When Postmodernism Came to Russia: Notes[1]

Vladimir Bilenkin

"An art which espouses the *Lebenswelt* of Las Vegas is not the same as one which takes to the streets of Leningrad."

-- Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*

Marx observes somewhere that when the contradictions accumulated in society cannot be resolved by its progressive classes this task is accomplished by its reactionary forces. In this case, history develops "by its bad side." Something similar happened in the USSR. When its workers had failed to solve the contradictions of Soviet society in the interests of their class, the bureaucracy solved them to its own advantage. The result of such sublation (*Aufhebung*) has been a tremendous regression in all aspects of the material and cultural existence of the masses. The Soviet working class paid for this by enormous physical and moral decline and was thrown back to the conditions of primitive want and political prostration. But the knot was cut, the dead end overcome, the historical motion resumed . . . if only "by its bad side."

Ten years after the fall of the Berlin wall the social reality, which historical materialists find today in Yeltsin's Russia, can be described in one word--anachronism. If in October of 1917 Russia put itself ahead of all mankind in theory and in practice, the country now finds itself behind its own past in both. What was, on the clock of history,

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the Russian 1989 if not a comic repetition of the French 1789?; its August 1991 a farce of February 1848?; the Moscow uprising in October 1993 a bloody parody of the Paris resurrection in June 1848? It took sixty years of turbulent historical development, culminating in the massacre of Paris workers, to prove the inability of the bourgeoisie to realize the principles proclaimed by its revolution. It took only two years--from August 1991 to October 1993--to convince Russian society of the "priority" of tank artillery over "universal human values." A farce of a farce, a parody of a parody. Could it be that Russia's modern history has indeed become a vulgar phantasmagoria of the bygone historical stages, "simulacra," fitting the imagination of Russian postmodernism, which itself is but an unwitting parody of its Western original? But there is a method in this madness. The rapid metamorphoses by the actors of the Russian theater of historical burlesque obey a certain law. They are forced to change stage settings and costumes in reverse chronological order: from modest democratic jackets in the streets to the wardrobe of mantels and cassocks in Kremlin halls. The same hack moralists who ten years ago poured their jeremiads on the Bolsheviks for their alleged principle that "the end justifies the means" now call for a Russian Pinochet to defend "civilization" in Russia.

In short, the ruling clique, who promised society universal political emancipation in exchange for its own economic liberation, is inevitably coming to the conclusion that the former calls for universal political slavery. After all, their enemy is not the absolute minority of a feudal society but the absolute majority of the wage workers of modern society who have behind them not the "sacred" but the real history of struggles by the Russian and international proletariat. This is why the capitalist regime in Russia is compelled to resuscitate the ancient enemy of the bourgeoisie against its modern enemy and to raise from the dead the Romanovs, dethroned by the bourgeoisie of Miliukov and aggrandized by the bourgeoisie of Yeltsin. Aestheticizing philistines see in Russian history a phantasmagoria. Marxists explain it by the logic of capitalist restoration at the twelfth hour of Capital.

Bourgeois apologists excuse criminal capitalism in Russia by the criminal past of its godfather--western, especially U.S., capitalism. They forget to add that we see in Russia not only the past but the future of capital as well. For the Russian bourgeoisie hopes to begin its history precisely at that moment which ideologists of the world bourgeoisie have proclaimed the end of all history. Like Faust, the triumphant bourgeoisie repeats: "Time, stand still!" In vain! If time fails to move forward, it will move back-- by its "bad side," that is. In this sense capitalism finds in Russia not only its criminal past but its coming barbarism as well--the beginning and the end of the bourgeois order as such. Russian society and state is a mirror that shows the bourgeois world a purely negative aspect of its own history. To paraphrase Marx, they express only its slavery--without its right; only its destruction of productive forces--without their creation; only the inhumanity of its social relations--without their civility; only its barbarism--without its culture. War on conditions in Russia! These conditions are beneath the level of the distant past, they are beneath critique. The task of historical materialism in Russia is not to refute the enemy but to destroy him!

