A Century of Tomorrows: How Imagining the Future Shapes the Present

Glenn Adamson

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Dark Futures: How the European Dream of Modernization Ended in Totalitarian Despair

Glenn Adamson on the Rise and Fall of Europe's Early 20th-Century Artistic Avant-Garde

By Glenn Adamson

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The machine has come to the village. We are half an hour into Sergei Eisenstein's *The Old and the New* (1929), the director's last silent film. The heroine of the story, Martha—played by an actual peasant woman—is striving to bring modernity to her rural community. Her dream of progress is symbolized, above all, by a mechanical cream separator, which has been provided by the Soviet government. Unveiled with a flourish in the humble setting of a wooden barn, it seems an alien presence, a mysterious construction of shining steel.

Initially, it prompts deep suspicion among her neighbors. Scowling, they gather round the device. But then the machine is set underway with a hand crank. It quickly takes on a life of its own. The separator's inner workings spin faster and faster, agitating the milk into a whirling vortex. To the amazement of the assembled peasants, cream begins to sputter at the machine's gleaming spouts, then drips down, and at last, flows freely.

At the climax of the sequence, Eisenstein intercuts triumphant shots of arcing fountains. Numerals of increasing size flash across the screen, representing the number of peasants who spontaneously join up to the new dairy cooperative—4, 17, 20, 29, 38, 46, 48, 50! Overjoyed,

Martha cups the fresh cream in her hands, laughing. Her face is dappled in white splashes of animal liquid and metallic light.

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It's an astonishing scene, in which the maternal and the mechanical, the orgasmic and the inorganic, are fluidly combined. It is, of course, pure propaganda. Eisenstein had hoped his next project after *October* would be his most complex yet, a cinematic treatment of *Das Kapital* (he memorably described it as "a new work on a libretto by Karl Marx"). Instead, he deployed his avant-garde montage techniques to politically reactionary ends, making a film that was slavishly faithful to Stalinist rhetoric and ignored collectivization's actual brutality. Eisenstein's passage from radical to tool of a repressive state was typical of his generation.

Even prior to the revolution, the country had been economically backward by European standards: overwhelmingly agricultural, with a comparatively tiny industrial base in the cities. Now, in the wake of an all-consuming civil war, factories lay in ruins. Those that were still functioning struggled to get materials and parts, and given the devastated railway system, found it difficult to distribute what products they could manufacture. Mechanization, in these circumstances, was not a complicated and contested fact of modern life, as it was in America. It was a dream to be realized.

Back in 1912–13, the artist Kazimir Malevich—soon to create his iconic *Black Square*, a degree-zero from which all subsequent art might depart anew—had created an icon of that potential transformation in *The Knife Grinder or Principle of Glittering*. It is a picture of a machine in use, but an archaic one, of a type that might be brought from village to village by an itinerant artisan. Change is coming, though—or so this radiantly explosive image implies. It's a painting you can almost hear. The repetition and fragmentation of forms—the wheel, the blade, the craftsman's face and hands—evokes the rhythm of the grinding action, the sparking friction of metal against stone, and by association, the inexorable motion of time itself. A rustic subject rendered into a kaleidoscope, the knife grinder points the way ahead to a world similarly transformed.

Malevich had borrowed this polychromatic, fragmentary composition from Italian Futurism, the twentieth-century's first avant-garde, led by a high-octane provocateur called F. T. Marinetti. Indiscriminate in his disdain for the old, Marinetti called for the wholesale destruction of libraries and museums, and even declared pasta obsolete, lamenting those who "carry its ruins in their stomachs, like archaeologists." Instead of these benighted souls, with their soft decaying innards, Marinetti envisioned a reinvented human race, technological to its core. "We must prepare for the imminent and inevitable identification of man and motor," he wrote in a 1911 manifesto. It was as if mechanical principles had to be literally, not just conceptually, digested. "Future man will reduce his heart to its purely distributive function. The heart has to become, in some way, a sort of stomach for the brain."

As these chilling words suggest, Marinetti's own heart was definitely in the wrong place. When the Great War came, he celebrated it as a scouring that would cleanse Europe of its heavy accretions of tradition. He was equally entranced by the rise of fascism. Marinetti collaborated closely with Benito Mussolini, coauthoring one of the Fascists' first manifestos in 1919. Even after he realized, at some level, that he had allied himself with a monstrous force, he continued to seek the regime's favor and fought for the Fascists in World War II, dying of natural causes in 1944.

In retrospect, we can see that the self-declared leader of the Futurists was completely wrong about everything that was to come. Yet this has done little to detract from his fame, or that of his movement. Marinetti's most well-known piece of writing, the *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909), set a template for countless equally intemperate documents to come. It remains an admittedly riveting read, with its infamous declaration that "a roaring car that seems to ride on grapeshot is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace," and its zany recounting of an incident in which a band of Futurists drove off the road into a muddy ditch, a baptism-by-auto-accident from which they arose as new men, "plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot."

