated Social-Democratic [at that time, Communist] Party work" ("Party organization and party literature," p.26). Few claims have sparked such outrage among generations of liberal commentators; Lenin's argument is not, however, either as eccentric or as baseless as it is usually made out to be, being not far removed from, for example, *Tendenzkunst* (the claim that all art, irrespective of its intentions, embodies a political "tendency"). Despite ambiguities in the text, it seems that Lenin was referring specifically to party literature—newspapers, pamphlets and so on, as well as presumably fiction published by party members, at least in the party press. As we have seen, during Lenin's time the party did basically keep its hands off the arts, intervening only when artistic questions strayed into areas of organization or ones that had a functional aspect such as education. Socialist Realism of the 1930s did however extend the principle of *partiinost* to "the entire realm of culture," as Henri Arvon put it, thereby reducing artists and writers to the condition of "docile bystanders explicating the political decisions of the Central Committee and party satraps" (H. Arvon, *Marxist Aesthetics*, p.92).

There is one picture that seems to condense this state of affairs, not to mention its contradictions, very nicely. It is by Aleksandr Gerasimov, who among other things happened to be Stalin's favorite artist. The technique is not wholly Academic—not as "finished" or "photographic" as, for example, Brodsky's *Lenin at the Smolny*; it is in effect a moderate, very moderate, academicized sort of modern surface, suggestive and a little brushy, "expressive," and hence "felt." It depicts Stalin speaking at the Sixteenth Party Congress. To one side of him is the party, a mixture of obedient bureaucrats and Old Bolsheviks in their civil war medals (not many of them would be left, soon—after the purges). Behind him—as if overseeing the whole thing, giving his blessing one might say (as one is surely intended to)—is a white marble bust of Lenin. This juxtaposition is a hallmark of Stalinist entrenchment, and the way in which the picture sets it up is in itself interesting (and it is of course different from Brodsky's—the eagle-icon rather than the working man). But an added twist is given by the fact that it was the Sixteenth Congress that approved the first Five-Year Plan. As well as being a picture of Stalin's victory (it happened also to be his fiftieth birthday that year), and the smooth elision of Lenin in behind him, it is also

in a sense a picture of its own triumph—of a semi-academicized, vestigially modern Socialist Realism triumphing over proletarianism as well as over the ruined avant-garde.

Given the impact that the notion of realism in art had between the wars, and given also the fact that debates in Russia constituted the epicenter for arguments internationally—for and against—it is important not to caricature Socialist Realism. It was not all manual workers with necks thicker than their heads, generals laden with medals and rosy-cheeked maidens gazing into the blue future. As with AKhRR's "heroic realism" of the 1920s, one problem is that the doctrine does not constitute a set of prescriptions about style, but was able, along the lines already seen, to accommodate limited technical variation. In fact this feature is perhaps more pronounced than it was in the case of AKhRR. Thus Socialist Realist theory continuously harps on the notion of Truth. Just as [Avner] Zis in 1977 spoke of the "truthful depiction of reality," so [Andrei] Zhdanov in 1934 spoke of "knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully" (A. Zhdanov, speech to the Writers' Congress, quoted in Scott, *The Soviet Writers' Congress*, 1934, p.21). Yet it is a perplexing fact that truthful depiction is not the same as what Zis calls "precision in external description." That is to say, Socialist Realism is actively distinguished from Naturalism.

It seems obvious to any outside observer that AKhRR's rehabilitation and transformation of the Wanderers tradition in the early twenties sets the tone for Socialist Realism. The rhetoric is more or less the same, and the pictures look very similar. And yet in one of those bizarre reversals that characterize the whole question, Socialist Realism condemns the AKhRR tradition for its "naturalism." What Socialist Realism purports to be true to, that is to say, is not external appearances but "the inner essence." Furthermore, naturalism is interpreted as "not an inferior variety of realism, but merely the reverse side of formalism (Zis, *Foundations of Marxist Aesthetics*, p.245). Socialist Realism thus presents itself as the synthesis, the overcoming and transcendence of two equally discredited opposites that cancel each other out—the avant-garde on the one hand and naturalism on the other. Zis makes a distinction between the "mechanical repetition" of reality and its "creative reproduction" (p.39). In other words, what is to constitute an adequate Socialist Realism, on this model, is no simple matter, and consists more in the application of Marxist philosophy than in any direct match to observable features of the world as it is. Since definitive knowledge of Marxism is assumed to rest with the leadership of the Communist Party, the question of what is good and bad in art is—quite legitimately within the terms of the theory—to be decided by the politicians. This sounds hideous to Western ears, or indeed to anyone outside the orbit of the Stalinized Communist parties; but within them, all was seen to proceed from "the people" transmitted via their historic representative, the party. In practice this often led to a hagiographic depiction of leaders, and rampant idealizations of working people, as in Gerasimov's many portraits or Mukhina's monumental *The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman* [at the 1937 World's Fair]. Yet Socialist Realism in the hands of an artist such as [Alexander] Deineka could produce telling images of ordinary people, or of the struggle against Fascism, that were simply not within the purview of the Western avant-garde.

[...] Be that as it may, it is important for us to understand that Socialist Realism was not always a caricature. And to treat it as if it was is significantly to underestimate its power. It is perhaps also to underestimate the claims on art of those whose lives are marked less by a preoccupation with art than with the making and living of life itself. [...]