“WE ARE LIKE THE FOREMOTHERS”

Traces of the Avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus

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Abstract

The thesis explores and argues the traces of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus during the Interwar period (1918–1939). Because of a particular historical frame, as the dissertation explains, these traces are closely related to the political processes of the 1980s (perestroika and glasnost). The research, therefore, begins, like a travel to the past, by investigating the non-conformist artistic scene of that period. Despite the established tradition of avant-garde theory, recent scholarship proclaims the need to re-think this social and cultural phenomenon from the perspective of non-Eurocentric experiences. It is a question of alternative theoretical models that are essential for determining the phenomenon beyond Western European borders, especially in countries such as Belarus, where the avant-gardes emerged when a new Belarusian state and culture were 'mapped'. Based on decolonial studies, performative and biographical approaches, the thesis unfolds some cases of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus as (un)performed histories problematising the relationship between the transcultural agenda of the avant-gardes and (past and current) processes of decolonisation of Belarusian culture. However, the study reasons that what is identified as (un)performance and incompleteness signifies neither less significance nor less value of those arts. Instead, it problematises the existing "canon" of art history based on different forms of hierarchy (firstly, centre/periphery and gender logic).

This research not only explores the lesser-known context of Soviet Belarussian culture but also makes a significant contribution to the current debates about the avant-gardes in "peripheries". It sheds light on their diversified and multidimensional characters, adding a new dimension to the ongoing discourse.

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Contents

Note on language and transliteration

Officially, there are two languages in Belarus—Belarusian and Russian—although the latter dominates all spheres, including transliteration in humanities. Usually, personal and place names are transliterated according to ALA-LC style that "universalises" the Belarusian language, making it "closer" to Russian. Besides, the linguistic context loses the peculiarities that have a singular meaning in the study of culture. For this reason, I find it significant to adhere to the tradition of Belarusian Lacinka, which was used from the sixteenth century and has been developed—as an alternative version of the Belarusian language—since the end of the nineteenth century. Still, the Belarusian language exists in two alphabets—Kirylica (Cyrillic) and Lacinka (Latin), which, as an umbrella term, describes several historical alphabets that aimed to transliterate Belarusian Cyrillic texts to Latin script. Despite some differences between these versions, the common practice is to use diacritical marks, which include č (ч), š (ш), šč (шч), ž (ж), dž (дж) instead of ch, sh, zh, dzh. Also, I keep ŭ (ў) and ´ (ь) at the end of words (e.g., дзь = dź, зь = ź, ль = Ĺ, нь = ń, сь = ś, ць = ć).

Despite official bilingualism in Belarus, I use the Belarusian version of personal and place names in the first place for translation. But I also give in brackets the Russian form at the first mention since it might be more widespread in literature and science. In some cases of writing the names of Belarusian Jews, I keep the Russian version but add the original Jewish name in brackets. The names of such artists as Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine or Ossip Zadkine, who belonged to the phenomenon *École de Paris* and have turned into "global" art history brands, are spelt in their recognisable "universal" forms. Besides, the names of some scholars from Belarus who live abroad and work in foreign universities for a long period are also presented in their "globalised" manner, e.g. Almira Ousmanova and Elena Gapova.

Emphasising the significance of a decolonial approach in my study, it might encounter scholarly 'resistance'. For instance, the use of 'Viciebsk' (from Belarusian) instead of 'Vitebsk' (from Russian) in the spelling could be challenging to accept. However, as my research is rooted in a decolonial approach, it must commence with language, as Armando Muyolema aptly states, "to name is to struggle".[1]

[1] Armando Muyolema, "De la 'cuestión indígena' a lo 'indígena' como cuestionamiento: Hacia una crítica del latinoamericanismo, el indigenismo y el mestiz(o)aje", qtd. in Catherine E. Walsh, "The Decolonial For. Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements," in *On Decoloniality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 22. See also, Eric Anchimbe and Stephen A Mforteh, *Postcolonial linguistic voices: identity choices and representations* (Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2011).

The names of Belarusian magazines and artistic groups are presented in the original with the English translation in the brackets: ‘Uzvyšša’ (Elevation), Belaruskaja litaraturna-mastackaja kamuna (the Belarusian Literature and Art Commune) but UNOVIS (The Affirmers of the New Art), TEREVSAT (Theatre of Revolutionary Satire). As for the abbreviation of Soviet institutions and organisations, I follow the standard rules: NKVD (the All-Union People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs), but the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (Narkompros).

Abbreviations

AAVF: Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo Foundation
BDAMLM: Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art
BDT-1: First Belarusian State Theatre
BDT-2: Second Belarusian State Theatre
BelGOSET: Belarusian State Jewish Theatre
BPR: Belarusian People's Republic
BSSR: Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic
GAVO: State Archives of Viciebsk Region
GPU: State Political Directorate
IZO: Department of Fine Arts
KP(b): All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)
LEF: Left Front of the Arts
MOPR: International Red Aid
Narkompros: People's Commissariat of Enlightenment 1917–31
NKVD: People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
OKNA Rosta: Russian Telegraph Agency
Proletcult: Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organizations Theatre
RABIS: Art Workers' Union (Artists' Trade Union) 1919–24
RSFSR: Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
TEREVSAT: Theatre of Revolutionary Satire
TRAM: Theatre of Working Youth
UNOVIS: Affirmers of the New Art
VKhUTEMAS: Higher Artistic-Technical Studios, replaced SVOMAS, 1920
Zhenotdel: Women's department of the Central Committee of the All-Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks)

The periphery has the potential to subvert categories that have dominated (art) historical thinking since its inception (centre, canon, nation), while bringing to the fore the fundamentally unequal power configurations that have characterised the discipline and its various practices.

Foteini Vlachou[2]

[2] Nandia-Foteini Vlachou, "Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery," in *The Disappointed Writer*, ed. Pinto dos Santos Mariana (Lisbon: Edições do Saguão, 2019), 335.

In the intermission between
two wars
your father sang a song.
By the time

I heard this song, it had no music.

Patching the lyrics with mmm and
aaa (after the third war you got by
as a seamstress),
you lost the thread
of melody and pitch.

[...]

It goes mmm and aaa
without melody, without
music.

All there is to it
is your sad face

that goes mmm and aaa
to Bach, Brahms, Rachmaninov—

Valzhyna Mort, “Music Practice”[3]

[3] Valzhyna Mort, “Music Practice”, in *Music for the Death and Resurrected* (London: Bloomsbury Poetry, 2022), 43-5.

Introduction

On 4 November 1988, in the Belarusian city Viciebsk (Vitebsk), a group of artists headed by Ludmila Rusava (Ludmila Rusova) and Ihar Kaškurevič (Igor Kashkurevich), two of the leading figures of the Soviet Belarusian informal art scene, performed the piece *Ažyŭliennie Kazimira* (*Kazimir's Revival*). The performance was shown at the opening of the exhibition "Ekspieryment" ("Experiment") dedicated to the heritage of Malevich, who founded the art suprematist group UNOVIS (The Affirmers of the New Art) in 1920 in Viciebsk. Almost seventy years later, the artists of Soviet Belarus who opposed Soviet state ideology turned back to the avant-garde, which was forbidden (as 'an enemy art') in the Soviet republics since the mid-1930s and almost 'forgotten' after World War II. The artists proclaimed the need for alternative art roots, which they found in the 1920s, a period that played a crucial role in the 'mapping' of Belarusian cultural identification.

There was an installation of one circle and two sheets of white metal squares on the background; a white cross-shaped coffin (similar to the one in which Malevich was buried in 1935) was placed at the centre. Using the sheets as drums, men dressed in red and black were making beats. The performance had started. Men and women dressed in red came to the coffin and lifted its lid. A young woman (Ludmila Rusava) dressed in black was lying in the coffin; she stood up. Two women put wooden shields with geometric figures on her. Another woman put a cone-shaped cap on her head. Then, Rusava moved slowly on a white track. Following the beat of the drums, she opened geometrical signs; she came to a white wall and painted three black squares. "Supremos!" Ihar Kaškurevič acclaimed. The women took the black clothes and the cup off and put it on a rack, reviving the figure of Malevich. The artists turned Malevich into an effigy. Ihar Kaškurevič proclaimed, "Supremos!" (Fig.1).

This image of Rusava clothed in a black dress with a cone-shaped cap on her head became iconic for Belarusian modern art history. However, this action was not simply an artistic gesture that embodied the moment of political transition in the 1980s, when the Belarusian informal art scene left the underground and placed itself in the vanguard of social

and political processes.[4] Nor was it merely a gesture reclaiming avant-garde history for Belarusian cultural narrative. In 1909, Tommaso Marinetti attacked artists who wasted "all [their] best powers in this eternal and futile worship of the past, from which you emerge fatally exhausted, shrunken, beaten down." He said, "we [as futurists] are the revival and extension of our ancestors. [...] But who cares?"[5] The break with the past became a fundamental criterion for the 'recognition' of avant-gardists for decades. However, for the artists of late-Soviet Belarus, it was essential to identify who their ancestors were. Due to the colonised and oppressed character of Belarusian culture, they could not access their history for many years. From the West-European perspective, they might be considered representatives of the so-called 'neo-avant-garde'; therefore, they should rather replay, revise and challenge the past[6]. And they did. But this gesture had another meaning because it was the first time when neither Russian nor Soviet but a particular *Belarusian avant-garde* was proclaimed. This was done not directly through this performance, as it was one among other artistic actions that referred to the avant-gardes of the 1920s in Soviet Belarus. But the makers of *Kazimir's Revival* belonged to those groups of artists who (were) identified as the 'Belarusian avant-garde' (ch.1).

Exploring the phenomenon of the Armenian art context of the late-Socialist and post-Soviet period, Angela Harutyunyan mentions the definition of 'national avant-garde,' which was introduced by Armenian art critic Nazareth Karoyan to define art which—in contrast to figurative art of socialist realism and Armenian modernism ("formalism in service to a fading and disintegrating ideology")—was aesthetically "radical and innovative" and national in content without any reference to 'the historical avant-garde.'[7] Harutyunyan concludes, "The avant-garde is used on occasions when the actors of the contemporary art scene positioned themselves in the vanguard of the very scene they were part of."[8] It was not an allusion to "periodisation" or "qualitative transformations," as the Western and North American canons propose. Instead, it poses the question of theoretical revision of relations between 'the avant-garde' and 'contemporaneity' in the context of current attempts to imagine art history in

[4] See, Tania Arcimovich, "Freedom cannot be personal, or Art as a Restrictions Antithesis," in *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*, ed. Tania Arcimovich and Artur Klinau (Minsk: Halijafy, 2016), 15–20.
[5] Tomaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Documents of 20th Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 24.
[6] See, Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* 70 (1994): 5–32; Dietrich Scheunemann, ed., *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005); David Hopkins, ed., *Neo-Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006).
[7] Angela Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde: The Journey of the "Painterly Real," 1987–2004* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 21–2.
[8] Ibid., 23.

multiple temporalities.[9] In addition, the controversial definition of 'national avant-garde'—as a contradiction between 'national' and 'transnational'— discloses a temporal 'confusion' (or transition), which happened in Soviet republics during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Harutyunyan describes it as "an evolutionary and gradual disintegration [which] was combined with the disruptive event of its actual legal and political demise." It requires, therefore, "an approach that conceives history through a dialectic of rupture and continuity."[10]

This was entirely what the makers of *Kazimir's Revival* had done. In response to the role of the past and the constructed discourse of 'tradition' (in the sense of what 'traditional' Belarusian art can be), the performance attacked the 'conventional' discourse of the avant-garde as a program of 'burning' the past. On the contrary, the reference to memory was meaningful for Belarusian culture, where the processes of its institutionalisation (including the narrative of the past which the avant-gardes should attack) have not been completed. Consequently, *Kazimir's Revival* manifested different possible embodiments, or, referring to James M. Harding, "births,"[11] of the avant-garde beyond its Western European model. "By showing how the present is constituted historically,"[12] it destroyed *a linear history of art*[13] opening the field for, what Walter D. Mignolo calls, "a local story."[14]

A glance back at history

The avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s was a special period for Central and Eastern European countries and the Soviet Union[15] because "territory met geography and geography intersected with the geopolitics of nation-states."[16] The old systems of hierarchies and norms collapsed while new states, borders, social and cultural structures emerged. World War I, the February

[9] Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde,* 23–30. The term "contemporaneity" was developed by such scholars as Terry Smith and Foteini Vlachou as a "device" to describe alternative temporal modes for those contexts which are identified as a "province" or "periphery". Vlachou, "Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery," 343.
[10] Ibid.*,* 7.
[11] James M. Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 2.
[12] Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde*, 9.
[13] See, James Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing: North Atlantic Art History and its Alternatives* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).
[14] W. D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 21–2, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unigiessen/detail.action?docID=999946.
[15] Although the USSR was formed in 1922, I will refer to this formation to speak about the territories which were under Bolshevism before the Soviet Union was officially declared.
[16] Steven Seegel, *Map Men. Transnational Lives and Deaths of Geographers in the Making of East Central Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 6. About the relations between cartography and imperialism in the Russian Empire, see, Catherine Gibson, *Geographies of Nationhood. Cartography, Science, and Society in the Russian Imperial Baltic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

and the October revolutions of 1917 provoked a historical moment for these countries to declare their cultural autonomy. Before 1918, when the first attempt to establish a sovereign state was made, Belarus had never existed as a state. From the thirteenth century to the eighteenth century,[17] it was a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth[18]; at the end of the eighteenth century, the entire territory of modern Belarus was annexed by the Russian Empire. At the beginning of the twentieth century, political transformations and crises in Western European countries and the Russian Empire made possible the consolidation of some Belarusian political groups and, as a result, "the institutionalisation of the Belarusian idea into *nacyjanaĺna-adradženski ruch* [the national revival movement] which aimed to embody the idea of the political independence of Belarus. [… WWI] became a powerful catalyst of political and ethno-cultural processes in the region."[19] Historians describe this period as a time of ideological controversy among different political groups. In 1920, due to struggles between Belarusian nationalists and Byelorussian Bolsheviks[20], the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic was finally proclaimed and existed till the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

According to most studies of Russian and Soviet avant-garde,[21] revolutionary or left art, as it was called in the Soviet Union, occupied a significant ideological role in the Soviet Republics in the years following the October Revolution. As Saint-Simon proclaimed a century ago, the new Bolshevik authority considered artists a force "to spread the ideas among men [...]. This is the duty of artists, this their mission"[22]. In 1920, the People's Commissar of Enlightenment Anatoly Lunacharsky wrote, "The state asks itself: could art be of use to it in [promotion of a revolutionary mode of thinking]? And the answer inevitably suggests itself: if

