
On Some Specific Traits of Russian Culture

Changes and Continuities Between the Pre-Soviet, the Soviet, and the Post-Soviet Phase

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For Maxim Kantor, the true heir of Russian art

ONE OF THE FASCINATING PHENOMENA of the philosophy of culture is the persistence of cultural traits. This persistence becomes a reason for philosophical wonder when it survives radical political and social changes – in the most extreme case even a revolution that claims to begin a new phase of history. Cultural persistence can be explained partly by the deliberate transmission of behavioral patterns through education and socialization; but it may also occur against the intentions of the agents. Even when cultures sincerely desire to break with traditions that they experience as burdensome and oppressive, they may not succeed; the specific way in which they turn against their own traditions may be determined by exactly those traditions they want to revolt against. Everyone knows people who, despite sincere efforts to overcome them, remain victims of certain personal characteristics; and something similar seems to hold also for cultures. Perhaps the most striking example is constituted by the continuities in Russian culture. The Soviet Revolution of 1917 was one of the greatest watersheds in Russian history; it even had the aims of showing the whole world the right way and leading to a new and final phase of history. The historian of ideas, however, who studies the pre-Soviet and the Soviet epochs of Russian intellectual history, discovers, besides important changes, astonishing continuities between the two eras. It is less surprising that the post-Soviet epoch shows similarities with the pre-Soviet era, for part of the new cultural adjustment after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 was the deliberate desire to return to the pre-Soviet past, which began to be idealized after decades of official condemnation. But if it is true that the Soviet decades were less different from the past than Russians believed them to be, a return to earlier models was not incompatible with the persistence of Soviet traits – traits that, in any case, were unlikely to disappear given the just mentioned tendency of human cultures to maintain basic features even through epochs of rupture.

My essay pursues the question whether there are certain traits of Russian culture that distinguish it through the centuries from other cultures and, if so, which

ones. I must ignore features that belong to political and social history¹ and concentrate on the arts, mainly on literature and film. In the long first section (1.), I will discuss the pre-Soviet culture, then the Soviet (2.), and finally the post-Soviet epoch (3.).

1. Pre-Soviet Russia

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 it seemed that the world had entered a phase that ultimately signified the end of all historical struggles to find and implement the right political order – suffice it to mention Francis Fukuyama in *The End of History and the Last Man* of 1992. For with the end of Soviet communism the only plausible alternative to democracies based on market economies had disappeared. Certainly it would take some time before the new principles could be instantiated everywhere; but their theoretical validity was no longer in question, and despite some occasional setbacks their final victory was guaranteed. The future of humankind would consist in wealthy democratic societies competing peacefully with each other in the context of a comprehensive world market. The two most attractive features of this vision were the hope that the new system could ban the scourge of war by interconnecting economically the various political systems and the expectation that through generalized trade and good governance the nations of the world would overcome by the mid of the twenty-first century absolute poverty everywhere on the planet.

The optimism of the last decades has been replaced by much more somber feelings in the course of the last years. One cause is the return of Russia to the world stage with the clear ambition to recover a place as a superpower and to retrieve at least some of the territories lost with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The risks to world peace connected to these strategies are considerable, but they are not the topic of this essay. What I am interested in is rather trying to understand why Russia engages in policies that threaten, as few other phenomena of the present do, the transformation of the world into a peaceful association of societies engaging in commercial activities. My central claim is that the traditional values of Russian culture have been more inimical to basic liberal ideals than those of the other great cultures and that it is difficult to deal with Russia appropriately, if one fails to understand this crucial feature. My statement is not intended primarily as an indictment. While the Russian aversion against liberalism might constitute a threat to world peace, the refusal to reduce human existence to the lives of con-

¹ See on those features my forthcoming essay: Vittorio Hösle: How Should One Evaluate the Soviet Revolution?, in: *Analyse und Kritik* 39 (2017).

sumers has something noble in it; thus, the radical otherness of Russian culture may elicit both fear and admiration and certainly bewilderment, as Fyodor Tjutchev points out in his famous verses on Russia.

