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SOVIET CULTURAL POLITICS AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY: PERSPECTIVES OF AN AESTHETIC PARADIGM

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Abstract

The present work aims to take advantage of contemporary western political-aesthetic theory and to introduce it into the field of social psychology. It describes the epistemological tradition of the convergence of scientific and aesthetic cognition in the works of Russian philosophers and psychologists: M. Bakhtin, G. Shpet and L. Vygotsky. This direction in psychology was translated by an aesthetic paradigm that became an attempt to solve the problem of theoretical pluralism. Considering the recently emerging interest in Soviet art and aesthetics, this paper offers the analysis of cultural life in the Soviet Union. The comparative analysis, in this case, will reveal the connection between political and social consciousness and their expression in the cultural life of people. In the outcome, it will permit to characterise the emotional experience of people during a particular period of social transition, also to explain how individuals adapt their behaviour to a new social context. The analysis of Soviet aesthetics in this article was based on the works of Soviet aesthetician M. Lifshitz and contemporary Russian-American anthropologist A. Yurchak, which are compared to the Soviet tradition of social psychology in Moscow psychological school (L. Vygotsky, A. Leontiev, G. Andreeva).

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1. Introduction

This paper aims to describe how the *aesthetic paradigm* expands the methodological horizons of social psychology by referring to art and by emphasizing the role of art in the *crystallization* of people's world perception and image of the world. As an illustration of the possibility to expand the meaning of radical social, cultural and historical change, this paper regards the Soviet aesthetics that nowadays attracted considerable interest by social scientists, since the conceptual Soviet art entered the Western culture.

Whereas the term aesthetics have different interpretations depending on the area of studies, we will consider it as a concept strongly correlating with both political and social consciousness or existence. The different points of view on this relationship can be found by academics writing about aesthetics. The extension of the term aesthetics, initially, being a part of cultural studies, to the political and social sciences provoked its various translations. Aesthetics represent different aspects of cultural experience and aesthetic judgment allows us to organize this experience (Holm & Duncan, 2018).

Among philosophers who exercised considerable influence on the development of political aesthetics, we would like to mention the conceptions of Adorno (2013) and Rancière (2000), because they designated a certain framework of theorizing on aesthetics. Adorno underlines the importance of aesthetic experience for understanding and organization of the social world in its complexity. He argues that the meaning of an artwork cannot be entirely explained by a philosophical interpretation, because art reveals the truth which cannot be submitted to conceptualization (Adorno, 2013). Although Adorno is sceptic about the assignment of a political function to art, possibly due to his intuition of '*mechanical reproduction*' (Benjamin, 2008) of an art object in the future, he still regards aesthetics as the organizational system of social life.

Aesthetic conceptualization in politics emerges through Rancière (2000) process of the distribution of the sensible. Under the distribution of the sensible, he understands the system of sensitive evidence which can be seen as different perceptions of the reality by different social groups. Rancière considers aesthetic and politic activities as equal and interconnected. The political act represents an experience systematization and makes possible the existence of new forms of sensible and introduces new forms of subjectivity (Rancière, 2000, p. 52-59). His aim was not just to observe and to identify sensitive evidence, but rather to redesign the whole system of the distribution of the sensible. Thus, aesthetic in Rancière works can be seen as a frame of political activity and art as a model for the investigation of social reality.

2. Problem Statement

The epistemological tradition of the convergence of scientific and aesthetic cognition was already prophesied after the 1917's Revolution in works of Russian philosophers and psychologists: Bakhtin (1979), Shpet (1991), Vygotsky (1974). They all argued that objective knowledge cannot be reached without reference to the aesthetic and cultural life of society but from rather different methodological positions.

According to Bakhtin (1979), "the problem of the soul, from a methodological point, is a problem in aesthetics" (p. 89). Aesthetics represent a dialogical and intersubjective form that captures lived

experience and connects a great historical time with the modernity. Bakhtin showed the psychological significance of aesthetics in his remarkable works about F. Dostoevsky and F. Rabelais.

Shpet (1991) developed phenomenological and hermeneutic tradition in the methodology of psychology and underlined the significant role of the personality as the source of any understanding of the social life. He applied semiotics to explain human consciousness and its connection to art and, this way, anticipated linguistic turn in social sciences. The idea of the personalization of social experience was always expressed in social sciences but, in the 20th century, sociological models of the society appealed to the axiological meaning of culture. Shpet (1991) suggested that a social phenomenon has several components: *material form, meaning and subjective representation* (emotional experience). Thus, an object of social perception represents '*objectified subjectivity*'.

