Beyond Diversity: Cultural Studies and Its Postcommunist Other

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Initially, I had planned to address the relationship between art and politics in modernity. But during these talks, listening to what other speakers had to say, I decided that it would be useful to do so by concentrating in the first place on the present situation in postcommunist Eastern Europe. There are some specific reasons for this choice in the framework of our present discussions — and I would like to begin by trying to elucidate these reasons.

First of all, the topic of this symposium — "Democracy Unrealized" — refers in a very obvious way to the currently dominant discourse describing the victory of the West at the end of the Cold War as the final victory of the forces of democracy over the forces of communism. But the theoretical reflection of this event remains at the same time significantly absent in the context of our present talks. As Okwui Enwezor told me in a private conversation, the postcommunist world, and, specifically, postcommunist Russia, remain a blind spot for today's cultural discourse. And it seems to me that we have reached the point at which we have to ask ourselves: Why?

We have heard already many voices that challenge the claim of democracy's final victory and assert that democracy is still unrealized or even unrealizable. And we can, of course, generally agree with this judgment. But it seems to me very characteristic that all the examples that were used to illustrate this point were — with very few exceptions — related to the noncommunist part of the world as it was divided by the Cold War. All these examples referred namely to the countries of the First World — the countries of the West — or the countries of the so-called Third World that were more or less controlled by the West during the Cold War. And that means that the choice of these examples, being very interesting, stimulating, and fascinating, on the one hand, still tends, on the other hand, to perpetuate on the discursive level the dividing lines of the Cold War that were meanwhile obliterated — or at least transformed — in the field of real political practice. Now, it is, of course, obvious that the concentration on Western countries and on the countries of the Third World which were part of the Western sphere of influence can be easily explained by the mere fact that the majority of the speakers at this conference have a Western cultural background — and it seems only natural and legitimate that these speakers are especially interested in Western topics. But it seems to me that this is not the whole story. The deeper reason for this blind spot is, actually, theoretical and perhaps — on an even deeper level — aesthetic. And this deeper reason has in its turn everything to do with the question of the fate of radical politics — and, for that matter, of radical art — in modernity and, specifically, in our time.

I think it is safe to say that the theoretical discourse we have witnessed during these talks has its origin in a certain period of the development of Cultural Studies. Now, Cultural Studies has some very fundamental difficulties in describing and theorizing the postcommunist condition. And, frankly, I do not believe that a simple adjustment of the theoretical framework and vocabulary of Cultural Studies to the realities of Eastern Europe — without reconsideration of some of the discipline's fundamental presuppositions — would be sufficient to make its discourse able to describe and discuss the postcommunist reality. Now, I will try to explain why such an adjustment seems to be so difficult.

The presently dominant theoretical discourse in the field of Cultural Studies has a tendency — we have heard it from Stuart Hall — to see historical development as a road that brings the subject from

the particular to the universal, from premodern closed communities, orders, hierarchies, traditions, and cultural identities toward the open space of universality, free communication, and citizenship in a democratic Modern state. This road of democratization is, at the same time, the road of modernization. Contemporary Cultural Studies shares this image with the venerable tradition of the European Enlightenment — even if the former looks at this image in a different way and, accordingly, draws different conclusions from the analysis of this image. The central question that arises under these presuppositions is namely the following: How to deal with an individual person traveling along this road — here and now? The traditional answer of liberal political theory, which has its origins in French Enlightenment thought, is well known: this person on the road has to move forward as quickly as possible. And if we see that a certain person is not going fast enough — and maybe even takes a rest before moving ahead — then appropriate measures must be taken against this person, because such a person is not only moving too slowly toward universal freedom but holding up the transition of the whole of humankind to the state of freedom. But humankind cannot tolerate such a slow movement because it wants to be free and democratic as soon as possible. That is the origin of the liberal mode of coercion and violence in the name of democracy and freedom. And it is very much understandable that today's Cultural Studies tries to reject this kind of coercion and to defend the right of the individual subject to be slow, to be different, to bring its premodern cultural identity into the future as legitimate luggage that may not be confiscated. And, indeed, if the perfect, absolute democracy is not only unrealized, but also unrealizable, then the way that leads to it is an infinite one — and, being infinite, it makes no sense to force the homogeneity and universality of the infinite future on the heterogeneous cultural identities here and now. Rather, it is better to appreciate diversity and difference, to be more interested in where the subject is coming from than in where it is going to. So we can say that the present strong interest in diversity and difference is dictated in the first place by certain moral and political considerations — namely, by the defense of the so-called underdeveloped cultures against their marginalization and suppression by the dominating modern states in the name of progress. But at the same time, the ideal of progress is not completely rejected by contemporary cultural thought. This thought, rather, strives to find a compromise between the requirements of modern uniform democratic order and the rights of premodern cultural identities situated inside this general order.