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These remarks on postmodernism in Russia were occasioned by two recently published volumes of essays: *Post-Soviet Art and Architecture* (Academy Editions, 1994), with a photomontage by Charles Jencks and Jason Rigby on its front cover, and *Re-Entering the Sign* (edited by Ellen Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar and published by the University of Michigan Press in 1995). Over forty contributors to these volumes--mostly Russian, but also Western artists and critics--address a broad range of issues concerning new artistic developments in Russia in particular and the cultural situation in general. The critical quality of these contributions is not very high, especially that of the Russian participants.2 Their significance lies elsewhere. Never before was there a collection of voices from Russia which would give us such a comprehensive collective aesthetic, ideological and moral portrait of Russia's "creative intelligentsia" of neoliberal persuasions. Moreover, the volumes signal a new level of interaction between Western postmodernism and its followers in Russia, and articulate their agendas in a startlingly frank way that allows for better understanding of their social and political nature. Finally, the volumes produce a strong impression of a new cultural institution in the making: Russian postmodernism (RPM) which is better understood as a specific instance of the ongoing process of transplantation and domestication of economic, cultural and political institutions of Western capitalism in the post-Soviet Russia.

Not unlike other institutions of Western hegemony transplanted to the peripheral and semi-peripheral zones of global capitalism, RPM includes Western "experts" (a group of American Slavists), Western "high theory" (French post-structuralism) and access to Western infrastructural networks: scholarly presses and journals, scholarships and grants, international conferences and electronic media. The Russian component appears to include a motley assortment of artists and critics united by little more than their anticommunism, neoliberalism and opposition to realism in art and literature. Certain doubts have already been expressed as to how postmodern is the art of Russian postmodernism.3 These doubts are well justified, but this is a secondary issue. The arcane problems of aesthetic nature do not appear high on the agenda of either Western or Russian contributors. In fact, they focus almost exclusively on the terrain of political ideology and cultural politics. It is on this terrain then that I want to engage them critically. I will first discuss a case of Western intervention in Russia's politics and culture by Charles Jencks; and secondly I will address the issue of anti-realism, which unites most of the Russian contributors and offers, as I will argue, a valuable insight into the socio-political conditions that brought about the institutionalization of "Russian postmodernism."

I will now question some common assumptions about postmodern values by discussing their application to Russia by Charles Jencks, whose photomontage on the front cover and lead essay give the first of the volumes the air of Western prestige and authority. Jencks--a foremost expert on postmodern architecture and a committed postmodernist--has long been known for his fascination with historical chronometry of a rather morbid kind. In 1972 he announced that modernism had expired on 15 July, exactly at 3.32 p.m., with the demolition of the Pruitt-Igoe housing project for the poor in St. Louis (Harvey, 39). Apparently the good news was somewhat exaggerated, since

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Jencks, with clock in hand, continued to monitor the moribund modernism stubbornly clinging to life.

In October 1993, Jencks was a guest of honor in the international conference/exhibition on Post-Modernism and national cultures, which was held at the Tretyakov gallery in Moscow. The conference coincided with Yeltsin's coup, which culminated on October 3-4 with the massacre at the Ostankino TV Center, followed by the military assault on the Supreme Soviet building and its destruction by tank artillery. The bloodshed was mediatized by CNN as it occurred. It was also observed as a spectacle from the ground by a mob of government sympathizers from the nearby prestigious Kutuzovskii Avenue. For Jencks, this event was a stroke of luck he could not pass up. With grave solemnity, more appropriate for a pastor than a mischievous postmodernist, he pronounced: "Moscow, October 4 1993--10:10 AM Modernity Is Dead" (*PSAA*, 9).

