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## **Artistic culture: The Trial by Freedom**

**Daniil Dondurei**

### **The Official Blueprints and Unofficial Realities of Soviet Artistic Culture**

"The poet in Russia is more than just a poet." This line from Evgeny Yevtushenko's verse hints at the unique place that artistic culture has occupied in Russia 's tragic history. From Radishchev and Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn and Tarkovsky, writers, painters, film makers -- cultural producers of every kind -- undertook to explain Russian society to itself. The common view that depicts Soviet art as subservient to ideology is well grounded in facts, but it tends to conceal as much as it reveals. Soviet artists served the state, and thus could not help but being influenced by the nation's poisonous political climate. But they also thrived in the pungent native soil, soared high in their struggle against the system, carved out an inner space where they could experiment with their craft and turn their humiliation into inspired works of art. Soviet artistic culture is a paradoxical tangle of forces, impulses, and relations generated by the nation's spiritual and social currents that defy attempts to dispose of them in one fell swoop.

Take, for instance, the ideological pressure under which Soviet artists had to labor for some 70 years. It weighed heavily on artistic creativity, but it also inspired an unofficial art which flourished on the Soviet Union 's cultural reservations. The same goes for popular or mass culture. It shaped a multi-layered mythological consciousness steeped in official values and beliefs; at the same time, it fulfilled a certain therapeutical and compensatory function by fostering an ideal of closely-knit human relations based on love, friendship, and ethical concerns. Film makers Grigory Aleksandrov and Ivan Pyriev, painters Aleksander Deineka and Petr Konchalovsky, composers Aram Khachaturian and Isaak Dunaevsky did sell themselves to the powers, but in the process, they managed not only to save their lives but also to produce some genuinely innovative art.

Russian Marxists did not create tension between the state and the artist -- this tension predated the October Revolution -- but they exacerbated the situation by insisting that the artist must subordinate his creative impulses to the noble goal of improving people's lives. Pushing the idea to the logical extreme, Bolsheviks proclaimed that serving the common good was the mark of genuine art and that the failure to subordinate one's artistry

to the revolutionary cause could be taken as the proof that one did not belong to the profession. In 1918, People's Commissar, A. Lunacharsky, promised that the Soviet power would "mercilessly purge the temple of art from all those who are out to sell it and poison people's minds." Soviet art had to be dedicated exclusively to the propaganda and education of "the widest masses of working people." According to this ideologeme, all unaffiliated, nonpartisan, and foreign artistic experience was judged to be suspect, alien, or bourgeois, consequently incompatible with the building of a new socialist culture and personality. [1]

"Taming of the art," as Yuri Elagin aptly called this process, required that all cultural institutions be nationalized, governed from one center, subjected to censorship, and used to promote uniformity among artists. *Agitprop* or the Department of Agitation and Propaganda was set up in 1920 at the Party Central Committee and charged with the task of "guiding the political education in the RSFSR [the Russian Federation] in its entirety." Along side this overarching agency and under its watchful eyes, flourished other state and public organizations responsible for what Soviet ideologists liked to call "cultural building." The most important among these organizations turned out to be "creative unions" that, beginning in the 30s, moved to enlist in their ranks all writers, painters, composers, theater artists, film makers, and architects. Creative unions helped the party monitor the artistic process in the country, and their leaders did whatever necessary to insure that their rank and file members follow the doctrine of socialist realism.

The official artistic culture was distinguished by its totality. The heroes brought to life by Soviet artists had to be universally admired, be this Furmanov's Chapaev, Gaidar's Timur, or Mikhalkov's Uncle Stepa -- a noble representative of the ruthless Soviet militia. This does not mean that the aesthetic doctrine had remained unchanged throughout the Soviet era. Periodically, new campaigns would be instigated to promote naturalism, everydayism, academism, documentalism or other artistic fads deemed to be the order of the day. Somewhere along the lines, Ilya Erenburg even dared to attack photographic realism that "sells itself as a reflection of real life." Still, each innovation had to be sanctioned from above, and it remained in vogue as long as it had the official seal of approval, which could be revoked at any time.

The keen interest that the party took in Soviet art comes across in lengthy broadsides published in Pravda, the communist party's official newspaper. In 1936, a series of articles appeared in this authoritative source, bearing such eloquent titles as "Chaos Instead of Music," "Falsehood in the Ballet,"

