

Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment (Princeton, 9-10 May 14)

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ROMANTIC SUBVERSIONS OF SOVIET ENLIGHTENMENT:

Questioning Socialism's Reason

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One year after Nikita Khrushchev's famous "secret speech," *Voprosy Literaturny* (Literary Issues), a new Soviet journal dedicated entirely to topics in literary theory, history, and criticism, published an essay that initiated a long-term intellectual discussion. In her article, Anna Elistratova, an expert on the English romantic novel, directly challenged the aesthetic doctrine of the post-Stalin period by asking, "When it comes to the artistic perception of the world, can we really say that realism is historically the only effective method we should rely on?" Was it not time to admit, the essay continued, that the legacy of romanticism, with its humanistic dreams and rebellious outbursts, could still offer an important source of inspiration for progressive socialist art?

This initial challenge to the hegemony of realist art was followed by a series of heated debates in 1963-1968 and 1971-1973. Drawing on European and Russian aesthetic traditions, participants of the debates highlighted such characteristics of romanticism as its propensity "to stare at the darkness in order to discern new directions" and its emphasis on the "absolute autonomy and uniqueness of the individual." Within a few decades, the status of romanticism had radically changed. From "literature's ballast," romanticism evolved into a symptom of "social emancipation." By the 1980s, dismissive descriptions of romanticism as "passive, conservative, and reactionary" had ceded to a vision of it as a "revolution in arts" that privileges dynamism, becoming, and spontaneity.

Today it is hard not to read these literary debates as an attempt to reframe the role of the humanities in the USSR in the wake of the Terror, World War II, and Stalinism. Ostensibly an esoteric philological enterprise, these late-Soviet discussions used romanticism as a historically available framework that could generate alternative versions of identity, spiritual values, social communities, and relations to the past.

Philological explorations of romantic tropes, of course, were only one expression of a broader interest in reclaiming romanticism. In the 1960s, newly publicized texts by Isaak Babel, Andrei Platonov, and Boris Pilniak helped to reframe the Bolshevik Revolution, giving Communist Utopia one more chance. The reappearance of revolutionary romanticism was paralleled by a host of other trends. Late Soviet cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare and the theatrical productions of Alexander Vampilov and Viktor Rozov highlighted the figure of the "problematic hero," deeply attuned to psychological nuance and the complications of being in the world. Interest in the occult and the mystical (facilitated by the publication of Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* in 1966) provided yet another ground for destabilizing normative socialist-realist canons. A structurally similar escape from the rationality of Stalinist neoclassicism was manifest in various attempts to articulate a feeling of kinship with the natural world: from the vagabond aesthetics of 'tourism in the wilds' and the bardovskii chanson to the village prose movement, with its insistence on cultural rootedness and national belonging. Throughout the Soviet Union, romantic nationalists offered alternatives to the unifying and universalizing notion of the "Soviet people" via reinterpretations of folkloric motifs (in Sergei Paradzhanov's films), revitalization of the historical novel (through the novels of Vladimir Korotkevich), revisions of ancient history (in Lev Gumilev's exploration of ethnogenesis), or reconceptualization of Marxism (in Yulian Bromley's theory of ethnos). The rhetorical force of romanticism had a profound impact on such key late-Soviet phenomena as the *communard* movement in education, major construction projects in Siberia (e.g. in Bratsk), or Soviet fascination with taming the atom and conquering the cosmos.

Instead of reducing these romantic interventions to the status of non-conformist versions of dominant Soviet aesthetics, our conference proposes to view *sotsromantizm* as an autonomous (and relatively coherent) form of historical imagination. This politico-poetical configuration brought together dispersive impulses, anarchic inclinations, psychological introspection, and metaphorical structuring in order to repudiate the basic Soviet conventions of normative rationality and mimetic *sotsrealism*. In short, this conference will approach the romantic imagination in the late Soviet

period as a form of critical engagement with "actually existing" socialism.

While many recent studies of late socialism are structured around metaphors of absence and detachment, we want to shift attention to concepts, institutions, spaces, objects, and identities that enabled (rather than prevented) individual and collective involvement with socialism. Sotsromantizm offers a ground from which to challenge the emerging dogma that depicts late Soviet society as a space where pragmatic cynics coexisted with useful idiots of the regime. The romantic sensibility sought to discover new spaces for alternative forms of affective attachment and social experience; it also helped to curtail the self-defeating practices of disengagement and indifference.

We invite historically grounded and theoretically informed submissions from anthropologists, historians, sociologists, and scholars of art, architecture, cinema, literature, music, media, theater, and popular culture, and all those interested in investigating social and cultural practices made possible by the late socialist appropriation of romanticism. In particular, we welcome submissions that analyze the double nature of sotsromantizm, understood both as a critique of the Soviet Enlightenment and as an alternative form of Soviet socialism. We especially encourage submissions that explore instances and practices of romantic subversions in non-Russian cultural and linguistic contexts of the socialist world.

Abstracts (300 words) and short CVs (no more than two pages) should be sent to sotsromantizm@gmail.com by January 20, 2014.

Those selected to present at the conference will be contacted in early February 2014. Final papers will be due no later than April 15, and will be posted on the conference website.

We may be able to offer a number of travel subsidies for graduate students and participants from overseas.

Program committee:

Serguei Oushakine, Chair (Princeton University)

Marijeta Bozovic (Yale University)

Helena Goscilo (The Ohio State University)

Mark Lipovetsky (The University of Colorado at Boulder)

Vera Tolz-Zilitinkevic (The University of Manchester)

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