As far as I know, Jencks' short essay of the same title did not draw any comments from respectable academic journals and the critical community, who otherwise pay close attention to his writings. This is most unfortunate, since the essay reveals those tendencies within postmodernism which remain latent in socially stable conditions or simply suppressed in the controlled and sanitized space of Western publicity, but which burst into the open in socially explosive contexts. Such is the present situation in Russia, which makes any intervention a litmus test for the true political nature and integrity of intellectual currents. When Jencks crossed the Russian border and took the test, postmodernism--which normally avoids "ideological closures"--shed its "radical democratism," finesse, and sophistication, changed the euphemistic prefix "post-" into the unambiguous "anti-", and equated its anti-modernism with trivial anti-communism.

According to Jencks, Soviet Russia "suffered Modernism and the modern paradigm more than any other country. With the possible exception of China, its forms of brutal materialism were more systematic than elsewhere and its imposition of a reductive rationalism and mechanistic mind-set more thorough-going" (*PSAA* 10). Not surprisingly, this profound vision of Soviet civilization could not but strengthen Jencks' sense of his historical mission. Like a Spanish priest--determined to save the natives from their pagan materialism by cross and, if necessary, by sword--Jencks found Yeltsin's tanks a valuable addition to the postmodern catechism in the business of delivering Russians from darkness to light. On the occasion of the violent end of the last Supreme Soviet and the suppression of what Jencks calls the "October putsch" and the "Second October Revolution," he threateningly proclaimed that "reactionary modernists all over Russia know the game is up" and that the "post-modern paradigm progresses cheerfully, death by death, marking thereof the more notable funerals with architectural ruins" (*PSAA*, 11)

In Jencks' politics of ideological forgery, modernism equals socialism, equals bureaucratic absolutism, equals reaction. Gone without a trace are all the cherished "pluralistic values" of postmodernism: its hair-splitting and "interplay of differences," the legendary "sensitivity and openness to the other," "decentered subjects," "ironies" and "self-ironies," and even Jencks' own celebrated principle of all-inclusiveness: "not either . . . or, but both and . . . ."

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The cynicism of Jencks' exploitation of the October tragedy throws into sharper relief what has been already noticed by some critics of postmodernism: the shallowness of postmodern "theory," its blatant disregard for any rational understanding of social phenomena, and, in particular, its propensity to erase the boundary between aesthetics and politics. But we also learn something new from Jencks' escapades in Russia. Postmodernism can work not only to desensitize us to naked violence but to "cheerfully" sanction its use by the forces whose true nature postmodernism prefers to ignore. If there are any historical and architectural analogies to the destruction of the last Supreme Soviet that can help us to identify these forces, one can think of the 1933 Reichstag Fire in Berlin and the 1973 siege and bombardment of the presidential palace in Santiago de Chile. The latter analogy will have to include another architectural metaphor of "reactionary" modernism: that of the stadium which the postmodernists in Chile and Russia "cheerfully" used for torture and summary executions.4

One might object to my harsh treatment of Jencks on the ground that he may just be blissfully ignorant of Russian politics. (One must be to call the anti-communist Rutskoi a "modernist," or to label the defense of a Constitution a "putsch.") But how could Jencks, a world-renowned specialist on architecture, miss the architectural symbolism of that place from which came the orders to shell the Supreme Soviet: the Russian Gothic of the Kremlin, familiar to millions around the world? In recent years, small replicas of that feudal structure were built in great numbers for the new Russian bourgeoisie, whose material interests Yeltsin's coup was intended to protect. If, according to Jencks' classification, the historical period represented by the last Supreme Soviet and its architecture is "Modernism," then what is the social-historical symbolism of Yeltsin's Kremlin, of the new class behind his regime, and their architectural taste?