But there is also one aspect in all this which I would like to stress. The discourse of diversity and difference presupposes a certain aesthetic choice — I mean here a purely aesthetic preference for the heterogeneous, for the mix, for the crossover. This aesthetic taste is, in fact, very much characteristic of the postmodern art of the late 1970s and ‚80s — that means during the same time that the discipline of Cultural Studies emerged and developed to its present form. This aesthetic taste is ostensibly very open, very inclusive — and in this sense also genuinely democratic. But, as we know, the postmodern taste is by no means as tolerant as it seems to be at first glance. The postmodern aesthetic sensibility rejects namely everything which is universal, uniform, repetitive, geometrical, minimalist, ascetic, monotonous, boring — everything gray, homogeneous, and reductionist. It dislikes Bauhaus, it dislikes Geometric Abstraction, it dislikes the bureaucratic and the technical: the classical avant-garde is accepted now only under the condition that its universalist claims are rejected and it becomes a part of a general heterogeneous picture. And, of course, the postmodern sensibility strongly dislikes — and *must* dislike — the gray, monotonous, uninspiring look of communism. I believe that this is, in fact, why the postcommunist world remains today a blind spot. Western spectators trained in certain aesthetics and conditioned by a certain artistic sensibility just do not want to look at the postcommunist world because they do not like what they see. The only things that contemporary Western spectators like about the postcommunist — or still communist — East are things like Chinese pagodas, or old Russian churches, or Eastern European cities that look like direct quotations from the 19th century — all the things that are noncommunist or pre-communist, that look diverse and different in the generally accepted sense of these words and that fit well within the framework of the contempo-

rary heterogeneous Western taste. On the contrary, communist aesthetics seems to be *not* different, *not* diverse, *not* regional, *not* colorful enough — and, therefore, confronts the dominating pluralist, postmodern Western taste with its universalist, uniform Other.

But if we now ask ourselves: What is the origin of this dominating postmodern taste for colorful diversity? — there is only one possible answer: it is the market. It is a taste *formed* by contemporary markets, and it is a taste *for* the market. In this respect, it must be recalled that the emergence of the taste for the diverse and the different was directly related to the emergence of new, globalized information, media, and entertainment markets in the 1970s and the expansion of these markets in the ‚80s and ‚90s. Every expanding market, as we know, produces diversification and differentiation of the commodities that are offered on this market. Therefore, I believe that the discourse and the politics of cultural diversity and difference cannot be seen and interpreted correctly without being related to the market-driven practice of cultural diversification and differentiation in the last decades of the 20th century. This practice opened a third option for dealing with one‘s own cultural identity — beyond suppressing it or finding a representation for it in the context of existing political and cultural institutions. This third option is to sell, to commodify, to commercialize this cultural identity on the international media and touristic markets. It is this complicity between the discourse of cultural diversity and the diversification of cultural markets that makes a certain contemporary postmodern critical discourse so immediately plausible and, at the same time, so deeply ambiguous. Being extremely critical of the homogeneous space of the Modern state and its institutions, it tends to be uncritical of contemporary heterogeneous market practices — at least, by not taking them seriously enough into consideration.

