BOOK REVIEWS/КНИЖНЫЕ РЕЦЕНЗИИ

Julia Vaingurt. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde: Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013. xii, 308 pp. $40.50 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0-9101-2894-1.

Julia Vaingurt's ingenious study of the theme of technology in Russian culture and the arts in the 1920s tackles a lingering conundrum of the early Soviet period: Why did members of the Russian avant-garde, whose zeal for technology was no less fervent than – and seemed to provide the perfect artistic analog to – that of the Bolsheviks fall so decisively out of favor under Stalin at the turn of the 1930s, just when the technocentric First Five-Year Plan and "gigantomanic" construction were gaining momentum? Vaingurt accounts for this apparent paradox by distinguishing between the state's and the avant-garde's conceptions of technology and its uses. As she writes, although avant-garde artists found the "principle of utility" inherent in technology no less appealing than did the goal-driven Bolshevik leadership, "their imaginative approaches to technology led them away from the conception of usefulness narrowly understood as unilateral mastery, conquest, control [over the environment], and toward a more complex idea reminiscent of the Greek *techne.*" (p. 5) Citing Aristotle, Heidegger, and Marcuse, Vaingurt defines *techne* as the contemplation of the act of creation, of "coming-to-be," (pp. 5-6) and proposes that the imaginative technologies of the avant-garde are by their nature exploratory, aimed at revealing the nature of reality rather than exerting control over it. It is this essential complexity of the avant-garde's imaginative technologies that, in her view, ensured that they "remain unfinished, provoking perpetual ethical questioning and aesthetic wonder" (p. 14) and "prevented their full conscription into the arsenal of political hegemony." (p. 7)

Needless to say, the complexities of *techne* were of little use to the Soviet regime, which tended to view "technology as neutral, as a mere means for the achievement of particular ends." (p. 7) The ends, of course, were socialism and communism. However, by adopting the mindset of "technical rationality" (a category Vaingurt borrows from Max Weber, via William Leiss and the Frankfurt School) – a mindset which stresses efficiency and productivity, regardless of what is being produced – the Soviet regime laid the groundwork for the substitution of means for ends. Under high Stalinism, the Soviet Union became, as Slavoj Žižek has noted, an empire of signs, in which the "appearance of success [was] more crucial than success itself." (p. 9) The state's industrial projects and "giganto-

manic" constructions, Vaingurt argues, came to symbolize, and eventually to replace, progress towards socialism itself. By contrast, the avant-garde's non-rational, inefficient imaginative technologies had a very definite aesthetic and ethical end. The artists under discussion never regarded their technologies as "value-neutral"; indeed, they invested them with "the traditional humanistic values embedded in the very theory of defamiliarization," enjoining themselves and their audience to see the world with new eyes and to avoid what Viktor Shklovskii presented as the dehumanizing and immoral process of "habitualization." (pp. 13-14)

Viewed through Vaingurt's theoretical lens, the lingering conundrum is no conundrum at all. The avant-garde and the Bolshevik leadership had fundamentally differing conceptions of the uses and implications of technology; their conceptions may have seemed compatible for a time, but this compatibility was almost purely superficial. In fact, the avant-garde was set on an inevitable collision course with the regime. In framing her study, Vaingurt expressly polemicizes with Boris Groys, whose *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1991) presents Stalinist culture and Socialist Realism as natural outgrowths of the avant-garde's own tendency toward "demiurgism" – the belief that the artist can transform human nature and the world around him through his work. Her reading of the avant-garde's program is closer to that of Susan Buck-Morss, who in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (2000) describes the artists' imaginative technologies as "expressing the wish for a transformed relationship between human beings and their environment [. . .] not to exploit nature but to enhance human existence within it." (quoted on p. 13)

Having established this framework, Vaingurt proceeds to a vigorous, wide-ranging, and fruitful analysis of various avant-garde imaginative technologies. In the first section of her book, "Homo Faber, Homo Ludens," she focuses on the biomechanical theories of Aleksei Gastev, Director of the Central Institute of Labor and avant-garde Proletkul't poet, whose attempt to remake the Russian man through the manipulation and refinement both of labor practices and of language reflected an ideology of "self-colonization," a "lust for the foreign" – namely an imagined futuristic America, the homeland of Taylorism – that proved "incompatible with the siege mentality officially cultivated in the Soviet Union of the 1930s." (p. 53) In the second chapter of this section, she discusses the "adulteration" of biomechanics in the theatrical realm by Vsevolod Meierkhold. The avant-garde director's staging of Commelynck's *The Magnanimous Cuckold* – in which a husband's baseless suspicions cause him to manipulate his wife's body and mind, and end in his losing her – emerges, in her convincing analysis, as an exploration of the ludic ele-

ment in biomechanics, and, ultimately, "a cognitive exercise investigating its potential failure." (p. 55)

