

*This essay is excerpted from my undergraduate thesis at Reed College in 1997, revised and edited 20 years later. It lays out some of the main aesthetic issues that have concerned me in my music.*

## Theoretical Justifications of Art in Revolutionary and Soviet Russia

“Art and life are not one, but they must become united in myself—in the unity of my answerability” - Mikhail Bakhtin, 1919

The young philosopher Bakhtin’s reminder to the poet that “it is his poetry which bears the guilt for the vulgar prose of life” is characteristic of certain longstanding paradigms of Russian thought, which the events of the twentieth century have served to amplify. In his early essay “Art and Answerability”, Bakhtin claims that Romantic poetry, instead of offering a transcendent escape from daily existence, actually engenders quotidian mediocrity by refusing to engage it. Or, in his language, it is not acceptable for the poet to compose his flights of fancy without “answering” for them in his daily life. It is typical of Russian thinkers, from the 1830s on, to see the production and reception of art in general as central to people’s construction of themselves and the world, and as both indicative and constitutive of their mode of action. In this way, the connection between aesthetic and ethical debates has been particularly intimate in the Russian context.

The philosopher and literary critic Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848) provides a starting point for modern Russian aesthetic debates. He initiated what Isaiah Berlin calls “a new type of social criticism, which searches in literature...for the attitude to life of an individual author”. Belinsky believed that “every work of art is tendentious” and that, given the morally unacceptable cultural and economic schisms between the landed gentry and the serfs, the Russian artist had an ethical responsibility to affiliate his work with progressive rather than regressive tendencies. To do so, the artist must illumine what is universal (“typical”) in the particular subject matter of the work, thereby promoting the critical stance toward reality that is necessary to socially progressive action.

In the tsarist state, open debate of social issues was largely repressed; censorship and political imprisonments forced these debates into the “semi-disguise” of literature and literary criticism, connecting literature directly to social problems through its function as the main arena of political and ethical debate. This sublimation of political discourse only increased the cultural importance of the written word, and particularly that of criticism. Berlin describes the phenomenon of Belinsky as the “domination...of one man over the entire consciousness and imagination of a vast nation...to which there is no precise parallel.” Belinsky “established the relation of literature to life in a manner which even writers not at all sympathetic to his point of view...were forced to recognize”. This same principle was essentially maintained in the work of writers all the way through the Russian Revolution, after which time it became codified as official policy under Soviet rule—the important difference being that its original critical, reforming thrust became self-congratulatory and propagandistic.

I proceed now to a discussion of two visual artists from different but contiguous periods in Russian history, Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935) and Ilya Kabakov (1933- ), who both produced considerable theoretical writings alongside their artworks. I observe that the ideological legacy of Belinsky, as it manifested itself in Revolutionary and Soviet Russia, impelled these artists and their contemporaries to orient themselves toward *justifying* their work in a functional sense. Specifically, and in keeping with progressive and socialist dogma, this justification centered first on the communicative properties of

visual art—a burning issue, given that the principles in question originated primarily in *literary* criticism—and consequently on art’s ability to educate or enlighten its audience. Malevich and Kabakov represent two different solutions to this problem that are typical of their respective historical periods. In both cases the justification is conditioned not only by the familiar (in a western capitalist context) question of what service (outside of commerce) artists can supply to society, but also by the more typically Russian attribution to art, or at least to literature, of real power and influence over the essential being of individuals, and to the culture as a unified whole.

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As a central figure of the classic Russian avant-garde, Kazimir Malevich was intensely involved with the verbal self-realization, mostly in the form of manifestoes and short-lived periodicals, which partially defines that movement. During the period just before the Bolsheviks gained power in 1917, avant-garde artists issued hundreds of statements attempting to formulate and resolve “purely artistic” problems. The fundamental issues of representation in art, the nature of reality, and the relation of content to form were taken up by many of Malevich’s contemporaries. A representative essay by the Estonian artist Vladimir Markov entitled “Principles of the New Art”(1912) applies principles borrowed from the literary movement of Symbolism to techniques of visual representation. Markov asserts that the world consists of two distinct realms: the visual, surface reality and the unseen “world of the divine”. In creating beautiful forms, artistic intuition must commune with the latter of the two, which is the source of all beauty and religion. This affects a transformation of visual reality, which can be represented in abstract art.