[17] Before this period, the history of Belarus was similar to the histories of other Central and Eastern European countries, in particular, its division into different principalities (*kniastva*) both within and outside of Kievan Rus.
[18] Stanley Bill and Simon Lewis, *Multicultural Commonwealth. Poland-Lithuania and Its Afterlives* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2023).
[19] Uladzimir Liachoŭski and Andrej Čarniakievič, "'A Chto Tam Idzie?' Bielaruski ruch na miažy XIX i XX stahoddziaŭ i pačatki idei niezaliežnasci Bielarusi", *ARCHE* no.4 (2017): 6.
[20] According to the new rules of 2007, the spellings "Belarus" and "Belarusian" are officially accepted. The main point to change the early version "Byelorussian" was to declare Belarus as an independent state and to dissociate it from both Soviet Byelorussia and Russia (my highlighting). I use "Byelorussian" in some cases when it is necessary to contrast "Belarus" with "the Soviet Byelorussian Republic" to underline the heterogeneity of ideologies within the country in a particular period. See, Andrew Savchenko, *Belarus: A Perpetual Borderland* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Siarhiej Šupa, *Padarožža ŭ BNR, Archiŭny raman* (Prague: Radyjo Svabodnaja Eŭropa, 2018); Alena Marková, *The Path to a Soviet Nation: The Policy of Belarusization* (Paderborn: Brill Schöningh, 2022).
[21] See, Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918–1928* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).
[22] Qtd. in Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of Avant-Garde in Art and Politics," *Leonardo* 3, no. 1 (1970): 76.

revolution can give art its soul, then art can give revolution its mouthpiece."[23] For the avant-garde artists, the October Revolution, which was associated with the emancipation of class, ethnic minorities, and artistic means, opened a horizon for realising artistic revolutions. But it was just one of the reasons that they were often directly engaged in the process of creating new institutions or even state buildings. As recent scholarship exposes, the involvement of artists in the political and social fields constituted a long-term process and happened for various reasons (ch. 3). Nevertheless, artists established and worked in Bolshevik institutions, leading the vanguard of cultural and social transformations. Their manifestos, artworks, and performances presented programs for a new cultural and social order, "launching the readers into a utopian space of hitherto unknown life forms and experiences."[24] In 1921, the theatre director Asja Lācis wrote, "Art is not an end in itself, yet it helps to achieve the ultimate goals of humankind. In this sense, art and socialism have to walk hand in hand. [...] This new life will be united with art."[25]

As in many other countries, even outside the Soviet Union,[26] the communist agenda looked like a hybrid of communism and nationalism in Soviet Belarus. Before the October Revolution, Belarusians were mainly peasants regarding class hierarchy. Therefore, Belarusian nationalism, which was articulated by several political formations, was rooted in "the gaps between national and social identity and was coloured to a substantial extent by external forces."[27] It was one of the reasons that many artists and writers supported Belarusian Bolshevism in the 1920s, being engaged in the development of the Belarusian cultural project in the BSSR. Defining the phenomenon of the avant-garde in Belarusian literature, scholar Iryna Bahdanovič (Irina Bogdanovich) mentions the poets and writers of such groups as "Maladniak" (Young Growth), "Uzvyšša" (Elevation) and Belaruskaja litaraturna-mastackaja kamuna (the Belarusian Literature and Art Commune[28]), who closely collaborated with the

[23] Anatolii Lunacharsky, "Revolution and Art 1920–22," in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson, 2017), 191.
[24] David Ayers et al., "New People of a New Life. Modernism, Avant-Garde and the Aesthetics of Utopia", in *Utopia. The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life*, ed. David Ayers and al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 3.
[25] Asja Lācis, "New Tendencies in Theater", in A. Lācis; W. Benjamin and A. Brinkmanis, "Signals from Another World: Proletarian Theater as a Site for Education", *Documenta* 14, no.9 (2017). https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/25225_signals_from_another_world_proletarian_theater_as_a_site_for_education_texts_by_asja_la_cis_and_walter_benjamin_with_an_introduction_by_andris_brinkmanis.
[26] See, Steven S. Lee, *The Ethnic Avant-Garde: Minority Cultures and World Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).
[27] Simon Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions. Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Routledge, 2018).
[28] Viktar Žybul, "Futurystyčnaja mara bielarusaŭ. Dziejnasć 'Bielaruskaja litaraturna-mastackaj kamuny' va ŭspaminach i dakumientach," *ARCHE*, no. 9 (2008): 106-148.

new Bolshevik authority. Despite the visible intersection with Russian futurism and LEF (the Left Front of the Arts) programs, Bahdanovič highlights some features of the Belarusian model of the literary avant-gardes. On the one hand, this model criticised the romantic literary tradition. On the other hand, it referred to the visions of the past as a means for cultural emancipation, for instance, using motives of Belarusian paganism.[29] Identifying themselves as "the avant-garde of new proletarian literature"[30] in the military sense of the term, these writers and artists spoke in Belarusian, wore clothes with the national symbols, and generally participated in Belarusian cultural projects.

Other artists were inspired by the transnational agenda of Bolshevism which was proclaimed during the first years after the Revolution and promised equal status for the people of *non-Russian* ethnicity, including Jews.[31] For Leŭ Litvinaŭ (Lev/Leib Litvinov), who was known as one of the most experimental theatre directors of the time, such a promise allowed for the possibility of a professional theatre career in the Jewish theatre. Not only that, but at the beginning of the 1930s, he became the leader of the Belarusian national theatre (ch. 6.2.). At the same time, there were individuals and collective avant-garde projects that avoided involvement in national debates. The artists of Viciebsk People's Art School, which became famous for the activities of Marc Chagall and Kazimir Malevich, made radical experiments with the modes of perception and presented an alternative communal form of artistic collaboration that existed next to and independent of the debates about nationality and identity as an ideological project (ch.3.3–4.).

In the mid-1920s, the new leader of the Communist Party, Stalin, started centralising power by declaring the main ideological programs. As Erik van Ree notes, earlier in his political career, Stalin described "the Great Russians as the most modern, leading nation of the empire."[32] While giving a speech in 1925, he touched upon the question of the relations

[29] I. Bahdanovič, "Na ŭzviejach avanhardyzmu. Avanhard," in *Avanhard i tradycyja. Bielaruskaja paezija na chvali nacyjanaĺnaha adradžennia* (Minsk: Belaruskaja Navuka, 2001), https://kamunikat.org/usie_knihi.html?pubid=24482.

[30] Hanna Sieviaryniec, *Uladzimir Duboŭka. Jon i pra jaho* (Minsk: Limaryus, 2017), 91. Transl. from Belarusian.

[31] In my research, I use the notion of non-Russian beyond the linguistic connotations since the Russian language (due to imperial policy) was widespread in the entire territory of the Russian Empire and then the USSR. Instead, "non-Russian" contrasts with Russian ethnicity, originally Velikorossy. See: Marija Leskinen, *Velikoross/velikorus: iz istorii konstruirovanija ėtničnosti: vek XIX* (Moscow: Indrik, 2016). However, scholars should be careful with the English translation of Velikorossy which is currently *Great Russians*, see, e.g. the speech of Stalin below. Such a translation constructs unnecessary connotations that might even sound contradictory. Thus, the title of the article by Lenin "O natsional'noj gordosti velikorossov" (1914) in which the author focused on the need to emancipate non-Russian ethnicities in the Russian Empire and criticised imperialism was translated as "On the National Pride of *the Great Russians*" (my underlining) which creates another, even opposite, meaning.

[32] E. van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin: A Study in Twentieth Century Revolutionary Patriotism* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 190.

between national and proletarian cultures and concluded "that the slogan of national culture is a reactionary slogan of the bourgeoisie ... [therefore, it should be] Proletarian in content, national in form."[33] This statement started the political campaigns against nationally-oriented cultural programs and their leaders in all Soviet non-Russian republics. In the following years, the formula "socialist in content, national in form" delineated cultural politics throughout the Soviet Union. According to Stalin's doctrines, the method of socialist realism—as a "historically open aesthetic system of the truthful representation of life"—was the only legitimate form of art,[34] while all the national and "left" aesthetic programs, paradoxically, were associated with Western "bourgeois" art.

Since the early 1930s, a wave of political repression swept across artists, theatre directors, writers, and poets who were initially deemed *too nationally oriented* and, later, *too avant-garde* (formalist).[35] The post-revolutionary Bolshevik agenda of transnationalism morphed into Soviet Imperialism, with Russian culture at its helm. Arts of other nations within the USSR were labelled "national" but flourished due to the "influence of the advanced Russian culture filled by progressive and revolutionary thoughts."[36] At the end of the 1930s, many Belarusian intellectuals, scientists, artists, and writers were exiled or executed by the Soviet authorities. Comparable processes were unfolding in other Soviet non-Russian republics.[37]

Following Stalin's demise in 1953 and the onset of the Thaw period (*ottepel*) in the USSR, the memory of the avant-garde began to stir. In the Russian Soviet Republic (RSFSR), many artists and scholars who had been repressed during Stalin's rule were rehabilitated. However, in Belarus, as in other national Soviet republics, the nature of these processes varied due to new campaigns against nationalist movements initiated by new Soviet leaders. It remained prohibited to reference any national model of history. In 1956, the Institute for the

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[33] E. van Ree, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin,* 190–1.

[34] Thomas Lahusen, "Socialist Realism without Shores. Some Historical Remarks on the 'Historically Open Aesthetic System of the Truthful Representation of Life,'" in *Socialist Realism without Shores* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 5–26.

[35] For instance, most members of the Belarusian Literature and Art Commune (the most leftist artistic group associated with futurism) were executed by NKVD in the 1930s. V. Žybuĺ, "Futuryst Piatruś Broŭka", *ARCHE Pačatak*, no. 5 (2005), https://xn--d1ag.xn--e1a4c/pub/arche/html/2005-5/zybul505.htm. Several labels were used in Soviet propaganda, such as *nac-demy* (nationalist democrats, or natsdems) and *nacyjanal-fashysm* (national fascism), see, Anton Stalievič, *Belaruski nacyjanal-fashysm* (Minsk: Bielaruskaje dziaržaŭnaje vydaviectva, 1930).

[36] *Kul'tura. Nauka. Iskusstvo SSSR. Slovar'-spravochnik* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1965), 195. Transl. from Russian.

[37] Ukrainian historians and scholars use the term "Executed Renaissance" to describe the generation of Ukrainian artists and writers repressed and executed by Stalin's regime in the 1930s in Soviet Ukraine. The term is rooted in the end of the 1950s when Ukrainian literary scholar Yuriy Lavrinenko published an anthology of literary works by this generation, using "Executed Renaissance" in the title. The term has been criticised in recent studies due to its general and vague character. See: Halyna Hryn, "The Executed Renaissance Paradigm Revisited," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27, no. 1/4 (2004): 67–96; Paweł Krupa, "Arguments against 'The Executed Renaissance,'" *Zeitschrift Für Slawistik* 62, no. 2 (2017): 268–96.

Theory and History of the Visual Arts at the Academy of Arts in Moscow published a six-volume (eight books) *The Universal History of Art*. The final volume was dedicated to the USSR and socialist countries. James Elkins refers to these publications as "a Stalinist project, intended to prove that Western art outside communist countries is aimless, purely formal, and decadent. Communist art is the culmination of art history, its apotheosis."[38] However, it was not merely an ideological project in terms of the Soviet state's confrontation with the West. Besides the global dominance of the Russian paradigm in art history, *The Universal History of Art* solidified the narrative about the art of other Soviet non-Russian republics as entirely peripheral—as if it can only be "belated" and/or, referring to Mignolo, only *folklore but never art.*[39]

Public debates about local history, including art history, became possible in these countries only in the 1980s during perestroika. In Soviet Belarus, it was the artists of the informal art scene, like Rusava and Kaškurevič, who—by their artistic practices—performed *acts of remembering*, reclaiming the discourse of the avant-garde.[40] At this point, I argue that the so-called "national avant-garde" of late Soviet Belarus might be considered not merely "art as the avant-garde of the contemporary,"[41] which is the aim of Harutyunyan's study. In contrast to the Armenian case, Belarusian artists addressed the past knowingly to assert their own history. Before the 1980s, the memories of the experimental arts of the 1920s–1930s in Soviet Belarus only existed as oral stories. But they were mainly presented as belonging to the phenomenon of the Russian avant-garde as if the Belarusian territory was caught in its shadow by accident.

However, is it possible that the avant-gardes did not happen there, shifting to the 1980s when the artists proclaimed themselves "Belarusian avant-gardists?" How did this loss occur and why do attempts to speak about the Belarusian narrative of the avant-gardes still face difficulties, forcing artists and scholars to reproduce these "acts of remembering?" (ch. 1)

Confronting the fog

While I was starting my research, I believed that my purpose lay in the identification and description of the phenomena in Soviet Belarus like the scholars of other former-Soviet

[38] Elkins, *Stories of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 94.
[39] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs,* 5.
[40] Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 36.
[41] Harutyunyan, *The Political Aesthetics of the Armenian Avant-Garde*, 18.

republics have done.[42] Such a mapping would have allowed the inclusion of the "Belarusian avant-garde" on the global map of art history. Due to the interdisciplinary character of the avant-garde, the idea was to explore manifestos, installations, and artistic and mass performances, which could be analysed through the concepts of performativity and theatricality. My primary assumption was that the avant-garde as a social and cultural phenomenon was realised and performed—in particular aesthetic programmes—differently because of the unique points for its departure (cultural context). Occurring in a moment of historical transition, these programmes would have attempted to dispute the existing boundaries and norms (of aesthetics, ethnicity, social and political structures). At the same time, they would have presented (performed) alternative models of social and cultural order. Thereby, I would have hunted for the forms which were realised in Soviet Belarus, for aesthetic and social programs proclaimed by Belarusian avant-garde artists to correlate the transnational agenda of the avant-gardes with the process of mapping the new Belarusian state and culture.