"Cacophony in Architecture," and "About the Defiling Painters." During the Great Terror systematically carried out by Stalin, artist's aesthetic convictions were literally a matter of life and death. Every poetic word, paint brush, or dance step was closely scrutinized to insure that it adhered to an ideologically sound pattern. Whenever the latest campaign would break out, be this the struggle against rootless cosmopolites or the celebration of Soviet multi-ethnic art, artists had to show their enthusiasm. The emphasis on Soviet classics, the nation's economic achievements, or the people's victory in World War II were periodically decreed as the most important artistic themes, which then would become more or less mandatory for all art practitioners. In the same fashion, the Communist Party Central Committee or the KGB departments responsible for art could instigate a national debate about the latest theater premier or painting exhibit, as was the case with the 1973 premier of "The Master and Margarita," a play directed by Yuri Liubimov, or with the (in)famous art exhibit staged in 1975 at the Palace of Achievements of People's Economy. The public's real interest and opinion did not count in such carefully orchestrated discussions, which were planned ahead by the party bosses, who used their power to settle scores with nonconformist intellectuals and to reward the politically correct ones. The latter learned to navigate between official values and the shifting political currents of the day. Even when the audience clearly favored one artistic product over another, the outcome did not mean much, for honorariums and praise lavished on the artists had little to do with the proceeds from the show. The law of supply and demand was inoperative under the monopoly conditions prevailing in Soviet art. The masses might crave Hollywood movies, but the authorities refused to order more than ten Hollywood films a year. About as many films were imported annually from India . Box-office considerations could never override ideological imperatives. Any film, record or book was deemed to be a priori "unprofitable," if it did not conform to correct political standards. While the communist party tirelessly monitored artistic products for signs of ideological infractions, it strenuously avoided examining the economic consequences of its hare-brained schemes. Artistic production in the Soviet Union had to submit to the same principles of centralized planning and cope with the same shortages and distribution gaps as the rest of Soviet economy. Thus, the State Cinema Committee determined which movie theater would show a certain film on a given day, with every single movie showing in every single movie theater following, at least in theory, a centrally approved plan. This absurd supercentralization persisted for decades and survived into the early perestroika years.

According to Osip Mandelshtam, the works created by Soviet artists could

be broken down into two categories: "permitted" and "created without permission." "I want to spit on those writers who write what is permitted," wrote Mandelshtam in his "Fourth Prose," "I want to hit them over their heads with a stick. . . . I would prohibit such writers to marry and have children." [2] Few authors dared to explore the realm of the unpermitted subjects and ideas during the Soviet reign. Most dutifully followed the ideologically proven path. Some remained ambivalent, alternatively trying to march in lockstep with the masses and strike on their own, to obey the party line and express their uncensored feelings. Very few shunned the requisite conformism altogether and dared to challenge the monolithic value system decreed by the regime.

It goes without saying that artistic life in such a complex modern society as the Soviet Union could never be fully controlled from one center. Things had to go awry, as orders were passed along the chain of command. There were also internal policy divisions within the communist party itself, which Soviet artists learned to exploit. During the Khrushchev-inspired debate over Stalin's crimes, for instance, a number of works was published, including Solzhenitsyn's "Ivan Denisovich," which would not have had a ghost of a chance at other junctures in Soviet history. The official blueprint for Soviet artistic culture failed to suppress the unofficial reality, which remained far more diverse than the taboo-laden party guidelines would have it. Various unofficial strands of artistic life sprang to life after Stalin's death and even prosper in the relatively liberal times unleashed by Nikita Khrushchev. In addition to the quasi-official ranking system that arranged all Soviet artists according to their contribution to building a socialist society, there was an unofficial hierarchy that assigned prestige to artists according to their skills, talents, and personal courage. An artistic event frowned upon by ideological watchdogs could be hailed by the nonconformist intelligentsia, the information about it swiftly spread by the word of mouth. Similarly, a highly-touted art exhibit by a state-decorated painter could be boycotted by independent artists.

It would be wrong, therefore, to judge Soviet artistic culture by official pronouncements, formal reviews, and award ceremonies, which consistently glossed over the complex realities of artistic life in the Soviet Union. Hidden behind the "iron curtain" was a complicated process that absorbed within its bounds bizarre, utterly incongruent elements: the unlimited power of ancient war lords, feudal corporate guilds, predatory capitalist practices, and a centralized system of aesthetic education. When the Communist Party finally yielded its monopoly on power, it left behind a murky legacy that included along with the ecological and spiritual

Chernobyls the diverse cultural achievements with a continuous appeal to the cultural elite and mass consumers alike. After all, official Soviet culture was produced not just by the witless political opportunists but also by highly talented artists. Hence, mistaken are those progressive liberals who dismiss Soviet artistic culture in toto and treat its products exclusively as ideological ciphers devoid of artistic merit.