Malevich famously took this “transformation” a step further. Unlike earlier abstractionists, he believed (in his high style) that the translation of the unseen world to works of art should be unmediated by contact with surface reality. Thus the non-objective appearance of his Suprematist paintings; the real-world object is no longer altered by the artist’s intuitive sense, but forsaken by it completely. Represented instead are pure, unconscious, intuitively derived forms. These forms have their source in the unconscious mind of the artist and their goal in the unconscious minds of the audience, bypassing and transcending rational thought. It follows that such art could have no commonly understood use, since utility is bound to surface existence, while intuition originates in the primordial “nothing” or “eternity” from which emanates an object-less “stimulus”. However, Malevich does draw a connection of artistic intuition to technical invention; although intuition is in essence alien to utility, he asserts, the impulses that it yields (e.g. the desire to fly) are actually behind all human progress in the functional realm. He also claims a humanitarian value for his work, namely to bring intuition into the conscious mind of man, thus achieving a permanent alteration of the old, objective consciousness to a new, non-objective “supraconsciousness”. It is typical of his revolutionary polemic that he wrote less about what the future life would actually be like than about the necessity and means of change; he was seemingly content to leave organizational matters to the yet-to-be supraconscious man, and saw himself as a “stair”. Echoing the then-current theories of Henri Bergson, he saw the artist as having the power to actually change perception, and therefore reality, by bringing to light “some element in the world in principle accessible to all of us but which, before he came to paint it or write about it, we had not been able to pick out for ourselves.”

The Russian revolution changed the tenor of artistic theories and debates, and began a process of consolidation of artistic groups as well as a change in their primary concerns.

Manifestoes from 1918 on discarded for the most part problems of artistic form and began to focus more on the socially and politically progressive function of art. Russian artists were now required to realize how art could join in the transformation of the country according to socialist principles, in a concrete sense. As Boris Groys convincingly asserts in *The Total Art of Stalinism*, this sort of functionality was actually latent in pre-revolutionary avant-garde thought, occupied as those artists were with art as a means for a quite literal (albeit cosmic in its conception) transformation of the world. The concern with social function seen in Malevich's post-revolutionary statements can then be read as the outgrowth of pre-revolutionary trends. It is perhaps for this reason that he never experienced the degree of persecution and exile that befell less fortunate artists and writers during this time; although he was marginalized in his later years, Soviet cultural officials recognized that Malevich's conceptions were not altogether "formalist" or "bourgeois". In fact, they constituted a genuine attempt to conceive a new, functional art for the nascent socialist world in terms of the importance of pure art to social and technical evolution. It was only his lack of interest in direct utility (and more importantly, his failure to make a convincing link to political ideology) as a principle of artistic creation itself that made his work ill-suited to meet the demands placed on art by the mature Soviet state.

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The "Stalinist" period in Soviet art officially began in 1932, with the dissolution of all existing artistic organizations as well as of the remnants of the avant-garde, and the establishment of a centralized state bureaucracy to control virtually all artistic education and practice. This ushered in the complex and much-discussed phenomenon of "Socialist Realism" as "the basic method of Soviet literature," and by extension, of visual art as well. The strict application of literary principles to visual art, together with an even stricter adherence to communist ideology, led to a heterogeneous artistic style with, nonetheless, an absolute uniformity of purpose with regard to the Leninist formula of the 'progressive' and the 'reactionary' in literature. This theory asserts that all elements in a (literary) work can be classified as either working in accord with the dialectical progress of society towards communism, or working against it; there can be no neutral elements. This was applied to visual art by rigorously subjecting depicted objects to an ideological code, whereby every element of an image was made 'legible' through a commonly understood web of cultural, historical, narrative and other associations, with the complete work gaining coherence through the dominant principle of a utopian conception of Soviet life.

Socialist Realism was firmly entrenched, both culturally and institutionally, during the time Ilya Kabakov received his artistic education. In order to subsist as an artist, one had to be employed by the Union and produce work useful to and in accord with state policy, which he ultimately did for over 30 years as an illustrator of children's books. However, the political Thaw initiated by Nikita Khrushchev in 1955 led to the emergence of "unofficial" Soviet artists, of whom Kabakov became a leading figure. An essential feature of Kabakov's unofficial art is its appropriation and subversion of the Socialist Realist context. In common with Socialist Realism, Kabakov intended an educative and representational purpose in much of his work; however, he sought not to portray an idealized reality, but instead the "plain reality," or actual psychological and material conditions, of Soviet people. A dominant feature of this reality was the dissonance between the jubilation and perfection expressed by Soviet propaganda and the poverty, terror and depression typical of actual Soviet life. However, the utilitarian spirit of socialist art is maintained in Kabakov's conception of art as a "model of the world." By

providing an accurate “model”, art fulfills Kabakov’s stated artistic criterion, in which “the worth of [an art work] lies only in how we can interpret it, in its message and weight, in the principles it can help me discover within myself.” He did this in large part by ironically yet meticulously following the socialist artistic dictum to “represent life in the forms of life itself”.