Vygotsky (1974) aimed to elaborate a well-grounded methodology which could be applied to the aesthetic study and tried to unit methods of scientific psychology and aesthetic perception. His main idea was the application of an analytical approach to aesthetic experience through an art object. He suggested that an art object should be represented from the structuralist point of view, namely as an aesthetic experience of its objective structures. This way the form of a piece of art elaborates a semiotic frame. This process is based on inner conflict and its resolution and must be supported by individual activity, such as motivation or disagreement, and by, related to this activity, emergent effects (Vygotsky, 1974).

The role of aesthetic and art in modern Russian social psychology is becoming more significant in the actual epistemological situation of pluralism and polyparadigmality. An important methodological breakthrough refers to the social constructionism theory and expands the role of the language in the context of society. This way of theorizing allows the analysis of the human perception of social reality through cultural semiotics. The intellectual history of XX century calls into question the existence of the objective knowledge, especially, in psychology where academics try to avoid the reductionism by the understanding of complex psychological phenomena (Zinchenko & Mamardashvili, 1977).

The same way as the mechanical reproduction leads to the destruction of the uniqueness and 'clear' understanding of an art object (Benjamin, 2008), the scientific attempt to define a true knowledge changes to the tolerance for different points of view and the lack of a general theory. Thus, aesthetic paradigm permits to social phenomena to be introduced into the framework of the culture, where its understanding in scientific terms can be expanded with the help of the language of art (Martsinkovskaya et al., 2019). The aesthetic approach consists in comparing different symbolic systems, namely, in art, media or science and makes possible exploring the every-day life from different angles of view.

3. Research Questions

This article aims to show how an aesthetic analysis of the transformations occurred in the former Soviet Union helps to shape the peoples' life perception during a specific historical period. It will also show how people use art creation to adapt to new life conditions and social changes. The aesthetic approach will be illustrated by the works of Soviet Marxian aesthetician M. Lifshitz and contemporary Russian-American anthropologist A. Yurchak, compared to the tradition of social psychology in Moscow psychological school (Vygotsky, A. Leontiev, G. Andreeva). We found advantageous to explore the representations of cultural

life from the angle of view of the thinkers living in different periods of Soviet and post-Soviet history and writing on the same phenomenon of social life.

4.   Purpose of the Study

This paper allows to see how the aesthetic approach offers to social psychology an authentic and realistic way to understand the relationship between art and social life. It captures a gap between a form of representation and what is represented therewith (Bleiker, 2001). Culture and modern art are ahead of science to foreshadow the main tendencies of social development. Specifically, through culture and art, we can observe cultural and historical crystallization of social experience, at the same time, avoiding excessive generalization, which is often characteristic for social sciences. This way, the convergence of psychology and aesthetics opens new horizons for modern epistemology introducing new data and giving a better and deeper understanding of social and political life in a specific historical period. Considering Soviet aesthetics, it will be shown how the aesthetic analysis discover the latent changes of social representations and collective emotions in a specific cultural context and how these changes influence the social order.

5.   Research Methods

In the process of research, the methods of historical hermeneutics were used, as well as the historical-genetic and comparative-analytical methods (Martsinkovskaya et al., 2019).

6.   Findings

The origins of Soviet political aesthetics date back to the ideas of Lunacharskii (1923) who proposed communist comprehension of aesthetics and pointed its connection to the class struggle or the world's reconstruction. However, the aim of the cultural activity of the period was propaganda. In the 1920s the political ideology of the Soviet state created the movement of Social Realism which became the cultural activity guided by the regime. In general, a surge of the interest in Soviet cultural politics was associated with crucial periods of transitions in the history of the country when aestheticians tried to explain and to understand the changing social reality. Soviet aestheticians faced several problems by creating a new art under the permanent surveillance of the Soviet regime. One of the issues was to apply the Marxist-Leninist theory to the cultural experience without having the possibility to elaborate appropriate methodological principles. The aestheticians of that early period were imposed to accomplish specific contradictory tasks. They aimed to instruct the soviet people about humanity's values and at the same time not to deviate from the basic foundation of Marxism-Leninism such as the idea of material nature of consciousness. Besides, the new culture of the Soviet state was supposed to be different from a non-socialist or capitalist culture. The main task of the new cultural policy was to construct a '*New Soviet man*', what, however, turned into numerous conflicts and contradictions in Soviet aesthetics (Degot, 2000).