Let us put these trivial architectural fantasies aside. The October coup made visible for the first time the fascist tendencies in the regime of restoration that soon after took the form of the genocidal war in Chechnya. The coup initiated new anti-labor measures, physical and moral intimidation of the workers in factories, and the use of paramilitary gangs against political opponents. All of this cleared the way for the massive plunder of the country, the criminal privatization of national property in the hands of a few oligarchs, and the formation of monopolistic, financial-industrial capital. These are classical features of fascist politics. Jencks renders them aesthetic. I want to suggest, then, that the belief of some observers that "postmodernist philosophy's aversion for orthodox fascism is so far not to be seriously questioned" (Larsen, 11) should be re-examined in the light of Charles Jencks' revelations from Russia.5

Examples of art which respond differently to the social reality of Yeltsin's Russia are Gennady Zhivotov's drawings from his series "Moscow-95 at Night." Prior to the coup, Zhivotov worked in the traditions of the avant-garde and surrealism. Since the coup he has become a political artist. These drawings, stylistically reminiscent of German expressionism, portray the post-coup bourgeois Moscow as a milieu of universal prostitution, corruption, and the rule of raw force exercised both by the state and the criminal world, now barely distinguishable from each other.

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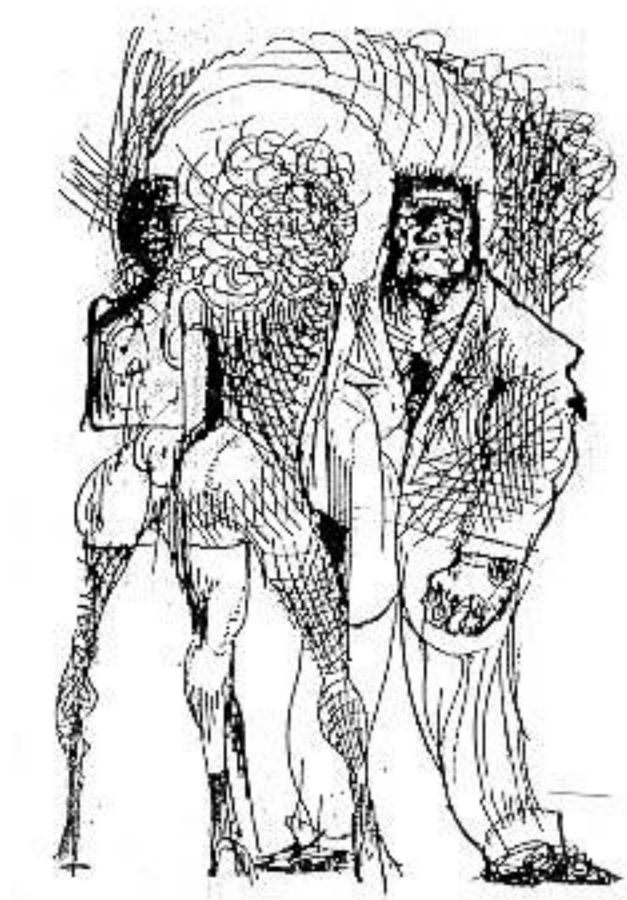

I will now explore some links between RPM and recent socio-economic transformations in Russia, usually either completely ignored or admitted in passing only. By situating RPM within the context of Russian restoration and its social contradictions we can demystify its self-representations and understand why RPM has been playing an increasingly important role in the cultural politics of the neoliberal intelligentsia. The way RPM legitimizes its break with realist, representational and socially committed forms of art and literature, traditionally prominent in Russian/Soviet culture, offers an entry point into this problem. In what follows, I will rely on the materials from *Re-Entering the Sign.*

The broad range of anti-traditionalist pronouncements in this volume can be reduced to two closely connected lines of argumentation. The first employs what can be called the "Gulag argument," by analogy with Adorno's "art after Auschwitz" thesis. The horrors of Stalinism, revealed in mass publications during perestroika, have made the artists radically reconsider their view of Soviet society in particular, and of the human condition in general, which they received from the classical tradition of Russian and Soviet literature and subsequently rendered this tradition naively obsolete and inadequate. The second argument attacks the realist tradition as complicit with "totalitarism" by generating all sorts of "mythic" cultural identities and "totalizing" concepts, like the "people," "class struggle," the "Soviet man," the "Great Patriotic War," etc. It is also unanimously agreed that the traditional concerns of Russian and Soviet literature with

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"reality," i.e. society, have been totally misguided and harmful to "Russian culture" as well as to society itself.

