

Russian Constructivist Architecture as an Urban Carnival: The Creation and Reception of a Utopian Narrative¹

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FOR A NATION in the process of revolutionary redefinition, such as Russia following the 1917 revolution, culture becomes a critical player in the formation and propagation of national narratives. More than the recipient of the stories or ideologies which the state seeks to communicate, the creators of visual culture devise strategies which embody, as process and product, new national myths, even as they infuse these myths with variations and prescient anticipations of future myths. As Barbara Stafford has argued, “imaging, ranging from high art to popular illusions, remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas” (*Good Looking* 4). But where she goes on to assert that traditionally, the word has been overvalued and the image trivialized, I argue that in post-revolutionary Russia, the image was feared. State efforts to control the image, to render it subservient to the word, culminated in the aesthetic ideology of socialist realism. The constructivist image of utopia, an image and process which postulated the existence of an “engaged” public, and an image of fragmentation and grotesque complexity,² predicated on a carnivalesque and dialogical reality, may have been particularly vulnerable to this fate.

To the extent that utopia is envisioned and understood as a tropic state, rather than as a static condition, the idea of utopia becomes a metaphor for understanding Russian culture of the revolution, even as that culture engaged in the production of utopia. But a utopian narrative in a state which believes itself engaged in the action of creating utopia will impose a critical and creative dynamic on artists such that their work will be scrutinized and face rejection for the utopian narrative it embodies; concurrently, artists, to avoid this censorship, may reframe their narratives either through the language of representation or the content of the form. This act of reframing itself became a part of the constructivist utopian expression: an expression of utopia as the instrument of change. A utopia of process, a utopia in which dialogue is endemic to a fragmented world of almost irreconcilable conjunctions: the constructivist utopia was the utopia of an urban carnival and the magical machine.

Although the carnival has been acknowledged as an influence on Russian culture, especially the culture of festivals and, to a lesser extent, of artists’ exhibitions (see, for example: Kelly; Pospelov; Sartori; Swift), it has not been identified as a central and formative component of constructivist culture—its architecture and stage design. Traditionally, the constructivist



Figure 1. *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, photograph from actual performance (1923). Source: Bakhrushin Theater Museum collection of photographs.

stage set and constructivist architecture have been analyzed in terms of industrial and machine metaphors and images. Characteristic of this response was the reception accorded the paradigmatic constructivist stage set: *Velikodushnyi Rogonosets* (*The Magnanimous Cuckold*; designer Liubov' Popova, producer and director Vsevolod Meierkhol'd, 1922/3) (Fig. 1: photograph of 1923 performance, Bakhrushin Theater Museum collection). Referred to as a "machine for the actor's playing" (Rakitina; Pozdnev 9), the stage set makes an explicit but unnoticed reference to the design for a people's pantomime theater production of the late 19th century. This design, which closely parallels Popova's eventual stage set, depicts a "magic mill which turns old women into young" (Fig. 2: unpaginated illustration in Alekseev-Iakovlev).³ Without asserting the carnival as its only source, we can nevertheless view the production of the *Magnanimous Cuckold* as a precedent for the influence of folk and people's theater, along with fantasy, on a developing constructivist strategy of uniting low and high art and technology—or more specifically, a union of the carnival and the machine—and as a model for a new relationship of the stage set to the play, of the audience to the work of art, and ultimately, of people to society.

From a visual perspective, a union of the carnival and the machine may seem untenable. In fact, it was a union of process and goals, a union which derived from and reflected a commitment to kinetic, mechanical, and psychological movement, to dynamism and transformation, as the generative principle of design—the design of the environment, the object, and the human being.

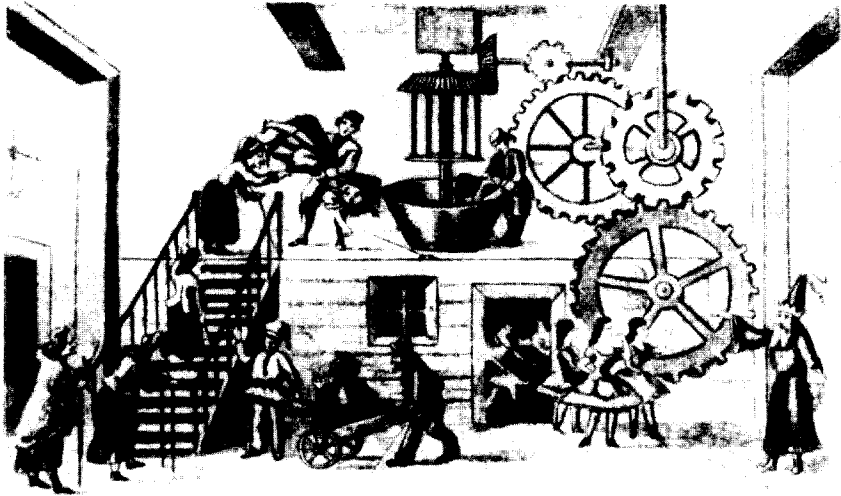


Figure 2. The Magic mill which turns old women into young. Poster for a pantomime play performed at a balagan theater. Source: Alekseev-Iakovlev, *Russkie narodnye gulian'ia*.

To this end we find an increasing confluence between the goals of theater and architecture, such that the stage set moved from its constructivist inception as an actual and metaphorical machine to become an encompassing environment, while the building (the workers' club, in particular) changed from its origin as an environment into a "theatrical" machine. In both cases, a new relationship between the environment or the work of art and the human being was postulated—the human being as a "theatrically engaged spectator," a person who can will and enact transformation. I have derived the construct of the engaged spectator from my observation that constructivist scenographic design often functioned as a virtual or alternative actor, modeling and promoting a point of view which competed with or challenged the textual theme of the play. The spectator, in turn, had to resolve the production's dialectic individually. The demand for this type of mental and emotional involvement creates a "theatrically engaged" spectator, a more dynamic form of involvement than a spectator role of observation and/or reflection.

In this essay my central concern is to establish the presence of carnival—as process, metaphor, and form—in the constructivist visual language. I trace the narrative/image of the urban carnival, which, I suggest, can be read as a metaphor for the constructivist paradigm and which consequently functions as an ideological and visual bridge between constructivist theater and architecture. This narrative/image ultimately informs the constructivist imaging of utopia. But this utopia, with its implications of utopia as heterotopia, utopia as spectacle, and utopia as the "world upside down," is almost by default a utopia of chaos—in a society which wants to impose order on chaos, it will be rejected.

“Complexity and Contradiction”: Primitivism, the Allure of the Carnival, and a New Language of Art

Calls for a new language of art—coming from artists of many persuasions, activists in the world of art, politicians, and critics—converged on one belief. This was the belief that only primitivism—the arts of the past and of the people—could lead to an art capable of resonating with the dynamic pathos of the revolutionary era, expressing the truth of the revolution, and bringing to the factory a veneer of the unexpected and of eccentricism, the chaos of the carnival, and in that way, it would thwart the latent capitalistic morality (amorality) inherent to factory production. A way had to be found to unite peasant and rural life forms with the urbanized factory worker; likewise, the evils of bourgeois urban culture and industrialization were to be mitigated and dispelled by a transformative synthesis with native culture.⁴ Consequently, for ideological, formal, and metaphoric reasons, folk culture, particularly in the form of fairground or carnival-derived devices and influences, had undeniable appeal as a means of reaching the people, making an art that would be accessible to the masses, and creating an art of transformation and amalgamation—concepts central to the utopian goals of the communist state.

