Review Article

The Ethnic Avant-Garde

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There is much to admire in this succinct, highly original, and carefully researched volume. *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* maps out the co-ordinates of the intellectual and aesthetic trajectories traced out by artists such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and the Jewish American poet Moyshe Nadir, who belonged to different ethnic minorities, were involved, with varying degrees of commitment, in avant-garde art movements, and who looked to Soviet art and society for inspiration. But the book is also wise enough to tell a tale of revolutionary pathos, as the revolution's promise of equity is betrayed and American artists, such as Paul Robeson, who witnessed this betrayal, failed to speak the truth about the Soviet Union when they returned to America. It is utterly remarkable that Lee traces the themes of *The Ethnic Avant-Garde* through to the 1950s and New York intellectuals' response to Soviet anti-Semitism, focussing largely on their rebuttal of Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 essay "Réflexions sur la question juive" and the parallels between Sartre's idea of an "authentic" Jew and anti-Semitic ideas that had developed in the Soviet Union, and from there to the perceived promise of Maoism in 1960s and 1970s radicalism, another enthusiasm that ultimately led to disappointment.

One of the most remarkable of the discoveries Lee's assiduous research turned up concerns an account Langston Hughes offered of the reasons Soviet authorities cancelled a film project, *Black and White*, on the topic of the persecution of Blacks in America. In his autobiography, Hughes suggests that the script, developed under the auspices of the Comintern and MEZHRABPOM, the leading Soviet film trust, reflected Soviet artists' risibly poor misunderstanding of African American society,

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and, in particular, African-American speech. Following strenuous efforts at remediating the problems, Hughes explained, the project was shelved. As early as 1989, Michael Scammell had already brought that account into question, pointing out that in his 1954 autobiography *Invisible Writing*, Arthur Koestler claimed that the Soviets canned the project on the basis of geopolitical considerations. On December 6, 1917, shortly after the October Revolution, the US government broke off diplomatic relations with Russia, purportedly because the Bolshevik government refused to honour the debts to America the Czarist government had incurred and declined to commit to the continuance of treaties the Russian government had signed with foreign governments. Throughout the 1920s, the American government refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Soviet government, becoming in time the last of the great powers to do so. By 1931, there were signs that the American resolve on that matter was weakening, and that a political rapprochement between the USSR and the USA was possible. Secret negotiations were taking place with the Soviet Union, and one of the conditions the Americans set for recognition was that the USSR should cease its propaganda among African Americans. As a result, the film on Blacks' lives in America was dropped suddenly. This much, as I noted, has been known since 1989. It is a bit surprising, given the centrality of the discussion of this film project to Lee's book, that *The Ethnic Avant-Garde* does not mention Scammel's work, nor does his name appear in the bibliography or index. Even so, Lee's meticulousness led him to dig up Georgii Grebner's script, and his painstaking efforts give us a new perspective on Hughes's tale: he asserts the script is far from the disaster the one-time leader of the Harlem Renaissance made it out to be. Hughes certainly knew that. However, explaining as he did the Soviet authorities' cancellation of the film project allowed Hughes to protect the Soviet government from accusations of making concessions to mainstream American interests, while at the same time protecting himself, in a period of growing anti-communism, from being identified as a Communist or a fellow traveller.

One great virtue of Lee's book is its scope. He deals not only with writing by minorities, but also with how non-minority Western and Russian writers turned to ethnic cultures, especially the ethnic cultures of the Soviet Union, as alternatives to capitalist modernity. He discusses in precisely those terms the embrace of Asian culture by Russians such as Sergei Tret'iakov, Velimir Khlebnikov, and Aleksandr Blok, and the interest Vladimir Mayakovsky showed in the African influence on minority cultures of Cuba and the United States and in the indigenous cultures of Mexico. His treatment of the political thrust of these artists' works relies on the idea that it aimed at dismantling Hegelian temporality, at ushering out the belief that time is a linear development; he contends, in essence, that the forms these artists forged demonstrated that the past is a sediment to be found in the present, a notion he amplifies with Trotsky's notion of uneven and combined development. That view of the impetus to embrace archaic forms of thinking and communicating is fine as far as it goes, although the supposedly anti-Hegelian idea of time he claims it represents is based

on a very basic misreading of Hegel. For Hegel, time as history is not a simple, linear process, in which historical development simply overcomes and leaves behind the phases it goes through. It is, rather, a complex, multilayered process, in which aspects of a given historical moment are negated and synthesized with aspects of the preceding moment, and features of the given moment are thereby preserved and elevated (sublated/*aufgehoben*) in the next phase of historical development.[1] However, the main issue with the assessment of the importance of Soviet artists' interest in ethnic cultures is that it overlooks the widespread influence of a Russian tradition in culturology and the importance within that tradition of the idea of inner speech.