However, both arguments fail to account for the postmodern break with realist tradition, if we take a closer look at what exactly this tradition was in recent times. Indeed, it suffices to point out that virtually all literary works that became revelatory for our postmodernists, as they themselves admit, were written in the realist tradition of Russian literature, more precisely, in its epigonic form. If it is true that these works, dealing with some of the most traumatic experiences in human history, had such a profound influence on our critics; if they, indeed, helped them to gain a deeper insight into the nature of their society--then, it seems, one should greatly appreciate the lasting power of realist art and use it in the service of a new democratic culture, rather than reject this tradition. Indeed, realist art has proved its unsurpassed aesthetic effectiveness for spreading humanist, liberal values on a rare, and perhaps, unique scope. It is well-known that the publications of Vasily Grossman, Solzhenitsyn, Rybakov, Dudintsev and other "traditionalists" affected not only the minds of our critics, but, more importantly, those of the Soviet masses and were instrumental for their support of Gorbachev's reforms. This begs the rhetorical question: Could postmodern art achieve anything approaching this accomplishment? Could one imagine Kabakov's "*kommunalkas*," Petrushevskaya's "cruel prose," or Dragomoschenko's "meta-poetry" to awaken social activity in the masses, to stir their moral consciousness and political imagination? Only realist art with its democratism of form could and did so. But democratic is what RPM is not. In addition to the anti-modernism of its Western godfather, the aggressive anti-realism of RPM is a distinctive feature of its aesthetics and ideology.

It is more likely that the reason for this ferocious attack against the "traditionalists" is not the aesthetic inadequacy of their epigonic realism, but the embarrassment of their liberal humanism in the face of the social reality that this literature was instrumental in bringing about. As is well known, this ideology became all but official during the perestroika years (1985-1991), when it was adopted by the anti-communist fraction of the party bureaucracy in its struggle against their conservative opponents. Gorbachev summarized this ideology in his slogan of the primacy of "universal human values" over and against their materialist, class-based understanding. In 1989, the pro-capitalist partocracy, in alliance with liberal intelligentsia, fought bureaucratic absolutism under the same banner that was raised by the ideologists of the third estate against the old regime in 1789. And this uncanny resemblance was neither accidental nor the only one.

The middle-brow literature, in fact, the whole culture of "denunciation" depicting the crimes of Stalinism and the injustices of bureaucratic absolutism from the vantage point of "ordinary human values," pure and simple, was incomparably qualified for the task of Gorbachev's liberal reformism. This moral gospel was easily digested by the masses who had no prior political existence and experience to question its assumptions and foresee its political and social implications. For the Soviet liberal intelligentsia this was a time of self-apotheosis. The "creative intelligentsia" proclaimed themselves elevated above all social classes and claimed to embody the "conscience" of Russian society as a whole. But the period of their liberal "*Sturm und Drang*" was short-lived. Once real historical forces,

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the working class and new bourgeoisie, began to emerge on the political scene by the 1990s, the intelligentsia could only follow one of them, and thus had to recognize, sooner or later, that its claim to be the guardians of "common" interests was now impossible to defend.

The moment of recognition came with the October coup, in the wake of which the liberal intelligentsia performed one the most startling ideological turnabouts in modern history. As one witness of the October events, Boris Kagarlitsky, observed,

> "Prestigious" newspapers and journals were full of vulgar abuse directed against the people themselves, and of bloody summonses. Even the poet and humanist Bulat Okudzhava, who once glorified "commissars in dusty helmets," related how he had been gladdened by the shootings on 4 October, adding that he felt no pity for the unarmed victims (116).