Generally, my research route led me in the right direction. I did not face an absence or lack of materials beyond well-known cases (firstly, the Viciebsk People's Art School) that was one of the potential risks of the study. I suppose that there are still plenty of documents—neither explored nor presented—that are both problematic and engrossing aspects of Belarusian studies. Geographically dispersed, these materials are waiting for scholars to discover them in Belarus, Russia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Poland, Germany, France, the US, and other countries (ch. 6.1.). However, while I was exploring the documents of the 1920s, I observed how, from an aesthetic point of view, the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus were dispersing and disintegrating only to vanish at the end of the 1930s entirely. Identifying them as the avant-garde in terms of a complete phenomenon was virtually impossible. I was facing the avant-garde's ghosts instead, observing its traces or signs of what might be its traces. This incompleteness, non-embodiment, or dispersion of the avant-gardes (and not only on the map of Soviet Belarus) raised new questions that drove my study in a slightly different direction.

[42] The most intense process of "rewriting" the history of the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes happens nowadays from the Ukrainian perspective. In addition to the previous publications—e.g. Myroslava M. Mudrak and Tetiana Rudenko, eds., *Staging the Ukrainian Avant-Garde of the 1910s and 1920s* (New York: Rodovid Press, 2015)—the full-invasion of Ukraine by Russia in 2022 has provoked institutional and public actions reclaiming the Ukrainian avant-garde. For instance, exhibitions with such titles were shown in Great Britain, Portuguese, Germany, Estonia, and elsewhere which presented not only so-called local avant-gardists but also those who were born in Ukraine and associated with the "Russian avant-garde" (e.g. Kazimir Malevich, Alexandra Exster, and David Burliuk). See, the talk with the curators of "Futuromarennia: Ukraine and Avant-Garde" in the Kumu Art Museum in Estonia, Epner, Eero. "Forbidden, Forgotten and Eradicated. But Alive." *Ekspress.delfi* (10 May 2023). The same processes happened slowly but less visibly in other countries. See, e.g. Zoltan Imre and Dariusz Kosiński, eds., *Reclaimed Avant-Garde: Space and Stages of Avant-Garde Theatre in Central-Eastern Europe* (Warsaw: Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute, 2017).

Why did it happen that after the first years of the October Revolution avant-garde programs took off slowly, sporadically appearing and vanishing, mutating and dispersing, mainly in service to Soviet ideology? Which kinds of avant-gardes were realized in Soviet Belarus, and where did their traces come from and lead to? How were the ideas of the avant-gardes transformed and for what purposes? What might this story of the unperformed avant-gardes tell us? And finally, why was the memory of this phenomenon almost lost, and how does its reclaimed history contribute to the current process of decolonising Belarusian culture? Pondering over all these questions, I came to the primary frame of the dissertation: the relationship between the transnational agenda of the avant-garde and concurrent processes of Sovietisation and nation-building in Soviet Belarus.

The state of research

Attempts to define and theorise "the avant-garde" as a particular phenomenon started before World War II. There is a vast corpus of publications aimed at describing the avant-garde from different temporal and geographical perspectives.[43] However, many of them are rooted in the theories by Renato Poggioli (1962) and Peter Bürger (1974) who developed particular criteria to determine "the avant-garde." At first glance, it may seem that Italian and West German scholars proposed different approaches to interpreting the phenomenon. Poggioli considered the avant-garde "a historical concept" and "the avant-garde ideology [as] a social phenomenon."[44] Therefore, he focuses mainly on the historical background and relationship between avant-garde aesthetic programs and political ideologies. As opposed to Poggioli, Bürger develops the avant-garde as an aesthetic category, referencing to Herbert Marcuse, György Lukács, Theodor Adorno, and Karl Marx (in particular, the Marxist approach to history and dialectical criticism). He defines "the institute of art" as a preliminary frame for the production and perception of artworks, which contradicts what Bürger called "daily praxis" in bourgeois society. Therefore, "a specific function of art in bourgeois society [was] the neutralisation of critique."[45] From this perspective, Bürger argues that the avant-garde could be considered an essential stage for the development of art. On the one hand, it "made artistic

[43] See, early publications by Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Dehumanization of Art* (1925), Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935), Clement Greenberg, *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939). Also, Herbert Marcuse, *Die Permanenz der Kunst: Wider eine bestimmte Marxistische Ästhetik* (1977), the essays by Rosalind Krauss which were published during the 1970s in *October* magazines and as a monograph in 1986, entitled *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, and many others.
[44] Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 3–4.
[45] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 12–13.

means recognizable;"[46] on the other hand, "with the historical avant-garde movements, the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism." The primary purpose of the avant-garde was "to reintegrate art into the praxis of life."[47] Bürger concludes, "the European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. [... Since] it directs itself to the way art functions in society"[48].

Despite the significance of Poggioli's and Bürger's contributions to the process of theorising the avant-garde phenomenon, their models are often criticized due to their "universalised" character and geographical boundaries. Both theories were limited to radical art movements in Western Europe (such as dadaism, surrealism, futurism, expressionism, and Russian futurism as an "exception"), which excluded other cultures from the history of the modernist avant-gardes.[49] Over the past decades, scholars have proclaimed the necessity of reassessing the phenomenon beyond the Eurocentric tradition, which determined the canon of the avant-garde for years.[50] As Per Bäckström and Benedict Hjartarson note, the focus on cultural and geographical peripheries ("a topographical turn") played a significant role in these debates that changed "the landscape of avant-garde studies [...] fundamentally."[51] Scholars emphasise that the aim of a critical approach to the Western-centralised model does not consist in changing the canon by mapping the avant-garde in "peripheries"— "rethinking the topography of the avant-garde rather calls for a critical process that involves rethinking the parameters on which our theoretical models rest."[52]

Elaborating upon the subject, James M. Harding indicates "the avant-gardes' subtle entanglement in the politics of colonialism". He notes that understanding "the idea of an avant-garde as another ideological conduit for European cultural hegemony" is an essential condition of its reassessment "as a fundamentally global cultural phenomenon."[53] The scholar proposes to consider the avant-gardes through the concepts of "nonsynchronous" and "multiple

[46] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 19.
[47] Ibid., 22.
[48] Ibid., 49.
[49] Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*.
[50] See, Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002); Mike Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005); James M. Harding and John Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Sanja Bahun-Radunovic and Marinos Pourgouris, eds., *The Avant-Garde and the Margin: New Territories of Modernism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006); Per Bäckström and Benedict Hjartarson, eds., *Decentring the Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014); Zoltán and Kosiński, eds. *Reclaimed Avant-garde*.
[51] Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, "Rethinking the Topography of the International Avant-Garde. Introduction," in *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, 8.
[52] Ibid, 12–13. See also: Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power" [1992], in *Essential Essays, Vol. 2. Identity and Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 141–84.
[53] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 138.

temporalities" that allow us to understand them as a phenomenon which "not only goes in many different directions, but it also has multiple points of departures, none necessarily reliant on another."[54] However, the fundamental question is not about the peculiarities of a cultural context (as a point of departure). That task is to redefine the avant-garde itself. Sascha Bru and Peter Nicholls notice that the term "avant-garde," like "modernism," "comes with an array of often conflicting connotations."[55] They emphasise two main directions of the definition: a radical art movement and a program with "a cultural or conceptual order differing altogether from that of modernism."[56]

Per Bäckström makes an important note that, due to the various cultural and historical uses, "there is not really anything like 'the avant-garde' in the singular, but there are several disparate movements that share a collective feeling or idea about art."[57] From his point of view, "the hegemony of English in academic studies"[58] and misleading translations became reasons why this heterogeneity is often ignored. Bäckström revises the term from historical and cultural perspectives, describing the avant-garde as a "travelling concept."[59] He argues that different interpretations and uses of the term are not "a mistake." Rather, they happened due to the "different national and linguistic backgrounds" of theoreticians and translators.[60] This means that Bürger and Poggioli spoke about the avant-garde from different points of view: "the Germanic notion of 'avant-garde,' with its limited inclusion of movements, versus the more open Romance notions of 'avant-garde,' 'avanguardia,' 'vanguardia,' 'vanguarda' and their Anglo-American relatives 'modernism,' 'high modernism' and 'post-modernism.'"[61]

In the Soviet context, the notion of the avant-garde in art and literature was primarily used in relation to the military. In the conceptual sense, the definitions of *revolutionary, left*, or *proletarian* specified such art. However, it was not the same, and these definitions had different meanings in different periods (ch. 5.1.). Therefore, Bäckström's way of thinking

[54] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 4.
[55] Sasha Bru and Peter Nicholls, "About the Series," in *The Aesthetics of Matter. Modernism, the Avant-Garde and Material Exchange* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), ix.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Per Bäckström, "One Earth, Four or Five Words. The Peripheral Concept of 'Avant-Garde,'" in "Centre-Periphery. The Avant-Garde and the Other," special issue, *Nordlit. University of Tromsø*, no. 21 (2007): 26. Bürger also refers to the concept of collectivity. He argues that the avant-garde attacked the individual mode of perception and production. Hence, avant-garde artworks were "not the collective as the subject of production but the radical negation of the category of individual creation." Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 51–3.
[58] Per Bäckström, "One Earth, Four or Five Words," 21.
[59] Mieke Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2002).
[60] Per Bäckström, "One Earth, Four or Five Words," 25.
[61] Ibid., 40. See also, Ansgar Nünning, "Towards Transnational Approaches to the Study of Culture: From Cultural Studies and Kulturwissenschaften to a Transnational Study of Culture", in T*he Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*, ed. Doris Bachmann-Medick (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 23-50.

assists in avoiding the generalisation of the phenomenon, asking from the very beginning to focus on specific socio-political and cultural contexts of any particular avant-garde movement.

Frozen decolonisation

Despite theoretical revisions, the Belarusian cultural context is almost absent in the current debates about decentralising and remapping the avant-gardes, nor can it be found in Central and Eastern European studies of art history.[62] One reason could be that the "idea" of "Eastern Europe,"[63] was mainly associated with an area called the "Eastern Bloc," as Winston Churchill referred to it in 1946. However, the origins of Eastern Europe as a definition, as Larry Wolf shows, arose much earlier.[64] Nevertheless, according to Bojana Pejić, it might be considered "a purely political contract formulated for the purposes of Gold Warring, when the adjective 'Eastern' connoted 'red,' i.e. 'ideological' Europe, ignoring that the USSR consisted of a number of Asian lands."[65] For instance, Piotr Piotrowski, who explores Central and Eastern European art, refers to the historical definition of Eastern Europe as the "Eastern Block"—a territory "between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet Union."[66] He argues that the art of the USSR was characterised by "a system of cultural and artistic references that are completely different and impossible to compare with that of the East European countries."[67] He does not focus on the differences between the cultural contexts of the former-Soviet non-Russian countries. And

[62] See: Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszyl, eds., *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); IRWIN, ed., *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books, 2006); Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds. *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015); Amy Bryzgel, ed., *Performance Art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); COURAGE international research project of cultural dissent under Socialism in Eastern Europe, http://cultural-opposition.eu. However, this situation slowly but changes, first of all, because of new studies on the transnational history of East Central Europe and scholars of Belarusian studies who are capable of writing in English. See, Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds. *A History of Modern Political Thought in East Central Europe.* In 2 Volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016–2018); Dariusz Kosiński, ed. *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde* (The Zbigniew Raszewski Theatre Institute in Warsaw; Performance Research Books, 2024).

[63] Elena Gapova and Almira Ousmanova, "Razmyshleniya na temu geografii i istorii", in *Gendernyye istorii Vostochnoy Evropy,* ed. Elena Gapova, Almira Ousmanova, Andrea Peto (Minsk: European Humanities University, 2002), 5.

[64] See also, Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); Mark Kramer, "Stalin, Soviet Policy, and the Establishment of a Communist Bloc in Eastern Europe, 1941–1949," in *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945–1989,* ed. Mark Kramer and Vit Smetana (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 3-37.

[65] Bojana Pejić. "Introduction: Eppur si muove!," in *Gender Check: A Reader: Art and Theory in Eastern Europe*, ed. Bojana Pejić (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), 19.

[66] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009), 7.

[67] Ibid.

despite the significant contribution of Piotrowski's works to the topographical turn in art history, firstly, with approaches like "horizontal art history" and "provincializing the centers,"[68] like many other scholars, he reproduces the stereotype of the homogeneous character of both Soviet and post-Soviet cultures.[69]

In contrast, some scholars advance the concept of "post-Soviet postcoloniality" as proposed by David Chioni Moore, who in 2001 postulated a lack of (post)colonial approaches in the studies of former-socialist countries. He compares their conditions with the postcolonial cultures (called "the Third World") that are "characterized by tensions between the desire for autonomy and a history of dependence, between the desire for autochthony and the fact of hybrid, part-colonial origin, between resistance and complicity, and between imitation (or mimicry) and originality."[70] Moore argues that it is essential to apply the postcolonial approach in the field of post-socialist studies since "[t]hese nations, some young and some quite old, were unquestionable subject to often brutal Russian domination—[political, economic, and cultural]—(styled as Soviet from the 1920s) for anywhere from forty to two hundred years."[71] Regarding the destination and the character of conquests, he describes three strategies of classical colonialism that, from his point of view, were used by the Russian Empire and then by the Soviet State. He calls the USSR—"Russo-Soviet" emphasising the centralised and vertical model of the regime.[72] He argues that Belarus and Ukraine—as adjacent lands—experienced "the notion of *dynastic*" that aimed at "the disappearance of the subjected people

[68] Beáta Hock, "Introduction-Globalizing East European Art Histories. The Legacy of Piotr Piotrowski and a Conference," in *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1-22.
[69] The essays by Milan Kundera "The Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984) and Czeslaw Miłosz "Central European Attitudes" (1986) also played a crucial role in the formation of the Central and Eastern Europe idea. The Ukrainian scholar and publicist Mykola Riabchuk refers to Kundera's text in which "Europe" as a space was based on the ideas of freedom almost excludes the Soviet non-Russian countries. Riabchuk notes that Kundera "created a particular hierarchy 'more' or 'less' European societies which more or less wanted to be free and, therefore, they deserve (or not) to be immediately released [from Soviet Imperialism]." The scholar concludes, "Instead of destroying the wall between the West and the East, [this concept] merely moves it far to the East. Instead of struggling against Totalitarianism as a universal phenomenon, [the concept of Europe] locates it geographically on the territory of the USSR." Mykola Riabchuk, "Jak i chomu (popri vse) ja lyshajusia 'chechoslovakom,'" in *Leksikon nacionalista ta inshi eseyi* (Lviv: Vydavnytstvo Staroho Leva, 2021), 62. Transl. from Ukrainian. See also, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, "Birkbeck College, University of London Unworlding Slaka, or Does Eastern (Central) European Art Exist?", in *Local Strategies International Ambitions. Modern Art and Central Europe 1918-1968*, edited by Vojtěch Lahoda (Prague: ARTEFACTUM, 2006), 29-40; Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East European Art", in *Blindheit und Hellsichtigkeit: Künstlerkritik an Politik und Gesellschaft der Gegenwart,* edited by Cornelia Klinger (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 61-84.
[70] David Chioni Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique," *PMLA* 16, no. 1, (2001): 112.
[71] Ibid., 115.
[72] See also, Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR: The Study of Soviet Dynastics* (London: Macmillan, 1961); Hugh Seton-Watson, *The New Imperialism: A Background Book* (London: The Bodley Head, 1971).

as such," using, for instance, the rhetoric of siblings.[73] Except for the dynastic strategy, many Russians (*Velikorossy*) settled in these territories since the end of the eighteenth century which, according to Moore, corresponds to the second model of colonialism. He differentiates between the Russian Empire and Russo-Soviet colonialism. The Soviet Union was officially declared as a union of autonomous republics supporting national languages and cultures, women's emancipation, and anti-colonial struggles in the Third World. At the same time, there were histories of relocations and deportations of ethnic minorities and indigenous people, anti-national campaigns including antisemitism, and military invasions in 1956 and 1968 in Budapest and Prague, respectively. Even in 1921, before Stalin's statements, there were declarations that "[g]enerally, non-Russian language nations [in the USSR] are culturally ignorant."[74] But, as Moore argues, it shows the more complicated character of Russo-Soviet colonialism, referring to the diversity of both the post-Soviet and postcolonial worlds.