Nonetheless, the issue of primitivism in the arts and in the new communist society always aroused ambivalence and for several reasons. First, utopian visions for the communist state followed at least three different strands of thought, strands which evoked specific and even conflicting images of rural life, the role of urban culture, and the importance of machines and technology in the new society. That is, a rural utopia, dominated by a peasant/rural mistrust of urban life, was both tempered by plans to replace peasant and religious rituals with “revolutionary” ones and efforts to “uplift” peasants and eliminate their “backward” ways, and countered by the vision of an urban, technological utopia in which the machine-city triumphed over nature and rural backwardness. This utopian vision tended to merge with the idea of an administrative utopia that shared much of the machine imagery and metaphors of the urban utopia, and consequently gave added weight to both (Stites, 1989). Yet, this urban vision did not reject outright a nostalgia for rural primitivism, for the nature of urban utopian visions was such that they did not ignore the countryside, and many were actually dominated by the belief that rejection of the capitalist city type, a “stone prison,” and the creation of a new urban form could overcome the opposition between country and city and also result in a healthier and more joyous life for workers (Uitts).

But apart from these utopian conundrums, the issue of primitivism/peasant culture was a divisive and inconclusive one. After the revolution many felt that the peasantry formed an oppositional culture to the workers and the emergence of a communist society: “In the eyes of the Bolsheviks, rural Russia was a stronghold of conservatism. They regarded the peasant economy as primitive and undeveloped, the peasant as retarded and uneducated, and peasant behavior as rough, stupid, and slow” (Altrichter 192).

In addition to dissatisfaction with the peasant lifestyle and a deeply abiding mistrust of the peasant commitment to agricultural production, urban workers and Bolsheviks resented the migration of many peasants to cities, believing it led to the infiltration of conservative attitudes in the urban setting, as well as further exacerbation of the housing crisis (Chase). But even those newly-arrived peasants who attempted to merge with proletarian workers in factory settings were accused of possessing an incorrect ideology—i.e., a peasant ideology which then posed a great danger to the city.

Ambivalence about the desired role of the peasant in the new culture was fully matched by ambivalence toward the influence of western technology and urbanism. Although the latter influence was centralized in terms of goals such as the electrification of the country, the need for a reconciliation between the indigenous rural culture and a western urban culture informed art, society, and politics. The urban/rural or peasant/worker dichotomy permeated attitudes about culture and art. Although some writers recognized the contradictions produced by these opposing forces, neither force was consistently appraised as positive or negative. Thus, in the rural/urban opposition, peasant and/or folk culture, sometimes paired with popular culture, could exist as either a positive or negative alternative to an urban, western, and overly intellectualized culture. In its negative capacity it functioned as a source of cultural disorder; sometimes, however, *urban* culture was identified as the disorderly form and accused of having lowered or debased the quality of folk art. This, for example, lay behind a proposal for a “women’s university of folklore,” the underlying mission of which was to save the natural art of the countryside from destruction by the urban, factory-influenced, depersonalized culture (Benua). Finally, peasant culture, even when valued as an example of true primitivism, could be threatening as a form of “the world upside down” and as a sanctioning of taboo behaviors, or at least, taboo values (Burke 186–213). This belief, that folk arts—music, stories, and the *lubok* (popular engravings which combined pictures and text, and often used to communicate “political” fables)—glorified undesirable aspects of peasant culture, made them initially repugnant to groups seeking the development of a true proletarian culture. Although true at the beginning of the 1920s, this attitude did not last (see Oinas; Stites, 1992).

Overall, the general goal which unified and motivated the search for a new visual language was the creation and description of a new reality—the reality of an innately proletarian culture—in both art and life. But because this goal was to be achieved within the context of an art for the people, and further, because this new life had to be the paradigm of an alternative to capitalist life, primitive and peasant culture could not be ignored. Sources that evoked or denoted the arts of the masses, of the people of a Russia unadulterated by the west, assumed particular valency in the derivation of this new language, and folk art traditions had a general appeal in this respect. The folk arts which could most immediately and vibrantly serve as a model were holidays and carnivals (especially the Russian *gulian’*e, a winter holiday fair).

At the same time, the avant-garde rejection of traditional realism, which represented an inured way of looking at the world and therefore lacked the ability to provoke intellectual and visual shifts in vision, impelled a turn to atraditional sources which could assist in the redefinition of art and the reformulation of its devices. Finally, the belief that theater could model the new environment welded a reciprocal and vital connection between architecture—the art that would literally build the new world—and theatrical stage design. That this connection was reciprocal is apparent from many calls on the part of critics and theorists to use the theater as a showcase for new ideas about the environment. The critic I. Berezark, for example, declared that the stage must demonstrate “models of the new habitat, furnished rationally, comfortably, economically and beautifully. The spectator will . . . become convinced of the efficiency of the new formulation of daily life” (“Veshch” 10). More metaphorical was Sergei Tret’iakov’s analogy between the scaffolding of a building under erection and a model for a new type of theater which would actively engage the audience in the mental process of constructing the meaning of a play (“Iskusstvo”) or V.V. Dmitriev’s description of the production of a play as the “construction of a building in [theatrical] space” (the artist’s production notes). In an inverse manner, the connection is reinforced by those critics who rejected the urban visions of particular stage sets because they were too capitalist, too bourgeois, or too frenetic to bring to life the monumental and three-dimensional space of the communist urban future.⁵ That stage sets could be seen as threatening visions for the future, however, arose from architects’ own belief in the fantasy potential of architecture, a belief which further strengthened the turn to theater. One architectural writer, for example, who not only called architects the “active builder[s] of the new life, and propagandist[s] for the new social ideas,” went on to describe the utopian value of architecture: “Architecture . . . is . . . a utopian plan, a stubborn work of fantasy” (Novitskii 2, 3). And it was the art form most singularly committed to creating the new environment which critics such as Berezark believed the theater could model—but a model is precisely that; it is not an enactment. Which would predominate in this new environment—fantasy or rationality? And was this new environment to be a static object of rational contemplation or an alchemical universe of transformation?

Reading the narrative

The connection that was forged between architecture and the theater was so strong that the narratives of one cannot be read without knowledge of the other. This interdependence derived from and contributed to an interaction between the language used to convey the narrative and the narrative itself. But unawareness of these interdependencies has obscured understanding of the utopian narrative of constructivist architecture. This narrative has long been incompletely read, read solely in terms of machine, technological and industrial imagery, whereas today, constructivism is being reread in

terms of post-Marxist theories of the commodification of the object (see, for example, Kiaer). There is an element of consumerist spectacle in the carnival, but the element of fantasy united with the machine is the element which serves to illuminate the dialectical visions of the constructivist avant-garde and its utopian imagery in post-revolutionary Russia. It is my argument that the theatrical connection itself impels the recognition that the visions and theorizing of constructivist architecture cannot cohere in the absence of a master narrative which unites the language of machines and science with the language of fantasy—and this is the narrative of the urban carnival, as the embodiment of theatricality and theater, as a paradigm for utopian soviet urbanism and architecture.

The carnival strand of this narrative can be identified and read with the aid of two strategies. First, the semantic strategy of metonymy almost serves as a metaphor for the relationship between architecture and stage design. That is, constructivist architecture and constructivist stage design existed in the same time and place—a chronological and locational contiguity. By the process of metonymy, we can transfer the meanings of constructivist stage design to constructivist architecture. Second, constructivist architecture was a key component of the language of constructivist stage design. It infused that language, and in turn, the language of stage design infused that of architecture. Recognition of this interconnection leads to the discovery of visual parallels between theater and architecture as well as a willingness to look to atypical sources as influences on the language and forms of constructivist architecture.