Liberal humanism, with its universal humanitarian concerns and the claim to represent the "normal human values" of the people, had played its role and had to go now. Kagarlitsky captures this moment of the ideological rupture with the "harmful tradition of the intelligentsia" by quoting a representative of the younger generation of Russian intellectuals:

> Looking at a beggar woman dying of hunger, the fashionable journalist Veronika Kutsillo observed: "All these allusions to the guilt of the intelligentsia before the people annoyed me. I look at this unfortunate the way I might look at some amusing animal, and do not feel any personal guilt. You can be sure that neither I nor any of my friends will ever sink that low." (116-117)

The humanist variety of Russian liberalism and epigonic realism, as its favored mode of literary expression, came to a crisis with the beginning of open capitalist restoration under Yeltsin's regime, and reached their end with the first round of class battles that culminated in Yeltsin's coup, the massacre in Ostankino and the bloody end of the last Supreme Soviet. From then on restoration developed unfettered and gave rise to a cynical and powerful bourgeoisie. And it is at this juncture that RPM moved to the forefront of the cultural scene and became institutionalized as the cultural equivalent of neoliberalism.

* * *

Historical parallels limp. There was no proletarian resurrection in October 1993. Politically, it was a struggle between different cliques of the pro-capitalist bureaucracy and nascent bourgeoisie over the further course of restoration. Neither workers nor the new bourgeoisie were yet strong enough to enter the struggle under their own banners. Yet the October events in Moscow revealed, as in a flash of lighting, the depth of social antagonisms in the face of which the ideology of "universal human values" was unmasked as irrevocably as it was in June 1848 in Paris.

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The demise of liberal humanism in Russia triggered the "crisis of representation" similar to that, observed by a number of literary theorists, in French literature after 1848, when the entire literary paradigm of the past became compromised. For the very possibility of writing as communication depended on the set of "natural" or "universal" truths proclaimed by the propagandists of the Enlightenment and decreed by the French Revolution to be the fundamental principles of good society. In 1848, with the bloody suppression of the proletarian resurrection by the bourgeoisie, these truths were unmasked as mere class ideology. The resulting crisis of literature as an institution was theorized by Roland Barthes as "writing degree zero." The writer can no longer uphold the illusion of writing for "humanity" or "society" as a whole because these words have lost their truth. Writing, then, withdraws into itself, becomes its own end and obsession. The writer turns back from reality as his referent and instead comes to see language as the only and proper end of literature.

We observe a similar pattern of change in the practice and ideology of modern art in Russia. I have already mentioned the unanimous rejection of realism and its concern with social reality. In fact, the various currents of new anti-realism and fetishization of language can be classified according to their forms of escaping from social reality. Metaphysical estrangement, self-referential language games, "blank writing" are some of them. There is one critical difference, however, which renders this analogy between the situation of French and Russian writers more or less formal and wanting in historical concretization. For the former it was a genuinely new experience whose actors were to suffer it at the cutting edge of history. Little in the past could warn them of what would come next. Their shock was often sincere, their disillusionment genuine, their search for answers and solutions a painful process of discovering a social reality whose economical and social determinations had been previously hidden. By contrast, Russian restoration, as a grandiose historical farce, denies this authenticity of historical experience to Russia's "creative intelligentsia." Unlike their French colleagues, they knew or should have known all too well what reality was coming under the banner of "universal human values." I would like to quote one expression of this "bad faith," remarkable only by its cynical frankness.