Listening to postmodern critical discourse, one has an impression of being confronted with a choice between a certain universal order incorporated by the Modern state, on the one hand, and fragmented, disconnected, diverse “social realities“ on the other. But, in fact, such diverse realities simply do not exist — and the choice is a completely illusory one. The apparently fragmented cultural realities are, namely, implicitly connected by the globalized markets. There is no real choice between universality and diversity. Rather, there is a choice between two different types of universality, between two universalities: between the universal validity of a certain political idea and the universal accessibility obtained through contemporary markets. Both — Modern state and contemporary market — are equally universal. But the universality of a political idea is an openly manifested, articulated, visualized universality that demonstrates itself immediately by the uniformity and repetitiveness of its external image. On the other hand, the universality of the market is a hidden, nonexplicit, nonvisualized universality that is obscured by the commodified diversity and difference. So we can say that the postmodern cultural diversity is a pseudonym for the universality of capitalist markets. The universal accessibility of heterogeneous cultural products which is guaranteed by the globalization of contemporary information markets has replaced the universal and homogeneous political projects of the European past — from the Enlightenment to communism. In the past, to be universal has meant to invent an idea or an artistic project that could unite people of different backgrounds, that could transcend the diversity of their already-existing cultural identities, that could be joined by everybody — if he or she would decide to join them. This notion of universality was linked to the concept of inner change, of inner rupture, of rejecting the past and embracing the future, to the notion of *metanoia* — of transition from the old identity to a new one. Today, on the contrary, to be universal means to be able to aetheticize one‘s identity as it is — without any attempt to change it. Accordingly, this already-existing identity is treated as a kind of ready-made in the universal context of diversity. Under this condition, becoming universal, abstract, uniform makes you aesthetically unattractive and commercially inoperative. As I have already said, for the contemporary taste, the universal looks too gray, boring, unspectacular, unentertaining, uncool to be aesthetically acceptable.

And that is why the postmodern taste is fundamentally an antiradical taste. Radical political aesthetics situates itself always at the *degré zéro* of literary and visual rhetoric, as Roland Barthes defined it[1] — and that means also at the *degré zéro* of diversity and difference. And this is also why the artistic avant-garde — the Bauhaus, etc. — seems to be so outmoded today: these artistic movements embody an aesthetic sensibility for the political, not for the market. I think there can be no doubt about it: every Utopian, radical taste is a taste for the ascetic, uniform, monotonous, gray, and boring. From Plato to the Utopias of the Renaissance to the modern, avant-garde Utopias — all radical political and aesthetic projects presented themselves always at the *degré zéro* of diversity. And that means: one needs to have a certain aesthetic preference for the uniform — as opposed to the diverse — to be ready to accept and to endorse radical political and artistic projects. This kind of taste can be, obviously, very unpopular, very unappealing to the masses. And that is one of the sources of the paradox that is well known to the historians of modern Utopias and of radical politics. On the one hand, these politics are truly democratic because they are truly universal, truly open to all — they are by no means elitist or exclusive. But, on the other hand, they appeal, as I said, to an aesthetic taste that is relatively rare. That is why radical democratic politics presents itself often enough as exclusive, as elitist. One must be committed to radical aesthetics to accept radical politics — and this sense of commitment produces relatively closed communities united by an identical project, by an identical vision, by an identical historical goal. The way of radical art and politics does not take us from closed premodern communities to open societies and markets. Rather, it takes us from relative open societies to closed communities based on common commitments. We know from the history of literature that all past Utopias were situated on remote islands or virtually inaccessible mountains. And we know how isolated, how closed the avantgarde movements were — even if their artistic programs were genuinely open. We have here a paradox of a universalist but closed community or movement — a paradox which is truly modern. And that means, in the case of radical political and artistic programs, we have to travel a different historical road than the one described by standard Cultural Studies: it is not a road from a premodern community to an open society of universal communication. Rather, it is a road from open and diverse markets toward Utopian communities based on a common commitment to a certain radical project. These artificial, Utopian communities are not based on the historical past, they are not interested in preserving its traces, in continuing a tradition. On the contrary, these universalist communities are based on historical rupture, on the rejection of diversity and difference in the name of a common cause.

To illustrate my point, I would like to quote a short but important text by Kazimir Malevich: "On the Museum," from 1919. At that time, the new Soviet government feared that the old Russian museums and art collections would be destroyed by civil war and by the general collapse of state institutions. The Communist Party responded by trying to secure and save these collections. In his text, Malevich protested against this pro-museum policy of Soviet power by calling on the state to not intervene on behalf of the old art collections because their destruction could open the path to true, living art. After posing several rhetorical questions such as "Do we need Rubens or the pyramids of Cheops? Does the pilot flying in the heights of our new awareness need the aging Venus? Do we need plaster copies of ancient cities borne by Greek columns?," Malevich comes to the following conclusion:

> Life knows what it is doing, and if it is striving to destroy one must not interfere, since by hindering we are blocking the path to a new conception of life that is born within us. In burning a corpse we obtain one gram of powder: accordingly thousands of graveyards could be accommodated on a single chemist's shelf. We can make a concession to conservatives by offering that they burn all past epochs, since they are dead, and set up one pharmacy.