### **Soviet Artistic Culture Under Perestroika**

The Gorbachev era was marked by the erosion of ideological taboos and the dismantling of Socialist Realism. Censorship was rapidly losing its grip on the artistic spirit. The party line that used to separate right from wrong, the aesthetically meritorious from the aesthetically worthless, was now open to second-guessing. By the late 80s, most artists discarded their ingrained habits of self-censorship; some dug out evidence of their nonconformist past and proudly paraded it before the public. Spearheading the revolt in the arts, members of the Cinema Union refused to reelect at their fifth national congress officially approved candidates for the organization's top offices -- an act of breathtaking courage by the standards of 1986. Long-humiliated and repressed, the artistic intelligentsia savored its revenge against the "art critics in civilian clothes" who did the party's and KGB's bidding among artists in the past. The earlier-suppressed art works by Soviet and foreign authors were exhumed and made public for the first time. In 1986, the Stanislavsky Theater staged Beckett's play, "The Chairs," and in 1987, the Ermolaeva Theater produced his "Waiting for Godot." In 1988, *Novy Mir* published Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago*. The same year, an immensely popular counter-cultural film, "Little Vera," was released in Soviet movie theaters. Next year, the Sovremennik Theater staged a play by Soviet dissident writer, Vladimir Voinovich. Meanwhile, nonconformist works by Soviet artists began reaching audiences abroad, some earning top honors at international competitions. All these novelties made abundantly clear that Soviet artistic culture was undergoing a major, perhaps revolutionary, change.

"In my view, Russia is the only country today where there exists artistic freedom. It is hard to say how long this situation will last. Freedom always faces challenges. One of its enemies is the market, the other -- censorship." [3] This remarkable testimony belongs to Andrey Konchalovsky, a Soviet film maker, who knew first hand the artistic scene in both Soviet Russia and the capitalist West. Indeed, perestroika offered Soviet artists golden opportunities for free self-expression. Political constraints no longer stifled artistic creativity. At the same time, the

paternalistic socialist state continued to take care of artists' needs, effectively relieving them from any economic responsibility. Every third film produced during the heyday of perestroika failed to recoup a tenth of its production cost. Hundreds of millions of rubles were lost, but since these were "nobody's rubles" generated by the still socialist economy, nobody complained. The question of the place that art should occupy in a postcommunist society did not hit Russian artists until after perestroika was nearly over. When Eric Weisman, ex-vice chairman of Warner Brothers, told a Moscow audience during his lecture about American cinema that "the movie director is worth as much as the proceeds from his last movie," Russian film makers were visibly upset. Such crass materialism seemed incompatible with the artists' lofty aspirations. [4] The Russian artistic intelligentsia always believed that "money could only ruin art," that the artist "must chose between commercial success and his talent." In the land of dying socialism, commercial success still appears to be a random event, the luck of the draw, which might bring the artist a fortune, but which is in no way indicative of his work's artistic merit. If anything, success at the box office bodes ill for the development of a true artist, whose calling is to create timeless spiritual values, not to please the public.

Still, many artists took notice that the changed political climate might bring one spectacular financial success. In July of 1988, at a major auction organized by a Western company, four paintings produced by a practically unknown artist, Grigory Bruskin, fetched \$700,000 -- the biggest personal profit ever made in the history of Russian art. [5] That Russian artists could spark interest in the West and have some real market value became clear from numerous art exhibits, film festivals, and musicians' contests that showcased Russian art abroad. Whoever had incurred the wrath of the communist authorities in the past could now expect sympathetic hearing abroad. The popularity that Mikhail Gorbachev and his reforms enjoyed in the West must have rubbed off on Soviet artists. True or not, ex-dissident artists were perceived in the West as Gorbachev's soul-mates, active carriers of liberal culture who helped bring the end of the cold war. "Sotsart," an artistic current that mocked socialist values by hyperextending socialist symbols and images, gained special favor in the West. The works by its representatives were prominently featured not only in elite art magazines but also in mass consumption publications, such as the Reader's Digest. One by one, all barriers to art exports from Russia fell off.

Just as Soviet art found a niche in Western markets, Russian emigre art made its way back home. Brodsky, Limonov, Willy Tokarev -- no border

patrol could any longer keep the ex-Soviet artists from regaining mass audience, entering the local markets in Russia, affecting the fortunes of publishers and art entrepreneurs. The art production in Russia increasingly came under the sway of market mechanisms. Indicative in this respect is the fate of the publishing industry in postcommunist Russia.

It is well known that word -- written or oral -- always had an extraordinary significance in Russia . As the saying goes, "In Russia, word is deed." This old saw is literally true: a word could land an individual in jail or deliver a person from bondage. Having a strict control over words uttered and printed had been a high priority for Russia 's rulers, communist and noncommunist. As soon as the communist party began to lose its monopoly on power, Russia saw an explosion of free speech. The floodgates were flung open in 1989 when party apparatchiks made a last-ditch effort to stem the rise of glasnost by limiting circulation of the most popular publications. This clumsy attempt failed miserably. Thousands of new magazines and periodicals hit the newsstands, catering to the public's insatiable appetite for free information. At the same time, the publishing industry experienced an unprecedented boom. Artistic books, astrological treatises, sex manuals, self-help guides -- whatever the Soviet reader wanted to know about anything and everything was now printed and made available in regular book stores or make-shift stands set up by private book vendors.