Russian culturologists expounded the belief that some non-European cultures and languages still reflected features of phylogenetically earlier, more vital modes of language that preserved features of inner speech. In Russia and the Soviet Union in the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, theories of language were crucial to the new verse that was developing. Indeed, the psychocultural theory into which these linguistic ideas developed had much the same influence on Russian and Soviet artists in that period that the Parry-Lord hypothesis concerning orality in poetry and ideas about Oral-Formulaic composition exerted on writers and artists in the 1960s and 1970s, an influence that the Nobel Prize committee celebrated in 2016 with its award to Bob Dylan.

An indication of the importance Soviet artists and thinkers of this period attached to the idea of inner speech can be discerned in the fact that an influential Russian literary scholar, the formalist Boris Eikhenbaum, used the notion of inner speech to help him understand meaning formation in the cinema, whose forms he characterized as fragmentary, flowing, and indefinite. As he notes in his crucial article, "Problems of Cine-Stylistics":

> One other fact is even more important however—the process of *internal speech* on the part of the spectator. For a study of the rules of cinema (and montage above all) it is most important to recognise that perception and comprehension of a film are inseparably linked with the formation of an internal speech which links the separate shots together. Only the "trans-sense" elements of cinema can be perceived outside this process. The film spectator must perform a complicated mental task in linking together the shots (the construction of cine-phrases and cine-periods), a task virtually absent in everyday usage where the word forms a covering and excludes other means of expression. The spectator must constantly compile a chain of cine-phrases—otherwise he will comprehend nothing. This is why some people find this cinematic mental task difficult, wearying, unaccustomed and unpleasant. One of the chief concerns of the director is to make sure that each film scene should "reach" the spectator, i.e. to enable him to divine the meaning of an episode, or, in other words, to switch the spectator onto the language of his own internal speech; this speech thereby comes into account in the actual construction of the film. (Eikhenbaum 3; emphasis in original)

Eikhenbaum's *Poetics of Cinema* only appeared in 1927, but its author's ideas on inner speech had been circulating for some time before that, for he was a key member of OPOYAZ, the Society for the Study of Poetic Language.

The work on inner speech that is likely best known to English-speaking readers is Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, published in Russian in 1932, and which synthesized ideas from this important Soviet cultural tradition. Vygotsky described inner speech as idiomatic and compared it to a dialect. Inner speech deviates from outer speech by its syntax. What is expressed in speech as diachronic appears in thought as synchronic. While inner speech is paradigmatic (associative), outer speech is basically syntagmatic (coordinative). It is elliptical, consisting of fragments and gaps. Further, inner speech is simplified and compressed, as it "opens up" with difficulty to others, and is hardly intelligible apart from the context in which it is formed.

The rudimentary form of thought that is reflected in inner speech verges on being synaesthetic, or verbivocovisual. Joyce and Eisenstein agreed that our inner monologues, formed of inner speech, straddle the domains of the verbal, the aural, and the visual; this is one of the interests the two shared that led Eisenstein to want to make a film of *Ulysses*. Both artists seem to have believed, too, that this rudimentary form of thought constitutes a genotext: inner speech plays a crucial role in shaping the manifest text of artworks. Hence, Eikhenbaum suggested that the cine-spectator must slip into the language of its genotext to discern a film's mode of construction, and Eisenstein believed that the ideogrammic method, which he believed is related to inner speech, came closer than other forms of writing to capturing the character of this synesthetic, ontologically ambivalent ur-text.[2]