The attempt to introduce the ideological concept to the art life caused a sharp reaction in cultural life. Soviet artists had the objective to express the every-day life of the Soviet people more realistic as possible and, at the same time, to affect their viewers. Art is a symbolic expression of cultural life but the soviet reality was hard to be characterised by aesthetics or beauty. The soviet reality was either dim, grey,

lifeless and cold. In the 1930s, when aroused the necessity to define the subject of Soviet aesthetics, which were supposed to help the transition from revolutionary to a peaceful society, aesthetics either consisted in hiding ugliness of life. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the soviet aestheticians appeared to be attempting to bring the Soviet life and aesthetics closer. It seems that the rigidity and monumentality of the Soviet regime had a wondrous attraction for the cultural activity of the country. Simultaneously, the aestheticians tried to conceptualise the soviet art, to elaborate a theoretical apparatus, in view to provide a new perspective on it (Efimova, 1997).

The crucial social changes resulted from the increasing tension in the economic and social life of Soviet society can be seen through the prism of the cultural existence of that period. One of the most significant investigations on Soviet art was conducted by a Soviet philosopher of art, Mikhail Lifshitz. He was misunderstood and often criticised by his contemporaries because of his appeal to ideas of Marxism. Meanwhile, his vision of Marxism was creative and original for that period, he was one of the founding philosophers of '*socialist humanism*'. Marx's works had different interpretations but the real value of his work was underestimated because of ambiguous interpretation of official Marxism. Aesthetic themes for Marx's work were crucial, but their understanding was often reduced to economic relations. In the masterpiece '*The Crisis of Ugliness*' Lifshitz criticised modernism so popular among contemporary artists. The book was published after Nikita Khrushchev's speech revealing Stalin's personality cult and the movement of modernism was seen by soviet artists as the movement of democratisation and de-Stalinisation (as cited in Lifshitz & Riff, 2018, pp. 1-15).

Probably, the modernist movement was supposed to rehabilitate soviet art and to adopt values of new industrial society. His anti-modernist position was not to disadvantage a new movement, his main idea was to show that people creating soviet art had very different intentions and he wanted to emphasize this variety of art perceptions existing in the Soviet society. Possibly, the inner conflict in the cultural milieu could be resolved, Lifshitz suggested that the artist has to accept some 'conventions', the same way as the religious conventions are to be accepted. In the work '*The Crisis of Ugliness*' was explained the significant function of art which was not perceived by many aestheticians of that period. The function of art was to express the complex emotional experience lived by an artist in a specific social context that was problematic considering the universalist world of the Soviet doctrine. First, Lifshitz gave an example of impressionists who could not support the dim and prosaic world of 'bourgeois' and wanted to blur it to make more beautiful. Then, he explained the emergence of the cubism that became a crucial moment for world culture. The artists realised that the only way to return the expressivity to the world was to destroy its form completely. Lifshitz was sceptical observing this destructionist nature of modernism. According to his meaning, the future of Soviet aesthetics was dubious to adopt the life-constructionism of avant-garde or the modernist idea of creating a new world (as cited in Lifshitz & Riff, 2018). In this regard, the social confusion emerged during the cultural construction of the Soviet country was translated in his ideological conflict with modernists.

Yurchak (2005) in his book '*Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*' focused on different aspects of the social life of the Soviet people. He aimed to explore the paradox of the Soviet reality: people were interiorly ready to the collapse of the existing system but at the same time perceived its endlessness. This book proposes the analysis of late socialism but its methodology

can be applied to any historical and cultural contexts. The discussion about economic, demographic or social problems, posteriori, explained the drastic changes in the society. But they seem to be incomplete to explain why this historic event was so unexpected. Thus, Yurchak (2005) suggested that the detailed research on cultural life would allow discovering the conditions which preceded the collapse of USSR and these conditions, and not the causes, would be more efficient by explaining a specific historical context. The author emphasizes a certain dissimulation existing in the everyday life of the ordinary people which was related to the compliance of different rituals. In effect, he explained, that people had an *official language* (dissimulation) and a *secret language* (real opinion). Soviet rituals became performative acts, which means that individuals did not pay particular attention during their execution but at the unconscious level these acts were introduced to their everyday life and became the part of their reality.