Just as the centuries-old civilization of unfreedom of speech has expired, however, "the most reading nation on earth" turned a deaf ear to the free word. Within a few years of total glasnost, the public lost its interest in reading literature and listening to speeches. Thick literary journals that once boasted circulation in the millions now print less than 5% percent of copies they used to circulate during the height of perestroika. Once immensely popular newspapers could not sell enough copies to support themselves and had to beg for government subsidies to stay in business. Book prices have skyrocketed, making the most sought-after volumes unaffordable for the average buyer. Even when prices are within reach, consumers often chose to spend their money elsewhere. Ex-Soviet citizens have grown tired with the orgy of glasnost. Kliamkin, Shmelev, Popov, and dozens of other prominent opinion makers who once captivated the entire nation with their fiery oratory and inspired essays have all but disappeared from the political center stage. The establishments that made headway during perestroika are being revamped under pressure from the market. Well established bookstores are forced to sublet part of their space to other businesses. In the Fall of 1992, the passerby could spot brand-new Cadillacs, Pontiacs , and Shevrolets prominently displayed

among the book shelves waiting to be taken out from the well-known bookstore nestled on the first floor of the newspaper *Trud*. The store administrators had to curtail their declining business to make room for the glamour business of the future. In a striking metaphor, shiny cars symbolizing capitalism assumed the honorary place inside the building, while the books epitomizing Russia 's precapitalist past were ready to be thrown out onto the streets.

Similar metamorphoses marked the transition to postcommunist realities in other cultural domains. The first Russian film market dates back to 1988, when movie distributors wrestled the right to buy films with an eye to their profit potential rather than ideological purity. This revolt spelled the end of the old communist bondage system that mandated which pictures were to be filmed, which shown to the public, and which indefinitely shelved. Foreign products inundated the Russian TV and movie theaters, their share jumping from thirty five percent in 1986 to eighty five percent in 1989. [6] About the same time, pirated video tapes poured into the country. The growth in cultural import was accompanied by the explosion of domestic artistic production. Hundreds of new art galleries, movie studios, theater groups, and musical collectives sprouted in urban centers. Giant companies, like Roskontsert and Mosfilm, managed to rid themselves of state control and made tentative moves toward financial independence.

Given this explosion of artistic activity, one would expect public interest in art to soar as well. But as with the publishing industry, the reality turned out to be less palatable. As soon as creative endeavor was freed from all ideological fetters, Russian artists confronted a formidable challenge: the sharp decline of public interest in art. In 1986, the cinema industry lost money. Movie theater attendance dropped from nearly two billion tickets sold in 1986 to 950 million in 1988. Concert halls and theater houses could not attract enough people to fill one third of the seats. [7] Ironically, interest in cultural events evaporated as soon as every Russian (and not just the well-connected members of the cultural elite) were allowed to watch once-forbidden movies of Pasolini and listen to the much-vilified music of Schonberg. Even the pornographic films that flooded the Russian market during the late 80s failed to arrest the steep decline in the nation's cultural consumption. The chronic shortages of cultural goods endemic to socialist society finally came to an end, and along with it, it seems, vanished the Russian public's yen for art.

This does not mean, of course, that Russians have no more interest in cultural and artistic products. What happened was that artistic

consumption shifted from the public arena to private homes, which by the end of the 80s became the locus of cultural life in the country. According to the sociological data gathered in this period, Russian citizens spent 5 to 6 times more time and 8 to 10 times more money on home entertainment and private cultural consumption than on attendance in theaters, concerts, art exhibits, and other public cultural outlets. Something strange, also, happened to the quality of cultural consumption. [8] The Russian intelligentsia in particular used to pride itself on its highly selective approach to what its members read or viewed; new findings indicated that intellectuals and nonintellectuals alike were watching TV programs across the board, as though fearing that life itself would grind to a halt if the tube went blind. Twenty-seven percent of viewers reported that their TV sets were turned on even when nobody was watching. "I don't like what I see, but I enjoy watching it anyhow," wrote an avid TV viewer in his letter to the editor. Another one angrily denounced a TV station because "I had to stay up until midnight to watch the garbage you put on the screen, as if I didn't have anything better to do."

Changing public attitudes took their toll on artists. Some prominent film directors (Gleb Panfilov, Elen Klimov, Aleksei German, Andrei Smirnov) stopped making movies. Well-known stage directors (Anatoly Vasiliev, Lev Dodin, Kama Ginkas) do more work abroad than at home. The same is true about Russia 's leading musicians (Vladimir Spivakov, Yuri Kitaenko, Alfred Schnittke) and painters (Ilya Kabakov, Leonid Purygin, Igor Ganikovsky). Still others went the commercial route, consciously catering to mass market tastes, however distasteful the final product. Emigration, the bulk of which was comprised by the intelligentsia, reached 200,000 people by the end of the 80s.

