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Sotzromantizm and Its Theaters of Life

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The introduction offers the notion of Sotzromantizm *(socialist romanticism) as a way of framing critical engagements with the actually existing socialism of the 1950s–1980s. Large-scale historicizing projects relied on the romantic re-appropriation of space to generate versions of identity, social communities, spiritual values, and relations to the past that significantly differed from the rationalistic canons of the perfectly planned socialist society. As the introduction argues,* Sotzromantizm *offers us a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late socialist society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime. Instead, the concept allows us to shift attention to ideas, institutions, spaces, objects, and identities that enabled (rather than prevented) individual and collective involvement with socialism.*

Key Words: *Sotzromantizm*, Soviet Architecture, Constructivism

For the Romantics, the striving for the ideal was motivated not by some abstract demands of duty (as the Classicists would have it) nor was it determined by the consideration of purposiveness or profit (as the Enlightenment thinkers' theory of the rational selfishness would maintain). Rather, it was the organic inability to exist outside the all-embracing thirst for perfection.

—Aron Gurevich, *The Thirst for Perfection*

Less than three years after the Russian revolution, El Lissitzky, a barely known director of a design and architecture workshop at the Vitebsk People's Art School, typed up a manifesto of sorts.[1] Within the next two decades, Lissitzky would significantly shape the visual language of the Russian avant-garde and Soviet official art, but in 1920 he was busily outlining a grandiose vision for the future that was about to arrive. Dispensing with such unnecessary trifles as capitalization (everybody is equal) and punctuation (nobody is separated), his *suprematism in world reconstruction* promised:

we shall give a new face to this globe. we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite … in architecture we are on the

1. For more on Lissitzky's work in Vitebsk, a provincial town in Belarus that became a meeting point for key figures of the Russian revolutionary avant-garde, see Shatskikh (2007) and Kantsedikas and Iargina (2004).

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way to a completely new concept ... we left to the old world the idea of the in-
dividual house individual barracks individual castle individual church. we
have set ourselves the task of creating the town ... the dynamic architecture
provides us with the new theater of life and ... the task of architecture—the
rhythmic arrangement of space and time—is perfectly and simply fulfilled
... for the new town will not be as chaotically laid out as the modern towns
of north and south america but clearly and logically like a beehive. (Lissitzky
1969, 332; capitalization and punctuation in original)

With its desire for the thorough reshaping of the world, for the resolute replacing
of individuals with the collectivized "we" and individual structures with rationally
constructed towns, this passage could be easily seen as yet another example of the
iconic Soviet revolutionary worldview, in which the chaos of the past would yield
to the clear, logical system materialized by a beehive. Lissitzky's parataxic style,
with its flattened but rhythmic structures, reveals yet another important feature.
The reshaping of the world through "the rhythmic arrangement of space and
time" was paralleled by the reshaping of representational tools, resulting in a pe-
culiar metaphor of "the new theater of life": a stage set for performing plays, which
would be written in the process of their own performance.

   When reading Lissitzky's plans for giving "a new face to the globe," it helps to
remember that the year was 1920; the bloody civil war was still going on, and no
major architectural projects, let alone the building of whole new towns, were
even in sight. The radicalism of his plans for reconstructing the world was tem-
pered by a lack of resources to implement them. This situation would change
quickly, though. Unleashed in 1928, the industrialization campaign would dramat-
ically transform the outlook of the Soviet Union. But it would not change the
utopian radicalism of the architects. For instance, when in 1930 *Sovremennaia Arkhi-
tektura* (*SA*), the flagship journal of Soviet constructivists, published a big selection
of essays reviewing the competition for the best architectural rendition of "the
principles of the socialist organization of the Green city," the level of their aspira-
tion and the scale of the envisioned changes were just as grand as in Lissitzky's
manifesto. Moisei Ginzburg and Mikhail Barshch (1930, 22), two leading construc-
tivist architects, insisted in their introductory essay that the transformation of
Moscow into a "grandiose park" would be the most "economical way" to get rid
of such "evils of the big city" as "housing crisis" or "the moving hell" of traffic
jams. Recognizing the radicalism of their proposal—the majority of plants, institu-
tions, and companies were to be "dispersed throughout the Soviet Union"—the ar-
chitects concluded: "We know that our project of the socialist reconstruction of
Moscow would provoke screams from various lovers of the old (*star'evchshiki*), re-
storers, and eclecticists; but we are completely convinced that these radical projects
are the only realistic and doable plan that can be economically implemented today
and would become unavoidable tomorrow." "Screams" came from an unexpected
corner. Le Corbusier, who was watching the competition in Moscow, on his way