Henry Adams, the much-travelled descendant of two American presidents, who saw the legacy of his family in building stable relations between the USA and the United Kingdom and hoped to extend their alliance to larger and larger areas of the world, including Russia herself,² writes in his autobiography about his only journey to Russia in 1901: »Russia had nothing in common with any ancient or modern world that history knew; she had been the oldest source of all civilization in Europe, and had kept none for herself; neither Europe nor Asia had ever known such a phase, which seemed to fall into no line of evolution whatever [...].«³ Adams recognizes in her inertia one of the most important features of Russia and contrasts this with »the hasty and unsure acceleration of America«.⁴ As is well known, it is Adams who anticipated Reinhart Koselleck's »law of acceleration« of the historical process in chapter XXXIV of his book. Adams even considers a swing of the Russian people into a Western movement: »Very likely, Russia would instantly become the most brilliant constellation of human progress through all the ordered stages of good; but meanwhile one might give a value as movement of inertia to the mass, and assume a slow acceleration that would, at the end of a generation, leave the gap between east and west relatively the same.«⁵ After Russia, Adams travelled to Scandinavia and was dumbfounded by the efficiency of its »electro-magnetic civilization and the stupefying contrast with Russia«.⁶ He characterizes Scandinavia geographically and geopolitically: »the ice on the north, the ice-cap of Russian inertia pressing from behind, and the ice a trifling danger compared with the inertia«.⁷

Adams' reflections point to the geography of a country as an important factor of its culture, although the contrast between Russia and Scandinavia demonstrates that relatively similar climatic conditions can lead to different cultural traits, if different political and religious structures are established. Still, one cannot understand Russia without its geography: Even before the Russian exploration and settlement of Siberia, which begins in the late sixteenth century, the population density of Russia was low; therefore, there was a very different ratio of villages

² Henry Adams: *The Education of Henry Adams* (1906/07), New York 1996, p. 423.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 408 f.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 411.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 412.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 414.

and towns than in Europe.⁸ Whoever reads the oldest Russian poem from the late twentieth century, the *Lay of Igor's Campaign* (Слово о плъку Игоревѣ),⁹ and compares it with contemporary Western European literature is struck by the extraordinary importance that the description of nature takes in it and by the almost shamanistic idea according to which the hero is transformed into other animated beings. Being at the mercy of nature and at the same time having some awareness of it as being ensouled have remained distinctive features of Russian literature long into the twentieth century; I mention only Leo Tolstoy's *Kholstomer* (Холстомер) but also the extraordinary characterization of nature in Boris Pasternak's *Doktor Zhivago* (Доктор Живаго). The persistence of the pagan belief in witchcraft is not only demonstrated by the figure of Matrona in Tolstoy's drama *The Power of Darkness* (Власть тьмы); even in the camp of the revolutionaries in Pasternak's novel do we encounter a witch, Kubarikha (XII 6f.). The particular attraction exerted by Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (Мастер и Маргарита) on Soviet readers can hardly be understood if one does not recognize that superstitious beliefs in Russia survived long into the twentieth century. This points to what I would like to call a peculiar asynchrony of Russian culture – the simultaneous presence of mindsets belonging to very different epochs of the evolution of humankind.

Certainly medieval Russia had some remarkable towns, in which there existed rudimentary democratic traditions – suffice it to mention the first Russian capital, Novgorod. When in the city the monument *Millennium of Russia* (Тысячелетие России) was erected in 1862, it combined in its structure the Monomakh's Cap and the Veche bell, somehow expressing the hope that under Alexander II a combination of the monarchy with the old Novgorod tradition of a popular assembly might succeed. But the Veche was abolished when Ivan III conquered the city in 1478, and the brutal sack of it by his grandson's *oprichniki* in 1570 signified the end of the city's prominence. Ivan IV is therefore absent from the monument. Of the 108 great Russians represented on the bottom of the monument most are military leaders, the second largest group consists of ecclesiastical figures, the third of political leaders, the smallest group (only sixteen) of writers and artists. No philosopher graces the monument. The rank order is important: A country with such a huge territory that could be attacked from many different parts had to consider its defense the paramount responsibility.

⁸ Think of the pun at the beginning of the second part of *Eugene Onegin* (O rus! Hor. O Русь!); Russia as being in its essence the countryside, referred to by Horace.

⁹ I share the opinion of many linguists that the work cannot be a forgery, as has repeatedly been claimed.