In 2016, Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann noted that in the last decade, there was a shift to postcolonial models producing a number of concepts and approaches for studying the post-socialist societies[75]. However, as Dorota Kołodziejczyk and Cristina Şandru argue, this kind of postcolonial theory is nearly "peripheral to the discipline."[76] At the same time, Martin Müller points out the limited character of "postsocialism" as a concept that—in opposition to postcolonialism—"tends to locate postsocialism in particular countries and draws clear boundaries around it."[77] The scholar questions if Central and Eastern Europe studies are still needed and if they still require the term "postsocialism," since it might narrow their value turning "the East" into "an exotic 'Other.'"[78] Müller argues that "the prefix 'post-' risks reifying socialism into a uniform experience that it never was [...] glossing over the varying degrees to which countries in the East are still, are no longer or have never been postsocialist."[79]

Although my research focuses on an earlier period, Müller's ideas allow me to pose another question regarding the term "Soviet," which also tends to cover up the differences

[73] Moore, "Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet?," 118–19.
[74] GAVO, f. 246 o.1 d. 18, l. 44.
[75] Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann, "Postcolonial Slavic Literatures after Communism: Introduction," in *Postcolonial Slavic Literatures After Communism*, ed. Klavdia Smola and Dirk Uffelmann (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2016), 1-25.
[76] Qtd. in Monika Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present*, ed. Monika Albrecht (London: Routledge, 2020), 14.
[77] Martin Müller, "Goodbye, Postsocialism!," *Europe-Asia Studies* 71, no. 4 (2019): 10. DOI: 10.1080/09668136.2019.1578337.
[78] Ibid., 9.
[79] Ibid.

between *multifaced processes of cultural Sovietization.*[80] Such a simplification creates clichés of identical cultural patterns with some ethnographical features which might turn into what Mignolo calls "the colonial differences" as a "condition of possibility [for coloniality of power] and as the legitimacy for the subalternization of knowledges and the subjugation of people."[81] For instance, there are still few publications in which authors even bother to differentiate between the Soviet and the Russian avant-gardes.[82] But could it be possible that regarding the avant-gardes, *Soviet* meant the same as *Russian*? Which culture do we identify as Soviet? What did it mean to be Soviet in the context of Belarusian, Ukrainian, or Georgian cultures?[83] Aiming to emancipate the concept of the Balkans, Maria Todorova proposes to treat it "as a space-time entity [...] characterized by simultaneous, overlapping, and gradually waning effects [that] allows to emphasize the complexity and plasticity of the historical process."[84] Clearly, the term Soviet is also characterised by the same complexity that refers not only to the negative note of colonialism, or occupation, as Almira Ousmanova (Almira Usmanava) notes.[85] Therefore, new optics and language are necessary to reimagine 'Soviet' in terms of transcultural geography.

Consequently, the avant-gardes of other non-Russian Soviet republics are marginalised and incorporated into the Russian avant-garde, although the process of its reconceptualisation is resolutely going on. For instance, some Ukrainian and foreign scholars have contributed to identifying the model of the Ukrainian avant-garde long before the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine which, as was mentioned, advanced these processes.[86] Already in 1981, Myroslava Mudrak mentions, "in speaking of the Soviet stage of the 1920s and the crucial role it played

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[80] Olena Palko, *Making Ukraine Soviet: Literature and Cultural Politics under Lenin and Stalin* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021); Olena Palko. "The *Path to the Soviet Nation: The Policy of Belarusization," Revolutionary Russia* 35, no. 2 (2022): 292–94.

[81] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 16.

[82] See, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, ed., *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992); Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015). Robert H. Davis Jr's publication, "Checklist of Russian, Ukrainian & Belarusian Avant-Garde & Modernist Books, Serials & Works on Paper at The New York Public Library & Columbia University Libraries" (Academic Commons, 2015) is uncommon in this range. Although the author puts "Belarusian" in the title, there is yet to be any publication about particularly 'Belarusian avant-garde' in the checklists of the library. The author presents the Russian and Ukrainian avant-gardes in the Introduction. However, the list includes several Belarusian authors (e.g. Uladzimir Duboŭka).

[83] Éva Forgács raises the same questions and uses, for instance, the definition of "Soviet-Russian avant-garde." Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East European Art," 63.

[84] Maria Todorova, "Southeast European Studies between Debates and Trends," *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 6 (2021): 17–30, 19.

[85] Almira Ousmanova, "Decolonizing through Post-Socialist Lenses," in *Decolonizing: The Curriculum, the Museum, and the Mind*, ed. Marguard Smith (Vilnius: Vilnius Academy of Arts Press, 2020), 138–63.

[86] See: Mudrak and Rudenko, eds., *Staging the Ukrainian Avant-Garde of the 1910s and 1920s*; Myroslav Shkandrij, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910–1930: Contested Memory* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019); Vera Faber, *Die ukrainische Avantgarde zwischen Ost und West: Intertextualität, Intermedialität und Polemik im ukrainischen Futurismus und Konstruktivismus der späten 1920er-Jahre* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2019).

in the cultural life of the new Soviet citizen, one needs to obtain a composite theatrical picture by also taking into account the non-Russian contributions to this realm and general development of the modern theatre of the USSR."[87]

In contrast to Ukrainian studies, the phenomenon of the avant-garde in Soviet Belarus has not yet been recognised even by local scholars, who direct their efforts towards the dominant model of the Russian avant-garde as a radical art movement.[88] On the one hand, as Ousmanova states, "[p]olitics of knowledge is developed not in the sterile space of the academic world; in many respects, it depends on the conjecture that is determined by the political agenda."[89] Since Moscow was a centre where the "universal form of knowledge"[90] in the USSR was produced, many local researchers (mainly of the older generation) base their scholarship on their Russian colleagues' studies (ch. 1.2.). This praxis refers to what Ousmanova calls the "existential confusion" of scholars who were trained in the Soviet Union and "cannot accept new identities" in the post-Soviet space.[91] On the other hand, the focus of local scholars, including those who left the USSR after WWII as anti-Soviets, is often limited by national history and, consequently, a nationally-oriented model of culture. They exclude the avant-garde as "a foreign element." For instance, Uladzimir Siadura (Vladimir Seduro), the author of the first study about the history of Belarusian theatre published in the USA in 1955, described the 1920s as a time of emancipation of Belarusian theatre from the influence of Polish and Russian cultures and as an attempt to create its own narrative. Siadura notes that the struggle for aesthetics in theatre was a political struggle. From his point of view, innovations of revolutionary theatre by Vsevolod Meyerhold were alien to Belarusian theatre.[92] In recent studies, Uladzimir Malcaŭ (Vladimir Maltsev) argues that the emergence of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus related to the expansion of the Russian avant-gardes, and visiting avant-garde artists used "stages of national margins [...] for spreading their ideas in breadth, and these ideas were relevant."[93]

The fact that many avant-garde artists who worked in Soviet Belarus during the 1920s

[87] Myroslava M. Mudrak, "Vadym Meller, Les Kurbas and the Ukrainian Theatrical Avant-garde: Hello from Wave 477," *Russian History,* 8, no. 1–2 (1981): 199.
[88] See: Tatiana Kotovich, *Encyclopedia russkogo avangarda* (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2003); Tatiana Kotovich, UNOVIS. Utverditeli novogo iskusstva (Minsk: Belarus', 2020); Vladimir Maltsev, "Russkij avangard i formirovanije natsionalnyh traditsij (Scenografija belorusskih teatrov 1920-h godov)," in *Avangard i teatr 1910-1920-h godov* (Moscow: RGBI 2008), 221-9.
[89] Almira Ousmanova, "Debaty o postsotsializme i politiki znaniya v prostranstve mnozhestvennykh post-," *Sotsiologicheskoye obozreniye* (2020): 52. Transl. from Russian.
[90] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs,* 81.
[91] Ibid., 50.
[92] Vladimir Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama* (New York: Research Program on The U.S.S.R., 1955).
[93] Maltsev, "Russkij avangard i formirovanije natsionalnyh traditsij," 222. Transl. from Russian.

were *ethnic* "non-Belarusians" supports these speculations. The artist Marc Chagall and the theatre director Leŭ Litvinaŭ were Belarusian Jews. Some artists, like El Lissitzky or Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo, came to Belarus at the turn of the 1910s–1920s. But what role did geography and cultural borders play in the avant-garde programs? What could the artists' tangled routes tell us? Is it a question of the artists' *homelessness*?[94] Or do the avant-garde—as *a hybrid transnational phenomenon*[95]—try to overpass geography by transcending any ideological restrictions?

"The Edges of Europe"

One more problematic point of my research is the identification of "Belarus" and "Belarusian." Historically, these toponyms are quite uncertain. Before the proclamation of the BSSR, the territory which we today call Belarus existed under different toponyms (Kresy Wschodnie, Severo-Zapadnyj kraj, the Belarusian People's Republic, the Lithuanian-Byelorussian Socialist Soviet Republic, and others.). Besides, for almost two hundred years, scholars used different spelling (ideologically and in transliteration) of its name—Kriwien, Weißruthenien, Belorussia, White Russia, and others.[96] In 1919, almost all of modern Belarus's territory was included in the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia but only for a few months. The Viciebsk district, home of the Viciebsk Art School, was annexed to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic for a couple of years (1919–1924). As Semen Krylov, Presiding Officer of the Viciebsk province committee of KP(b) (Vitebskiy gubernskiy komitet KP(b)), claimed that there was no sense in creating the Byelorussia Republic as "[t]he region has long been russified, there is no language and national culture."[97] Besides, the Treaty of Riga in 1921 passed the Western part of Belarus to Poland, where it remained until 1939. Almost half of modern Belarusian territory (the border was situated near Minsk) was not under Soviet rule[98].

Moreover, the name "Belarusians" circulated widely only in the nineteenth century. First, it was used by Polish and Russian ethnographers to describe "the peasantry of a

[94] Lotte S. Lederballe Pedersen,"Conditions of Homelessness. Kurt Schwitters' Investigation of Un/Homely Territories," *Nordlit*, no. 21 (2007), 219–27.
[95] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 138.
[96] See, Eugen von Engelhardt, *Weissruthenien: Volk und Land* (Berlin: Volk und Reich Verl., 1943); Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Vitaut Kipel, "Belorussians," in *Guide to the Study of the Soviet Nationalities: Non-Russian Peoples of the USSR*, ed. Stephan M. Horak (Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, 1982).
[97] NARB, f. 1440. o. 3. d. 478, l. 35–36. Transl. from Russian.
[98] For this reason, I keep stressing that the research focuses only on the context of Soviet Belarus.

geographically defined territory [...] as a subgroup of the Polish and Russian nations."[99] In the 1860s, the leader of the Belarusian uprising of 1863 Kastuś Kalinoŭski (Konstantin Kalinovsky) promoted *Belarus* and *Belarusian* as an autonomous toponym for this territory (based on ethnic borders) to distinguish it from Poland, Lithuania, and Russia[100]. For this reason, scholars who explore Belarusian history and culture should clarify how they define "Belarusian."[101] In the introduction to a collection of historical essays about Belarusian women from the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Elena Gapova (Alena Hapava) ponders that "it is a book about a country that did not exist." Therefore, the authors of various chapters "define the borders of this imaginary country differently."[102] Gapova explains the tradition of considering this territory as a borderland which emphasises its political and mental location in between "the East" and "the West." To escape "symbolic appropriation of the past by giving to it the current name," Gapova proposes to call the territory the "edges of Europe." From her point of view, such an irony—"as a means to position yourself in the field of language power, as an attempt to oppose the existing symbolic order"—could assist in overcoming the tension of naming the territory in a defined way.[103]

From this perspective, the task of this thesis is to escape the reference to *national*, *ethnic* or *geopolitical* cartography, which are, as Ousmanova points out, "ideologically engaged."[104] The notion of ideology also alludes to the relationship between art and national borders, which, for instance, art historian Nicos Hadjinicolaou defined as "a political art geography" which is a "sociohistorically oriented" construct. [105] This approach highlights the ideological framework of such geography as "[t]he fight for the borders [...], the fight for the nationality of [style], [...] the search for the [national] character in art."[106] To overcome this tension, I will refer to the metaphor of *routes/roots* by James Clifford who extends the vocabulary of the study of culture to challenge the concept of dwelling from classical anthropology.[107] Considering the new

[99] Lewis, *Belarus— Alternative Visions*, 46.
[100] Liachoŭski and Andrej Čarniakievič, "'A Chto Tam Idzie?': 7-8.
[101] See: Thomas M. Bohn, ed., *Bunte Flecken in Weißrussland: Erinnerungsorte zwischen polnisch-litauischer Union und russisch-sowjetischem Imperium* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013); Savchenko, *Belarus: A Perpetual Borderland*; Lewis, *Belarus— Alternative Visions*; Franziska Exeler, *The Ghosts of War* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 2022).
[102] Elena Gapova, "Kroja kraja Evropy," in *Zhenshchiny na kraju Evropy* (Minsk: European Humanities University, 2003), 7. Transl. from Russian.
[103] Ibid., 11.
[104] Ousmanova, "Debaty o postsotsializme i politiki znaniya," 44–69. Transl. from Russian.
[105] Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "Art Centers and Peripheral Art. A Lecture of 1982," *ARTMargins* 9, no. 2 (2020): 120.
[106] Ibid., 134.
[107] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

discourse of globalisation that emerged in anthropology, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies in the last decades, Jonathan Friedman notes that Clifford's routes "can be understood partly as roots on the move, a transmutation of roots into rhizomes."[108] In this sense, dwelling lost its primary meaning as it is impossible to consider culture as "packaged by territory."[109] Despite the potential to present the more complicated characters of modern (globalised) cultures, I argue that this approach is fruitful in analysing the avant-garde movements in Soviet Belarus. This metaphor assists in reimagining the map of the avant-gardes beyond the borders asking about how *routes* of the avant-gardes correlated with their *roots*.