home sent a letter to Ginzburg, in which he sharply criticized the plan to dis-urban-ize Moscow. As Le Corbusier (1930, 63) put it, it was precisely the urbanization and the increasing concentration of the city population that provided the key impetus for development: "Mind develops only when human masses become organized in groups. It is a fruit of concentration. Dispersion takes mind away and weakens all the disciplining bonds—both the material and the mental." The critique did not go unnoticed. In his response, Ginzburg formulated a line of ideas, which can be seen as emblematic for the early socialist approach to organizing urban space. Address-ing Le Corbusier directly, Ginzburg wrote:

> You are a superb surgeon of the contemporary city ... You plant wonderful gardens on the roofs of multistory buildings, giving people a bit of greenery; you create charming villas, providing their inhabitants with ideal amenities, peace and comfort. And you are doing this because you want to *heal* the city, trying to preserve it as it was originally created by capitalism. Here, in the USSR, we are in a much better condition: we are not tied to the past ... We diagnosed the illness of the modern city. We say: Yes, it is sick; it is inter-minably sick. But we are not interested in curing it. We prefer to erase it en-tirely so that we could begin the work of creating new types of human settlements, which would have no internal contradictions. (Ginzburg 1930, 61)

In these early Soviet architectural debates, I want to highlight only one point: their perception of the past as a burden to be abandoned, as a legacy to be forgotten, or as an inheritance that should remain unclaimed. Ginzburg's plans to disurbanize Moscow were never realized, but this failure did not stop subsequent generations of architects and urban planners to perceive landscape both as a site of major spatio-political transformations and as a screen for no less ambitious socio-political fantasies. Every decade of Soviet socialism would have its own signature project that would build things from scratch. The quick creation of new industrial cities (and labor camps) in the 1930s was gradually replaced by the massive Virgin Lands Campaign, which turned the steppes of Kazakhstan and southern Siberia into grain-producing regions in the 1950s. The campaign was followed by the rapid development of Siberia's oil and gas deposits in the 1960s and 1970s and the construction of the Baikal-Amur railroad, a Soviet analogue of the Trans-Sibe-rian Railway in the 1970s and 1980s. Producing in each case their own version of "the rhythmic arrangement of space and time," these state-sponsored projects nonetheless closely followed the basic principle of disassociation from history, which Ginzburg singled out as the key condition of possibility for large-scale alter-ations of space: erase the past in order to move forward.

   A future student of Ginzburg, Nikolai Miluitin, a high-ranking Soviet bureau-crat, is famous for commissioning the Narkomfin Building in Moscow.[2] But he is

2. On the Narkomfin Communal House and its importance for understanding the material culture of socialism, see Buchli (1999, chap. 4).

also remembered as an important person who in a sense operationalized the dream from Lissitzky's manifesto. Miluitin's 1930 pioneering study of the socialist city (*sotsgorod*) laid out the basic principles of how to think of space not in terms of individual *buildings* but in terms of separate *towns*. Defending his views, Miluitin (1930, 9) offered his own variation of Ginzburg's plea for abandoning history: "We have to resolutely reject our 'historical legacy' as something that is beneath any criticism ... to use as our benchmark an old rotten woodstove or a grandfather's dusty bed would be the greatest crime and an act of sabotage in relation to our own contemporary youth and the generations to come."