### **The Art, the Artist, and the Quasi-Market**

Let us now examine more closely the muddled relationship between art and market in the post-Soviet era, as exemplified by the Russian film industry. From 1988 on, the Russian artistic intelligentsia, including film makers, had most of their dreams come true. There were virtually no limits to what intellectuals could say about their society, government, and political system. Virtually all sexual taboos were abandoned. The state underwrote artistic work with little or no regard for its financial viability, which gave artists the incentive to take up ambitious projects. The Russian cinema industry worked overtime. Producers, screen writers, actors, stage hands -- everybody had as much work as one could handle. Financiers aggressively invested in risky movie projects, seemingly without concern for economic realities. [9] Artists did not stand to make

much money from their undertakings, but they did not have to worry about starving either, even though the ultimate product might be a financial flop. The socialist system continued to subsidize creative activity, never mind that the artists lampooned socialism and its byproducts. There were still nomenklatura bureaucrats with close ties to the party who had to okay the project, but sensing the changing of the guards, they did not miss a chance to show their benevolent support for perestroika art.

This situation, which lasted for about three years, produced disastrous results. Since the path-breaking picture "Little Vera," only one home-grown movie made the top-twenty list of the country's most popular films. No amount of sex and violence inundating the screen could change the general trend: movie-theater attendance dropped four-fold between 1988 and 1992. And even when the Russian economy reached the breaking point and made it impossible to continue generous state subsidies of art, movies continued to be made in the face of this economically absurd situation.

One reason why the movie industry did not go bankrupt under these trying circumstances was the shadow economy that targeted the movie business for its money-laundering schemes. There is a lot that Russian artists could learn from Russian entrepreneurs when it comes to imagination and creativity. [10] Say, there is a film produced by a company for two million rubles (prices are still in line with the Gorbachev era inflation rates). It is purchased by a phantom company which has no relationship to the movie industry whatsoever. The studio where the film was shot had all of its expenses reimbursed, plus an arbitrary established profit of some million and a half rubles was paid to the producers by the shady company that now owns the movie. The company that purchased distribution rights doctors the documents that attest to the fabulous proceeds of ten million rubles from movie runs in the nation's movie theaters. From that point on, illegal money made from unrelated shady deals are legitimized. You can bet that the principals in this game were paid off with hefty bribes that made them rich by Russian standards. Meanwhile, the film in question has not been shown to the public once.

Another scheme would have the producer get the money from a bank to pay for equipment, studio space, and actors' fees, spend a whole lot less for actual shooting, and in the end, present the resultant film as an experimental product of such extraordinary aesthetic quality that it could not possibly be understood by the movie-going public. Nobody ever sees the film, the investors are bought out (remember, money is nobody's!), and the auditors are still such a rarity that there is no point worrying

about them. In the end, the lost money is written off as a bad investment by the state.

Or else, the studio director could strike a deal with a foreign company that wants to use local facilities, show a fictitious price tag in the official documents, and then split the difference with the foreign partners. The studio director's personal profit could be deposited in a bank account abroad. All this in spite of the fact that the studio facilities are not privately owned, that they still belong to the state, or which is the same thing, they are collectively owned by the Russian people. [11] Add to this a chance to speculate on the changing conversion rates when you do transactions in both hard currency and soft (in Russia they are called "wooden") rubles, and you can see that the movie business had a lot of fresh opportunities in the post-Soviet period.

We should keep in mind, however, that local cinema had something to gain from all this wheeling and dealing. Hollywood paid dollars to Mosfilm, the preeminent Russian movie company, for Andrey Konchalovsky's picture "The Inner Circle," and the proceeds more than made up for the losses that Mosfilm incurred by producing two dozen Russian films. Similar stories come from Lenfilm and other leading movie companies that have their own production base and offer foreign companies their facilities. In those heady years, studio administrators did not look too closely at the projects undertaken by local directors, as long as the latter showed an overall profit. As to Russian film makers, they never cared that much about box office success. High brow pictures, the ones that win prizes at the international movie festivals, rarely attract much attention from the general public, anyhow. As long as the artists are allowed to exercise their artistic freedom, they are more than willing to shoot pictures for each others.

Thanks to this inane political economy of artistic production, films were shot that could not be sold, or sold without being copied, or copied without being distributed to theaters. "The new Russians," those entrepreneurs who sponsored many films in the perestroika and postperestroika years, did not care much about quality. The cult of hopelessness, also known as *chernukha*, permeated the movies of this period. Under the pretense of being truthful to reality, financial mentors encouraged artists to use one color, one emotional tonality, one cruel method to elicit the viewer's response.