Lee alludes frequently to Eisenstein's theories of cinema when discussing the fragment and parataxis (to which he generally refers as "discontinuity"), without ever mentioning that Eisenstein's interests in these topics in literary stylistics were connected to his obsession with pre-logical forms of thought, an obsession that claimed a larger and larger portion of his theoretical endeavours over time. But Eisenstein was not alone in his interest in these more rudimentary forms of thought: the avant-garde arose from a conviction that motivated the widespread interest in pre-logical thought, a conviction that developed in the nineteenth century and became more widespread in the early twentieth century. That belief is perhaps most succinctly summarized in Benjamin's recognition that Kant's Enlightenment project was undertaken "on the basis of an experience virtually reduced to a nadir, to a minimum of significance […] his unique radicalism presupposed an experience which had almost no intrinsic value and which could have attained its […] sad significance only through its certainty" (101). The crux of the problem is that Kant, according to Benjamin, "wanted to take the principles of experience from the sciences—in particular mathematical physics" (101). Thus, Benjamin asserted, the metaphysics of the knowable can concern nature only insofar as it is mathematizable. In one way or another, the vanguard movements of the twentieth century, each in its own way, protested this restriction of experience and the disavowal of the noetic value of trance, raw bodily feels, contemplation, prayer, ecstasy, mad love, and even experience induced by psychotropic agents. Archaic cultures, and ethnic cultures that descended from them and remained closely connected to them, were viewed as archives of experiential modali-

ties that were discounted with the rise of modern (mathematical) science.

Khlebnikov and Blok offer a case in point for these beliefs. Lee recognizes that both were ardent Slavophiles, but reductively suggests that the principal motivation for their Slavophilia was a commitment to the value of inclusivity, to affirming the equal worth of ethnic cultures that ranked lower in the prevailing binary of European/non-European cultures. Placing the value of inclusivity at the summit of the ladder of values is a relatively recent sociological phenomenon, to be sure, and that motivation would have been out of place in the framework of the Soviet advance-guard of the 1920s and 1930s. The objective of those factions was more radical/dialectical/agonistic: they wanted to deploy the vital force of these archaic modes of experience to destroy the experiential regimen of capitalism, which had impoverished modern life and, for most, precluded human flourishing. Only by eliminating the last vestiges of that experiential regimen could art and life be integrated.

The non-rational belief systems and orgiastic rituals of many sectarian cults impressed the Russian Symbolists and their heirs in the avant-garde, just as the shamanism of the "ethnic" regions of Russia fascinated several early twentieth-century revolutionaries who had been exiled to Siberia and wrote studies of these "ethnic" practices. Shamans induced trances, sometimes by using biological agents, in which seekers had the sensation of leaving their bodies, of travelling to another world, and there receiving the learning that would allow them to heal this world. Aleksandr Blok, an admirer of Soloviev, announced, plainly, that the Symbolist poet is a theurgist: akin to the alchemist, the poet, using sound, rhythm, and rhyme—and, most importantly, by creating correspondences between verbal sounds, rhythms, and rhymes and the natural world (considering R. Murray Schafer's *Patria* might help some readers grasp the full sense of the claim)—could penetrate the mysteries and unblock the way to redemption. This was an idea reflected in Trotsky's notion, alluded to in this book, that with the revolution, the last would become first. They argued, in true Schopenhauerian fashion, that their attunement to poetic language gave the poet access to a realm beyond space and time. Among those interested in the anthropological findings was Sergei Eisenstein, and shamanistic symbols appear in some of his films.

Russian Symbolism and its heirs in the various vanguard movements of the early twentieth century had great faith in the magic of language: many of its proponents offered a glottogenetic cosmology and, associated with it, a theurgic conception of language. They dreamt of a perfect language in which the natural object would be the truly adequate sign or, failing that, in which the sign, by its magic powers, could conjure up the object. This conception of language surely has affinities with the cinema, in which the natural object appears as a signifier, or, at least, the cinematic sign conjures up, or can seem to conjure up, the natural object itself. Influenced directly by Potebnja and Soloviev, and indirectly by the medieval tradition of realism concerning linguistic universals, Andrei Bely maintained that due to the special link between words (names) and their referents, the use of language affects reality: the use of words

brings the objects they refer to into being. "Language is the most powerful instrument of creation," Bely wrote in "Magiya Slov" ("The Magic of Words"): "When I name an object with a word I thereby assert its existence. Every act of cognition [*poznanie*] arises from a name. Cognition is impossible without words" (93). He asserted audaciously that "The word thus always gives rise to causality. It creates causal relations, which are cognized only subsequently" (95). "Every word is a sound. The flux of spatial and causal relations outside me first becomes intelligible to me by means of the word. If words did not exist, then neither would the world itself" (93). In that article, Bely distinguishes between the "living word," the "word-flesh" (*slovo-plot'*), which he characterizes as a flourishing organism and the "word-term" (*slovo-termin*), which he characterizes as a dead crystal "formed by the completed process of decomposition of the living word. The living word (the word-flesh) is a blossoming organism" (99). Against the waste of language, Bely believed deeply in the magical and incantatory powers of language and in poets' capacity to release them. He was convinced that the word, when it is still a "living word," possesses special powers, which it will once again claim when it is reborn in new verse; the "common prosaic word, that is, the word that has lost all its sound and pictorial imagery, but that has still not become an ideal term either, it is a fetid, decomposing corpse" (100). Our speech and thought are permeated with decaying words that poison us; we long for rebirth of the word. Surely all this should lead one to conjecture that Bely's conception of language, and that of the later Russian Symbolists and many of their heirs, was massively overdetermined, and reflected as much a theurgic tradition as a pervasive Romanticism, as much a pagan spirituality as an oppositional theory of language.