What are the main differences between Russian orthodoxy and Western forms of Christianity? The enrichment of Christianity by the deepening of one's own subjectivity that Augustine's work signifies remained alien to the Greek Fathers, and even less did Russian orthodoxy develop something analogous to the rational disputes of scholasticism and the systematic analysis of canon law. Icons and monastic mysticism have been the two traditional pillars of the Russian Orthodox Church. There is nothing comparable to the Renaissance in Russia, and modest rudiments of Enlightenment begin only after Peter the Great opened the country to the West. The Saint Petersburg Academy of Sciences, which he founded in 1724, was not yet a university. While this institution had deeply enlivened the Western European Middle Ages, Russia got its first university only in 1755, in Moscow, and had to wait until the nineteenth century for the next. Criticism of the political and social system by Enlightenment intellectuals was severely repressed under Catherine the Great: Alexander Radishchev was first condemned to death and then exiled to Siberia, and Nikolai Novikov spent fifteen years in prison.

One of the reasons for the extraordinary quality of Russian literature is that literary activity was one of the few outlets permitted to the landed aristocracy, since there was no parliament in which the aristocrats could satisfy their political ambitions. Most aristocrats were officers, whose honor code demanded risking one's life: the two greatest Russian poets of the first half of the nineteenth century, Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, died in or from the effects of duels, and even Turgenev and Leo Tolstoy came close to a duel after their quarrel at Afanasy Fet's house in 1861.¹⁰ Duels play a crucial role in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (Евгений Онегин) and Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* (Герой нашего времени). Neither Onegin nor Pechorin are admired by their creators; however, their aggressive and self-destructive behavior exemplifies crucial Russian traits, such as contempt for the lives of people perceived as inferior, justified by the lack of concern regarding one's own life. The specific value system of the bourgeoisie is absent from this world. In his masterpiece the great literary critic Erich Auerbach has grasped with concision the essence of the Russian realistic novel of the nineteenth century in the few pages he dedicates to it. Speaking of the merchants Kuzma Samsonov in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* (Братья Карамазовы) and Parfyon Rogozhin in *The Idiot* (Идиот), Auerbach writes: »This sort of thing has nothing whatever in common with the enlightened bourgeoisie of central and western Europe.«¹¹ A book celebrating bourgeois comfort and coziness as the award for

¹⁰ See Leonard Schapiro: Turgenev. His Life and Times, Cambridge, MA 1982, p. 171 ff.

¹¹ Erich Auerbach: Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Princeton 1953, p. 521.

hard and honest work, such as Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, is inconceivable in Russia. And this is not merely due to the fact that there was no comparable class. The deep Christian sensibility of the Russians revolted against the integration of the universalized rational egoism that has brought forth modern capitalism. Albert Hirschman has skillfully analyzed the transformation of the passions into interests – the channeling of the less harmful economic interests into a structure beneficial for the whole society accompanied by a greater individual control over the passions.¹² The heroes of the great Russian novels and dramas refuse to go this way; they remain either enmeshed in their passions, or they transcend the whole sphere of egoism into saintliness. Oscar Wilde famously quipped: »The Catholic Church is for saints and sinners alone. For respectable people the Anglican Church will do.«¹³ What Wilde says about Catholicism is even more true about the Orthodox Church; and the point of several masterpieces of Russian literature is that only the greatest sinners can become true saints.

The three most important dramas of the sage of Yasnaya Polyana render this very clear: through his final self-accusation, which includes even crimes that he did not commit, the hero of *The Power of Darkness*, Nikita, gains a greatness, which enraptures his father, whose rootedness in absolute Christian values outweighs by far his difficulties at speech, which demonstrate the clumsiness of his thoughts. Similarly, the self-sacrificial suicide of Fedya at the end of *The Living Corpse* (*Живой труп*) redeems the hero, with whom Tolstoy sympathizes far more than with his wife Lisa, who remarries after the false news of his death. Fedya's love for the vitality of the gypsies is contrasted with the bourgeois value system of his family; even if he is a wastrel and a libertine, Tolstoy clearly prefers him to the world of pretentious doctors and lawyers in the drama. It is well known that Nikolai Ivanovich Saryntsov in the uncompleted *And a Light Shinneth in the Darkness* (*И свет во тьме светит*) represents Tolstoy's own moral qualms concerning his life as a land-owning aristocrat (qualms fostered by the doctrines of Henry George). Nikolai in the final scene was supposed to pretend to have shot himself accidentally in order to exonerate Princess Cheremshanova, who murdered him to take revenge for the fate of her son Boris, whose refusal to serve in the army, inspired by Saryntsov's authentic Christianity, led to his imprisonment and his treatment as a madman. The unhappy consciousness, identified by Hegel with medieval Christianity, i.e. the incapacity and unwillingness to feel at home in the world, probably achieved a deeper manifestation in the scruples of conscience that tormented the most talented and morally sensitive Russian aristocrats of the late nineteenth century.