With some minor differences, this basic claim—"our 'historical legacy' ... is beneath any criticism"—can be traced across various forms of aesthetic, social, and political practices in the USSR. This historical nihilism of Soviet radical modernity is hardly unexpected, and many studies of the Soviet Union traditionally focus precisely on this. But the essays collected in this volume complicate this familiar story a bit. They offer us a diverse set of examples that nonetheless demonstrate how the original dismissal of *history* very quickly produced its own panoply of large-scale *historicizing* projects and historicist attitudes. Alexei Golubev's (2017) study of practices of the museumification of the "heritage architecture" in the Russian North (initiated by another student of Moisei Ginzburg) is, perhaps, the most striking example of the complex relationship between socialist modernity and its landscapes. Yet other contributions reveal the same fundamental tendency, albeit in a slightly less radical form: architects, museum workers, designers, artists, and writers turned to the past for "models" (Bellat 2017), "prototypes" (Maxim 2017), "modules" (Laanemets 2017), "toolboxes" (Sukrow 2017), and "artifacts" (Gapova 2017), which could be retrofitted, repurposed, replicated, or at least replayed in completely new theaters of life.

It is not that a conservative striving to hold onto the historical was entirely replaced by the original radicalism of the utopian desire for grand transformations in these projects, but as they demonstrate, when it comes to scale or effort, the drive to restore and repurpose often manifested itself through the same persistent unwillingness to be realistic: villages were to be moved (as Maxim and Golubev show), and the nation's historical narrative could be totally reimagined (Gapova).

But there is a significant difference. As these contributors make clear, the *retrospective* orientation of these socialist engagements with space (and time) was also accompanied by a palpable tendency to *integrate* trends and elements that had been seen as mutually incompatible earlier. "Synthesis" seems to be a key word in the contributors' descriptions of these projects.

At least to some extent, the historicist dialogism of these projects might reflect a different stage of Soviet socialism: by the 1960s–70s, Soviet socialism *could* look back on its own legacy, taking this as the homegrown point of a new departure. However, examples from Romania of the 1950s and the GDR of the 1970s suggest that this dialogue with the past could be more than just a sign of socialism's own maturity. The interest in giving *new* faces to the globe in these "newly

socialized countries" was coeval with a similarly strong desire not only to rediscover the globe's *old* faces but also to keep them together with the new ones.

The contributions to this volume grew out of presentations at two conferences that I organized at Princeton University. In 2013, "Illusions Killed by Life: Afterlives of (Soviet) Constructivism" explored the postwar surge of interest in the legacy of constructivist ideas and practices in design, photography, architecture, and literature of the 1920s and 1930s. In turn, "Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism's Reason," in 2014, drew attention to the visible emergence in the 1950s–70s of representational forms, artistic practices, styles of narration, and modes of inquiry that resembled the key conventions of romanticism, with its profound investment in the archaic, ruinous, brooding, and spontaneous. In both conferences, the language of afterlives and romantic retrospection tried to capture the dual dynamic of socialist development after the Second World War, a dynamic in which utopian futurity uneasily sat side by side with the retrospectively created past. The two conferences also clearly demonstrated that the blanket notion of socialist realism was capable neither of containing stylistically the diversity of aesthetic and symbolic practices of postwar socialism nor of explaining conceptually the appearance of new trends and styles of the time. The notion of socialist romanticism—*Sotzromantizm*—that was discussed at the latter conference emerged as a solution to this descriptive and analytic deadlock. It might not have a universal quality but it did help to make sense of many tendencies that had remained undertheorized for a long time. Without going into detail, I want to point out only a few aspects of *Sotzromantizm*, which could help to contextualize the larger intellectual climate that generated the phenomena discussed by the contributors.

In 1957, only one year after Nikita Khrushchev's famous secret speech, *Voprosy Literatury* (Literary Issues), a new Soviet journal dedicated entirely to topics in literary theory, history, and criticism, published an article that initiated a long-term intellectual discussion. Anna Elistratova (1957, 28, 32, 46) an expert on the English romantic novel, directly challenged the aesthetic doctrine of the post-Stalin period by asking, "When it comes to the artistic perception of the world, can we really say that Realism is historically the only effective method we should rely on?" Pointedly drawing only on examples from the history of Western literature, the scholar insisted that "artistic tools of the Enlightenment literature, with its rationalism, its mechanicism, and its metaphysical approach to reality, obviously proved its own insufficiency." Was it not the time to admit, Elistratova concluded, that the legacy of romanticism, with its humanistic dreams and rebellious outbursts, could offer an important source of inspiration for progressive socialist art?