Marinetti's down-with-the-old message had a particular appeal in Italy, a country where history is piled high on every side, and Futurism also caused a minor sensation in Japan, for similar reasons. The 1909 manifesto was quickly translated and passed around there, and the poet Hirato Renkichi wrote his own in response. He handed out leaflets to crowds in newly opened

Hibiya Park, right at the foot of the Imperial Palace: “There is nothing in futurism that deals in flesh—freedom of the machine.” And: “Try sniffing the abominable stench behind the piles of books—how many times superior is the fresh scent of gasoline!”

In Russia, too, Marinetti’s influence was strongly felt. The emergence of an exhilarated, machine-entranced vanguard there was announced in 1912 with a manifesto, matter-of-factly titled “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste.” It read, in part: “We alone are the face of our time. The horn of time blares through us in the art of the world…He who does not forget his *first* love will not recognize his last.”

Marinetti’s ideas set the stage for the radical movement that came to be known as Constructivism. Its acknowledged (yet unbuilt) masterwork was Vladimir Tatlin’s Monument to the Third International (1920), a proposed headquarters for global communism, a Soviet rejoinder to the Eiffel Tower. Tatlin envisioned a giant spiral of steel holding four glass volumes within. He stipulated that these geometrical chambers would revolve at various speeds, depending on their function: at the base, a cylindrical legislative assembly, completing its lugubrious rotation only once per year; above that a pyramidal executive office, turning each month; and then a further cylinder for the press bureau, which pivoted at a comparably brisk once per day. At the top, a small hemisphere would spin on its axis constantly, every hour on the hour, projecting the latest agitprop slogans against the underside of the clouds.

The Russian radicals, then, were imagining not just any kind of machine, but one capable of perpetual motion, powered solely by the will of the worker. A few thinkers did resist this ideal, however, most prominent among them the novelist Evgeny Zamyatin, whose dystopian novel *We* (completed in 1920) is the dark mirror of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward.* It depicts a nightmarishly efficient, completely industrialized police state, set in the thirtieth century A.D. The citizens of this future have numbers rather than names and inhabit a single gigantic city, where all the buildings are perfectly straight, and made of glass, the better to keep everyone under constant surveillance.

All activities—work, sleep, eating, even sex—are performed according to a Table of Hourly Commandments. As in later English-language satires of totalitarianism, such as Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* and George Orwell’s *1984*, Zamyatin centers his story on a

protagonist—here called D-503—who has a crisis of faith in the system. Ultimately, under threat of liquidation in the great Machine of the Benefactor (which is a literal mechanism, “a dim, heavy, dreadful mass”) he submits to an operation to remove his imagination, and so is brought into line with the ruling ideology, a “philosophy of cranes, presses, and pumps, as perfect and clear as a compass-drawn circle.”

The Constructivists’ fantasy of a totally mechanized society did come to pass—just not in anything like the form they had envisioned.

Zamyatin has been called the Soviet Union’s first dissident, and he seems, in retrospect, to have had an extraordinary prescience about the true nature of the Communist state. The Constructivists’ exuberant technophilia was to be no match for the pitiless mass mechanization that took place under Stalin. In policy terms, the primary vehicle of this transformation was the notorious Five-Year Plan, a political machine of terrible scale that ground up individual lives in its gears. Announced in 1928, it had two complementary goals: to dramatically increase factory production, and to collectivize agricultural lands, making them more efficient.

On the industrial side, it was a relative success. While improvements were routinely exaggerated for propaganda purposes, and never came close to the regime’s impossible-to-meet targets, there was a genuine expansion of the industrial base. New factories were built, as well as hydroelectric dams, steel works, and railways. It helped that the United States and Europe entered the Great Depression just at this moment. Russia had been importing American tractors and cars since 1923; now they began importing underemployed American engineers and machinists, too, and buying up equipment and parts at bargain prices.
Out in the countryside, however, the Five-Year Plan brought about untold disaster. The patchwork of individually held land was collectivized as promised. There were attempts to modernize the villages, just as Eisenstein showed in *The Old and the New*. But none of this made Russian agriculture any more efficient. On the contrary: Without the economic incentive to grow cash crops, farmers simply refused to plant, and sold off their equipment while they still could. So many fled to the cities that restrictions on internal migration were imposed; peasants were effectively returned to the condition of serfs, tied permanently to the land.

Most sinister of all was the liquidation of the kulaks, formerly prosperous landowners. Targeted as class enemies, they were either murdered or deported to work in the new industrial projects, itself often a death sentence. The horror culminated in the great famine of 1932–33, in which millions died—we will never know just how many, given the widespread falsification of statistics.

Against this horrific backdrop, the arts were brought to heel. Constructivism was forcibly replaced by didactic Socialist Realism, with its heroic, broad-shouldered men and women gazing out to the horizon. A great purge of the intellectual class followed. The Russian literary theorist Roman Jakobson, in a poignant essay titled “On a Generation that Squandered Its Poets” (1931), spoke for many when he wrote, “As for the future, it doesn’t belong to us. In a few decades we shall be cruelly labeled as products of the past millennium. All we had were compelling songs of the future; and suddenly these songs are no longer part of the dynamic of history.”

As for the Five-Year Plan, the regime would replicate it again and again, despite the chaos and destruction it had brought. When the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1989, its fourteenth successive Five-Year Plan was underway. As the historian Boris Groys has provocatively observed, the Constructivists’ fantasy of a totally mechanized society did come to pass—just not in anything like the form they had envisioned.