In his 1992 article in defense of the decaying library system, Alexander Terekhov--one of the best writers for the popular weekly "Ogoniok," a winner of the Booker Prize, and an advocate of liberal humanism--writes of a "New Covenant" between the "thinking and feeling sons of the Fatherland" (i.e., the "creative intelligentsia"--V. B.) and the "junior party nomenklatura who have decided to finish socialism off." He reminds the new rulers that it was not the "Street" but the "Library" that has supported them:

> The meaning of the New Covenant is peaceful and humble: have your millions, have your mansions, have your yachts, power and golden toilets, but you must protect the green lamps of the libraries, the concert halls, the freedom of the arts, and the quiet of the museums. . . . Yours is wealth and power, leave the peace of the high towers to the people of the libraries, they will light up the beacons of the spirit. To you--power and wealth, to the libraries--eternal spirit, morality, and education. This is the New

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> Covenant that gave victory to the bourgeoisie. So far it has been observed only by one side. (3)

This melancholy conclusion could have been foreseen had the intelligentsia been able or willing to learn from history. Pauperized and lumpenized by the "reforms" of the 1990s, Russian writers and intellectuals now find themselves in a tragicomic situation and can finally appreciate Sartre's summation of their French colleagues' experience: "The political triumph of the bourgeoisie which writers had so eagerly desired convulsed their condition from top to bottom and put the very essence of literature in question. It might be said that the result of all their efforts was merely a preparation for their ruin." (104)

The "New Covenant" has not materialized; the "beacons of the spirit" gave off smoke and burned out; the "eternal spirit" did not survive two sunny days in October of 1993. The *liberal* intelligentsia had buried itself only to rise from the dead in their new *neoliberal* incarnation. For this "new" intelligentsia, the epigonic realism of the post-war period--indeed, any realism--became as embarrassing aesthetically as the liberal humanism that had inspired it ideologically. They now needed an art that would "expose the vacuousness of the inherited ideological discourses," and an ideology that would empower them to "confront the unfinished projects of the modernist avant-gardes," as Professor Berry approvingly observes (*Re-Entering*, 338). They have found both in Jencks' "cheerful" postmodernism, which does not hesitate to sanction a stronger medicine against these stubborn "projects," when postmodern aesthetics and ideology fail again and again to bury them.

Postscript

Three years after I wrote the above notes the rumors have it that RPM is all but dead.[6] The reason for this is not so much the spiritual bareness of RPM as the rapid degradation of socio-economic conditions in Russia which changed the ideological outlook and political allegiances of the educated class.

Since 1990, the state budget has shrunk tenfold and now is smaller than New York City's. Modern industrial production has been virtually liquidated in Russia. High-tech products make only one percent of its export. The Russian economy is now based on the export of raw materials, with the majority of its shrinking labor force allocated to the low add-value production in the division of labor between the imperial center and the neocolonial periphery. Forty percent of Russian citizens live below the poverty line. There are four million homeless children. With the birth rate half of that in 1990 and mortality 50% higher, the country is threatened with a rapid depopulation.

The decline of the nation's education, science, and culture has been no less staggering. The number of pre-school facilities has dropped 27%, with 43% less children attending them. Almost five million children do not attend school at all. Book publishing has decreased four hundred percent. Theater and museum attendance is half of what it was. The share of GNP assigned to scientific research is 0.32%, lower than in countries like Portugal or Chile. The educated class has been devastated by the collapse of state

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financing no less than the working class and the peasantry by the privatization of economy. One can talk of a massive proletarization and even lumpenization of the intelligentsia who turned out to be too numerous for the brave new world of Russian capitalism. Former physicists and mathematicians, philologists and historians, writers and doctors have become petty traders and exchanged the "quiet of the museums" and the "green light of the libraries" for the tough world of the street flee-market, where they have finally and quite against their will "reunited with the people." A graduate of the Moscow University, with an M. A. in art history, may now recite Pasternak or Akhmatova in an Israeli army bordello or in a Brooklyn striptease bar. A high-school teacher with twenty years of experience now have a choice of fighting off fainting spells, from chronic malnutrition, in her classroom or becoming an extortionist, charging her students a flat fee for passing her class. The "betrayal of the clerks" has come to be self-destructive for the Soviet intelligentsia, not the least, morally. The "New Covenant" was, indeed, a double-edged swindle. Justice is rare in history, but not altogether absent.