¹² Albert Hirschman: *The Passion and the Interests. Political Arguments for Capitalism Before Its Triumph*, Princeton 1977.

¹³ Richard Ellmann: *Oscar Wilde*, London 1987, p. 548.

The authentic Russian intellectual is inevitably regarded as a madman by his society, whose values he utterly rejects and despises. The second and the third scene of the third act of the drama show Boris in opposition to the military, the church, medicine, and his own family. The conflict is presented in such a form that there is no possibility of a compromise or even reciprocal understanding; and as much as the radical Christianity of Tolstoy differs from the revolutionary impetus of the Bolsheviks, there is little doubt that the drama breathes a revolutionary spirit and expresses the utter impossibility of a reconciliation of the moral individual with his society. This is partly a result of the incapacity of Russian society to integrate intelligent criticism and to adapt to it. One of the first great Russian dramas is Alexander Griboedov's *Woe from Wit* (*Горе от ума*, written in 1823, but published only posthumously), whose hero, Chatsky, returns to Moscow after a long journey abroad and cannot find himself at home; his criticism of Russia engenders the suspicion that he is a revolutionary, and at the end of the drama a rumor takes over that he is a madman – an early anticipation of the psychiatrization of the dissident, so widespread in the Soviet Union. Indeed, his relentless attacks against Russian corruption and his famous answer (I, 7) to Sofia's question »Где ж лучше?«, »Где нас нет« (»Where is it better?« – »Where we are not«),¹⁴ could hardly endear him to his former girlfriend and her family. And yet it would be completely unilateral to interpret Chatsky as a Westernizer. His suffering is at least as much induced by the ridiculous attempts of the Russian nobility to imitate Western Europe as by the lack of education he perceives among the native aristocracy. Early on he blames the confusion of languages, the mixture of Russian and French so peculiar of the Russian aristocracy;¹⁵ and in his long harangue (III, 22) Chatsky expresses his hatred against the French who consider the Russians barbarians and find among Russian nobles, who are unable to retrieve their traditions and to connect with the »smart and good people,« only a cheap counterfeit of French culture.¹⁶

It is not unlikely that Chatsky was intended as a portrait of the first Russian philosopher, Pyotr Chaadaev, whom Griboedov knew personally. Chaadaev is crucial in the history of Russian thought because he anticipates both the Westernizers and the Slavophiles. When the first of his *Philosophical Letters* (*Lettres philosophiques*) was published in 1836 in Russian translation in a journal, the latter was confiscated, the editor banished to Siberia, and Chaadaev officially declared and treated as a madman; thus his response, published in Russia only in the twentieth

¹⁴ A.C. Грибоедов: Полное собрание сочинений в трех томах [A.S. Griboedov: Complete Works in Three Volumes], Saint Petersburg 1995, I, p. 27.

¹⁵ Ibid., I, p. 29.

¹⁶ Ibid., I, p. 95 ff.

century, had the title *Apology of a Madman* (*Apologie d'un fou*). One has to recognize that the image that Chaadaev presented of Russia was not flattering – he declares it a country that, instead of being a synthesis of Europe and Asia, between which it lies, has not contributed at all to the progress of the human spirit and disfigured what it received from outside.¹⁷ But as much as this first letter gives a bleak vision of Russia, Chaadaev in his letters expresses also his hopes concerning Russia's future development – and they could inspire the Slavophiles, even if they were first uttered in French.¹⁸