Therefore, turning back to the framework of my study, I will follow the biographical routes of avant-garde artists, analysing the cultural situation of Soviet Belarus through the concepts of *hybridity*, *liminality* and *third space.*[110] My explanation of "Belarusian" refers to a hybrid identification and a borderland topos that determined the character of the avant-garde in Soviet Belarus. The lens of hybridity has a long tradition in Belarusian studies. In 1999, the Belarusian philosopher Ihar Babkoŭ proclaimed "transculturalism as Belarusian experience"[111]. Recently, this approach has been widespread since it allows to explain the multiethnic and multinational character of the Belarusian culture[112]. Therefore, instead of the notion of identity as a political category—in terms of ethnicity and nationality—I will refer to the concept of *belonging* which allows one to avoid additional ideological restrictions.[113] Significantly, such an approach is necessary to explore individual (culturally transgressive) programs of the avant-gardes. Besides, it allows me to avoid being entrapped in *Belarusian* as a national category, leaning on the framework of transnational history.

[108] Jonathan Friedman, "From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trippers." *Anthropological Theory* 2, no. 1, (1 March 2002): 22.
[109] Friedman, "From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trippers," 22.
[110] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. Adam Blauhut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).
[111] Ihar Babkoŭ, "Etyka pamiežža: Transkuĺturnaść jak bielaruski dośvied", *Frahmienty*, 1-2 (1999). https://knihi.com/storage/frahmenty/frahmenty6.htm. Transl. from Belarusian. See also, Simon Lewis, "Cosmopolitanism as Subculture in the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth", in *Identities In-Between in East-Central Europe*, ed. Jan Fellerer, Robert Pyrah and Marius Turda (London: Routledge, 2019), 149-69.
[112] Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions*; Franziska Exeler, *The Ghosts of War*.
[113] See, Mary Jacobus, *On Belonging and Not Belonging: Translation, Migration, Displacement.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

Sources and Methodology

This dissertation is grounded in several primary corpora of materials: documents from archives in Minsk, Viciebsk, and Hämeenlinna, including private archives (resolutions, reports, lists, letters, notes, and photos); published memoirs, newspapers, magazines, historical books and literary works from the 1920–1930s; and 'talks' with artists and local scholars who contributed to reclaiming avant-garde history for Belarusian cultural discourse in the 1980–2010s[114]. I also refer to the materials (documents and interviews) collected in my early research on the informal artistic scene in Soviet Belarus during perestroika.[115] When I started my project, I was supposed to make research trips to Moscow and St. Petersburg, where many primary sources for my topic are located. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the beginning of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, these trips could not happen. However, many primary documents are published online, special resources about the Russian and Soviet avant-gardes have been created. It provided me with access to the materials necessary for locating what I call "the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus."[116] Such an "unexpected" turn in my research allowed me to focus particularly on those documents that might refer to the "Belarusian" context.

In addition to known materials, firstly, from the Viciebsk State Archive (research in July–August 2021) and the Belarusian State Archive of Literature and Art (research in 2017-2021), this study includes several unique documents. In the first place is the family archive of Leŭ Litvinaŭ (ch. 6.2.), which was handed over to me (with the permission of his grandson Rustem Litvinov) by the Belarusian scholar Inna Gerasimova (Ina Herasimava). The second corpus consists of materials collected during my research trip to Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo Foundation in Hämeenlinna in March 2022 (ch. 6.3.). Since archives play a particular role in

[114] I identify the genre of these interviews as 'talks' referring to the method Marie Johanna Karner calls 'Ero-epische Interviews'. This method is characterised by the more flexible frame of an interview–as "a balanced, sensitive, in-depth, open and personal dialogue" in order "to gain confidence". Marie Johanna Karner, *Neo-diasporische Gemeinschaften. Blouzaniyye in Sydney, Australien* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2021), 129. It was also necessary since we knew each other with almost all respondents (because of my previous curatorial and research activity).

[115] The interviews were made for the exhibition "Minsk. Non-Conformism of the 1980s" (Y Contemporary Art Gallery, Minsk, 2014) which I co-curated. The materials were published in: Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, ed., *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*.

[116] Online library of Tatlin Press (Moscow, Ekaterinburg); TEHNE online Russian architecture and design platform; Princeton University Digital Library; Digital Library of the GAKhN project; Digital Collections of the National Library of Belarus; Kamunikat, The Belarusian Digital Library, and others.

the Belarusian cultural context and access to them sometimes turns into an adventure, there is a subchapter where I explain the process of "discovering" and a more expanded description of the sources (ch. 6.1.).

Decoloniality

Except for the biographical approach, which allows me to follow artists' *routes* instead of their *roots*, [117] this thesis relies on decolonial studies as a basic methodology. Despite the potential contribution of "postcolonial" to "post-socialist" (Introduction), as Monika Albrecht mentions, "mainstream postcolonial studies have managed to *establish* and *normalize* colonialism as an issue exclusive to Western colonial and imperial powers and their non-Western victims."[118] Therefore, "[i]t is reductive in the sense that its key concepts came into being on the basis of this very restrictive framework" as, for instance, the Soviet/Russian and the Ottoman Empires, and other Islamic empires are absent in this "map."[119]

Albrecht develops a "multidirectional postcolonial framework" which problematizes the universalised "mainstream postcolonial theories" diffusing the geographical binary framework of "West" and "non-West" (or Global North and Global South). She states that the inclusion of other forms of colonial/imperial experience not only extends the comprehension of their diversity, but also provides "the opportunity to compare, for instance, colonial practices, or forms of resistance to them, in a way that may considerably differ from comparisons *within* the familiar areas of the postcolonial map."[120] It also allows one to overcome, in Russell Berman's words, the "epistemological dead-end" of the studies as a result of discussions around such concepts as *perverse* "othering" (as a mutual process of differentiation between colonisers and colonised), [121] "differences" vs "similarities," which turned into a means "to displace questions of inequality, class, and class conflict."[122] Referring to Bauman, Albrecht argues that the struggle to be accepted as "different" became "not a struggle for equality but is concerned with pushing through a recognition of the 'superior' value of 'difference' (who is more "different?"). [123] At this point, such approaches merely produced

[117] Hans Renders, et al. eds., *The Biographical Turn: Lives in History* (London: Routledge, 2017).
[118] Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined,* 2.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid., 4.
[121] Russell A. Berman, "Colonialism and No End. The Other Continuity Theses," qtd. in Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," 4.
[122] Bennita Parry, "What Is Left in Postcolonial Studies?," qtd. in Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," 27.
[123] Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," 29.

a new hierarchy within postcolonial studies. Besides, as Uffelmann notes, it can be appropriated by the programs of "exclusive ethno-cultural nationalism" in post-socialist and post-Soviet countries[124].

In contrast, decolonial studies—as a response to this shift—refers, first of all, to the *bodily* experience of the colonised (a "subaltern perspective"), which is, according to Mingolo, almost impossible to replace by rationality and intellectualism (a "territorial" perspective).[125] If postcoloniality, as Madina Tlostanova states, is a geopolitical and geohistorical *condition*, a decolonial discourse is "an *option*, consciously chosen as a political, ethnical, and epistemic positionality and an entry point into agency."[126] Because of the widespread circulation of the reference to "positionality," it is essential to mention that positionality implicates not merely self-description (in terms of gender, race, class, location, etc.) but also the awareness that these "conditions" determine (to a greater or lesser extent) the perception of the world(s) a person intends to describe. At this point, scholars should be aware of the "limitations" (but at some point, the "advantages") of the knowledge they produce. Therefore, postcoloniality and decoloniality are two "different modes of thinking and being in the world"; at the same time, they can be developed alongside and overlap with each other.[127]

Although, as Albrecht notes, Mingolo develops his approach within the same limited perspective of West/non-West (she refers to his notion of "the darker side of the Western modernity" as a reproduction of the "orthodox" binary),[128] his perspective might be explained in particular by his *bodily* experience (positionality) which was/is determined by a hierarchy of power produced by the Eurocentric project. He speaks about what he *knows,* that is, according to decolonial projects, merely one narrative among (possible) others. The mode of decoloniality assists, therefore, in transgressing the "conventional" geographical binary, opening gaps for knowledge production by any "silenced society," regardless of its location. Mingolo's collaboration with Tlostanova supports this fact.[129]

One of the fundamental principles of decoloniality is "delinking," rooted in the publications by Samir Amin and Anibal Quijano.[130] According to Mignolo, delinking as "the

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[124] Dirk Uffelmann, "Postcolonial theory as post-colonial nationalism," in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined*, 135.
[125] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 45.
[126] Madina Tlostanova, "The postcolonial condition, the decolonial option, and the post-socialist intervention," in *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined*, 165.
[127] Ibid.
[128] Albrecht, "Introduction: Postcolonialism cross-examined," 8.
[129] See, for instance, Madina Tlostanova and Walter Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2012).
[130] Samir Amin, *Delinking. Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1985); Anibal Quijano, "Modernidad, colonialidad y America Latina," *Nepantla. Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80.

necessary direction of liberation and decolonisation"—instead of "emancipation" as the aim of Western and Eurocentric projects—implicates the revision of the dominated "totalitarian" system (hegemony) of knowledge including its terms and categories, [131] in other words, "to fracture the naturalised assumption that links words and things."[132] It is a fundamental condition for the decolonial epistemic shift which opens the field of knowledge to other worlds (philosophies, economies, politics, ethics, etc.) that Mignolo calls "pluriversality as a universal project."[133] Responding to the question of "delinking from what?" as the significant provocation of the methodology, Mignolo points out that the answer alludes, firstly, to the breakout "with the Totality of Western epistemology."[134] However, returning to Albrecht's criticism of the limits of linking colonialism to "the West," it is essential to imagine decoloniality not as a response only to Eurocentric modernity (that is a point for Mignolo's reflections). The decolonial mode of thinking does not presume the already existing matrix of knowledge. Otherwise, "the pluriversality of each local history and its narrative of decolonization" remains the same *universalised*. [135]

Another significant concept is "border thinking" as "a new epistemological (or gnoseological) dimension,"[136] which Mignolo "discovered" developing "local knowledge traditions," in particular, of the legacies of Spanish philosophers and intellectuals in the USA and his "own border gnosis."[137] "Border thinking" appears at the intersection of what he calls "local histories" (the "subaltern perspective" of knowledge production) and "global design" (the dominated and centralised system of knowledge).[138] However, the *exercise* of "border thinking" can be easily displaced.

> Border thinking from a territorial perspective becomes a machine of appropriation of the colonial differe/a/nces; the colonial difference as an object of study rather than as an epistemic potential. Border thinking from the perspective of subalternity is a machine for intellectual

[131] Walter D. Mignolo, "DELINKING. The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality," *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2007): 456.
[132] Ibid., 505.
[133] Ibid., 452–3.
[134] Ibid., 493.
[135] Ibid., 497.
[136] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 38. This concept alludes to other ones, many of which were proposed by other scholars, for instance, "contact zone" by Mary Louise Pratt. See, Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991): 33–40; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).
[137] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 67.
[138] Ibid., 38.

decolonization.[139]

Despite the trap of "appropriation," there might be another dilemma that Catherina Walsh, referring to Anzaldúa, determines through the question of how to produce decolonial knowledge without reproducing that system of knowledge which the scholar resists.[140] I assume the answer consists in the theory itself, which orients around "travelling" instead of "settlement." As Walsch points out, "decoloniality has a history" that started long before it was theorised.[141] This means that this field implies not only the theory but also the actions as "a component part of (trans)local struggles, movements, and actions to resist and refuse the legacies and ongoing relations and patterns of power established by external and internal colonialism."[142] From this perspective, decoloniality always unfolds *from below*—through practices which "continually generate and regenerate knowledge and theory."[143] It is "a lived project of/in praxis," Walsh concludes, that pivots on the *collective* mode of knowledge production ("to think from and with subjects, actors, thinkers, collectives, and movements that are signifying, sowing, and growing decoloniality in/as praxis"). [144] It is not a result of being named in a particular way, although "[t]o name is to struggle" too.[145] Instead, the theory might be open to new local stories coming *from below*; it should always be in the process of (re)invention including the awareness of its own "mistakes."[146]

Hence, decoloniality cannot be appropriated or displaced, as perhaps happened in some

[139] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 45.
[140] Walsh, "The Decolonial For. Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements," 20–1. See also, Maksym Sviezhentsev and Martin-Oleksandr Kisly, "De-Occupation or (de)Colonization? Challenges for Crimea's Future." *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 65, no. 2 (2023)" 232–44.
[141] Bandung Conference of 1955 is identified as the point of departure for decoloniality. See, Danah Abdulla, "Imagining Otherwise," in Marguard Smith, ed. *Decolonizing: The Curriculum, the Museum, and the Mind*, 86–99. Such scholars as Anibal Quijano, María Lugones, Walter D. Mignolo, and Gloria Anzaldúa are considered pioneers of decolonial studies.
[142] Walsh, "The Decolonial For. Resurgences, Shifts, and Movements," 16.
[143] Ibid., 19.
[144] Ibid., 20.
[145] Muyolema, "De la 'cuestión indígena' a lo 'indígena' como cuestionamiento," qtd. in Walsh, "The Decolonial For," 22.
[146] The Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine provoked a burst of conferences and publications with a focus on Russia's imperial past and present. One of the last examples is Issue 65 of the *Canadian Slavonic Papers* called "Approaches to Decolonisation." The editor James Krapfl mentions at the beginning that "Russia's dramatic escalation of its war against Ukraine in February 2022 compelled many people at last to realize that the Russian 'Federation' is in fact an empire." James Krapfl, "Decolonizing Minds in the 'Slavic Area,' 'Slavic Area Studies,' and Beyond," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 65, no.2 (2023): 141. However, as I describe in the introduction, much earlier publications discussed this issue. They proposed approaches to disclose the complexity of power hierarchy within the field of knowledge production, but these approaches were almost ignored.

cases with postcolonial or feminist studies.[147] It is not a theory but the autonomous (delinked) mode of thinking, which creates the knowledge from a given context as the point for departure. At this point, one could argue that this mode belongs to a particularly theoretical or cultural tradition. On the contrary, it is about the multidiverse combination of the approaches which the investigated context might demand. Since decoloniality refers to fracture and fragmentation, this "journey" always begins with the same primary questions (e.g. "delinking from what Totality?"). The answers might differ, but it is the only way to disclose the pluriversality.