With the mass intelligentsia proletarized, the ideological authority and power of the traditional literary intelligentsia, including its postmodernist vanguard, have virtually vanished. The printing runs of the so-called "thick journals"--through which this authority and power were traditionally exercized--are a hundred times smaller now than they were in 1989-1991. The proud title "independent," which these publications have generously awarded themselves, should not mislead anyone. They have lost their readers and publish only thanks to state subsidies, in memory of their past services to counter-revolution, and grants from shadowy Western funds. The days when the novels of Grossman or Solzhenitsyn could enrapture the average teacher or engineer and bring them out to demonstrate against "Soviet totalitarianism" have gone forever. It suffices to say that teachers' unions form one of the most militant strike movements in the country whose methods include locking off the administration, road blocks, and taking hostages. During the "rail war" of 1998, teachers and doctors joined the miners, blocking the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Neither the liberal humanism of the "traditionalists" nor the cultural escapism of RPM can have any appeal to this new intelligentsia who is now learning the hard way that being, after all, does precede consciousness.

Moreover, the RPM has largely lost even its most valued customer, the new "middle-class" intellectuals. This small "upwardly mobile" group--who led a comfortable existence on the fringes of the imperial order by providing technical and ideological services for a neo-colonial integration of Yeltsin's Russia into the "world community"--has been decimated by the financial collapse of 1998 and can no longer afford enjoying this earthly existence as playful "simulacra." It has become interested in politics and is now regrouping behind a powerful block of the "patriotic" bureaucracy whose slogans are all that RPM is not.

Finally, as if to add insult to injury, last August the activists of the militant labor union *Zashchita* (Defense) and several Marxist groups met in Moscow and founded The Movement for the Creation of Workers' Party. These men and women are mostly young people, though already seasoned in the class struggles of the 1990s. They are Russian postmodernists' nightmare incarnate: a "meta-narrative" of history in flesh and blood.

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Notes

1 Different portions of this essay were presented at the 1996 Southern Conference on Slavic Studies and the 1997 Conference on Contemporary Marxism in Moscow.

2 The following reflection on socialism by a noted Russian philosopher, who has "published extensively about logic, scientific methodology, and the philosophy of culture," gives a taste of the theoretical level and ideological makeup of the contributors to *Re-Entering the Sign*:

> Not long ago I had a conversation with a certain economist. I asked him, "What is socialism, if one were to really extract everything from it?" He said, "Society without exploitation of man by man." I said, "Allright, but what about the treatment of the peasants from 1927 up until 1961? That's not exploitation?" He said, "No! That's not exploitation! Exploitation is the appropriation of a *surplus* product. That was an instance of the appropriation of a *essential* product." So we are talking about a society based on the appropriation of the fruits of another's labor. Look in any law book and you will see what "appropriation of the fruits of another's labor" is. A minor instance is theft, and a serious one is robbery. So we can define the society in which we lived--and still live--as one based on the appropriation of the fruits of another's labor. (74-75)

3 See Katerina Clark, "Changing Historical Paradigms in Soviet Culture." In: *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika*, ed. Thomas Lahusen with Gene Kuperman (Duke UP, 1993).

4 On the executions of the defenders of the last Supreme Soviet at the Krasnaya Presnya stadium, see Alexander Buzgalin and Andrei Kolganov, *Bloody October in Moscow*, trans. Renfrey Clarke (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1994) 192-194.

5 Indeed, one of Jencks' contributors, Alexander Rappoport, observes, with genuine astonishment, "the closeness of Post-Modernism to power" in Russia, including that form of power represented by "one of the most sinister figures of the current political firmament, Vladimir Zhirinovsky," who "openly unites the principles of the Post-Modern game with popular cliches in his political agitation" (*PSAA*, 141).

6 As early as in the spring of 1998, the prominent anti-communist critic Natalia Ivanova observed the "emergence of 'new realism' on the ruins of postmodernist aesthetics" (n/p).

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