While I myself cannot recognize any particular originality in classical Russian philosophy (which continues the tradition of objective idealism but does not enrich it with the new philosophical ideas that emerged in Western European philosophy beginning with Descartes, whose methodical doubt remained alien to Russian thought), one has to recognize that the search for one's identity as well as the acute perception of the moral contradictions of the Western culture helped bring forth Russia's most lasting contribution to world culture – its nineteenth-century literature. In an earlier essay I have tried to give as one reason for this extraordinary achievement the fact that Russia was dealing with one of the most momentous moral issues, the transition from the pre-modern value system to the modern one, which Western Europe had addressed in the seventeenth century, but now with the literary techniques and the psychological perspicacity that the Western novel of the eighteenth century had acquired.¹⁹ The substantiality of the content and the complexity of the form in addressing the typically Russian asynchrony mentioned above is one of the reasons for the marvelous literary quality of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. That the poem is so much more than a brilliant imitation of Lawrence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is due to the enchanting figure of Tatyana, who is deeply enmeshed in the superstitions of the Russian countryside, but thanks to the reading of Western European novels capable of modern erotic love, so unintelligible to her nurse, and who at the end manifests her superiority to the French heroines of the same time by remaining faithful to her unloved husband and gratefully remembering her dead nurse, while rejecting Onegin. Pushkin's combination of irony, immediacy of experience of the world, and depth of sentiment inaugurates the grand narrative of the Russians. Auerbach connects its power to the sur-

¹⁷ »[...] nous n'avons en rien contribué au progrès de l'esprit humain, et tout ce qui nous est revenu de ce progrès, nous l'avons défiguré.« (Pierre Tchadaïef: *Œuvres choisies*, Paris/Leipzig 1862, p. 27)

¹⁸ Even the most famous love letter of Russian literature pretends to be a translation from French; for Pushkin knew full well that one needed his linguistic genius in order to create a Russian language able to express complex Western sentiments.

¹⁹ Vittorio Hösle: Woher rührt der außerordentliche literarische Wert der russischen Literatur des 19. Jahrhunderts?, in: *Communio* 27 (1998), pp. 359–372.

vival of the early Christian realism, which recognized the divine spark in every individual, also the humiliated and insulted ones. True enough, also the Western novel offers touching portraits of faithful servants, such as Roswitha in Fontane's *Effi Briest* or Jacques in Joseph Roth's *Radetzkymarsch*, but the depiction of the serf Natalya Savishna and her deep outrage, when her mistress wants to grant her freedom, in Tolstoy's *Childhood* (Детство) is peerless. The other trait pointed out by Auerbach is an extremity of the passions that had evaporated in the West (or rather, I would add, had there been limited to erotic experience). »The pendulum of their vitality, of their actions, thoughts, and emotions seems to oscillate farther than elsewhere in Europe.«²⁰ The intellectual discussions in the great Russian novels are often addressing, beside the ever-present topic of the Russian identity, deeper philosophical issues than the contemporary philosophical texts; and even if Dostoevsky often simplifies complex intellectual issues in an irresponsible way, at least he does not shun but deals with them.²¹

It is easy to understand why the discontent with Russian culture, accompanied by the tsars' refusal to reform the country and a deeply rooted aversion against Western liberalism, brought forth the new type of the revolutionary. The name of Chatsky already implied a criticism of pure chatting and producing mere smoke (чадить); the issue now was what to do, что делать – to quote the title of the famous novel by Nikolai Chernyshevsky (son of a priest and originally himself a seminarian) about female emancipation and revolution. Nikolai Berdyaev has insisted on the differences between the Western concept of intellectuals and the Russian concept of intelligentsia (интеллигенция), which, socially heterogeneous, »reminds one more of a monastic order or sect, with its own very intolerant ethics, its own obligatory outlook on life, with its own manners and customs and even its own particular physical appearance.«²² Paradoxically, even the most virulent form of it, nihilism, has religious roots – »[...] it could appear only in a soul which was cast in an Orthodox mould. It is Orthodox asceticism turned inside out, and asceticism without Grace.«²³ Rakhmetov, the ascetic professional revolutionary of Chernyshevsky's novel, which was written in prison, is an heir of the holy fool (юродивый), however, with the desire to transform the world, which he perceives as utterly unjust. He loves Isaac Newton's *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John*, and indeed the 1863 novel ends, against the reader's protest, with a prophetic anticipation of the year 1865, when the revolution will have occurred. On the other hand, the horrifying character of Pyotr Vercho-

²⁰ Auerbach: *Mimesis* (as note 11), p. 523.

²¹ Think of the famous question whether without God everything would be permissible (*The Brothers Karamazov*, IV, 11, p. 4).