Carnival and the Language of Constructivism

In constructivist art and architecture, stylistic consistency was never the goal; any explication of the goals and meanings of constructivism must focus on this style as a theoretical structure comprising ideological principles which in turn generate sensitivity to a constellation of visual sources.⁶ The language of constructivist architecture and constructivist stage design was a language culled from many sources, among them the structures, design and daily life reversals of the carnival; the *balagan* or people's theater (as an architectural form as well as a model for dramatic presentations); the wooden "mountains" or roller coaster type slides which dominated villages and parts of Moscow and St. Petersburg during the annual *Maslianitsa* (pre-Easter) festivals; the techniques of cinema, especially montage; cubist collage and the pre-constructivist relief constructions of Vladimir Tatlin (Fig. 3: photograph of an exhibition reconstruction);⁷ machine metaphors; a rejection of Aristotelian logic; and the early post-revolution mass demonstrations. Of these, perhaps the least familiar to the western reader but the most symbolically, semantically, and architecturally potent for the evolution of the constructivist utopia is the aggregation of forms, processes, and narratives subsumed by the *gulian'e* (the *Maslianitsa* carnivals). The wooden mountains or slides (engraving of an 1859 *gulian'e*, collection of Bakh-

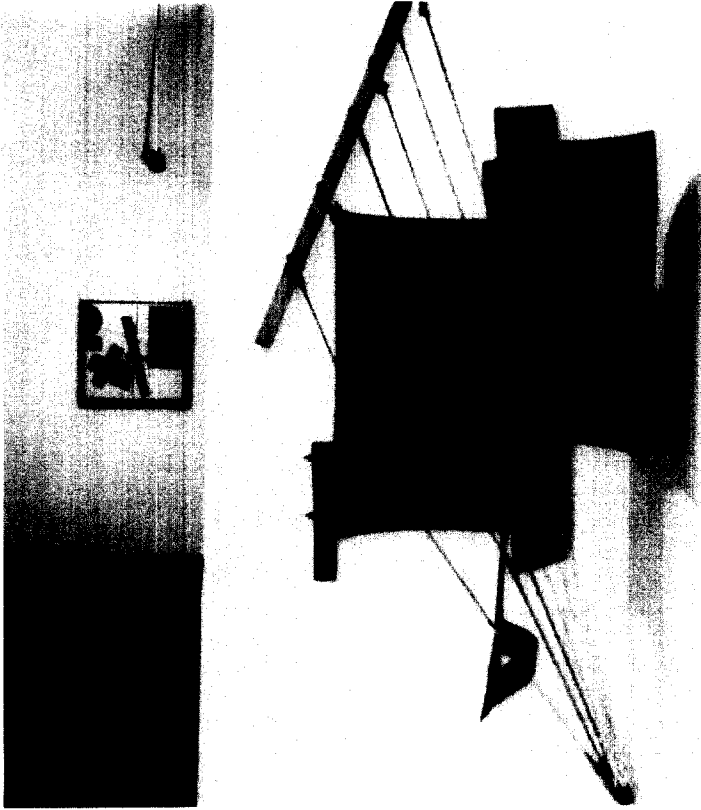


Figure 3. Vladimir Tatlin, corner-relief construction. Reconstruction for the Tret'iakov installation of the "Great Utopia," Moscow, spring 1993. Source: author's photo.

rushin Museum: Fig. 4), a central *gulian'e* feature, were made out of demountable wooden parts, erected by contractors before the holiday and taken down after it had ended. Turrets or towers, connected to huts decorated in a generalized oriental style, stood at the two ends of the *gulian'e*, or in the case of rural villages, at the town limits, and a parabolic slide extended between them. In the winter the surface was covered with ice and people would coast down the hill in sleds and other contraptions; in the spring they went in carriages and carts until the end of the century when the slides were mechanized with rails and wagons operated by electric devices (and called "American mountains") (Alekseev-Iakovlev 28–9).

The *gulian'e*, as a place for fun, laughter and merriment, evolved from rituals with symbolic meanings and functions—for example, ritual constructions of snow cities and the enactment of battles to destroy them, as well as celebrations of spring bounty and ritual offerings to the god-protector of livestock and property (Volkov 6–10). Further, as suggested by Vsevolod Miller, the centrality of the solar cycle to primitive life underlay most holi-

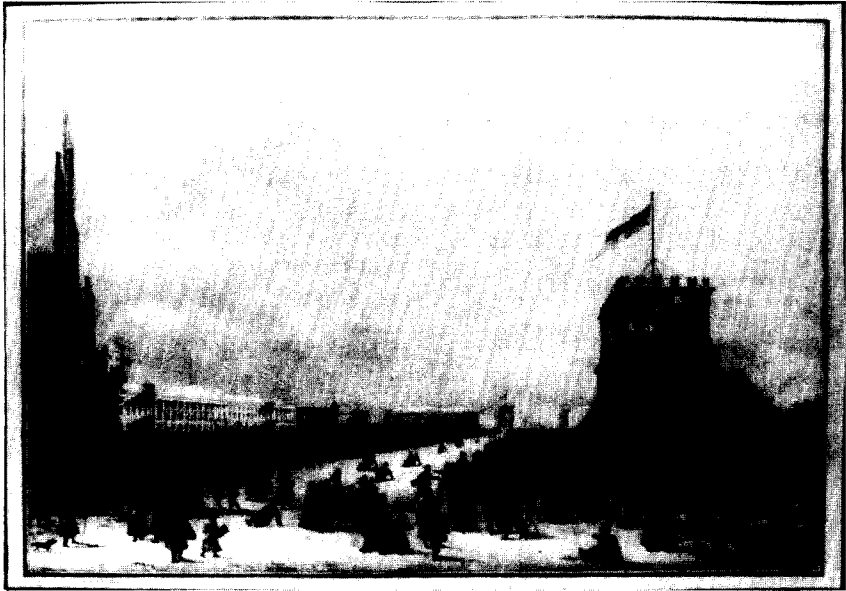


Figure 4. Engraving of an 1859 *gulian'e*. Source: Bakhrushin Museum photograph.

day formations, and even the “snow city” battles signified the battle between winter and spring—a battle which analogically becomes a metaphor for the rebirth of Russia as paradise. (More recently, Stephen Baehr has traced the importance and reenactments of the myth of Russia as paradise.)

As the *gulian'e* evolved, objects which originally served ritualistic purposes became “props” in a theatrical sense. The holiday sleds, for example, rigged with decorations, assumed the role of moveable stages. But whereas the original *gulian'e* props and stages were made from ordinary objects and materials to which symbolic meaning was ascribed, as the *gulian'e* evolved into a true “theatrical” event, the situation reversed, such that theatrical objects were now made with the intention of denoting ordinary things (see Levinson)—unintentionally anticipating the constructivist and production art goals of making life out of art.⁸

Several days before the holiday, construction of additional *gulian'e* attractions would begin. The larger *gulian'e* would be dominated by several lines of *balagan* theaters (engraving of a Moscow *balagan*, reproduced on a postcard: Fig. 5): often large and clumsy barns, with decorated entrances and exits on the sides. In between these *balagans* stood carousels, ceaselessly moving swings, horses, stalls, food stands, sleds, panoramas and the especially popular *raek* (Leifert; Ivanov). Essentially a box with peep holes for one or two spectators, the *raek* unveiled a panoramic picture, often a travelogue-type of illustration, which unrolled before the viewer’s eyes. While the viewer watched the unfolding scenes, the operator, or *raeshnik*, improvised a narrative that often enough had little to do with the pictures and far