In the second part of her book, Vaingurt explores three "alternative technologies" that subvert the ideal of the mechanized man and the state's idealized, utilitarian view of technology. The section is bracketed by two readings of important modernist novels that thematize mechanization and, to some extent, the avant-garde project, but are not themselves avant-garde. In Vaingurt's reading, the malfunctioning machines in Evgenii Zamiatin's *We* (1920) – in which the author polemicizes with Gastev's theories – preserve "life-sustaining disorder and incompleteness" and prevent a "state of intellectual stasis and complacency" by demanding constant "recalibration" and active engagement, "enabling reflection, introspection, and revelation." (p. 100) While the "suicide machine" Ophelia in Iurii Olesha's *Envy* – which appeared in 1927, when machine aesthetics were at the height of their popularity, enthusiastically embraced and disseminated by the regime – emerges as a consummate figure of rebellion, "epitomiz[ing] not humanity's desire to emulate technology nor merely its threat, but the trauma that humanity sustained in the process of transforming itself into a machine." (p. 133) The real meat of this section, however, is a penetrating and persuasive interpretation of Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* and *Letatlin* as programmatically non-functional examples of organic architecture and machinery, the "embodiment[s] of his friend Velimir Khlebnikov's visionary teaching of the interrelationship between man's endeavors and the movements of Earth, sun, and moon." (p. 103)

In the final section of her book, Vaingurt returns to the theme of Americanism that she broached in her discussion of Gastev, devoting two chapters to mainstream, modernist, and avant-garde encounters – both real and imagined – with the "homeland of technology." (p. 20) In the first chapter of this section, the author traces the genealogy and elaboration of the discourse of Americanism in Russian and Soviet culture and analyzes various takes on Americanism and America by Soviet-era authors (including Gorkii, Esenin, and Ilf and Petrov), but concentrates on Maiakovskii's pre-1925 "American" poems and the travelogue of his 1925 trip, *My Discovery of America*. She concludes that his eventual rejection of the "futurism of bare technology" and call "not to sing the praises of technology but to harness technology in the name of the interests of humankind" (quoted on pp. 177-78) – a result of his confrontation with "America the place," rather than "America the sign" – put him at odds with the goals of the Soviet state. In the second chapter, Vaingurt engages with the maddeningly multifarious phenomenon of the "Red Pinkerton," analyzing the use of Americanism in the works of A. Tolstoi (*Aelita* and *Engineer Ga-*

rin's Death Ray), Ilya Ehrenburg (*Khulio Khurenito* and *D.E. Trust*), Marietta Shaginian (*Mess-Mend*), and Valentin Kataev (*Erendorf Island*), as well as Lev Kuleshov's film *Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Soviets*, Sergei Eisenstein's unrealized *The Glass House*, and the avant-garde ventures of *Fabrika ekstsentricheskogo aktera* (FEKS). Some may argue with the notion that these works all fall within the confines of "Red Pinkertonism," but they certainly represent – often parodically – the 1920s Soviet vogue for Americanism and technology; Vaingurt limits herself to this aspect of the works under discussion. Her argument that these novels and films represent an "approach to otherness [that is] antagonistic to colonization" as well as an "openness to 'alien' values and experiences" seems sound indeed, and partially explains these projects' political failure in the growingly isolationist Soviet Union.

Vaingurt's choice of subjects may open her to critique. Not every project considered in this book can be called avant-garde, while some properly avant-garde groupings like *Ob"edinenie real'nogo iskusstva* (OBERIU) don't even rate a mention. It would have been interesting to see Vaingurt place the mechanized men and women of Nikolai Zabolotskii's "The Ivanovs" (1928) or the utopian vision of his "Triumph of Agriculture" (composed in 1929-1930) in her framework. But Vaingurt doesn't claim that her analysis is exhaustive; instead, she describes her book as mimicking the "center-fleeing trajectory of *techne*." (p. 234) This mimetic structure makes for lively and endlessly thought-provoking reading. Vaingurt's book is an important contribution to our understanding of the underlying tensions in Soviet culture and society in the 1920s and 1930s. As a study of the intersection of aesthetics and politics during this period of rapid modernization, it belongs on the shelf alongside the aforementioned works of Groys and Buck-Morss, as well as Vladimir Paperny's pioneering *Culture Two* (1985, English translation 2002) and Tim Harte's recent *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture* (2009).

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