²² Nikolas Berdyaev: *The Origin of Russian Communism* (1937), Ann Arbor 1960, p. 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

vensky in Dostoevsky's *Demons* (Бесы) is modeled on the real figure of Sergei Nechaev. According to his *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (Катехизис революционера),²⁴ the revolutionary is dedicated exclusively to the destruction of the existing social order and its science (2, 3, 13); his only moral criterion is whether something is conducive to the revolution (4); and he is even willing to intensify the suffering of the people if this drives them to the revolution (22). The revolution aimed at is radically different from all earlier Western revolutions because it will overthrow all property rights and the state (23). The charisma of Nechaev, in whom »vengeful power seeking and martyrdom were two sides of the same psychological coin«,²⁵ is proven by the fact that during his final imprisonment, he managed to convert several of his guards to his ideology.

2. Soviet culture

The complex interplay of factors that led to the victory of the Bolsheviks is not the subject of this essay. But there is little doubt that Bolshevism's moral and intellectual appeal resulted from the fact that it offered a synthesis of the ideologies of both Slavophiles and Westernizers. Marxism was a Western ideology, the »scientific materialism« as well as the hatred of religion were an Enlightenment heritage, and the desire to collectively remake society pointed to the modern principle of recreating the world. The intensification of the etatist tradition as well as the continuities with the *obshchina* system, on the other hand, could satisfy the Slavophiles' pride in national traits, and the claim to point the way toward the future to all oppressed nations appealed to the eschatological instinct deeply rooted in the »Russian soul«. Despite all the horrors of the Soviet dictatorship the artistic flourishing in the first decade of the new polity is a sign of sincere enthusiasm; for while sincerity is not a sufficient criterion of great art, it is doubtless a necessary condition of it. Unlike Nazi Germany (Leni Riefenstahl must be admired as the director of two astonishing propaganda films, but she was an exception – and she certainly was not a Sergei Eisenstein), the early Soviet Union impresses by its arts. While they shared features of modernity that we find also in other countries (think only of futurism), revolutionary fervor was undeniably an important factor in this unfolding. While Stalinist architecture belongs to the tradition of stripped classicism popular at the same time also in Italy and Germany and even in the Western demo-

²⁴ The Russian original can be found in: Ф. М. Лурье: Нечаев. Созидатель разрушения [F. M. Lurie: Nechaev. Creator of Destruction], Moscow 2001, pp. 104–109, an English translation in Philip Pomper: Sergei Nechaev, New Brunswick, NJ 1979, pp. 90–95.

²⁵ Ibid., Pomper: Nechaev (as note 24), p. 219.

cracies, someone like Vladimir Tatlin developed an avant-garde architecture reminiscent of Claude Nicolas Ledoux's and Étienne-Louis Boullée's utopian revolutionary architecture. Tatlin's projected Monument to the Third International was never built, not unlike some of the most daring ideas of his French predecessors in the late eighteenth century.

But it is the Soviet film where one can see the greatest artistic originality of the new system. This can be explained relatively easily. Film's peculiar position among the arts is that in its dominant form it is built on photography, which reproduces reality with a faithfulness unachieved by the earlier arts. At the same time, the success of a film depends on montage, a constructive activity that leaves much space for creativity. The combination of these two factors, which stand in a clear tension, had to enthral the artistically talented heroes of the early Soviet state. The objectivity in the depiction of reality corresponded to the ›scientific‹ aspect of Marxism grasping the laws of reality against the dreamy illusions of utopian socialism; the montage mirrored the activity in which the Soviet people were engaged in their great transformation of society. Dziga Vertov's documentary *MAN WITH A MOVIE CAMERA* (ЧЕЛОВЕК С КИНОАППАРАТОМ) captures both tendencies in a superb way. It cannot come as a surprise that most early Soviet fictional films were propagandistic but – strange as it is to say – this does hardly detract from the sublime aesthetic quality of their best specimens. Besides the glorification of the October Revolution itself, the civil war that consolidated it, the events that prepared it, such as the mutiny on battleship *Potemkin*, and the relation of the Soviet ideals to less developed civilizations as well as to the allegedly superior Western culture (think of Vsevolod Pudovkin's *STORM OVER ASIA* (ПОТОМОК ЧИНГИСХАНА) and Lev Kuleshov's *THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURES OF MR. WEST IN THE LAND OF THE BOLSHEVIKS* (НЕОБЫЧАЙНЫЕ ПРИКЛЮЧЕНИЯ МИСТЕРА ВЕСТА В СТРАНЕ БОЛЬШЕВИКОВ)), the Soviet directors liked to extoll the beginning industrialization of agriculture – I mention only Eisenstein and Grigori Alexandrov's *THE GENERAL LINE* (ГЕНЕРАЛЬНАЯ ЛИНИЯ) and Alexander Dovzhenko's *EARTH* (ЗЕМЛЯ). What makes the latter film such a masterpiece is that the homage to modern technology, which is almost treated like a religious icon, does not prevent it at all from capturing nature's beauty in all its shades. No less lasting are the contributions to early film theory that the Soviet Union brought forth, particularly those by Pudovkin and by Eisenstein. The latter's essay *A Dialectic Approach to Film Form* remains a classic also for those who do not agree with the author's condemnation of long takes as ›utterly unfilmic‹. I mention only its conception of film as representing the dynamic nature of things, its analysis of the various types of conflicts in the new art, its distinction of epic and dramatic montage, the insistence on directing not only emotions but also the thought process, and particularly the defense of cross-montage, so typical of the Soviet film. It goes without saying that Soviet