Later, Malevich gives a concrete example of what he means:

> The aim [of this pharmacy] will be the same, even if people will examine the ashes of Rubens and all his art — a mass of ideas will arise in people, and will be often more alive than actual representation (and take up less room).[2]

For Malevich, the ideas inspired in someone viewing the ashes of Rubens' pictures are certainly not recollections of the burned past, but are instead forwardlooking ideas stemming from the realization that a return to the past has become impossible. The sight of the ashes obstructing the way back to their origins is meant to point us — indeed, even compel us — toward the future. Actually, Malevich wrote this short text in a period which saw a widespread surge of enthusiasm for crematoriums in Russian left-wing circles. This fascination with irreparable destruction certainly represents a very traditional line of radical European progressivist thinking. Rousseau had marveled at the burning of the ancient library at Alexandria, a loss which was claimed by him to have opened up the way for a new school of writing. Cremation was viewed as a symbolic rejection of the church's promise of life after death, portrayed in Christian mythology as resurrection from the grave. Anyone willing to make way for the future should also agree to the cremation of his body and the scattering of his ashes. Also in the West, many left-wing intellectuals, particularly Marxists, drew up their wills according to this perspective. In the radically progressive mood that gripped Moscow during the postrevolutionary years, artists and writers in particular were invited to take part in specially organized tours to experience the newly built crematoriums in operation — which also demonstrated in what order and manner the various parts of the body were cremated. These guided tours were very popular, especially among avant-garde artists who were eager to take their friends and lovers with them to such displays. Highly typical in this respect were projects furthering the secondary use of heat emitted during the cremation of corpses, especially for heating public buildings. The inefficiency of Russian crematoriums at that time was cited as the reason why these projects were ultimately discarded. But in any case, the reduction of historical identities and differences to the ashes with their absolute neutrality, uniformity, and complete lack of diversity was seen as a remedy against every nostalgia for and return to origins. By the way, this latter option remains alive in our time. Progress in modern genetics now offers the possibility of reconstructing the genetic code of even the most thoroughly decomposed corpse. On the other hand, as far as we can judge at present, cremation fully erases the genetic code, making it indeed utterly impossible to reproduce the past.

On the political and economic level, the October Revolution effectuated precisely such a complete break with the past, such an absolute destruction of every individual heritage. This break with every kind of heritage was introduced by the Soviet power on the practical level by completely abolishing private property and transferring every individual heritage into the collective property. Finding a trace of one's own heritage in this undifferentiated mass of collective property has become as impossible as tracing the individual incinerated objects in the collective mass of ashes. This complete break with the past constitutes the political as well as artistic avant-garde. The notion of the avantgarde is often associated with the notion of progress. In fact, the term *avantgarde* suggests such an interpretation because of its military connotations — initially, it referred to the troops advancing at the head of an army. The term begins to be used to characterize the radical artistic movement relatively late. To Russian revolutionary art, this notion began to be applied systematically in the 1960s. The Russian artists themselves never used the term *avantgarde*. Instead, they used names like Futurism, or Suprematism, or Constructivism — meaning not moving progressively toward the future but being already situated in the future because of the radical break with the past, being at the end — or even beyond the end — of history, understood in Marxist terms as a history of class struggle, or as a history of different art forms, different art styles, different art movements. Malevich's famous *Black Square*, in particular, was understood as the point zero of art and the point zero of life — and because of that,

as the point of identity between life and art, between artist and artwork, between spectator and art object, and so on. The end of history is understood here not in the same way as Francis Fukuyama understands it.[3] The end of history is here brought about not by the final victory of the market over every possible universal, unified political project but, on the contrary, by the ultimate political project, which means an ultimate rejection of the past, a final rupture with the history of diversity. It is the radical, the apocalyptic end of history — not the kind of end-of-history as is described by contemporary liberal theory. That is why the only real heritage of today's postcommunist subject — the real place where it is coming from — is the complete destruction of every kind of heritage, a radical, absolute break with the historical past and with every kind of separate cultural identity. Even the name of the country "Russia" was erased and substituted by a neutral name lacking any cultural tradition: Soviet Union. The contemporary Russian, post-Soviet citizen is coming from nowhere, from the point zero at the end of every possible history.