Russian and Soviet artists other than Bely propounded pre-Enlightenment ideas about language and experience. The year before the publication of "The Magic of Words," another Symbolist, Aleksandr Blok, had pondered in "Poeziia zagovorov I zaklinanij" ("The Poetry of Spells and Incantations," 1908) the vital belief in the word that characterizes the ancient soul. The ancients had faith in the word and in the power of incantation because they did not think of human being as separate from nature, nor did they conceive of subject and object, word and deed, as separate. Six years after Bely's essay, Konstantin Bal'mont considered the theme of incantations in *Poeziia kak volshebstvo* (*Poetry as Magic*, 1915). Bal'mont exhorted his readers to relocate within themselves the primal power of casting spells, from which would emerge the Word's innermost voice that would speak magically. *The Ethnic Avant-Garde* constantly cites Russian and American artists who connected their art to magic. Curiously, not once does Lee pause to deliberate on how literally the term should be taken, assuming simply, or so it seems, that it was a spent metaphor, or what Bely called a word-term, such as we use in casual conversation.

Yet, such extravagant, magical theories of language are the foundations for practices of the Soviet artists with whom Lee deals in this book. By dealing almost exclusively with sociological issues of the period, especially issues relating to race and ethnicity, Lee avoids grappling with the deep motivation for the stylistics of avant-

garde literature, which he tends to reduce metonymically to the use of linguistic fragments; most of his stylistic analyses can be summarized by saying that he notes that the work he is analyzing presents discontinuous fragments.

The closest Lee comes to dealing with the theories of language that produced the Soviet avant-garde occurs in his mention of Nicolai Marr's similarly extravagant language theories and Walter Benjamin's interest in what that philosopher described as Marr's "generally rather strange ideas." Marr's ideas certainly were peculiar: Marr was the son of a Scottish father and a Georgian mother, who never learned each other's language. Not surprisingly, he concocted a fantasy of the unity of languages, and went on to prove, at least to his own satisfaction, that all languages descended from Georgian.[3] Eventually, Marr posited that Georgian itself derived from a protolanguage called Japhetic, which developed out of a sign language and which, in its earliest form, consisted of only four primal cries: *sal, ber, yon*, and *rosh*. Lee's treatment of Marr essentially consists in connecting to the conception of time as sedimented, which is one of the themes of the book; his connection to the theories of language in Russian and, later, Soviet culturology and to themes in the poetics of the Silver Age of Russian literature go virtually unacknowledged.

Even so, this idea of pre-logical sounds that are meaningful in themselves has clear parallels in the ideas of Bely's wondrous *Glossolalia*, published in Berlin in 1922, which Lee does not mention, and the work of the *zaum* poets, to which Lee does allude. The idea of a core of universally meaningful sounds was remarkably widespread among the vanguard, and its artistic implications go far beyond the desire for ethnic inclusion that Lee discusses, for it relates to the felt need for a new metaphysics, founded on the idea of vibration, and the conviction that this unified reality could heal the divisions of the world. That, in fact, is the deep source of the ideas some of these artists had about inclusivity, a very different notion of inclusivity than the sociological conception on which Lee relies. The Cabalistically-inclined thinker Walter Benjamin, who was sufficiently acute to recognize that Marr's historical linguistics is really a reworking of the Tower of Babel myth, offers a similarly Adamite conception of language. Lee mentions Benjamin's tracts on language, and on the Tower of Babel myth, without acknowledging their extravagance. He does not remark on the deep relevance of Benjamin's ideas on the Tower of Babel myth to the Soviet artists' interests in the ur-language, even though he himself comments on the Babel myth recurrently and sometimes at length; nor does he comment on the relevance of Benjamin's writing on language to Soviet artists' ideas on magical language.