Even after the Soviet Union collapsed, its economy continued to churn out products that were not meant for consumption, that were not designed to

make profit, that were produced for some mysterious purposes having nothing to do with art. For all the talk about profit, marketing, cost-accounting, and so on, Russia still has no market in place. At best we can talk about a quasi-market that imitates its external forms. This is not to deny that revolutionary changes have taken place in the last few years in financing, production, and distribution of art in Russia . But the central for market economy relationship between the producer and the consumer remains profoundly distorted. The Russian market is still largely immune from the law of supply and demand. Nor is there any credible system of accounting that would allow a bona fide investor or economist to make an informed judgment about the industry conditions. There is no national statistical agency that can track the data and report on federal and local trends. You cannot be sure how many studios are open for business at any given point, how many viewers saw a particular picture, what was the production cost, and so on. All this is a commercial secret. Credible information is a luxury in a country that, defying Marx, is moving from mature socialism via eternal feudalism toward primitive capitalism. Or could it be that reliable information is a barrier to relentless wheeling and dealing? Here comes to mind the words of the Marquise de Custine, the 19th century Frenchman, who travelled to Russia and observed her inimitable mores: "In theory, everything seems so overregulated that one can hardly live under this regime. But in practice, exceptions abound, so much so that the resultant chaos and contradictions make you wonder how on earth one could govern the country under these circumstances." [12]

Russian artists are struggling to shake loose their old shackles and adjust to the new economic conditions, but in the process they discover that the old artistic culture -- cliché-ridden, politically-stifling, full of envy and petty rivalries -- was not without its graces. For all its absurdities, it bred a sense of belonging and solidarity that comes from being a member of an exclusive guild. Like a centaur, Soviet artistic culture spliced together and made possible the coexistence of diverse interests and groups. It fed a mythology that was familiar to all, that united under one umbrella all those exposed to the same principles, even though some of these principles were experienced by as hated official stereotypes. At least there was a feeling of collective injustice, of shared fate, of a common dead end where any artist could be hounded by ideological watchdogs. And now this cozy feeling of negative and positive togetherness is gone, artistic space is being totally revamped, and those who inhabit it find themselves competing for the same resources, divided by the market forces more than they ever were by ideological differences. The aesthetics of socialist surrealism has fallen by the wayside; the artist is thrown to his own

devices; at last, he is free. But the creative boom promised by vulgar sociology has failed to materialize. "I am not sure why," confides Aleksei German, "but we made our best movies when stagnation reigned supreme and everything was prohibited." [13]

### **Russia as an Artistic Colony of the West**

Now that we have examined the shady transactions between the quasi-market and Russian artistic culture, we can turn to the relationship between the state, the artist, and the local and international markets. Specifically, we shall try to understand the impact of the international art market on Russian art and the policies through which the Russian state is trying to regulate artistic activity.

The fine arts have always been among the most conservative domains of Russian artistic culture. It is all the more astounding how quickly the practitioners in this field have adjusted themselves to postsocialist realities. Within a few years, Soviet painters and craftsmen were attending international art auctions, forming joint ventures with Western customers, selling their ware for hard currency, and opening bank accounts abroad. The explanation is rather simple: painting is a labor-intensive art that does not require sophisticated technology and equipment, or for that matter, mass audience. In the old Soviet Union, it was practiced by individuals who might have quarrelled with the socialist state, but who managed to carve out a niche for themselves and, in relative obscurity, perfected their skills and developed innovative ideas. Painters, animation artists, craftsmen, and other fine art practitioners did not have to do as much catching-up with the West as artists in some other fields. When liberal reforms rolled in, they were ready to come out of the closet fully equipped for the new deal. However, the state saw the field's considerable potential as a source of hard currency and it geared its tax policy accordingly. More than half of the profits made by the artists have to be returned to the state in the form of taxes. If a transaction between the Russian artist and the Western customer involves hard currency, the state prefers to keep the dollars, Deutsche marks, franks and pay the artist the after-tax portion of his profit in rubles. But the economic strength of the ruble does not compare with that of freely convertible currencies. Nor are Russian art collectors in a position to pay top-notch prices for national art (an art work that could be sold abroad for thousands of dollars would not fetch a fraction of this amount at home). As a result, the artist is placed in a situation where he is either going to cheat a state that tries to rob him and his dealer or to resettle in the West. Russian artists keep in foreign banks anywhere between 50 to 60 million dollars, according to some

conservative estimates. All the participants in this charade -- dealers, gallery administrators, collectors, and of course artists -- are convinced that they are being cheated, that somebody is out to deprive them of their fair share of profit. The pressure is mounting for all those involved in fine arts to make a killing, evade the taxes, and then bid goodby to this monstrous, inefficient, corrupt system.

Our very best artists, both in fine and performing arts, leave the country in droves in hope of escaping the clutches of the sputtering economy. Painters, craftsmen, composers, musicians -- the whole orchestras and ballet schools -- are bidding goodby to their homeland and settling in the West. The best Russian composers are now permanently residing in Germany . Even more ominously, the second string musicians, dancers, singers, philologists, and architects are straining to land a contract abroad as teachers, coaches, chorus line performers -- whatever could get them out of the sinking country. Most of them have no wish to leave their country permanently, but they believe they have to bide their time abroad until things back home settle enough to afford them a half-decent living.