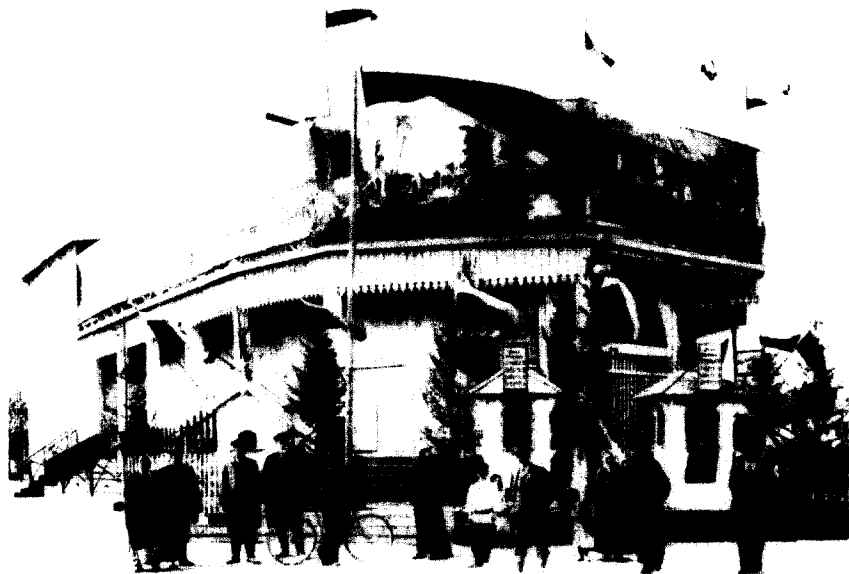


Figure 5. Engraving of a Moscow *balagan* theater, reproduced on a commercial postcard.

more to do with attracting additional customers. Another device for wooing customers was puppets attached to the roof of the box and animated by the *raeshnik*. Eventually the popular travelogue subjects of the early *raek* years were displaced by subjects pertaining to daily life, and the *raek* assumed the role of an “oral people’s newspaper” (Konechnyi 134)—again, prescient of a theatrical form promoted after the revolution for its appeal to a largely illiterate population.

Like the wooden slides, the *balagans* were temporary structures, set up for the winter holiday, taken down, and then reconstructed six and a half weeks later. But each time they had to look new and surprising, a goal achieved by colorful, *lubok*-type posters and painted architectural decorations attached to the exterior (Leifert 31–2). Visually, the effect almost defied the architectonic nature of these sheds, suggesting instead a two-dimensional collage. The larger *balagans*, although a primitive form of architecture, were decorated from inside to outside with colored materials, posters, and signs in bright colors (Vsevelodskii-Gerngross 319). In most cases a necessary feature was a special balcony or gallery, on which would appear clowns or actors, embodying living advertisements for the productions within.

While a connection to commercialization and commodity culture appears somewhat undeniable in this context of the fairground spectacle/market, the true commodity here was not a product but an adventure—a theatrical exposition of history and current events, performed within and without these nineteenth-century fairground theaters, and an opportunity for

subversive protest against the prevailing political and social norms. By the 1920s, these outlying poles of the theatrical adventure had been fused into a singular critical expression taking the form of a utopian image. To the extent that an image or concept resists commodification, the risk was not the risk of commodification but the risk of reification.

Cultural activists may have been all too aware of this risk which paradoxically underlay the turn to folk spectacle. That is, the grand folk spectacle of the *gulian'e* and the more intimate ones of the *balagan* offered a compellingly deviant aesthetic attraction to revolutionary theater reformers, precisely because of its potential for grotesque deviation. An observation made by Mikhail Bakhtin in the context of carnival forms penetrates to the core of this attraction—the carnival, he wrote, “belongs to the borderline between art and life” (*Rabelais* 7). Indeed, the entire nature of the festival, holiday, or carnival was that of a liminal, nether zone—a site where oppositions (artistic, social, political, and personal) were transformed into amalgams. Amalgamation and transformation characterized these folk forms of celebration in their activities, rituals, and physical forms, an effect captured by one writer in her description of the *gulian'e* as a “beautiful chaos” (Nekrylova 32). The experience of a “beautiful chaos” further typified the individual forms of the entertainment comprised by the *gulian'e* in its entirety. Deviance, liminality, chaos—the antithesis of reification, it would seem.

Whereas Meierkhol'd's interest in the Italian commedia dell'arte is well-documented, less is known about his attraction—and that of other Russian dramatists and producers—to the Russian carnival and *balagan* (Meierkhol'd fond; Meierkhol'd and Bondi). Meierkhol'd and Nikolai Evreinov (*The Theater in Life*) were similarly drawn to the *balagan* for its ability to arouse passion in the spectator. Somewhat later, the writer and theatrical activist, G. Kryzhitskii, in a book entitled *The Philosophical Balagan*, called the *balagan* a model for the contemporary theater because it united mystery with discovery, wisdom with action, and comedy and senselessness with mystery and tragedy. Finally, he said, the *balagan* was a world outside of logic, and it would force spectators to understand life not through their heads but through their entire being.

But, as I have tried to suggest, it would be misleading to attribute the constructivist language to a single visual source, no matter how multiplicitous that source is. Central to the language of constructivism, but in a different way, were the “laboratory” (to use the word of the constructivists) experiments of the *ZhivSkulptArkh* group, a group of painters, sculptors and architects. Shortly after the revolution (1919–1920), members of this group engaged in the exploration of cubist and historicist forms fused in dynamic, architectural compositions projecting new communal structures. These exploratory compositions, not constructivist in nature nor intended as expressions of utopia, did, however, function as another source for the formal, utopian language of constructivism. In this case, it was a source for a symbolic and metaphoric language derived from high art and explicitly avant-garde traditions. Through the parallel strategies of selection and amalgamation, this use of

high art ultimately led to a parallel between high art and the art of the people, or high art and carnival, a people's art. The multi-media practices of this group also reinforced a belief about the interchangeability of media. For example, Aleksandr Rodchenko's architectural designs, in their amalgamation of geometric and cantilevered forms suggesting movement into space, but with any suggestion of volume annihilated by the energizing presence of hatched and intersecting lines and at times letters, coalesced into approximations of cubist collages, a parallel strengthened by examination of contemporaneous collage compositions made by Rodchenko with no intention of serving architectural functions. Although two-dimensional, they are, however, as architectonic and suggestive of relief constructions (such as those of Tatlin) as his architectural designs are collage-like. Architecture as collage—a two-dimensional medium—defied the idea of a monumental architecture, and in the confusion of media boundaries, it became a chaotic aggregation of forms which evoked the ambience of a carnival and its people's theaters covered with posters, newspaper, and unfolding panoramic scenes.

The conflation of all the sources of the language, from spectacle to cubist collage to futurist machines, yielded a language dominated by strategies of transformation; instability; movement and dynamism; fusion—of time, of form, of the real and unreal or the known and unknown; opposition to previous artistic and social norms such as symmetry and classical composition; assemblage and aggregation rather than synthesis; realism without the imitation of reality; metaphor; eccentricism; dissonance; chance; and a commitment to the active, intellectual and emotional engagement of the spectator. This last commitment, a conceptual construct with direct ties to the theater and carnival, as the most critically differentiating attribute of constructivism—and the one most likely to insure against reification—would prove to be its most utopian and its most subversive characteristic.