Performativity

Dwelling on the irreproducible nature of performative artworks, Gerald Siegmund notes, referring to Peggy Phelan, that they "nicht wieder wiederholbar ist, ohne seine performative Kraft zu verlieren," but, at the same time, according to Phelan, "[w]riting about it cancels the 'tracelessness' inaugurated within this performative promise."[148] Therefore, the multilayered reading of different sources (published letters, diaries, memories, periodicals, and literary works) is the only way to reconstruct and interpret *performances*. In addition, Edward Said's method of "contrapuntal analysis" can assist in understanding the colonial context of the Belarusian cultural situation. Said argues that such a reading allows the reader to "take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it, which can be done by extending our reading of the texts to include what was once forcibly excluded."[149] It might assist not only, referring to Mignolo, "to look into the spaces in between" but precisely to "produce knowledge from such in-between spaces."[150]

Through methodologies of decoloniality and biographical studies, I follow the traces of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus. However, I am not interested in the most common points of *what is known*. Instead, travel to the margins allows me to question the latent and implicit embodiments of the local avant-gardes. For this reason, my study does not focus on those avant-garde cases that *were performed*. For instance, it does not unfold the unique phenomenon of the Belarusian State Jewish Theatre (BelGOSET) in Minsk, whose theatre productions fit

[147] Dirk Uffelmann, "Postcolonial theory as post-colonial nationalism"; Alexander Pershai, "Feministskaya yazykovaya reforma kak resurs belaruskogo natsionalizma: chastnyy sluchay 'feminizatsii belaruskogo yazyka'," *Ab Imperio* 1 (2013): 303–27
[148] Gerald Siegmund, *Abwesenheit: eine performative Ästhetik des Tanzes* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2006), 65.
[149] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 66–7.
[150] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 18.

into an existing canon of the avant-gardes.[151] Generally, I do not focus on the "Jewish" aspect of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, which is another considerable topic.[152] However, since history is not my aim, my research tends to reconceptualise and reconfigure the field, provoking the question of whether we need such a (linear) history. Hence, my project pivots on the cases which might be considered the traces of the avant-gardes or their *failed* attempts that unfold another perspective on the avant-gardes at large.

While the current theories of the avant-gardes cannot be applied directly (ch. 2), they create a space for discussion. If, as Peter Bürger argues, there might be a tension between avant-garde programs and bourgeois culture (culture of the dominant class),[153] or, as Poggioli states, "avant-garde can flourish only under a liberal regime" that "permits evasions or admits exceptions,"[154] how is it possible to interpret what was realised as the avant-gardes in the Soviet Republics? Or, in what sense can the programs of the avant-garde performed in the USSR be considered *avantgardish*, since the artists directly collaborated with the dominant ideology (Bolshevism)? To answer these questions, it is not enough to be guided by aesthetic criteria. It is necessary to explore the relationship between power and art. From this perspective, the concept of the "pluralities of the avant-gardes" (Harding), or the recently developed "pluriversal" perspective on them,[155] can undermine the solid character of the phenomenon since this theoretical model starts preciously from a specific moment of departure and embodiment (ch. 2.2.).

The notions of *performance* and *performativity* are among the most significant categories for such conceptualisation. It is not merely a reference to the performative turn,[156] when the meaning of the concepts was expanded during their travel from one discipline to another.[157] As Erika Fischer-Lichte points out, performance and performativity were always profoundly integrated into the field of theatre since "Theater erfüllt immer zugleich eine

[151] The story of BelGOSET is still not fully described, first, because of the diffusion of materials. Recently, Inna Gerasimova has been researching the theatre, collecting materials from different sources which will hopefully be published soon.
[152] Mark H. Gelber and Sami Sjöberg, *Jewish Aspects in Avant-Garde: Between Rebellion and Revelation* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017); Alexandra Chiriac, *Performing Modernism* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).
[153] Describing the function of art in bourgeois culture, Bürger refers to Marcuse's concept of *affirmative*, which "characterizes the contradictory function of a culture that retains 'remembrance of what could be,' but is simultaneously 'justification of the established form of existence.'" Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 12.
[154] Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 101, 103.
[155] Rossella Ferrari, "On the Pluriversality of the Avant-Garde," *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* 1 (2020): 151–3; Marsha Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms and Art's Transhemispheric Histories: Ecologies and Genealogies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023).
[156] Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 73.
[157] Uwe Wirth, "Der Performanzbegriff im Spannungsfeld von Illokution, Iteration und Indexikalität" in *Performanz: zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Uwe Wirth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002), 9–66.

referentielle und eine performative Funktion."[158] She identifies *referentielle* (representation) and performative functions, and it is the second one which includes actions engaging the audience. But the avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s shifted to the function of performativity radically. It was a spectator—a co-creator—who, according to Fischer-Lichte, played a crucial role in an avant-garde performance—"zu körperlichen Handlungen provozieren."[159] The boundaries between forms of art disappeared; instead, it was Performance-Kunst that might resemble the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Richard Wagner (1851). But Fischer-Lichte differentiates between these concepts because Wagner's vision was based on one space for different arts but with distinguished boundaries between them. Performance-Kunst develops this note of negotiation but not in terms of forms of art. The matter is a reconfiguration of relations among—space ("eine spezifische Art der Raumwahrnehmung"), the body ("ein besonderes Körperempfinden"), time ("eine bestimmte Form von Zeiterlebnis"), meanings („eine neue Wertigkeit") and things ("und Gegenständen"). The scholar concludes, "Es konstituiert und manifestiert sich hier eine bestimmte Weise des leiblichen In-der-Welt-Seins, das schöpferische Prozesse der Gestaltung und Umgestaltung fokussiert, in denen es die Performanz ist, über die man zur Referenz gelangt."[160]

Fischer-Lichte argues that this form of Performance-Kunst, which was shaped in the avant-gardes of the 1910s and 1920s and exploded in art and theatre in the 1950s and 1960s, aims not only to transgress the boundaries between forms of art. Instead, "es ließ auch die Grenzen zwischen Theater [als ein kulturelles Modell] und anderen Arten von cultural performances verschwimmen."[161] Therefore, "konnte Theater nun als sein kulturelles Modell begriffen warden."[162] She develops the notion of performance (Performance-Modell) and theatricality (as staging and representation), but not in opposition to the idea of culture as text (Text-Modell). She proposes to think about negotiation between these two models of "Konstitution von Wirklichkeit (Welt) und Wirklichkeitserfahrung, zwischen denen nein Austausch-, Spannung- und Oszillationsverhältnis besteht."[163]

Fischer-Lichte also focuses on the concept of theatricality, which has a special meaning from her point of view. However, she argues that at the beginning of the twentieth century, theatricality was re-invented in terms of what later will be identified as performativity (opposite

[158] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Grenzgänge und Tauschhandel. Auf dem Wege zu einer performativen Kultur," in *Performanz. Zwischen Sprachphilosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, 279.
[159] Fischer-Lichte, "Grenzgänge und Tauschhandel," 283.
[160] Ibid., 289.
[161] Ibid.
[162] Ibid., 291.
[163] Ibid., 293.

to Plato's theory of imitation). Theatricality turned into an anthropological category that was a result of the transformation of theatre to "verschiedene andere Arten von cultural performances" (a festival, a ritual, a circus, a variety show, a political gathering).[164] Due to the changes in theories of art and theatre after the Second World War, when the reverse process—from cultural performances to the realm of art—happened, theatricality was again re-invented but in terms of artistic means or as a way to performativity. Referring to recent theories, Fischer-Lichte differentiates the next aspects of theatricality—staging or dramatisation (die Inszenierung), embodiment (die Korporalität), sensation (die Wahrnehmung), performance (die Aufführung/Performance) which are situated between the bodies and voices of actors and spectators.

Since my research includes not only artistic performances but also political mass performances, Ahola-Valo's architecture project and biographies (*as performances*), the aesthetic categories play a significant role in identifying these case studies as avant-gardes (ch. 5.1.-2.). Such an approach expands the range of what we can understand as avant-garde artworks. The boundary between performance in praxis and artistic performance becomes elusive; the transition from one terrain to another cannot happen anymore as they represent a twisted whole.

Overview of chapters

The first chapter starts in the 1980s when the artists of the informal art scene in Soviet Belarus initiated the process of reclaiming the memories of the avant-gardes of the 1920s. Relying on memoirs and talks with local scholars and artists who were directly or indirectly involved in these (and following) artistic "interventions," this section asks why this return was so necessary and with whom and for what the artists struggled. According to chronological logic, this chapter might be at the very end of the dissertation. However, I begin with it to disclose the tangled and diffuse character of the avant-garde narrative in the Belarusian cultural context. Such an entry is necessary not only "dramaturgically" (although it was incidentally my point of departure for this research). Due to a non-linear, fractured, and dispersive model of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, the "stories" of the 1920s and 1930s might be considered part of what happened in late Socialism and after the collapse of the Soviet Union that I develop at

[164] Fischer-Lichte, "Grenzgänge und Tauschhandel," 295.

the end of the chapter.

Chapter two reviews the primary and current sources of avant-garde studies, focusing on the approach of *pluralities* and the more recent *pluriversality*. Although some theoreticians question the efficiency of the etymological genealogy, particularly, Harding argues that this approach might lead to a generalisation of the concept, I presume that the same can happen with such tempting means as "multiplicity" or "pluriversality" which also tend to turn into abstraction without criteria. Besides, the travel on "edges"—that is my general objective—is possible if the tension between the dominant and peripheral narratives about the avant-gardes is determined. I do it not merely to show how the dominant criticism was constructed based on the notion of modernity or where the roots of the current debates about the avant-gardes are. Instead, I argue that this revision allows me to intervene in the field in order to situate my study within a certain place. To specify the avant-gardes in Belarus, I refer to the concept of *third space* by Homi Bhabha that, from my point of view, not merely assists in conceptualising the peculiarities of the phenomenon on the Belarusian territory but discloses its "nature" as a result of the particular "location" of culture.[165]

The third chapter describes the historical background of the October Revolution as a liminal space and, at the same time, as a symbolic point of departure for the avant-gardes in Belarus. Despite the unchallengeable influence (from different perspectives) of the October Upheaval on the shaping of the avant-garde fields in the USSR, the chapter raises the question of its role and effects on the political and cultural margins of the former Russian Empire territories. It also includes notes about the cultural identification of Belarus as transnational and hybrid, referring to the concept of "a fluid form" formulated by the Belarusian philosopher Ihnat Abdziralovič (Kančeŭski) in 1921. Exploring the Russian Revolution as a time-extended event, the section introduces Viciebsk, where, as I argue, the history of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus began. In particular, I unfold the story of the post-Revolutionary Viciebsk People's Art School and UNOVIS group associated with the names of Chagall and Malevich. Identifying the phenomenon of the School in 1918–1922 as an immediate embodiment of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, I argue that it was possible due to the liminality of the moment. Following some common facts about the School's foundation, the chapter focuses on relations between artists and different ideological discourses in the city. I assert that a situational moment of these overlapping ideologies in a particular *place* (the city of Viciebsk with its own history and specificities) produced a space of possibilities and creativity (in Abdziralovič's

[165] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

sense), which chronologically opens the frame of third space of the avant-gardes in Belarus.

The main task of chapter four is to trace some of the female names that have "vanished" from the history of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, including from the Viciebsk People's Art School. I question both common points of women's biographies and the differences between their paths that allowed them to remain in history or, in contrast, "forgot" them. Demonstrating how many still "undiscovered" sites every art phenomenon has, the chapter disputes the ability of the existing "canon" in art, as a matter of fact, *to tell a story.*[166] At this point, the feminist approach contributes to decoloniality as praxis since, as Marsha Meskimmon points out, "What would a decolonial, ecocritical feminist art history be like? Arguably, plural and planetary, but never pure"—and never facile and poor. [167]

Due to the centralisation of power and ideological pressure during the 1920s, the strategies of avant-garde art were appropriated by Soviet ideology and valued according to their potential to represent and promote Bolshevism. Following the activity of TEREVSAT (Theatre of Revolutionary Satire in Viciebsk, 1920–1922), which initiated the movement of "theatre of agitation" (*agitteatr*) over the Soviet republics, chapter five explores the relationship between the avant-gardes and propaganda art. Moving toward and through the TEREVSAT history, it examines the definitions of *revolutionary art*, *left art*, and *proletarian culture* as the pivotal matters of debates in 1917–1922. Unfolding the notion of revolutionary, this section correlates a particular position of the body (as a primary analytical category) in Soviet theatre after 1917 with the social and political programs of that period. Focusing on the politics of the body in the performing arts of the 1920s in Soviet Russia (Meyerhold's biomechanics) and Soviet Belarus (theatre productions and performances in Minsk and Viciebsk), I argue that the avant-garde projects could not be transferred directly from one context to another beyond the peculiarities of the cultural situation. The point is that during the process of transmission (*travelling*), these ideas were displaced, refracted, or, more precisely, *translated* according to the context of their embodiment. [168]

Chapter six explores the almost forgotten and lost stories of theatre director Leŭ Litvinaŭ and the artist Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo who is identified as the "Belarusian Finn" or "Finnish Belarusian."[169] Despite a lack of documents about Litvinaŭ's early artistic years (the

[166] Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms and Art's Transhemispheric Histories*, 1.
[167] Ibid.
[168] Doris Bachmann-Medick, ed., *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).
[169] Olga Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen (Uutta tietoa A. Ahola-Valosta vieraskielisistä aineistoista)," manuscript. Published in K*ulttuurivihkot* 6 (2020): 38–43. Transl. from Finnish.