A related problem is the tendency to gear all artistic output to export needs. Consciously and unconsciously, Russian artists today strive to adjust their priorities and criteria to Western standards. They are trying hard to please potential customers abroad, and along the line neglect their own creative impulses. The dictate of the Western markets could be no less stifling than the standards laid out by Suslov's Politburo. Whether the artist follows Socialist Realism or places himself in the service of his new employer, he has to do somebody else's bidding. For some Russian artists, it was easier to submit to the hated ideological strictures of the past when there seemed to be no other choice than to subordinate one's artistic impulses to free market demands.

If Russia ever was an artistic superpower, it does not seem to be one any longer. There is an uneasy feeling in the air that the country has turned into an artistic colony of the West. It is reinforced by scores of art dealers and entrepreneurs rummaging Moscow for artistic bargains, feeling like Victorian Englishmen in Africa or India . Nonetheless, superpower habits and pretenses are dying hard, even in the face of mounting evidence that the nation's standards of living are on par with, if not less than certainly Thailand . Meanwhile, unofficial art, this fountain spring of creativity in the past, has virtually disappeared. [14] The spiritual opposition that fed this uncensored artistic endeavor has been sapped. It was easier for the artist to assume a defiant stance when Zhdanov , Suslov, and Ligachev wagged their fingers at artists and threatened to put

them in jail. [15] With the doublethink and the multi-layered aesthetic sensibilities it engendered becoming the thing of the past -- the artistic intelligentsia has little to nourish its nonconformist impulses.

### **The New Aesthetics and Mass Culture**

Official Soviet ideology prided itself on creating a state with "mass aesthetic literacy," "the highest prestige of art," and "genuinely free artistic activity." None of these cliches withstood the test of time. We can size up the situation by taking a closer look at current TV programming and examining the manner in which mass media shapes popular culture.

If you watch Russian TV today for any length of time, you are likely to conclude that the Russian viewer must know English to watch the news, appreciate a movie, or understand advertisement. A synchronized Russian translation could be provided, depending on the program and its sponsors' agenda. Nothing new here: English may well become a universal language for the global media-market civilization of the future, but the pace of change is staggering.

Take the children's program "Rock-lesson" that first aired in 1992. The program hosts are a sixteen year old girl, symbolically named "Barbie" after an internationally acclaimed doll, and a young boy Vania, apparently born after the death of Leonid Brezhnev. Vania asks his counterpart all sorts of questions that might interest members of his generation, like how to dance rap and hip-hop, how to dress up in order to resemble the dance machine M. C. Hammer, what is love and how to make out. The national children's audience, which includes kids from provincial towns like Syzran' and Vologda, are instructed how to look like Americans and act like the average European. One might think that Russian children have already emigrated and cannot waste a day without learning the hippest dance step, tuning in on the top-ten show, or finding out the latest development in the sensational rape trial of the American heavy-weight boxer, Mike Tyson. The pirated Hollywood movies and the Hollywood-style programming that jam Russian TV do far better job at changing the country's centuries-old mind-set than all of Yeltsin decrees taken together. We can judge this from a survey conducted in 1991 among six year old Moscovites. When researchers asked Moscow kindergarten graduates, "Who do you love the most?", the answer was: mother, father, Chip and Dale, captain Power, and only then . . . grandma.

Do not rush to conclude, however, that American values dominate Russian mass culture. Russians may be dreaming about a trip to Disneyland and a

taste of burger at McDonalds, but when it comes to loftier matters, they crave the Mexican soap opera "The Rich One's Are Crying, Too." Very few viewers missed entirely this sensational series that Russian TV programmers aired a few years ago. It broke all the rating records, easily outstripping in popularity American blockbusters and tying the nation to their screens for months in a row. I do not know if guns fell silent in Nagorno-Karabakh where Armenians and Azeris were fighting, but it is a fact that viewers in Moldova and Lithuania thwarted their governments' decision to boycott Moscow TV because they could not bear the thought of missing the ending of this melodrama. [16] Veronica Castro, the Mexican actress who played the soap opera's main character, emerged as one of the country's most popular personalities in the 1992 polls, placing right behind the country's president, head of government, and vice-president.

There are several reasons why this run of the mill soap opera had such a hypnotic effect on the audience in the former Soviet Union . Perhaps the most compelling one is the full rehabilitation of the lowly -- mass -- culture in postindustrial societies, where it invariably supplants folklore as the archetypical mode of construction of social reality. Among the main feature distinguishing mass culture are nonambiguity of moral judgments, consistency of values, accepted wisdom of common sense, inescapability of suffering, and abiding optimism. Over sixty percent of TV viewers in the former Soviet Union who saw this soap opera (twice as many as any other TV program, including the news) gratefully clung to the helping hand extended to them by the Mexican producer. Disoriented, neglected, and scorned, the millions of Russian speaking viewers found in this unpretentious TV series the certainty they missed in their everyday life. The program allayed their fears before the menacing English-speaking civilization that threatens their life experience with the words like "voucher," "digest," broker," "impeachment," and "rating." It relieved their inferiority complex before high modernist culture and strengthened their heart in the face of an uncertain future. After watching this soap opera, many ex-Soviets could summon enough courage to say no to violence and sex that invaded their screens, to resist aggressive advertising and ruthless politicians. The Russians took close to heart Latin American culture because it appeared to them devoid of ethnic, economic, and generational differences. They felt more attuned to the problems facing the Salvators' family with its colorful array of dons and seignoritas than with their own reality shoved down their throats by the familiar political and artistic personages competing with each other for the dubious honor of painting the most dire scenario for the future. The simple folk who survived the Soviet regime know the difference between fiction and reality, yet they prefer to trust fiction which tells them that evil will be