By comparing the justifications for art in the writings of Malevich and Kabakov, we can see that in both cases the productive function of art depends on the artist’s ability to *communicate* something to the viewer. However, the artistic philosophies of both Socialist Realism and Kabakov are distinguished from that of Malevich by their focus on the specifically *linguistic* aspect of this communication. As discussed, this was historically conditioned by the overarching importance of ideology in the Soviet period, and the implicit fact that ideology is by nature verbally based. The surface objectivity or neutrality of visual phenomena and images therefore requires a complex process of contextualization in order precisely to convey an ideological meaning. In the case of Socialist Realism, we can assume that this process was intended to take place subconsciously, much in the same way that Malevich intended his work to take effect, in accordance with Stalin’s idea of the artist as the “engineer of human souls”. One can even draw an ironic, yet appropriate, parallel between the avant-gardist “world of the divine” and the mythical Soviet utopia. Kabakov on the other hand, states “it was characteristic of us, a small group of friends, to react consciously and not unconsciously to such ‘context’ [Soviet cultural codes], to create in our works a distance between the ‘text’ and the ‘context’, to reveal and describe their correlation.”

In drawing out this tension between text and context, or (sub-) text and image, Kabakov reveals a compelling aesthetic phenomenon. He demonstrates this by the example of an illustration in a children’s book, with a caption below it referring to the corresponding moment in the story. The caption reads, “the bo’sun thoroughly went down the list which he held in his hand, checking off the goods on board the ship,” which sets the young Kabakov (the essay is written as a reminiscence) on a chain of speculations about the picture:

Seems like everything does check out. There’s the bo’sun, yes that’s him, the paper is in his hand and...it seems to be the left one, but must check...yes it’s the left one. But why does he look so suspicious and discontented—he’s checking, “checking off the goods,” but something’s not quite right, it seems that the bo’sun himself is fuelling our mistrust—it’s not clear—are the sailors themselves standing behind him not completely trusting him, they are pointing at something, and what is that grave officer thinking?

First, he establishes a dichotomy between the objectivity of the picture and the subjectivity of the narrative as a whole, which stimulates the imagination of the reader. When viewing the picture, the reader feels himself to be where he is, looking at and evaluating the picture, but when reading a story he is “transported” to an imaginary place that he, under the stimulus of the book, has invented. In Kabakov’s view, the collision of text and image presents a mystery far more complex than the picture unaccompanied by text. The problem is to reconcile the “internal spectacle” (text) with the “external spectacle” (image) while being denied the ability to privilege one over the other by their proximity<sup>1</sup>. One’s subjective idea of what the text “looks” like comes up against the

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting parallel can be found in the relation of image and music in film. According to Adorno and Eisler in their book *Composing for the Films*, this contrast consists largely in the fact that image must struggle to free itself from objectivity, while music is essentially subjective; in the words of

picture, or what “really is”. Kabakov locates the link between the two in the consciousness of the observer, who by a process of “continuous hypothesizing” locates within his own mind the connection, which in a sense is predetermined by his own mental peculiarities. Each viewer paradoxically “finds” a preexisting connection while simultaneously forming it anew.

By removing the ideological and socially rooted aspects of this phenomenon as it occurred in socialist art, Kabakov seems to depart from his ostensibly didactic purpose. The process illustrated by this example does not carry a clear, quasi-linguistic message, but instead revels in the ambiguity resulting from the collision of different types of media. However, I see a connection here, albeit perhaps a tenuous one, to the idea of “supraconsciousness” asserted by Malevich. In both cases, an area of consciousness is stimulated that extends beyond what is immediately evident. But the mechanisms and processes in the two cases are different: in the case of Malevich, the new consciousness is more or less passively received via the supreme intuition of the artist-genius, while with Kabakov it relies on the active participation of the viewer. The supraconscious element in this latter case is precisely in the unique connection that each viewer must make in order to unite the text and image, or to “complete” the whole picture that is only suggested in the conflict of material. This connection must take place on a plane intermediate between text and image, and coincident with neither. Thus while we can see a certain unity of purpose in Malevich and Kabakov, along the lines of a kind of psychological (if not necessarily metaphysical) elevation, we also see the shift from a didactic to a participatory method of engagement. By sacrificing some of the metaphysical aspirations of a Malevich and restoring art’s referential aspect, Kabakov arrives at a more viewer-centered, active mode of artistic experience. We can also see that by stimulating such a process, art can continue to serve an “enlightening” purpose, both by elucidating certain psychological phenomena, and by initiating actual changes in the perception of the viewer. And despite the sense of ambiguity produced by such an approach, the communicative orientation of art is also maintained, since there can be no ambiguity without the supposition of meaning.

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Miklos Rosza, music “serves the drama and creates in the subconscious an idealistic and sometimes irrational dimension against which the naturalistic components play.” Similarly, the composer Leonard Rosenman says, “the musical contribution to the film should be ideally to create a supreality, a condition in which the conditions of literary naturalism are perceptually altered.”

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