1910s and 1920ss—the period I was more interested in), it was his case, apparently, as one among (not yet discovered) others, which allowed me to come to the idea of unperformed avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus. These (un)performances allude not merely to the ghosts of what happened. Describing the notion of traces, Jacques Derrida points out particular relations between them and the categories of past, present, and future to which traces refer, and, in this way, the structure of time becomes complicated. [170] Following Litvinaŭ's route, which began when the space for the avant-gardes was slowly compressing, I endeavour to answer why *this* avant-garde was not performed and whether there were any chances it could have happened. In contrast, Ahola-Valo, who spent ten years in Soviet Belarus and created the project "The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind" (Minsk, 1930), had time to complete his avantgardish performance almost entirely. Moreover, the twisted routes of his biography represent the complexity of the political and cultural situation after the October Revolution in Soviet Belarus. The review of multiple corpora of materials discloses the role of life writing as an imaginary construction and form of self-representation in the process of creating avant-garde mythology. [171] In this regard, Ahola-Valo's case extends the existing theoretical models of the avant-gardes beyond common aesthetic criteria (such as futurism, dadaism, luchism, and others, including the model of Soviet avant-garde).

I argue that as heterogeneous and asynchronous phenomena, the avant-gardes were determined by historical and cultural peculiarities of a "geography," or a cultural context, where they emerged and performed. The avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, like in other Central and Eastern European countries, appeared as a reaction to geopolitical and social changes and performed at the intersection of (or in between) the Bolshevik revolution, the national policy, and transcultural agendas which created diverse models of avant-gardism. Therefore, the avant-gardes in the Belarusian context balanced between the transnational agenda (as a network and a rhizome), horizons of different utopias, and the politics of cultural emancipation that emphasise their hybrid, incomplete, and even unperformed character. However, this peculiarity signifies neither less significance nor value of those artistic performances. Instead, it troubles the existing "canon" of art history based on the hierarchy between centres and peripheries.

[170] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).
[171] Claudia Ulbrich, Hans Medick and Angelika Schaser, eds. *Selbstzeugnis und Person: transkulturelle Perspektiven* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2012),

chapter one

Rescuing from Oblivion:
A Claim for the Avant-Gardes in the 1980s and 1990s

The Belarusian artist and writer Adam Hlobus (Adam Globus, real name Uladzimir Adamčyk/Vladimir Adamchik, b. 1958, Minsk) remembers how he and a fellow student, Alieś Loś, [172] went to Viciebsk at the beginning of the 1980s and by accident "discovered" Chagall's house at Malaja Pakroŭskaja Street (the locals told them that presumably, Chagall lived in this house; they knew nothing about other places).[173] They took photos to show to their teacher Chaim Livshits (1912 Viciebsk —1994 Chicago) at the Theatre and Art Institute (today, the Belarusian Academy of Arts). They asked Livshits to tell them what this house was. "You tell me," he responded. After the explanation, Livshits clarified that he knew this place well; he was born nearby but was waiting for a "story" from the students. "Do you know I was so 'left' at your age that you wouldn't have believed?" Livshits continued. "And, yes, we wouldn't," Hlobus confirms. "Imagine, he attended Filonov's classes!"[174]

Regarding the Soviet cultural policy, it might seem that the names of Chagall, Malevich, Ermolaeva, Kogan, and others were consigned to oblivion. However, Hlobus says that he knew about Viciebsk's avant-gardes (the artists' names) from official art history.[175] "They were included. Another point, how they were represented and interpreted. [They] were a marginal phenomenon [...] formalists who were mentioned somewhere at the end of the official history" (Hlobus). These "tales" circulated in artistic communities as oral history. Lectors at art schools and colleges talked about those artists whom the Soviet

[172] Here and further in the chapter: *Talks with Adam Hlobus*. Conducted 24 January and 26 May 2023. Transl. from Belarusian.
[173] The Viciebsk scholar Taciana Katovič (Tatyana Kotovich), an author of scores of publications and the curator of many projects aimed at memorising and promoting Viciebsk cultural heritage, remembers that for a long time, locals thought that the People's Art School building had been located at Valadarskaha Street, today Suvorava 3, where the school moved after the reformation in 1923. "There was a fence with a [unauthorised] notation written by white chalk... or paint... that Chagall and Malevich were here," she says. Here and elsewhere in the chapter: *A Talk with Taciana Katovič.* Conducted 31 July 2021. Transl. from Russian.
[174] Chaim Livshits was a Belarusian Soviet artist and teacher. His parents' house in Viciebsk was located on Malaja Pakroŭskaja Street, where Marc Chagall lived. Livshits studied at the Viciebsk Art Technical School (1927–30). He also attended Pen's class. In 1930, Livshits went to Leningrad and attended Pavel Filonov's studio, the founder of the school of analytical art. This experience had a serious influence on Livshits' works.
[175] Hlobus mentions *The History of Russian Art* in 13 volumes, edited by Igor Grabar and published in Moscow in 1953–69.

authorities declared "enemies" and even showed (in secret) the reproductions of their works to the students.

Besides, Viciebsk was a part of the biographies of many Belarusian Soviet artists. "Ščamialoŭ said that as a child he used to go to [Yehuda] Pen's studio, you see, for them, it was just a story of their life,"[176] the art historian Volha Archipava (Olga Archipova, b. 1974, Minsk) explains (ch. 3.3).[177] Another art historian, Aliaksandar Lisaŭ (Alexander Lisov, b. 1959, Ščučyn), who studied in Viciebsk, also confirms that despite the "secrecy," the stories about the post-revolutionary People's Art School were already—as a local legend—on the surface.

> Those who dealt with the art history of Viciebsk, mainly at the Faculty of Art and Graphic Arts [at Viciebsk State University] went around this material.[178] There were few researchers, and there were local historians, but you understand what attitude Chagall and Malevich had from a purely ideological point of view. Evidently, it was almost impossible to defend this material.[179]

In the 1990s, the situation changed ideologically. If not many scholars were (officially) interested in the People's Art School's history during the Soviet period, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, many Russians and foreigners visited Viciebsk to collect materials. However, Lisaŭ decided to focus not on these household names. "There was a field of unknown materials in Belarus," he explains. Therefore, the scholar investigated the history of exhibitions in pre-Revolutionary Belarusian cities at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (he defended his PhD in 1998). He discovered a rich artistic life before and beyond Chagall and Malevich, and this history is still waiting to be told.

This chapter follows the memory of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus and describes how it first returned to the local cultural discourse through artistic practices. Relying on memoirs and conversations with local scholars and artists who were directly or indirectly involved in these artistic "interventions," this chapter questions why this return was necessary for artists and against whom and for what they struggled. The correlation of their

[176] Leanid Ščamialoŭ (Leonid Shchemelev, 1923 Viciebsk—2021 Minsk), Belarusian artist, People's Artist of the BSSR (1983), Honoured Artist of the BSSR, Laureate of the State Prize of the BSSR (1982).
[177] Here and further in the chapter: *A Talk with Volha Archipava*. Conducted 5 May 2023. Transl. from Russian.
[178] The faculty was organised based on the Viciebsk Art and Graphic Teaching College, which was the name of the People's Art School since 1949. Therefore, the roots of the faculty refer directly to the foundation of the People's Art School.
[179] Here and elsewhere in the chapter: *A Talk with Aliaksandar Lisaŭ*. Conducted 30 July 2021. Transl. from Russian.

remembrances with documents from state archives indicates the problematic aspect of the study from a historical perspective. While the artists and scholars tell the rich story of the informal art scene in Viciebsk during perestroika, there are almost no references to this phenomenon in the archives of state cultural institutions. Additionally, it is still impossible to find any trace of an "alternative" (or "another") culture in the city's architecture (as places of memory), which provokes a question not about what archives or museums tell but rather what they conceal (ch. 6.1.; Conclusion).

1.1. "Who on earth is Chagall? ... Don't you dare! My god!"

It was 1978. The studio of the young artist Aliaksandar Malei (Alexander Malei, b. 1951 Šadkoŭščyna, Viciebsk district) was in a cellar at Žastkova Street in Viciebsk. Often, the small, tight room was flooded by water. "Rusty, rotten pipes are a symbol of the era in which my comrades and I lived," Malei mentions. "Communication pipes, like a vital substance, were systematically leaking, rusting and bleeding."[180] However, artistic studios—where "not even the lack of daylight was a problem"— were the only spaces where artists who were opposed to the Soviet ideology "could get freedom."[181] They dreamed about exhibitions, no matter where, even on fences (since, without official permission, artists could not exhibit their works at that time). But these intentions were not realised.

> What could we bring with us? What kind of painting would be perceived as oppositional? We were in an information blockade and did not know what was happening in the art world. We did not even know the culture of our city, let alone European art. Knowledge was more or less superficial, and the names of Chagall and Malevich remained only a rumour.[182]

Alexander Solovyev (1926, Soloni, Novgorod district— 2021, Viciebsk) was the only artist of the earlier generation who was their so-called kindred spirit. Most artists of the "sixties" (shestidesyatniki)—who, according to Malei, started the Viciebsk movement of the cultural resistance to ideological pressure "because their romanticism created the illusion of

[180] Alexander Malei, *Vitebskiy "Kvadrat." Khudozhestvennoye issledovaniye nonkonformistskogo dvizheniya khudozhnikov* (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2018), 6. Transl. from Russian.
[181] Ibid.
[182] Ibid., 9.

another world and thereby contradicted existing ideological attitudes"[183]—mainly "capitulated," heading official artistic structures and institutions. Solovyev was one of the "exceptions" who kept his artistic principles. He identifies himself as an avant-gardist. In the 1970s, he organised an unofficial artistic group "Osa" (A Wasp). He worked as a stage designer at the local theatre because it "allowed him to escape censorship. He could improvise presenting his abstract works as the search for a stage design solution."[184] However, Solovyev seldom exhibited. Malei describes how the censors checked the artist's paintings, and almost all were withdrawn.

At the beginning of perestroika, Malei moved to another studio in the basement, and it was placed near the former building of the Viciebsk People's Art School at Bucharynskaja Street. According to the artist, his turn to spatial composition happened in his art after that move—"as a follower of Kazimir Malevich."[185] In 1987, Malei initiated the creation of "Kvadrat" (Square), an artistic group which alluded to the artistic programs of the 1910s and 1920s. "[We] didn't plan to refer to UNOVIS. [...] The avant-garde came to an end in the late 20s, and, in the 80s, artists tried to fill the void."[186] In December 1987, "Kvadrat" had already participated in the Belarusian informal art exhibition "Perspektiva" (Perspective) in Minsk. They got to know the central figures of the non-conformist scene, including Rusava and Kaškurevič.

> The biography of "Kvadrat" begins with this exhibition, consonant with the legacy of the Viciebsk School and UNOVIS association. [...] Subsequently, wherever we exhibited and however we tried to be independent of the history of our city, we were no longer perceived outside the logic of the Viciebsk School[187].

In a year, "Kvadrat" started the project "Kazimir Malevich-110" to discover and promote the heritage of the remarkable suprematists. Malei remembered that they faced a lack of information—where to find the traces? They went to Leningrad to the Russian Museum and met with Evgeny Kovtun who "silently" explored the Russian avant-garde during the Soviet period. He told them about UNOVIS, its members' dramas, and mentioned that Malevich's wife Natalya was still living in Leningrad. Besides, Kovtun showed original works by

[183] Malei, *Vitebskiy "Kvadrat"*, 15.
[184] Ibid., 14.
[185] Ibid., 22.
[186] Ibid., 40–1.
[187] Ibid., 60–1.

Malevich, Suetin, and others from the Museum's repository. They attented several official exhibitions of the Russian avant-garde in Moscow and Leningrad. "For the first time, I discovered suprematism as an artistic movement. [...] We explored almost every centimetre of the artworks."[188] The artists met with Malevich's last student, Solomon Gershov. Then, they visited Natalya Malevich who lived in a small, poor one-room apartment with her sister, and got to know Una Uriman, Malevich's daughter.

On 4 November 1988, the exhibition "Experiment"—"collective actions of the people from different generations and times"— opened in Viciebsk. [189] Artists from Viciebsk, Minsk, Leningrad, and Moscow participated in the exhibition. The audience and invited scholars from different cities came to the opening. "Pluralis" group (Rusava, Kaškurevič, Aliaksiej Ždanaŭ, and Viktar Mališeŭski) prepared the performance *Kazimir's Revival* shown in the Spartak cinema theatre hall. The performance started on the street when the artists and audience moved from the main exhibition space in the Union of Artists to the Spartak building. The artist Volha Sazykina (Olga Sazykina) remembered that they were "honourably following Malevich's coffin with black flags in [their] hands, accompanied by the drum beat. When everything was over, Ira Sazanava [the designer from Leningrad] burst into tears and told Aleh Surski [Oleg Sursky, the art critic from Minsk] that she was deeply touched by what she saw."[190] Malei also mentions that the chief of the Viciebsk District Department of Culture was in the head of the column—"as if she was acting as a symbol of the change of consciousness of the administration and officials at the time, or she was simply in the good holiday mood being aware of the importance of what was happening."[191] However, "[p]erhaps the most important thing about this project was not that we took the first step towards restoring historical justice, but the action itself," Malei points out.[192] In a year, artworks by Minsk and Viciebsk artists from the "Experiment" project were exhibited in Minsk in the Palace of Arts. *Kazimir's Revival* became a symbolic culmination during the opening.

Nevertheless, the "revolutionary" meaning of these actions did not lie in the artists' making visible the "unknown" pages of the Viciebsk Peopele's Art School. As Hlobus points out, nobody "forgot" Chagall or Malevich, but they were placed officially at the bottom of the hierarchy—as less meaningful. The artist Alieś Rodzin (Ales Rodin, 1947, Baranavičy—2022, Minsk) also mentions that, although nobody spoke openly about the artistic programs of

[188] Malei, *Vitebskiy "Kvadrat,"* 67.
[189] Ibid., 76.
[190] Qtd. in Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, eds., *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch,* 165.
[191] Malei, *Vitebskiy "Kvadrat," 79.*
[192] Malei, *Vitebskiy "Kvadrat"*, 76.