punished and loyalty rewarded, that in spite of its endless confusions and challenges -- life is really simple, that all people could be divided into two classes: angels and demons, and that the only problem is how to tell them apart.

### **The Trial by Freedom: Prospects for Russian Artistic Market**

Soviet artistic culture has been often pictured in black and white colors: official art approved by the communist party, on the one hand, and unofficial, experimental art that flourished on the fringes of society, on the other. Looked at from the vantage point of the present, the reality seems more complex than common judgment allows. Compared to the market-imposed uniformities, the art produced during the Soviet era now appears to be complex, nuanced, pluralistic, daring, and often inspired. It may be premature to talk about the decline of artistic culture in today's Russia , but we can attest to the precipitously declining public demand for art. When a book-salesman can earn twenty times as much as a writer and professor's salary is typically lower than his student's income, the public turns away from art and looks for other venues of personal growth.

The drop in prestige of art is inevitable in a country where art served as a political club, research laboratory, psychological therapy, and performed numerous other functions not central to its mission. With the public redeploying its interests and resources toward material comfort, a slogan once issued by a 19th century aesthetic realist, D. I. Pisarev -- "boots are higher than Pushkin" -- seems to have come true. The status of art as an aesthetic force binding together the nation has been compromised, and along with it, the need to cultivate aesthetic sensibilities. Art has lost its power to confer prestige on its practitioners and connoisseurs. Your place in the group hierarchy depends on your ability to tell the difference between a Toyota and Nissan more than on your ability to distinguish between Sartre and Camus, it has more to do with your awareness of the Baskin Robbins ice cream flavors than with the fact that you have attended an exhibit featuring paintings from the Prado Museum. The "new Russians," resembling yuppies in their fondness for expensive suits and glitzy cars, are yearning not for tickets to attend a Tarkovsky's retrospective but for a vacation in the Bahamas . They cannot stand the intelligentsia's interminable kitchen debates about the country's future that used to absorb the country's cultural elite. Now, consumer culture supplants artistic culture, imported culture -- domestic culture, mass culture -- elite culture. The Russian artist can no longer hope to earn a living by selling his art to local consumers. To survive, he has to appeal to the state, shady businessmen, and foreign buyers. What would Russian

film makers do without a money-laundrying sponsor, given the galloping inflation, dwindling ticket sales, the flood of pirated videos, and a virtual guarantee that any locally produced movie could not earn more than a quarter of its cost? [17] If current trends continue, Russian film makers will lose the last outlet for their artistic production -- national TV.

We are witnessing the great historical experiment: the titanic struggle between Russian economic theory and practice, on the one hand, and a Western-style market economy, on the other. [18] If capitalist market laws prevail in Russia, we should see the Russian film industry coming to the brink of extinction. Already most of some five hundred movie studios in the country are without business. The result will be massive unemployment among artists, perhaps mitigated by the arrival of advertising agencies and other start-up businesses that could use artistic skills. [19] If things are allowed to drag on, Russia's voodoo economics will avoid forging the bond between art industry and mass consumers.

As ever, our best minds are tirelessly pondering the question how to build the market in postcommunist Russia, how to make the state serve its citizens instead of sacrificing individual interests to the state. Some point to precedents from the prerevolutionary era, when Russia made considerable strides toward the market under the able stewardship of Witte and Stolypin. As Gogol once lamented, Russia's privileged fate is to skip the present and dream its way into the future. The fantastic blend of the old and new structures in today's Russia, of the legal and black markets, reflects the inertia of a centuries-old cultural tradition that stubbornly resists radical reforms. [20] But there is always hope. Unlike gas and oil, the nation's supply of renewable artistic talent is vast. Perhaps one day, the country will manage to put it to good use. Perhaps, it will even find a place within its own border for both mass and high culture, consumer and elite art. Meanwhile, the question persists when, if not whether, the country would develop a viable economics and at what price. As L. Nevler, student of culture, put it: "I know that the market has many advantages, but we should remember the inhospitable native soil where it is struggling to sink roots, our fabled capacity to make a mockery of the most wonderful ideas that we seek to adopt. How many times in the past did we feel foolish and idiotic after sowing one thing and harvesting something altogether different?" [21]

The fate of art in Russia, both socialist and nonsocialist, tells us something important about society as a whole. We just need to figure out what could it possibly be?

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