Now it becomes clear why it is so difficult for Cultural Studies to describe the way that postcommunist countries and populations entered after the demise of communism. On the one hand, this way seems to be the same old, wellknown way from a closed society to an open society, from the community to civil society. But the communist community was in many ways much more radically modern in its rejection of the past than the countries of the West. And this community was closed not because of the stability of its traditions but because of the radicality of its projects. And that means: the postcommunist subject travels the same route as described by the dominating discourse of Cultural Studies — but it travels this route in the opposite direction: not from the past to the future, but from the future to the past; from the end of history, from existing in posthistorical, postapocalyptic time, back to historical time. Postcommunist life is a life backwards, a movement against the flow of time. It is, of course, not a completely unique historical experience. We know many modern apocalyptic, prophetic, religious communities which were subjected to the necessity of going back in historical time. The same can be said about some artistic avantgarde movements and also about some politically motivated communities as we know them from the 1960s. The chief difference is the magnitude of a country like Russia, which must now make its way back — from the future to the past. But it is an important difference. We know that many apocalyptic sects have committed collective suicide because they were incapable of going back in time. But such a huge country as Russia does not have the option of suicide — and has to proceed backwards whatever feelings it has about it.

It goes without saying that the opening of the communist countries has meant for their populations, in the first place, not democratization in political terms but the necessity to survive under new economic conditions dictated by the international markets. And this means already a return of the past, because all communist countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia, had their capitalist past. But until very recent times, the only acquaintance most of the Russian population had with capitalism was above all via pre-revolutionary, 19th-century Russian literature. The sum of what people knew about banks, loans, insurance policies, or privately owned companies was borrowed from reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov at school — leaving impressions not unlike what people felt when they read about ancient Egypt. Of course, everyone was aware that the West was still a capitalist system; yet they were equally aware that they themselves were not living in the West, but in the Soviet Union. Then suddenly all these banks, loans, and insurance policies began to sprout up from their literary graves and become reality; so for ordinary Russians it feels now as if the ancient Egyptian mummies had risen from their tombs and were now reinstituting all their old laws.

Beyond that — and this is probably the worst part of the story — the contemporary Western cultural markets, as well as contemporary Cultural Studies, require the Russians, Ukrainians, etc., to rediscover, to redefine, and to manifest their alleged cultural identity. To demonstrate, for example, their specific

Russianness or Ukrainness, which, as I have tried to show, these postcommunist subjects do not have and cannot have because even if such cultural identities ever really existed they were already completely erased by the universalist Soviet social experiment. The uniqueness of communism lies in the fact that it is the first modern civilization that has historically perished — with the exception, perhaps, of the short-lived fascist regimes of the 1930s and ,40s. Up until that time, all other civilizations that had perished were pre-modern; therefore they still had fixed identities which can be documented by some outstanding monuments like Egyptian pyramids. But the communist civilization used only the things that are modern and in everyone's use — and, actually, non-Russian in their origins. The typical Soviet thing was Soviet Marxism. But it makes no sense to present Marxism to the West as a sign of Russian cultural identity because Marxism has, obviously, Western and not Russian origins. The specific Soviet meaning and use of Marxism could function and be demonstrated only in the specific context of the Soviet state. Now that this specific context has dissolved, Marxism has returned to the West — and the traces of its Soviet use have simply disappeared. The postcommunist subject feels itself like a Coca-Cola bottle of Warhol brought back from the museum into the supermarket. In the museum, this Coca-Cola bottle was an artwork and had an identity — but back in the supermarket the same Coca-Cola bottle looks just like every other Coca-Cola bottle. Unfortunately, this complete break with the historical past and this complete erasure of cultural identity are as difficult to explain to the outside world as it is to describe the experience of war or prison to someone who has never been at war or in prison. And that is why, instead of trying to explain its lack of cultural identity, the postcommunist subject tries to invent one — acting like Zelig in the famous Woody Allen movie.

This postcommunist quest for a cultural identity that seems to be so violent, so authentic, and so internally driven is, actually, a hysterical reaction to the requirements of the international cultural markets. Eastern Europeans want now to be as nationalistic, as traditional, as culturally identified, etc., as all the others — but they still do not know how to do this. Therefore, their apparent nationalism is primarily a reflection of and an accommodation to the quest for otherness that is characteristic of the cultural taste of the contemporary West. Ironically, this accommodation to the present international market requirements and dominating cultural taste is mostly interpreted by Western public opinion as a "rebirth" of nationalism, a "return of the repressed," as an additional proof corroborating the current belief in otherness and diversity. A good example of this mirror effect — the East reflecting Western expectations of "otherness" and confirming them by artificially simulating its cultural identity — is the reshaping of Moscow architecture that took place almost immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union.

