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***Encounters with the Russian Avant-Garde* by Michael Craig**

This introductory guide to the history of key figures and movements of the Russian avant-garde is a companion to the documentary series *The Russian Avant-Garde*. Michael Craig has opted to give a sweeping overview of the movement's artistic practices by focusing on a relatively small number of artists who he considers to embody the Russian avant-garde's main sensibilities and concerns, roughly spanning the late nineteenth century up until the early 1930s.

Craig sets out his thesis in the introduction when he says, "encounter suggests...a sense of living in the avant-garde and being part of it...it was the intention of the Russian avant-garde to connect with the real lived world" (p.11). The drive to make art part of the proletariat's everyday life is, Craig contends, still possible: "I came directly into contact with the Russian avant-garde as a living and breathing entity" (ibid). This approach suggests the reader will encounter art works through Craig's subjective lens, perhaps in his mention of living in Moscow taking inspiration from Michel de Certeau's urban walker to experience the city as a text to be navigated through. But what follows is a series of artistic profiles interlaced, sometimes awkwardly so, with the political upheavals caused by the Russian revolution of 1917.

The opening chapter begins quite strongly by outlining the importance for avant-garde artists of creating a new visual language for the early twentieth century, a language that could best express how it was to live in the industrial age and embody the dreams of socialism. Craig takes Alexander Rodchenko's photography as an example of avant-garde artists' interest in capturing people's perspective on the built environment. The ultimate goal was to offer the viewer a new perspective of the world in order that they may imagine how it might be different. It was the artist's duty to contribute to society by helping to change existing socio-political realities. In the context of post-revolutionary Russia, this was a rejection of the ostensive bourgeois values of formal aesthetic beauty and decorative illusion. Art was to be taken out of the galleries and theatres by enjoining with the mundane experiences of the masses.

The brief mentions of Marx's theory of historical materialism are made without any scholarly references and so the political allusions lack the appropriate degree of nuance for the reader to fully appreciate how avant-garde art and socialism interrelate. This is of especial importance for art produced during the formative years of the Soviet Union when all spheres of life were intended to advance the aspirations of the revolution. The scant references to specific events relating to the October Revolution makes the discussion rather theoretical and does not sufficiently ground the art work of the period in its socio-economic context.

Craig makes quite a convincing case that it was rationalists such as Ladovsky who pioneered architecture as an art form of the proletariat by abandoning decorative features and replacing them with a style that combined socialist principles and modern production techniques. Treating space, movement, rhythm and form as the architect's toolkit enabled this branch of the avant-garde to consider how their work might become

a social utility through its use. The photographs in this chapter exemplify these principles well but Craig fails to address how works such as Chuseyev's Narkonzen building continue to engender feelings or actions in the post-communist context of modern Russia.

The poet Mayakovsky is presented as the embodiment of the spirit of the Russian avant-garde for his refutation of anything associated with traditionalism and his belief that art must not be the preserve of the intelligentsia. As one of the authors of the Futurist anthology *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* he gave his heartfelt support to the revolution for its potential to give the masses the fresh eyes required to build a new culture from the ground up. But how could a proletarian art rooted in the everyday lives of the masses abandon the past whilst simultaneously contribute to the spread of socialism through revolution? The colliding forces of tradition and innovation are, Craig argues, central to the avant-garde project, for it is in this meeting where the horizon of the future reveals itself. Mayakovsky's solo play *Vladimir Mayakovsky – A Tragedy* is presented as the piece which most effectively addresses the impossibility of achieving a synthesis in this paradigm. By treating himself as the subject and not the author of the play, Mayakovsky declared that he was the revolution and the revolution was him; the artist and the world are each other's content but neither completely dissolves into the other. Without any description or analysis of the dramaturgy, however, there is nothing to base this assertion on except for an extract from Konstantin Rudinsky.

The section on *Mystery-Bouff* is better for its focus on the use of staging to show socialism as a city sitting on the threshold of the future. But Craig relies too heavily on socialist jargon to offer an aesthetic judgement of the performance, making the specific characteristics of the piece less important than its historic resonances. This becomes particularly jarring in his mention of naturalism and Stanislavski as representing a traditional Russian theatre, failing to mention that Mayakovsky's collaborator Meyerhold was a former student of Stanislavski or that the work of the First Studio and the Moscow Art Theatre represents some of the boldest and most important theatrical experiments ever undertaken. The basic level of critical analysis regarding theatre contrasts with the chapter on Kandinsky, where Craig takes a far more considered approach to studying the role of spiritualism in his paintings and their connection with Russian folk art.

Students of art history will find *Encounters with the Russian Avant-Garde* a useful introduction to the basic ideas underpinning the art movements associated with the period, but the frequent repetitions of information, awkward phrasing and rather random structure of the chapters makes for a frustrating read. As an accompaniment to the documentary series it may work more effectively as a source of further reading, but owing to some under researched areas it does not possess a sufficient level of critical discipline or developed argumentation to provide more than a general historical overview. Craig's tendency to jump from artist to artist also makes it difficult to determine how they differed in their methods and philosophy. The emphasis on the encounter suggests the author's perspective would be given equal weight to historical detail, but instead the reader is given a mixture of artists' biographies and explanations of their creative goals with little attention given to their successes or failures.