The Constructivist Language as a Language of Utopia

Not only was this language highly resonant with and derivative of the carnival; it *was* the language of the carnival as well as the language of an alternative system of logic—Ernst Cassirer's project logic. It was not, as Kryzhitskii wrote, truly outside of logic; it was the language of a different logic. The constructivists defined their movement as a "method" and not as a "style"—their goal was the action—the demonstration of the principle of organization—rather than the appearance of an object; they embraced process and rejected the results. In this emphasis on process, translated into an emphasis on function and creation, form was deemphasized or deformed—monism, unity and anthropomorphism were destroyed as values, and the driving form which remained necessary to constructivist thought was a centripetal, open, and transparent form, oriented towards eternal expansion and metaphorically conceived (by the constructivists) as giant turbines scattering people with newly acquired strengths in all directions. Still, this image of untethered freedom was counterbalanced by both technological con-

straints and the constructivist belief that architecture was an act of will, an act of re-making the world. This duality of freedom and constraint, of constructivism as an art, or an act of disinterested creativity, and also a science, emerged from the rejection of Aristotelian logic and its replacement by Cassirer's project logic (see, for example, Eneeva 1988; 1993). Thus, a logic of categorizing the real and known world was replaced by a logic of producing the unknown from discovered principles. This transcendence of the known is utopian without being messianic or prescriptive; it is transcendence achieved through choice—a logic of choice which asserts in place of the values of Aristotelian logic the valuation of choice in much the same way as this is inscribed in the desiring machine of Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oedipus*). The metaphor of the desiring machine describes the human being as someone who produces reality and order out of an almost inchoate and disordered flow of desires and passions. But the machine, or person, produces order through the multiplicity of connections. Order is not static. In comparable manner, the logic of Cassirer centralizes the process of thought. The equation, rather than the solution, became the locus of production and of the aesthetic. Metaphorically and actually, this was a rejection of the exterior in favor of the interior, a rejection of the known world in favor of a utopian unknown. Paradoxically, and in much the same way that the cycladic icons of ancient Minoan culture reduced the female goddess to her figurative essence, thereby depriving her of material substance, this turning inside-out of architecture destroyed it by transforming it into a graphic, two-dimensional descriptive equation as well as a perpetual motion machine. But through the carnival connection, this machine of perpetual motion, the constructivist dynamo, was an alchemical machine of magical transformations.

Still, destruction or apocalypse may be a precondition for a utopian paradise on earth, a redemptive or messianic utopia (see Gardiner). The messianic utopia, predicated on the apocalyptic termination of the present and a radical restructuring of the future, was the utopian image offered by the post-1917 communist government. The constructivists, however, did not clearly share in this apocalyptic metaphor of ending the past. Unlike the cultural paradigm of Russia which claimed no continuity with the past,⁹ and which further claimed that scientific discoveries did not lay a foundation for the present, the cultural paradigm of constructivism re-used and transformed the past and present, even as it embraced the new knowledge offered by science. Perhaps even more dissonant with the communist state was the potential for an unregulated direction of change, implicit in the emphasis on a theatrically engaged mode of spectator reception, and likewise implicit in the chaotic universe of desiring machines. This is another source of contradiction with a redemptive paradigm.

But architecture had to meet yet another demand. As a utilitarian, life-shaping process, and as an art, it was to play an undoubtedly significant role in the elimination of social and urban chaos. As an artistic work, the building was an organized and rhythmic system of masses, and such a system would counteract the aesthetic chaos born of the artistic contradictions of

life. Further, as an appearance of the social order, architecture did not just create efficient, utilitarian spaces. Rather, it organized social life, improved the conditions of living, and ultimately attested to the freedom and joy of life, thereby eliminating the chaos born of the contradictions of social life (Golosov). These dualistic, almost competing claims for the goals of architecture, are, interestingly, the legacy not of communism but of classical utopian visions of the city.

The "classical utopia" of the early Renaissance was less a prescription for the future than a symbol of the ideal state, and an icon against which to measure the current state. As an image, it was the substitution of the stage setting of a scene of Tragedy (as depicted in Sebastian Serlio's Renaissance treatise on architecture) for the stage setting of a Comic scene, or the conversion of a world of medieval disorder and random events into one of integration, symmetry, and stateliness. But this vision could only become prescriptive if it incorporated a vision of the human being. Thus, the myth of the "noble savage" or "natural man" admitted to civilized and rational society later becomes the basis for an 18th century utopian/arcadian myth, but this is a myth of contradiction: a myth which links constraint and freedom, reserve and passion—an accommodation of irrationality and primitive passion, in the form of the human being as the "noble savage," with a vision of ordered emancipation. Eventually, the noble savage will be replaced by an assemblage of buildings—the city as the assertion of the energy of machines but still within the context of classical order (see Rowe and Koetter). In this way, utopia as a montage of order and chaos, of built rationality and raw, untrammeled passion, underlies visions of urban naturalism, or the insertion of picturesque nature into the city and into architecture, along with the post-futurist replacement of nature and revolutionaries by buildings which function as dynamos of passion (Tafuri). But in this transition and translation, when the noble savage is replaced by the dynamo and the piston, technology and industry will be as tainted with ambivalence as are primitivism and the peasantry. As ineluctable a vision of utopia as the urban carnival seemed to be, it inevitably contained within it the seeds of its own demise: the urban carnival was not the courtly festival, the paradise garden in the city, in which order triumphs over chaos (the imperial paradise garden, described by Baehr).

The Emergence and Expression of the Urban Carnival

Just as style evolves through multiple diachronic and synchronic attempts to find a solution to a problem, the elements of a visual language do not immediately cohere or coalesce into a legible statement of this solution. Before arriving at a full expression of the utopian metaphor of an urban carnival, architects, designers and artists had incorporated elements of it in their projects, stage designs, and buildings of the 1920s. That utopian ideology might find expression in two- and three-dimensional plastic arts, although it is ultimately directed at urban and architectural design, is consis-

tent with a visual ideology predicated on the interchangeability of media, the centralization of process over form, and a culture of experimentation, all of which characterized the constructivist culture of the 1920s. These characteristics were implicated in the philosophical premises of constructivism, as adumbrated in the earlier exegesis of the constructivist adoption of Cassirer's project logic, and the language and culture of the carnival. It is worth noting that the carnival as a visual language was consistent with the principles of constructivism even as it offered a visual model to emulate. Because it functioned in this dual capacity, I have identified it as a metaphor for the constructivist paradigm as well as a formative component of the constructivist image of utopia. From this, I further want to suggest that the constructivist paradigm itself is a paradigm of utopia.

Although technically a pre-constructivist work, Giorgii Iakulov's transformation of the Kafe Pittoresk into a vision of the city as a carnivalistic marketplace is an early and visually assertive step toward the urban carnival. A preexisting establishment with a vaulted glass ceiling was the site of the transformation. Iakulov commented that the glass latticework created by the iron arches supporting the vault was the driving idea in his design. He then felt that in terms of a theme, the design should incorporate the lines of the Russian street market festival (*iarmarochnyi*) which he compared to a Parisian sidewalk market. The stage of the cafe would present the musical, comedic and dance numbers usually found in the market festival. Justifying his design decisions in a letter, Iakulov wrote in the fall of 1918 that he wanted to express the problems of the contemporary city in his design: "The Kafe 'Pittoresk' should reveal the decorative problems of the contemporary city and provide the basis for a new style not only in painting but in all the branches of art." Working with a large and significant group of artists, Iakulov transformed the interior into a multimedia street carnival—the stage was covered with a cupola decorated with geometricized, dancing figures representing theatrical characters—Pierrot, Harlequin, and so on—made out of cardboard and plywood, and surely evocative of the dancing puppets on top of the *raek*. Continuing the puppet/theater decor, wall lights took the form of marionette-like theatrical characters, lit from inside. Everything vibrated and moved, so that both light and kinetic effects were part of the total design solution. The structure of Iakulov's cafe-estrada in this way became a theatrical event in itself—it was a kinetic perpetual motion machine and a synthetic art form dominated by the spirit of the marketplace—it was, I would suggest, the prototype of an architectural urban carnival.