For Benjamin, "*There is no such thing as a content of language; as communication, language communicates a mental entity-something communicable per se*" ("On Language" 66; emphasis in original). Divine language is a saying: its effect is immediate, rather than being an instrument, a means that operates mediately, through meaning. Divine language provides Benjamin with a model of language as action: when a "saying" is uttered, the object leaps into being, bearing the nonsensuous imprint of the name God gave it. As concerns Divine language, "its linguistic being,

not its verbal meanings, defines its frontier" (i.e., circumscribes the domain of language) ("On Language" 64). For Benjamin, "the whole of nature […] is imbued with a nameless unspoken language [i.e., a language that does not make use of names, or meanings], the residue of the creative word of God" ("On Language" 74). It is this fact that allows Benjamin to generalize beyond Divine language, and to say that what a word says about an object imitates what the object says about itself, and what it says is its name. The name is that part of the object, its self-knowledge, that finds itself reflected in the word: "The name is the analogue of the knowledge of the object in the object itself" ("On Language" 71). However, in the Fall, "the essential purity of names was violated" ("On Language" 71); thereafter, "the supreme idiom is lacking" and "the immortal word" remains silent ("Task" 263; here Benjamin is quoting Mallarmé's "Crise de vers" in Stéphane Mallarmé, *Vers et prose. Morceaux choisis*, 1893). As Bely's "The Magic of Words," Blok's "The Poetry of Spells and Incantations," and Bal'mont's *Poetry as Magic* confirm, vanguard artists strove to restore language to its original Adamic condition, in which language was a saying, not something said, and that this saying would create objects in the full reality of their being.

It is astonishing how frequently such ideas appear in theoretical tracts issued by Russian and Soviet artists during the first three decades of the twentieth century. Benjamin's texts provide deep insight into motivation for this effort: righteous language and behaviour prepare for the coming of the Messiah, which not a few artists believed was the point of the revolution. The Soviet avant-garde's interest in magic, the occult, and atavistic forms of experience was all part of an effort to reconstruct the theory of language and representation, to develop a magical theory of imitation that would explain how the vanguard artist might transfigure the act of copying, eliminating the inertness that had come to characterize traditional forms of imitation and transforming them into vital forces that would animate reality rather than reproduce its appearance. As Sergei Eisenstein's later film theory shows, a belief in the ability of imitation to animate reality was the deep ground for vanguard artists' belief in the political efficacy of art. Lee leaves all this—the theories of language, inner speech, and imitation as a vital force—out of his account, and this depletes his formal analyses significantly: failing to consider these wild ideas about language results in an aesthetically conservative commentary on vanguard artworks and on the avant-garde movements that produced them, one that converts their deep, if sometimes zany, metaphysical ideas to sociological platitudes—decent and warm platitudes expressing admirable goals, but platitudes nonetheless.

The topic *The Ethnic Avant-Garde* addresses is a rich one, and the idea of conducting a cross-cultural examination of Soviet artists and radical American artists is simply terrific. But a certain soberness, if not reticence, in approach led Stephen Lee to ignore the wild ideas about art, language, and human beings that motivated the radical Soviet art of the era. But, to be fair to the author, this reduction of metaphysicopolitical ideas to sociological formulae is a sign of the times. Perhaps the heady excesses of "theory" two decades ago resulted in a backlash against highly speculative

writing and an embrace of sobering empirical approaches, but the practices of the Soviet avant-garde of the 1920s and the ideas that produced them do not reveal their richness to anti-speculative sociological approaches.

Notes

1. Given Lee's bias towards compressing Hegel's complex theory of time as history into a claim that it presents time as linear succession, it is astonishing to see him following Perloff in asserting that Futurists, whose art was so militantly directed against all forms of *passéisme* (*passeismo*), were committed to preserving the past by negation (50). What is more ironic still is that Lee traces this theme of sedimented time back to Trotsky's law of uneven and combined development, for that law extends and renders more historically specific ideas that themselves derived from Hegel's notion of the dialectic, as they were transformed by a Young Hegelian by the name of Karl Marx, and further developed into the notion of dialectical materialism by the father of Russian Marxism, Georgi Plekhanov.

2. A careful reading of "The Chinematographic Principle and the Ideogram" reveals that, while most deeply influenced by Fenollosa's writing on the Chinese written character, the essay is also influenced by this tradition in Russian and Soviet culturology; however, it represents only the beginning of Eisenstein's exploration of the topic of pre-logical thought.

3. The delusion that one's language is the primal language is sufficiently common that it actually has a name, "Goropianism," after the sixteenth-century humanist Goropius Becanus, who managed to convince himself that Dutch was the language spoken in Paradise.

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