film theory, unlike the later work by André Bazin, delves into the constructive element of filming; and indeed the cross-montage of the carnage of the workers and the slaughtering of a bull in an abattoir, the ice-break on the river and the workers' demonstration, and the hysteria in the stock-market and the killing on the battle-fields in Eisenstein's *STRIKE* (СТАЧКА), Pudovkin's *MOTHER* (МАТЬ) and his *THE END OF ST. PETERSBURG* (КОНЕЦ САНКТ-ПЕТЕРБУРГА) respectively are spectacular examples of this technique that creates unforgettable associations between two events causally disconnected, but which are suggested to be related in their essence.²⁶

In literature, Vladimir Mayakovsky is the foremost example of an excellent poet who for several years had strong sympathies for the Soviet revolution, even if his final attitude was quite complex. Yevgeny Zamyatin, on the other hand, wrote already in 1921 the first dystopia, *We* (*Мы*), a genre continued by Aldous Huxley and George Orwell; all three works feature an encounter between the doubting subject of totalitarian care with one of the leaders, who in *We* is called the »Benefactor«. Of particular interest is the discussion of whether the revolution that led to the dystopic state is the ultimate one, which of course has to be maintained by the supporter of the system.²⁷ Needless to say, the book could not be published in the Soviet Union (it was the first book banned by the Goskomizdat, the State Committee for Publishing), but its author was an old bolshevik; and this bitter satire of a totalitarian society could only be written by someone who had entered into the revolutionary mindset. The two greatest novels of Soviet literature, Bulgakov's and Pasternak's already mentioned masterpieces, could not be published in their authors' lifetimes either. Stylistically very different – while Bulgakov's book is modernist, Pasternak follows more traditional narrative patterns –, both oppose absolute, adulterous love between a man and a woman and the dedication to literary and poetic creation to the social frenzy around them. While Pasternak's tone is elegiac, lamenting the loss of the values present in the pre-revolutionary world, whose utter injustice he does not deny, Bulgakov's genius consists in transforming the devil into an ultimately benevolent figure, who, unlike Goethe's Mephistopheles, unites the lovers and whose destructive force is only directed against all the hypocrisy and pettiness of the bureaucrats of the Soviet state. Both works express a subtle religiosity, which, again, in Bulgakov is more complex, for the novel of the master aims at a complete humanization and historicization of Jesus, whose moral message, however, becomes thereby even more attractive for

²⁶ See Sergei Eisenstein: *Film Form. Essays in Film Theory*, ed. and tr. Jay Leyda, San Diego/London/New York 1949, pp. 45–63, particularly p. 57 f.

²⁷ Евгений Замыatin: *Собрание сочинений. Русь* [Evgeni Samyatin: *Collected Works. Rus*], Moscow 2003, p. 327 f.; Yevgeny Zamyatin: *We*, New York 1993, p. 168 f. (Record 30).

people living under oppression. Since these two books, whose place among the greatest novels of the twentieth century cannot be denied, are literary transformations of the Soviet experience and could not have been written outside Russia, they must be counted among the products of this society, despite all their criticism of it. They managed to survive despite totalitarianism, for »manuscripts do not burn« – probably the most famous and hope-inspiring sentence in Bulgakov's novel.²⁸

3. Post-Soviet Art

Of the various remarkable Russian artists that after the collapse of the Soviet Union have reacted to the formation of the new society, the painter, graphic artist, and novelist Maxim Kantor (born 1957) is probably the most complex. His work continues topics dear to the Russian tradition, such as a powerful defense of the dignity of the humiliated people at the bottom of society, and also offers a subtle reflection on Soviet history. As a dissident artist, Kantor became famous through his criticism of Soviet totalitarianism, for example in the oil painting *Politburo* of 1982 (Fig. 1). The thirteen men remind the observer of the Last Supper with Jesus and the Twelve Apostles; but the table is empty, the faces are all equally unexpressive, and the hands lie mostly inert on the table. Only three point to themselves, repeating the gesture known from Leonardo da Vinci's *Cenacolo*, which captures the moment just after Jesus said »One of you will betray me« (Matthew 26.21).