A more complete example of the architectural urban carnival, one in which stage design began to coalesce with architectural thought, was seen in Aleksandr Vesnin's work for the Kamernyi Theater production (1923/4) of *The Man Who Was Thursday* (*Chelovek, Koroty byl Chetvergom*) (Fig. 6: Vesnin's stage set, Bakhrushin Museum). The producer, Aleksandr Tairov, asserted his goal as that of portraying a capitalist city which turns the person into a machine (Koonen). Vesnin wrote in his autobiographical notes that he attempted to facilitate this goal with his own intention of enhancing the pace



Figure 6. *The Man Who was Thursday*: photograph of stage set and performance (1928). Source: Bakhrushin Museum.

of action through a mechanized construction. The set visually conflated allusions to the Vesnin brothers' design for a Palace of Labor with mechanized windmill forms, moving ramps, and the cinematic ethos of an American slapstick/chase movie. With its tricameral design, moving lifts, and suggestion of endless movement, both in the parts of the set and in the performances of the characters, the set became a mechanized container which oddly and presciently evoked later projects for communal housing. Thus, as an urban carnival of continually moving actors and scenery, subsumed within the guise of an architectural machine that evoked urban forms even as it seemed to live and grow organically to accommodate the play, the metaphor of the mechanized urban carnival richly symbolized the utopia of an urbanized countryside or carnivalized city, in both cases a fusion of the life force of the countryside with the industrial values and skills of the city and urban workers. But this urbanized carnival or "balaganized" city would be problematic for viewers, in part because of its fusion of forms evocative of capitalist urbanism with its suggestions of the emerging soviet urban carnival.

Not an isolated appearance, other plays can be pointed to in which the stage design evoked (at times in a more critically acceptable context) the urban carnival: *Lake Liul'* (*Ozero Liul'*, produced by Meierkhol'd, designed by V. Shestakov; 1923/4) (Fig. 7: Bakhrushin museum photograph from the original performance of the play),¹⁰ *The Forest* (*Les*, Meierkhol'd and V.F. Fedorov; 1924), *A Window on the Country* (*Okno v derevniu*, Meierkhol'd;



Figure 7. *Lake Liul'*. Photograph from original performance. Source: Bakhrushin Museum.

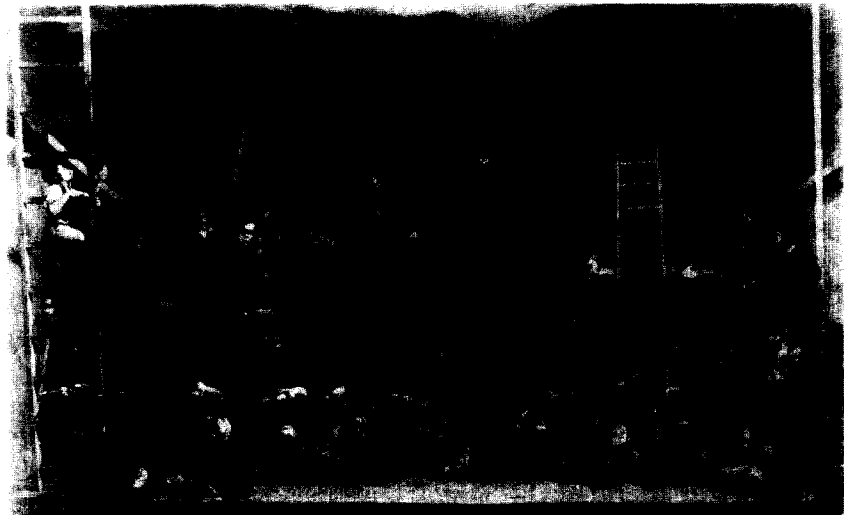


Figure 8. *The Sorceress*, photograph of set and performance (1922). Source: Bakhrushin Museum.

Shestakov; 1927), and *The Sorceress* (*Kol'dunia*; 1922) (Figure 8: Bakhrushin Museum photograph).

The last production, designed by Isaac Rabinovich for Granovskii's Hebrew (*Evreiskii*) Theater, involved a cluttered stage of staggered vertical

and horizontal forms—some skewed, some precariously supported by posts that do not appear sturdy enough to be weight-bearing—and stairs and ladders, some of which seem to be extending into the stratosphere. Some of the forms are closed and box-like, suggestive of compact, tiered housing. Suspended from the top of the stage there is a roof-like structure, similar to the hood of a fireplace or stove, but unattached to any structure underneath. The costumes also suggest a conglomeration of precariously assembled volumetric and structural forms (Fig. 9: costume design by Rabinovich, in the Bakh-rushin Museum drawing fond). The pervasive aura of ricketiness and nonalignment gives the set a look of instability and temporariness, as though it had been hastily assembled anew before each performance, in much the same way that a Russian fair was assembled and demounted and reassembled for each of its resurrections. Reviewers saw in the asymmetric non-orthogonality and the play's masked, moving characters "the ecstasy of a free creation of the folk masses" (unidentified reviewer)¹¹—an acceptable perception in this context since the play did not pretend to be offering a vision of the future of Soviet cities, yet not that far removed from the more cinematic visions of *Thursday* and *Lake*. *The Forest* and *A Window* literally incorporated fairground attractions on the stage as well as in the overall approach to production. With *The Forest*, Meierkhol'd took a classic text by Ostrovskii, cut it apart, and reassembled it—the script itself would seem to have become a demountable fairground.¹² *A Window* became an urban carnival through its conjunction of filmed "documentary" scenes of the countryside of the future, the use of fairground equipment, and a communally created text of slogans and episodes. The entire performance appears to have been modeled on the montaged ambience of a carnival without rejecting the mechanistic allusions of film and of Meierkhol'd's biomechanical principles of acting. The production was deeply disturbing to viewers who clearly did not accept this vision of the future.

What these productions (and others—most notably, *The Magnanimous Cuckold*) shared is that in the final analysis, they each modeled a process of revelation and transformation. The plots in at least three of these plays (only two of which were written in the 1920s) concern masks, disguise, and the eventual unmasking of the true identities and goals of the duplicitous characters. Through the fusion of the actors' almost continual movements, moving stage sets, and kinetic lighting, theater is both revealed as and transformed into cinema. Finally, the transformation of a carnivalistic theater into cinema visually enacted the transformation of an older cultural artifact into the culture of the revolution—the culture of the future. Conversely, this process unmasks a presumably diametric opposition between the past and the future. But the process of unmasking implicates the spectator who in comparable fashion will not be passively remade into a new human being but must take responsibility for this transformation.