This initial challenge to the hegemony of realism was followed by a series of heated debates in the 1960s and 1970s. The initial reliance on the European aesthetic tradition was quickly expanded to include examples from Russian (albeit only imperial) history. In their debates, participants highlighted such characteristics of romanticism as its propensity "to stare at the darkness in order to discern

new directions" (Kuleshov 1964, 130) and its emphasis on the "absolute autonomy and uniqueness of the individual" (Khalizev 1973, 259). Within a very short period, the status of romanticism swiftly evolved from "literature's liabilities" (*passiv litera-tury*) and an unfortunate "byproduct of the historic and literary development" (Nalivaiko 1982, 156) to a symptom of "social emancipation" (Krasnov 1969, 250). By the late 1970s, the former "passive, conservative, and reactionary" romanticism (Frizman 1978, 254) was elevated to a "revolution in arts" that privileged dynamism, becoming, and spontaneity (Dmitrenko 1982, 251).

It is hard not to read these literary debates as an attempt to reframe the role of the humanities in the USSR in the wake of the horrors of the Stalinist terror and the Second World War. Framed as an esoteric philological enterprise, these late-Soviet discussions discovered in romanticism a historically available framework that could generate versions of identities, social communities, spiritual values, and relations to the past that significantly differed from the rationalistic canons of the logically planned society.

Philological explorations of romantic tropes, of course, were only one expression of a broader interest in reclaiming romanticism. In the 1960s, newly publicized texts by Isaak Babel, Andrei Platonov, and Boris Pil'niak helped to reframe the Russian Revolution, giving Communist utopia one more chance. Symptomatically, in 1968, after years of oblivion, Lissitzky's works were republished by his widow (but only in German).[3] A host of other trends paralleled this reappearance of rev-olutionary romanticism in the 1960s. Late Soviet cinematic adaptations of Shake-speare by Grigory Kozintsev vividly highlighted the figure of the "problematic hero," deeply attuned to psychological nuance and the complications of being in the world (Moore 2012). Interest in the occult and the mystical (facilitated by the publication of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* in 1966) provided yet another ground for destabilizing normative socialist-realist canons with alternative forms of epistemology. A structurally similar escape from the rationality of Stalinist neoclassicism was manifested in various attempts to articulate a feeling of kinship with the world of nature, from the vagabond aesthetics of "wild tourism" (Noack 2006; Giustino, Plum, and Vari 2013) to the "village prose" movement, with its in-sistence on cultural rootedness and national belonging (Parthe 1992).

Throughout the Soviet Union, romantic nationalists offered alternatives to the unifying and universalizing notion of the "Soviet people" by reinterpreting folklor-ic motifs in the cinema of Sergei Parajanov (First 2016), by revitalizing the genre of the historical novel (Dobrenko 2000), and by reframing ancient history (Bassin 2016). The rhetorical force of romanticism had a profound impact on such key late-Soviet phenomena as the communard movement in education (Kukulin, Maiofis, and Safronov 2015) and the Soviet fascination with taming the atom (Orlova 2014) and conquering the cosmos (Gerovitch 2015).

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3. I describe in detail the return of the Soviet revolutionary avant-garde in another essay (see Oushakine 2016).

Sotzromantizm allows us to approach these seemingly disparate instances as examples of an autonomous (and relatively consistent) form of historical imagination. This politico-poetical configuration—a new theater of life, indeed—brought together dispersive impulses, anarchic inclinations, psychological introspection, and metaphorical structuring in order to repudiate the basic Soviet conventions of normative rationality and mimetic socialist realism.

In short, *Sotzromantizm* views the romantic imagination in postwar Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union as a form of critical engagement with "actually existing" socialism. While many recent studies of late socialism are structured around metaphors of absence and detachment, *Sotzromantizm* allows us to shift attention to concepts, institutions, spaces, objects, and identities that enabled (rather than prevented) individual and collective involvement with socialism. *Sotzromantizm* offers a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late Soviet society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime. As the contributors to "Landscapes of Socialism" convincingly demonstrate, the romantic sensibility not only sought to create or discover new spaces for alternative forms of affective attachment and social experience but also, and perhaps more significantly, helped to curtail the self-defeating practices of disengagement and indifference.

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