Fig. 1: Maxim Kantor: *Politburo*

²⁸ »Рукописи не горят«: Михаил Булгаков: Белая гвардия. Мастер и Маргарита [Mikhail Bulgakov: Belaya Gvardiya. Master i Margarita], Minsk 2008, p. 557; Mikhail Bulgakov: The Master and Margarita, New York 1997, p. 287 (Ch. 24).



Fig. 2: Maxim Kantor: *Russian Sphinx*

The central figure is a functional equivalent to Jesus, but since his glance is as dead as that of the other, the painting suggests that the treason at stake is not directed against the leader of the Politburo but a treason of all the members of the Politburo against their people. Probably it was the censors' lack of familiarity with Christian iconography that allowed this splendid painting to survive.

In the 1990s, however, Kantor evoked with nostalgia the rudiments of social justice achieved in the Soviet Union. The great cycle *Wasteland* of 2000/01 combines etching and woodcut to point to the Eurasian nature of Russia – for example, in *Russian Sphinx*, which depicts the country as half bear, half pig (Fig. 2). The impoverishment of large strata of the Russian population under the etiquette



Fig. 3: Maxim Kantor: *Structures of Democracy*, detail

of liberal democracy are denounced in the oil painting of 2002 *Open Society*, where the masses are desperately grabbing for the little food remaining, while *Structures of Democracy* of 2004 uses the Platonic subdivision of the ideal state into three ranks to indict the manipulation in contemporary Russian democracy: Cynical leaders sitting on the shoulders of frogmen (who correspond to Plato's philosophers and guardians respectively) wave shadow puppets to the masses absorbed in reading newspapers that contain the silliest headlines. Beneath the subjects of this ›democracy‹ are lying gray dogs, a powerful expression of the reduction of humans to animals, whenever they are utterly subjected to manipulation (Fig. 3). In the last years Kantor, who had to emigrate from Russia, became one of the most vocal



Fig. 4:
Maxim Kantor:
Dragon



Fig. 5: Maxim Kantor: *Leviathan*

critics of the resurgence of Russian imperialism, for example in the 2015 *Dragon* (Fig. 4): The greenish dragon treading upon humans and animals is easily recognizable as Putin, and the pink background symbolizes a generic poisoning of the atmosphere. The simultaneous *Leviathan* (Fig. 5) portrays a lonely intellectual in fact, the artist's father Karl Kantor somehow caught in the skeleton of a huge sea mammal. He represents the power of reflection, but it is not clear whether he will succeed in disentangling himself from his cage, which every reader of Hobbes connects with state power.

Andrey Zvyagintsev's 2014 film *LEVIATHAN* (ЛЕВИАФАН), visually and morally one of the most powerful post-Soviet films, uses in a similar way the skeleton of a whale as a symbol of the Russian state. The tragic story of the car mechanic Kolya, who is robbed of the house that he has built with his own work, after he finds his wife murdered and is falsely condemned to fifteen years of prison, because the mayor and the local bishop covet his land and want to build an Orthodox church on it, is one of the sharpest indictments of the collapse of the rule of law in Russia (superb is the visualization of the lack of judicial autonomy in the court scenes). Yet Kolya is far from being a Western bourgeois, even if he insists that the work of his hands gives him a right to his property. He is an alcoholic and violent to his wife, and this makes it easy to trap him. Both the government and the citizens lack elementary virtues without which the rule of law cannot be installed. On the other hand, Kolya's suffering reaches a biblical dimension – he is compared with the hero of the book Job, in which the Leviathan is first mentioned. Like in the nineteenth century, hopeless social conditions, metaphysical despair, and a depth of suffering unknown in the West bring forth an art whose radiance has hardly an equivalent in the contemporary Western world.