In the relatively brief period since the Soviet Union was disbanded, Moscow — once the Soviet, now the Russian capital — has already undergone an astonishingly rapid and thorough architectural transformation. A lot has been built in this short time, and the newly constructed buildings and monuments have redefined the face of the city. The question surely is, in what manner? The answer most frequently advanced in texts by Western observers and in some quarters of today's more earnest Russian architectural criticism is that Moscow's architecture is kitschy, restorative, and above all eager to appeal to regressive Russian nationalist sentiments. In the same breath, these commentators claim to make out a certain discrepancy between Russia's embrace of capitalism and the regressive, restorative aesthetics now evident in the Russian capital. The reason most often provided for this alleged contradiction is that, in view of the current wave of modernization and the host of economic and social pressures brought in its wake, these restorative aesthetics are intended as a compensatory measure through their evocation of Russia's past glory.

Without question, the aesthetic profile of modern Moscow is unambiguously restorative; although one encounters a few quotations of contemporary Western architecture, these references are always situated in a historicist, eclectic context. In particular, it is the most representative buildings of

Moscow's new architecture that signal a programmatic rejection of the contemporary international idiom. Yet in Russia, as was already mentioned, capitalism is already experienced as restorative, namely as the return from the country's socialist future back to its pre-revolutionary, capitalist past. This in turn means that, rather than contradicting it, restorative architecture is actually complicit with the spirit of Russian capitalism. According to Russian chronology, modernism is a feature of the socialist future, which now belongs to the past, rather than being part of the capitalist past, which is now the future. In Russia, modernism is associated with socialism — and not, as it is in the West, with progressive capitalism. This is not merely because modernist artists often voiced socialist views, but also due to modernism's concurrence with a period when socialism prevailed in Russia — which means, actually, with the entire 20th century. That is why the new Moscow architecture wants to signal the return of the country to pre-revolutionary times, e.g., to the 19th century, by abandoning the modernism of the20th century. Furthermore, Russians associate modernism above all with Soviet architecture of the 1960s and ‚70s, which by and large they utterly detested. During these decades, vast urban zones sprung up all over the Soviet Union, stocked with enormous, highly geometrical, standardized residential buildings of a gray and monotonous appearance and entirely bereft of artistic flair. This was architecture on the bottom line. Modernism in this guise is now spurned since it is felt to combine monotony and standardization and embody socialism's characteristic disregard for personal taste. As it happens, similar arguments can be heard today in a like-minded rejection of the oppositional and modernistically inclined dissident culture of the 1960s and ‚70s, whose proponents nowadays find approval for the most part only in the West. In Russia, the former dissident culture is dismissed for still being too Soviet, in other words, for being too arrogant, intolerant, doctrinaire, and modernist. Instead, the current cause célèbre in Russia is postmodernism. Thus, the postmodernist return of 19th-century eclecticism and historicism is currently celebrated in Russia as signaling the advent of true pluralism, openness, democracy, and the right to personal taste — as the immediate visual confirmation that Russian people feel liberated at last from the moralistic sermons of communist ideology and the aesthetic terror of modernism. But, contrary to this rhetoric of diversity, inclusiveness, and liberation of personal taste, the new Moscow style is, in fact, wholly the product of centralized planning. Today's most representative and stylistically influential buildings have come about on the initiative of the post-Soviet mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, and his preferred sculptor, Zurab Tsereteli. As was also the case with Stalinist architecture, which likewise was the result of close cooperation between Stalin and a small coterie of carefully appointed architects, this is an example of a most typically Russian phenomenon — a case, namely, of planned and centralized pluralism. The current Moscow style has distanced itself from the modernist monotony of the 1960s and ‚70s to the same degree as Stalinist architecture was divesting itself of the rigorism of the Russian avant-garde. The Moscow style is a revival of a revival. But most importantly, this return to popular taste and aesthetic pluralism in both cases ultimately proved to be a state-sponsored mise-en-scène.

The way this kind of controlled pluralism functions is well illustrated by a concrete example, the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in the center of Moscow, a project which was just recently completed. This rebuilt cathedral is already counted as the most important post-Soviet architectural monument in Moscow today. More than anyone else, Luzhkov has prioritized the reconstruction of the cathedral as the city's most prestigious project. A few historical details should shed light on the implications of this restoration project.