On a smaller scale, the sets for *Thursday* and *Lake* serve as models for communal housing projects of the late 20s. At the First Exhibition of Contemporary Architecture in Moscow, June–Aug. 1927, Moshe Ginzburg

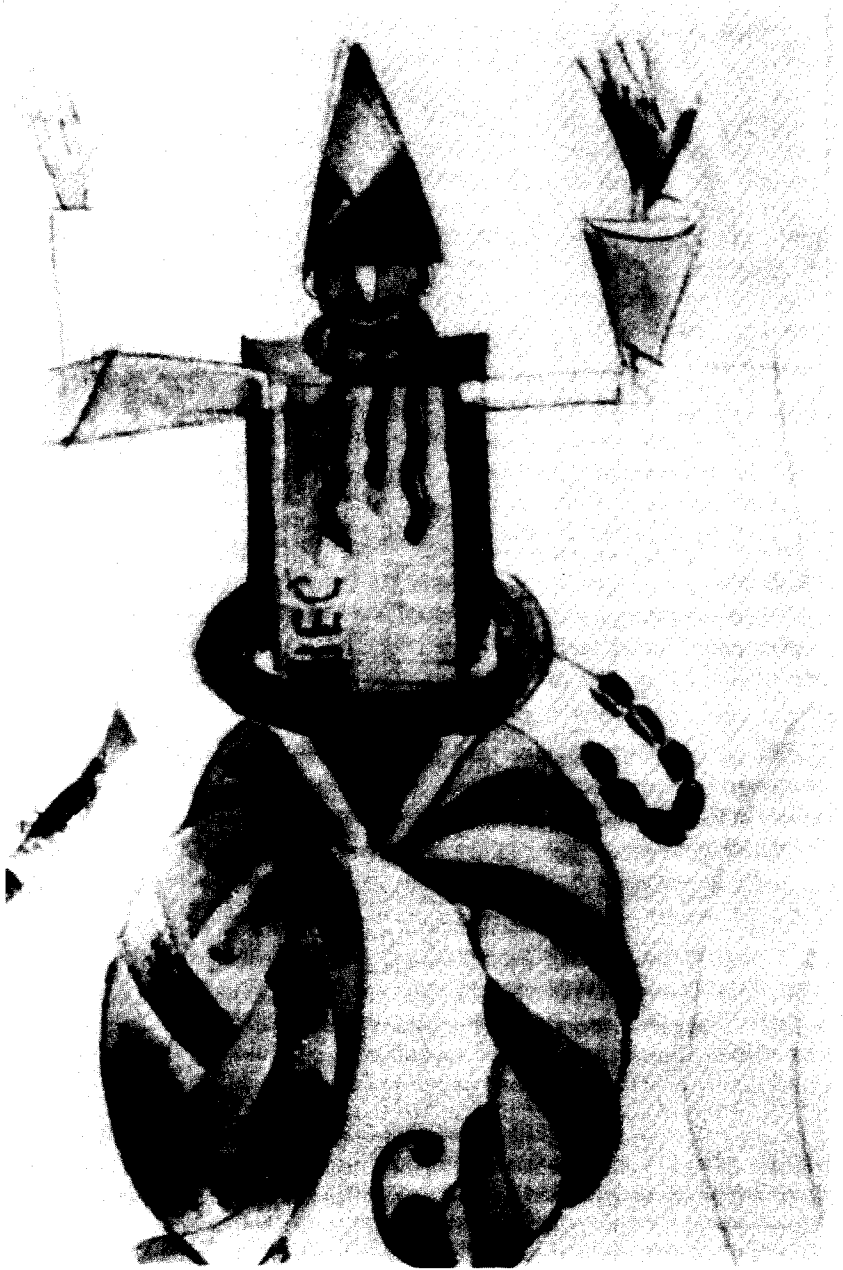


Figure 9. Rabinovich's sketch of a costume for *The Sorceress*. Source: Bakhrushin Museum drawing fond. Author's photograph.

exhibited a project which emphasized space and volume in its combination of varying heights and volumes, so that the building essentially became a plan for joining different volumes of space (Khazanova). An austere use of space ruled the interiors, contributing to an understanding of his project (and others which were similar) as a laboratory type of residence. Each habitation unit was arranged on two floors, with an interior staircase. The units could function as separate living spaces or they could be combined into joint, larger living units. A corridor on even-numbered floors was similar to a street, reflecting a parallel not only to Le Corbusier's communal living projects but also to the architecture-cum-city-cum-stage set of Vesnin's design for *Thursday*. Further conveying the idea of the building as a city was the plan for communal spaces in its center. This idea of a city complex whose parts are standardized elements, including the living units and the communal or social structures, taking the place of an apartment house, was expressed in some of the other eight projects with the primary differences being the spatial disposition—predominantly vertical (compacted vertically in space, like the Vesnin precedent), or predominantly horizontal (horizontally distended, like Shestakov's).

To the extent that these buildings were conceptualized as “cities” of standard elements, they visually paralleled the model of the demountable *golian'e* and followed in the path of Vesnin's and Shestakov's stage sets. They became the residence as city and as urban carnival, “stage sets” for the “theater of life”—stage sets which could be manipulated by the will of future inhabitants.

Although all the workers' clubs were theatrical in the language spoken by the facades, Konstantin Melnikov's workers' clubs embodied the idea of a mechanized theater which became a building or conversely, a building which became a theatrical machine. In his Rusakov club (1927/8) (Fig. 10: photograph of the building in 1993), which least ambiguously of all his clubs recreates the rounded, multifaceted form, with its balcony protrusions, of a *balagan* theater which had virtually landmark status for Moscow residents (see Figure 5), Mel'nikov juxtaposed the *balagan* shape with a soaring parallelogram springing from a rectangular base. More literally and also symbolically, Mel'nikov made his workers' clubs into stage sets when he designed moving interior walls. Facilitating transitions in the use of interior space, clubs with moving walls became carnivals, as it were—or theaters of political, educational or cultural actions, all presumably equal.

To the extent that a carnival is an eclectically unplanned aggregation of unrelated styles and to the extent that the architecture of the carnival suggested transformation and demountability, Mel'nikov's club-theaters, with their often ambivalent formal and functional evocations engaged, even if tentatively, the narrative of the urban carnival, a perception which quite likely underlay the criticism directed at Mel'nikov's clubs. Mel'nikov, accused of ignoring the ideological needs of the workers and of workers' clubs (Arkin), had prioritized heterogeneity and process, when he designed moveable walls for his clubs. These walls were designed with the purpose



Figure 10. Mel'nikov's Rusakov club, 1927/8, Moscow. 1993 photograph by author.

of facilitating transitions in the use of interior space, but the very fact of transition implied an equality of space usage which was no longer tenable, communicating, as it did, a narrative of free choice, fairground randomness, and a concomitant lack of commitment to presumably more serious club work. The implication was a theatrically engaged spectator who must take responsibility for the future—but like the constructivists' communal housing projects, this wasn't theater; it was real life.¹³ Nor was the theatrically engaged spectator destined to endure in the theater.

Conclusion

The urban carnival, whether manifested more completely in theater or hinted at in architecture, represented a fusion of a *balagan*-like use of cinema, of continual movement, and of an architectural machine that evokes urban forms even as it seems to live and grow organically. A symbol or metaphor for the idea of a *smychka*¹⁴ or union of folk and urban traditions—of the cinema, an urban art form, and the *balagan*, a people's art; of machine-urban culture and the folk or people; of the city and countryside; the urban carnival ultimately evoked a balaganized city, or urbanized country, the virtual fusion of east and west, past and present, and logic and fantasy, along with the more literal fusion of the uninitiated peasant with the social and scientific ways of thinking of the urban worker.