This social situation represents a particular interest for aesthetic analysis because it refers to the language as to the symbolic system, in contrast with the precedent work which was referring either to the symbolic systems of art and of scientific concepts. Yurchak (2005) regards the omnipresent ideological discourse at all symbolic levels, including the level of rituals and social practice. He explains that ideological representations did not change but the Soviet people ceased to associate them with Soviet ideological form. The ideological discourse was permanently reproduced and dominated by the system, but the system itself was subject to interior inexplicit changes which never came to the opposition with the dominant discourse. In the context of the Soviet country, this paradox originated from conflicting tasks: to achieve absolute personal freedom and to exercise permanent control. In the 1950s, when the dominant ideology began to lose its importance, the official language became a reproduction of the existing texts and formula to avoid any ambiguity. This capacity of reproductivity played a significant role in the perception of Soviet reality. Due to this process, new forms of subjectivity, meanings and interests emerged in the Soviet society but these new forms never opposed to the system and were not expressed in official texts.

In the same way, the divergence of two languages in the history of Soviet aesthetics, as in everyday life influenced social psychology. During the Soviet period, social psychology was organized around two subsequent research directions: Leningrad and Moscow schools. Andreeva (2001), the founder of the chair of social psychology at Moscow State University, was a leading figure of the Moscow school. This tradition of social psychology examines the epistemological problem of individual and social aspects of behaviour (Vygotsky) and defines the connection between personal meaning and socio-cultural values (Leontiev). Vygotsky and Leontiev refer to the metaphor of theatre to interpret the structure of personality and conciseness, which reflect the social order in the Soviet society. Theatre, as any creation of Soviet cultural life, was supposed to determinate the personal development of Soviet citizens. Vygotsky uses the expression '*personality as a drama*' because the coexistence of different social roles defines the conflict of reason and emotion in the hierarchy of higher mental functions. Leontiev writes about '*consciousness as drama*' and stresses the connection between meanings of culture and personal meanings (as cited in Andreeva & Leontiev, 2018).

These metaphors explain the Soviet reality where people were obliged to live their lives between official communist ideology and private life liberated from the party diktat. A similar illustration is a division into '*Culture 1*' and '*Culture 2*' that can be found in the field of Soviet architecture (Paperny, 2002). Since 1917, especially during Stalin's reign of terror, the theatre was an important part of a great

style that participated in the construction of a universal everyday simulacrum, when the material was replaced by the symbolic. This way the symbolic language of Vygotsky and Leontiev reproduces the permanent conflict of reality and appearance of the Soviet life that became performative towards the subject of cognition.

Referring to Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach and Leontiev's activity theory, Andreeva (1990) puts the social determination of cognitive processes at the heart of Soviet social psychology. According to her work, the subject of social psychology is not limited by the study of the interpersonal level of face-to-face interactions (like in American psychology) but also includes the process of the world's image construction and representation during the communications in the social institutes and large groups. The individual world's perception is an important element for the understanding of mass consciousness (as cited in Andreeva & Leontiev, 2018). Andreeva aims to expand the meaning of social psychology to contemporary culture and science as the relationship between personality and society in the context of radical social changes: she writes about the possibility of alienation of the image of the social world from the subject of cognition (as cited in Andreeva & Leontiev, 2018). It can be assumed, that her disciplinary project of social psychology reproduces the latent conflict of Soviet aesthetics and cultural politics.

7. Conclusion

The discourse on Soviet art strongly depends on the historical and geopolitical context. The image of Soviet aesthetics changed in the period of the dissolution of the Soviet Union with the end of the Cold War, as soon as this reality ceased to be frightening or hostile. This condition should be taken into consideration by the analysis of the art in a particular context. Any contemporary study on Soviet art will be retrospective and, in certain extend, will contain the subjective touch. Thus, the comparison of aestheticians working in different periods allows advancing a more complete understanding of the Soviet reality. As it was mentioned above, Soviet aesthetics was deeply conflicted. The Soviet social psychology, starting from Vygotsky, also tried to resolve the conflict between personality and society, individual and group world images, private and public areas of political consciousness.

Some art philosophers saw the antagonism between the Social Realism and the existing practices of the avant-garde, in reality, according to art critic Groys (2013), this impression issued from the universally popular antimodernist tendencies of that period. Soviet art was exploited by the regime as an aesthetic-political project of the social transformation. Later, Soviet cultural politics of Gorbachev and Yakovlev was directed to influence the Soviet reality and the people's way of thinking. Groys (2013) confirms that political forms have aesthetic implications but this dependence on politics cannot reject the function of art to conserve the past. The aesthetic experience is very live and expressive, so it reveals even secret emotional social experience, as it was shown with the example of secret language described by Yurchak (2005). In that way the *aesthetic paradigm* in social research allows, on the one hand, to observe the dynamics of the social life in a particular historical context through people's aesthetic experience, on the other hand, to unit existing social theories and practice at the universal symbolic level.

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