The original Cathedral of Christ the Savior was built by the architect Konstantin Ton between 1838 and 1883 as a symbol of Russia's victory over the Napoleonic army; it was demolished on Stalin's orders in 1931. Immediately after its completion, the disproportionately huge cathedral was roundly criticized and ridiculed as monumental kitsch. This original view was shared by all subsequent architectural opinion, which was probably a further reason for the later decision to blow it up — it simply was deemed to be of little artistic value. At the same time, this demolition amounted to an intensely

symbolic political act, since in spite of— or rather precisely due to — its kitschy character, the cathedral was immensely popular with the people, as well as being the most vivid expression of the power held by the Russian Orthodox Church in pre-revolutionary Russia. Hence its demolition came as the climax of the anticlerical campaign being waged in the late 1920s and ‚30s, which is why it has left such an indelible mark on popular memory.

Given its symbolic status, Stalin designed the square that had been cleared by the cathedral's demolition to be a site for the construction of the Palace of the Soviets, which was envisaged as the paramount monument to Soviet communism. The Palace of the Soviets was never built — just as the communist future that it was meant to commemorate was never achieved. Yet the design of the palace, drafted by Boris Iofan in the mid-1930s and, only after numerous revisions, approved by Stalin, is still regarded — justly — as the most notable architectural project of the Stalin era. For although the Palace of the Soviets was never actually erected, the project itself served as a prototype for all Stalinist architecture thereafter. This is particularly conspicuous in the notorious Stalinist skyscrapers built in the postwar years that even now largely dominate Moscow's skyline. Just as official ideology at that time claimed that communism was being prepared and prefigured by Stalinist culture, Stalin's skyscrapers were assembled around the nonexistent Palace of the Soviets in order to herald its advent. However, in the course of de-Stalinization during the 1960s, this locale was given over to build a gigantic open-air swimming pool, the Moskva, in lieu of the palace; and, like the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, it subsequently enjoyed enormous popularity. The pool was kept open even in the winter, so for several months each year vast clouds of steam could be seen from all around, lending the entire prospect the air of a subterranean hell. But this pool can also be viewed as a place where Moscow's population could cleanse themselves of the sins of their Stalinist past. One way or another, it is precisely its memorable location that makes this swimming pool the most dramatic embodiment of the "modernist" cultural consciousness of the 1960s and ‚70s: it represents a radical renunciation of any type of architectural style, it is like swimming free beneath a clear sky, the *degré zéro* of architecture.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the swimming pool was emptied and replaced by an exact replica of the demolished Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Just how true to the original this copy in fact is has now become a highly debated and contentious issue in Russia. But ultimately, all that counts is the underlying intention, which unquestionably is to construct the nearest possible replica of the demolished church — which functions symbolically as an exact copy of the historical past, of Russian cultural identity. Far from being a monument to the new Russian nationalism or a symptom of the resurrection of anti- Western sentiment, the rebuilding of the cathedral was designed to celebrate the defeat of the Soviet universalist, modernist, avant-garde past and the return to the folkloristic Russian identity, an identity that can be easily inscribed in the new capitalist international order. And at first glance, such a symbolic return to national identity seems to be especially smooth in this case: during the entire Soviet period, the site of the cathedral remained, as I said, a void, a blank space — like a white sheet of paper that can be filled with every kind of writing. Accordingly, to reconstruct the old cathedral on its former site, there was no need to remove, to destroy any existing buildings. The Soviet time manifests itself here as an ecstatic interruption of historical time, as a pure absence, as materialized nothingness, as a void, a blank space. So it seems that if this void disappears, nothing will be changed: the deletion will be deleted, and a copy will become identical with the original — without any additional historical losses.