The issue of city versus country, removed from the communist context, was not unique to Russia at this time, but the urban carnival utopia, as solution, was. That is, Germany of the immediate postwar era was rife with cul-

tural conflicts in which the city/country dichotomy was central. In the response which most approximates that of the Russian avant-garde, artists argued that anything created by culture was really a new form of nature, and therefore, the city was not opposed to nature: they were one and the same. Artists operating from this premise treated the landscape like architecture, the cityscape like topography, and turned to scenes of urban exoticism, like the cabaret and the circus, to endow the city with a more primitivistic nature and thereby abrogate the collision between city and country—the city and country, as just noted, became one and the same (see Lloyd). But this is in its essence a denial of the modern city; it is an anti-utopia. If the German architects depicted urban architectural utopias, they were utopias of crystal—a biblical image of purity, order, and transcendence, a messianic or redemptive utopia, in contrast to the chaotically liminal utopia of an urban carnival. Rather than transcendence, the Russian urban carnival promotes fusion; it does not deny the existence of two different realms. Through allegories of theater, carnival, transformation, and high and low-tech “machines,” the utopia of the urban carnival sought, instead, to embody the fusion of these spheres of existence, and to function as a social transformer or magic mill which turns the disorder of the old into the new and undefined order-to-be of the future.

Rejecting the messianic vision, without rejecting utopia, the constructivist urban carnival unacceptably propounded a dialogical engagement between the person and the machine, on one level, and between the narratives of fantasy, multiplicity, and a rationalized technocracy, on another. What might be described as the “radical tolerance”¹⁵ of this perspective is taken as being emblematic of a fundamental inattentiveness “to the feelings and demands of the people of our epoch” (Angarov). Constructivism, claimed its critics, neither understood nor found the correct forms for the transmission of emotional and ideological content, resulting in the chaos of ambiguity and of the absence of a driving conceptual schema.

In the constructivist narrative of logic and antilogic, as we have seen, constructivism rejected Aristotelian logic, or a logic of categorizing the real and known world, and replaced it with the “project” logic of Cassirer, a logic of producing the unknown from discovered principles. In this logic, the process, rather than the solution, and transparency and impermanence, rather than monolithic immobility, became the aesthetic (again, see Eneeva)—an aesthetic and logical structure of the “world upside-down.” The carnival, then, as the site for the rejection of Aristotelian logic, and the architectural embodiment of the carnivalesque narrative, by the 1930s must be rejected with the reassertion and re-valuing of Aristotelian logic; in its place a new narrative of urban utopia must be projected.

The theater and urban space, as M. Christine Boyer observes, are both ways of bringing order to chaos. They are the prisms through which reality is viewed and experienced; they impose meaning through the creation of a scene or setting for performance (*The City of Collective Memory* 74). But a utopia of opposing constructs, united in art (Herwitz 35) but not society, a

utopia of the grotesque—of complexity, simultaneity, ambiguity, and open-ended process, as opposed to the determination of a definitive and standardized solution—offered in a society that wants to believe in but has not achieved the formation of stability will be associated with fragmentation, a loss of coherence, and ultimately, with a chaotic vision of the world. Further, when the performance invokes the uncanny, invokes the sense of invasion by an alien presence, an unwanted double, the setting itself absorbs the sense of uncanniness (Vidler). To the extent that the urban carnival connoted the uncanny presence of a simultaneously western-derived and primitivist actor/spectator tradition, constructivism was at risk for absorbing and emitting an aura of the uncanny. Further, in its commitment to the destruction of monolithic unity, to the symbolization of a dialectic between free will and the necessities of function or fate, in its refusal to relinquish the metaphor of the social condenser or turbine, constructivism reinforced its image as an unstable art form in an unstable society; and as such, it may finally have angered or confounded critics by calling attention to the very instabilities that society itself could not tolerate. When constructivist theater and constructivist architecture were criticized as resulting in the creation of a soulless machine, devoid of socialist ideology and heroes, such criticism may have derived from and masked the realization not only that the “content” of constructivism was actually an uncomfortable reminder of the rural, dionysian, and chaotic sources of contemporary life, but that the very forms of contemporary life remained unperfected and ideologically repugnant. Art creates the realities and worlds through which people perceive ideology—the risk of an uncanny utopia was too threatening and a controversion of the image sought by the Soviet government. A new narrative of urban utopia, a narrative of Moscow as the third Rome, perfected and ordered and adjoined to technology, had to be—and was—inscribed in place of the urban carnival. Utopia was reified—but it was not the utopia of constructivism.

NOTES

1. This essay is based on ideas first developed in my dissertation, research and writing for which were supported by an IREX grant for research in Russia, the Samuel Kress pre-doctoral fellowship (Center for Advanced Studies in the Visual Arts), and the Social Sciences Research Council dissertation writing fellowship. The ideas developed here relate to two other publications of mine: for more on the connection between theater and architecture in Russian Constructivism, see my “Culture as a Battleground: Subversive Narratives in Constructivist Architecture and Stage Design” (*Journal of Architectural Education* 52/2 [1998]); and on the model of an engaged spectator: “The Constructivist Engaged Spectator: A Politics of Reception” (*Design Issues* 15/1 [1999]). Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Russian are my own. Transliteration of Russian names, titles, and words is based on the Library of Congress system. I have taken the liberty of “Americanizing” the Russian word *balagan*: “balaganized” and “balagans.”
2. I am using “grotesque” in the sense used by the producer Vsevolod Meierkhol’d, to refer to a deliberate confrontation between opposite qualities or conditions.

3. My argument for accepting the influence of this poster derives from my "discovery" of Meierkhol'd's plans to write a history of the balagan theater and a collection of articles he maintained for this purpose, now located in his fond at the Russian Archives of Art and Literature (to be abbreviated from here on as RGALI).
4. There are many sources for the theme of turning to primitivism in the arts. See, for example, Matsa's anthology of original documents (65–6, 117–19, 131–36).
5. In my analysis of the reception of these productions, I found numerous examples of such reviews, generally kept in theater fonds at RGALI or in the Moscow Theater Library archives.
6. My approach to style is based on Susan Sontag and George Kubler; rejecting a formalist definition of style allowed me to see the pivotal role of the carnival in constructivism.
7. My photograph of a reconstruction in the Tre't'iakov Museum's "Great Utopia" exhibition (spring 1993). This exhibition was also mounted at the Guggenheim Museum in 1992 and a large catalogue of the exhibition contains reproductions of this work and other relevant works which I cannot reproduce here. All photographs were either taken by me or obtained from the Bakhrushin Museum (as indicated in the text).
8. Although some of the same artists were involved with constructivism and production art, they are not identical; production art was more concerned with creating the "equipment" or tools for life whereas constructivism centralized the goal of inducing change or the desire and ability to change through a revelation of principles.
9. The notion of two cultural systems, with conflicting attitudes toward (among other things) the west and the use of the past, and their relationship to art and politics both, is developed by Vladimir Papernyi.
10. This production was generally compared with Tairov and Vesnin's *Thursday*. Although the comparison is not entirely justifiable, in terms of the urban carnival it reinforces the idea without introducing substantively new thinking. Shestakov's set is less mechanized than Vesnin's, and fills the stage rather than containing it, as Vesnin's does. Criticism of both often focused on which artist copied the other, but there is little evidence to support the possibility in either direction. It is more likely that they moved in similar directions because they were responding to similar visions of architecture and theater.
11. This review was in the fond for the Evreiskii theater, 2307-2-363 [RGALI].
12. I was able to examine Meierkhol'd's reconstructed text in the Bakhrushin Museum Meierkhol'd fond.
13. The workers' clubs raise an interesting issue of architectural reception because they are evaluated almost exclusively in terms of adherence to or rejection of socialist visions of the purpose of the clubs and a move towards increasing standardization of building types.
14. *Smychka* is the Russian word for a union; it was used during the 1920s to refer primarily to a union of the urban worker with the rural peasant, or the city with the countryside.
15. This term is used by Gardiner to describe Heller and Fehér's critique of messianism.

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