But in fact, this reconstruction demonstrates that the movement to the past — as, earlier, the movement to the future — only brings the country again and again to the same spot. And this spot, this point from which the panorama of Russian history can be seen in its entirety has a name: Stalinism. The culture of the Stalin time was already an attempt to reappropriate the past after the complete

revolutionary break with it — to find in the historical garbage pit left behind by the Revolution certain things that could be useful for the construction of the new world after the end of history. The key principle of Stalinist dialectical materialism, which was developed and sealed in the mid-1930s, is embodied in the so-called "Law of the unity and the struggle of opposites." According to this principle, two contradictory statements can be simultaneously valid. Far from being mutually exclusive, "A" and "not A" must be engaged in a dynamic relationship: in its inner structure, a logical contradiction reflects the real conflict between antagonistic historical forces, which is what constitutes thevitally dynamic core of life. Thus, only statements that harbor internal contradictions are deemed "vital" and hence true. That is why Stalin-era thinking automatically championed contradiction to the detriment of the consistent statement. Such great emphasis on contradictoriness was of course a legacy dialectical materialism had inherited from Hegel's dialectic. Yet in the Leninist- Stalinist model, as opposed to Hegel's postulates, this contradiction could never be historically transcended and retrospectively examined. All contradictions were constantly at play, remained constantly at variance with one another and constantly comprised a unified whole. So rigid insistence on a single chosen assertion was counted as a crime, as a perfidious assault on this unity of opposites. The doctrine of the unity and the struggle of opposites constitutes the underlying motif and the inner mystery of Stalinist totalitarianism. For this variant of totalitarianism lays claim to unifying absolutely all conceivable contradictions. Stalinism rejects nothing: it takes everything into its embrace and assigns to everything the position it deserves. The only issue that the Stalinist mindset finds utterly intolerable is an intransigent adherence to the logical consistency of one's own argument to the exclusion of any contrary position. In such an attitude, Stalinist ideology sees a refusal of responsibility toward life and the collective, an attitude that could only be dictated by malicious intentions. The basic strategy of this ideology can be said to operate in the following manner: If Stalinism has already managed to unite all contradictions under the sheltering roof of its own thinking, what could be the point of partisanly advocating just one of these various contrary positions? There can ultimately be no rational explanation for such behavior, since the position in question is already well looked after within the totality of Stalinist ideology. The sole reason for such a stubborn act of defiance must consequently lie in an irrational hatred of the Soviet Union and a personal resentment of Stalin. Since it is impossible to reason with someone so full of hatred, regrettably the only remedy available is reeducation or elimination.

This brief detour into the doctrine of Stalinist dialectical materialism allows us to formulate the criterion that intrinsically determined artistic creativity during the Stalin era: namely, each work of art endeavored to incorporate a maximum of internal aesthetic contradictions. This same criterion also informed the strategies of art criticism in that period, which always reacted allergically whenever a work of art was found to be expressing a clearly defined, consistently articulated, and unambiguously identifiable aesthetic position — the actual nature of this position was considered secondary. Contrary to the explicit and aggressive aesthetics of the artistic avant-garde, the aesthetic of the Stalin time never defined itself in positive terms. Neither Stalinist ideology nor Stalinist art politics are in any sense "dogmatic." Rather, Stalinist state power acts as an invisible hand behind the heterogeneity, diversity, and plurality of individual artistic projects — censoring, editing, and combining these projects according to its own vision of the ideologically appropriate mix. Which means that the symbolic void on which the new-old cathedral is built is not such a blank space after all. It is an invisible, internal space of power hidden behind the diversity of artistic forms. That is why, in the present context, it became so easy to coordinate — if not to identify — this invisible hand of Stalinist state power with the invisible hand of the market. Both operate in the same space behind the diverse, heterogeneous, pluralistic surface. Far from signifying a rebirth of Russian cultural identity, the cathedral's copy in the center of Moscow symbolizes a revival of Stalinist cultural practices under the new market conditions.

This example of the revival of Soviet Stalinist aesthetics as an effect of postmodern taste which I have tried to elaborate at some length illustrates a certain point that I would like to make at the end of my

presentation. Art is, of course, political. All attempts to define art as autonomous and to situate it above or beyond the political field are utterly naive. But having said that, we should not forget that art cannot be reduced to a specific field among many other fields which are functioning as arenas for political decisions. It is not enough to say that art is dependent on politics. I think it is more important to thematicize the dependence of political discourses, strategies, and decisions on aesthetic attitudes, tastes, preferences, and predispositions. As I have tried to show, radical politics cannot be dissociated from a certain aesthetic taste — the taste for the universal, for the degré zéro of diversity. On the other hand, liberal, market-oriented politics is correlated with the preference for diversity, difference, openness, and heterogeneity. In our time, the postmodern taste still prevails. Radical political projects have almost no chance today of being accepted by the public because they do not correlate with the dominant aesthetic sensibility. But the times are changing. And it is very possible that in some near future a new sensibility for radical art and politics will emerge again.

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