UNOVIS, the students focused on composition and concepts which were the basis of Malevich's programs. Rodzin also attended the class where Livshits talked about the School's innovations and supported students' experiments. "We saw everything through that black square. Especially as it was related to Belarus—the Viciebsk school, UNOVIS, Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine—we were very much impressed by this story."[193]

Hlobus also spoke about Malevich's centenary celebration when dozens of Belarusian artists, philosophers, and scholars gathered in the studio of the artist Viktar Paŭloŭski (Viktor Pavlovsky) in Minsk in 1979.[194]. The gathering was legal, and they even prepared spontaneous exhibitions of their works. Hlobus underscores that they did not hide. "The state did not celebrate [Malevich's birth], we did it, and that's it." There were artists, writers, and scholars of different ages with different perceptions of Malevich's programs. Art historian and ethnographer Michaś Ramaniuk (Mikhail Ramanyuk) and philosopher Uladzimir Konan (Vladimir Konon) gave lectures. Konan pointed out the roots of Malevich's philosophy in folk art since combining red-white/black-white/white-white was the base for Belarusian motifs. Hlobus disagreed arguing for, like Malei, the cosmic and scientific character of Malevich's art. (Hlobus repeatedly refers to two central circles—conservative, nationally-oriented right-wing artists and a left-wing group that remained in support of internationalism and permanent revolution for social justice. Hlobus identified himself as a leftist. At the same time, he speaks Belarusian and promotes Belarusian history and culture, which reveals, like in the 1920s, more complicated relations between national ideas as an emancipated program and left principles. Hlobus calls all Belarusian poets and writers of the 1920s leftists.)[195]

However, while Malevich's and other names returned to the Viciebsk cultural history precipitously, or, more precisely, "suddenly, they left the margins and turned into the mainstream; they became part of the vanguard," the artistic community had to struggle for Chagall's heritage. In 1987, a group of Minsk artists gathered nearby the Svislač River to celebrate Chagall's birth. The artist Valery Martynčyk (Valery Martynchik)[196] remembers:

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[193] Here and elsewhere in the chapter: *A Talk with Aleś Rodzin*. Conducted 30 July 2017. Transl. from Belarusian.
[194] Viktar Paŭloŭski fled Soviet Belarus in 1979. He went to Paris with an official delegation of Belarusian artists and remained in the city, applying for political asylum. It was a scandal, and, as Hlobus mentions, "Because of this trick, most of our artists have forever lost the hope of seeing the Louvre and the nude 'Olympia' by Édouard Manet." Adam Hlobus, "Minskiy avangard. Zametki byvshego molodogo i levogo khudozhnika," *Rodnik,* no. 2 (1989): 20. Transl. from Russian.
[195] Hlobus, "Minskiy avangard," 18–21.
[196] Valery Martynčyk (1948, Minsk district), artist. In 1972, he graduated from the Byelorussian State Institute of Theatre and Art. Since 1972, he has been participating in the underground informal art scene in Minsk, Leningrad, and Moscow. Since 1990, he has been living in London.

There was an item of luxury for those times in my studio—a telephone. According to rumours a political "thaw" had started again in Moscow, and then came the one-hundredth anniversary of our compatriot Marc Chagall. Ždanaŭ was in my studio when we were discussing the event when suddenly he had an idea to celebrate this event publicly. Who nowadays can be surprised by public events? At that time, however, nothing like this had happened before. Anything public, no matter what, was forbidden. Apart from the official marches, of course. At that time a public event in Minsk could lead to unpredictable consequences. Ždanaŭ, as I said, was a determined person. He called up the Ministry of Culture and exclaimed to one of the civil servants that a group of people were about to celebrate Chagall's anniversary in the open air near the Trajeckaje (Trinity) suburb. "Who on earth is Chagall?" asked the civil servant. Ždanaŭ explained who he was. "I'll find you hundreds of these Chagalls!" a voice shouted on the line. "Don't you dare! My god!"

Nevertheless, we went. It was a bit scary. I warned relatives that anything could happen. We invited some people from the photo studio just in case, to have some support. Ždanaŭ and myself, my friend physicist Ihar Fiadčenia from the Academy of Science with his friend Volha, and a couple more people. A poet Natallia Tatur (Nataly Tatur) was waiting for us near the Trajeckaje suburb. Ždanaŭ and Tatur started to recite poems, amazing poems. Suddenly the police came from everywhere—we had been expecting; the 'culture worker' from the Ministry had kept his word. A police major tried to stop the action. We were surrounded by police, but the poets kept on reciting. Photographers started taking pictures—from all sides the clicks of cameras—but Natallia and Aliaksiej [Ždanaŭ] continued to recite. We were impressed by their courage, but there were more and more police, and they finally pushed us aside. The action was over, but it did take place, and poets gave the first lesson of courage in a country where for decades fear reigned.[197]

Hlobus confirms that there were artists and academics in Soviet Belarus who did not accept Chagall as "Belarusian", because of the artist's Jewish origin.[198] "But what can you do

[197] Qtd. in Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, eds. *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*, 103.

[198] In 1987, one of the most influential Soviet magazines *Ogoniok* published the article by Andrey Voznesensky, "Gala Shagalla" (Chagall's Gala). The author talks about his visit to Viciebsk and the absence of Chagall's traces in the city. He calls for the creation of a museum there. This publication provoked a wave of interest in Chagall and the city. However, in Minsk, a group of scholars and artists used their local influence to prevent the foundation of the museum because of their anti-Jewish views. This year, the editor of the fifth volume of the *Encyclopedia of Literature and Art of Belarus,* Iryna Šyliankova (Irina Shilenkova), asked the art historian V. Bujval to prepare an article about Chagall; the name of the artist would finally be included in Belarusian art history. However, the deputy editor of the complete edition attempted to replace Bujval's article with a "critical and revealing" publication of Chagall. Only a decision from the editorial board of the *Big Soviet Encyclopedia* in Moscow reinstated Bujval's publication. Nevertheless, the editor Šyliankova was fired by the local authorities. The official reason was that she did not pass the qualification exam. The film *Teatr vremen perestroiki i glastnosti* (The Theatre during perestroika and glasnost) by A. Ruderman, which tells the story of forbidden Chagall and the fired editor, was also not allowed to be produced by the local authorities. The official explanation was that the film did

to Chagall? Nothing. [...] And we will wait through" (Hlobus). But not only Chagall was "ignored." Since the 1960s, Nadzia Chadasievič-Léger (Nadya Khodasevich-Léger)—who was born in Belarus, left the country in 1920, and is still known mainly as the wife of Fernand Léger (ch. 4.1.)—had been visiting the USSR permanently. As an ardent communist, she was welcomed by the Soviet authorities. She organised exhibitions of Léger, Picasso, and Leonardo da Vinci in Moscow and was friends with Soviet cultural celebrities. However, Soviet Belarus remained a special place for her. In contrast to Chagall, who did not want to visit Viciebsk during his Moscow trip in 1973 (according to one account, he was afraid of facing the city that was not *his*), Chadasievič-Léger came to Belarus several times (in 1959, she visited the place of her birth Zembin even after her parents had died). She offered some of her works to the Belarusian National Art Museum collection. But the direction board refused. "[They] were afraid of making mistakes," Archipava explains, since it was still unclear if this kind of art was allowed. The museum accepted presents only in the 1970s. There was a specially prepared collection of reproductions from the Louvre—"Egypt, antiquity ... some exhibits are only in our collection, in the whole territory of the Soviet Union there are none, only our museum has them." (Archipava)[199] Chadasievič-Léger also proposed creating a monumental mosaic panel for the Palace of Sport in Minsk façade, based on Léger's outline. The authorities refused flatly.[200]

At the same time in Viciebsk, the poet David Simanovich headed a group of local scholars and artists who struggled for Chagall's memorialisation in the city. For years, they conflicted with a local authority that did not want to accept any reference to Chagall in Viciebsk under the guidance of an anti-Chagall group in Minsk[201]. In correspondence from 1987–1988, the deputy chief of Viciebsk city responded that "Chagall's immortalisation is not envisaged for a number of reasons."[202] He also denied the fact that Chagall had wanted to present some of his works to Viciebsk, but the city refused. However, in 1988, the Department of Culture announced the creation of the Museum of the Viciebsk Art School, but it remained merely a plan.

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not have a coherent plot or artistic value. See, Victor Marcinovich, *Rodina. Marc Shagal v Vitebske* (Moscow: NLO, 2017), 184-204.

[199] Except for a collection of reproductions, there were dozens of plates painted by Picasso, Leger's prints, and artworks by Chadasievič-Léger.

[200] Some of Chadasievič-Léger's mosaics (the portraits of Léger, Picasso, Lenin, and Chagall) are kept in the small museum in Zembin. She also presented some reproductions from the Louvre to her town as she wanted the children to have a chance to see art. See, Barys Krepak, *Viartannie imionaŭ. U 2-ch knihach* (Minsk: Mastackaja litaratura, 2013).

[201] See the footnote 191.

[202] GAVO, f.2222, o.4, d.403, l.1. Transl. from Russian.

During the following years, the activists continued their public campaign in the city and abroad, looking for international support. In 1991, the authorities gave permission for an exhibition and conference "Chagall's Readings." "Kvadrat" performed several actions devoted to Chagall and Pen in places connected with the artists (Pen's grave in Viciebsk, Pakroŭskaja Street, the facade of Chagall's house). The performances were documented and published in several catalogues. After these events, the city authorities announced the creation of Chagall's Committee to open a House-museum; renaming of Dziaržynskaha Street as Chagall Street; the preparation for "Chagall's Readings" in 1993.[203] The scholar and curator Taciana Katovič (Tatyana Kotovich, b. 1954, Viciebsk) prepared the first Malevich's Plein Air with the participation of artists from Viciebsk, Minsk and Moscow (supported by the Open Society Foundation). However, the House-museum of Marc Chagall on Pakroŭskaja Street was opened only in 1997.[204] The Museum's collection includes several of Chagall's drawings. The first original painting appeared in Belarus only in 2012 (ch. 1.2.).

After a series of Malevich's plein airs and communication with the local authorities, Katovič and local artists gained access to two rooms in the building at Buharynskaja Street, where the People's Art School was located in 1919-1923. They launched the Viciebsk Centre of Contemporary Art. Katovič remembers the offices of brokers and a pawnshop which were also situated there in the 1990s; the Centre was a marginalised place. However, the future of the building was not clear for a long time. It was waiting for an investor and could be demolished or rebuilt at any moment. In the 2010s, due to a range of actions, publications, and events organised by local scholars and artists, the Ministry of Culture of Belarus finally decided to preserve and reconstruct the building. In 2018, the Museum of the History of the Viciebsk People's Art School was officially opened as a part of the Viciebsk Centre of Contemporary Art Museum, which already featured a central exhibit space at Generala Belabarodava 5, an exhibition space at Frunze 11, an art space at Talstoha 7, and the Museum of Photography named after Sigismund Yurkovsky.

1.2. Writing Belarusian art history

Exploring the meaning of Viciebsk as a centre of Belarusian art education, Lisaŭ points out that the first attempt to write Belarusian art history happened in the 1920s but was mainly

[203] GAVO, f.2222, o.7, d.8, l.1-2. Transl. from Russian.
[204] It is a part of the Marc Chagall Museum, which, in addition to the house, includes the Art Center of Marc Chagall, founded in 1992 and located in another part of the city.

focused "on the search for a national style,"[205] because it was the official political agenda of the 1920s in the BSSR. Still, local scholars refer to works by the art historian Mikalai Ščakacichin (Nikolay Shchekatsikhin, 1896–1940) and the ethnographer Mikalai Kaspiarovič (Nikolay Kasperovich, 1900–1937) who were actively published in the 1920s, "discovering" Belarusian art. In 1928, Ščakacichin finished the first volume of his fundamental work *Notes from the History of Belarusian Art*.[206] In the beginning, he pointed out the colonising character of the Russian Empire's politics during previous centuries when so-called "science" confirmed the "ancient 'true-Russian' character of the culture of the so-called 'western region.' The aim was to find the theoretical basis for practical measures of the government to 'restore true-Russian origins.'"[207] However, Ščakacichin stated that Belarusian art had its own traditions and peculiarities that foreign scholars also confirmed.[208] In 1929, the Belarusian State Museum published the catalogue *Modern Belarusian Art* which included a list of the artworks from the Department of Modern Belarusian Art. The catalogue began with two articles by Ščakacichin and Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, explaining the collection's origin and status. Lastoŭski pointed out:

> Modern Belarusian art is created by a group of artists, natives and non-natives, people of different professional qualifications and different artistic styles. The common thing that unites this diverse creativity is a relatively clearly defined Belarusian ethnography. [...] aristocracy in art, romanticism and symbolism cannot take place, [however] modern Belarusian art must be national in form and proletarian in content.[209]

Ščakacichin developed the same framework for "pure" Belarusian art. Although he mentioned avant-garde exhibitions in Babrujsk and Minsk in 1921, it was only "by accident." He continued,

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[205] Alexander Lisov, "Sovremennyye otsenki roli i znacheniya Vitebska kak tsentra khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniya," in *Mir iskusstva i deti: problemy khudozhestvennoy pedagogiki* (Viciebsk: Vitebskiy Gosudarstvennyy Universitet im. P.M. Masherova, 2007), 7. Transl. from Russian.
[206] He was unable to continue this publication, because on 18 July 1930, he was arrested by the DPU of the BSSR in the case of the Union for the Liberation of Belarus (ch. 3.2.).
[207] Mikalai Ščakacichin, *Narysy z historyi bielaruskaha mastactva* (Minsk: Inbelkult, 1928), 4. Transl. from Belarusian.
[208] According to Ščakacichin, German researchers Paul Weber and Albert Ippel introduced the concepts of "Belarusian art" and "the Belarusian school of painting" as an independent phenomenon. Ibid., 6-7. Transl. from Belarusian. In particular, he mentioned the next publications: Paul Weber, *Wilna, eine vergessene Kunststätte* (Jena, Vilnius, 1917); Albert Ippel, hrg. *Wilna-Minsk. Altertümer- und Kunstgewerbe-Führer durch die Ausstelung der Zeitung der 10 Armee* (Vilnius, 1918); Albert Ippel, "Zur weissruthenischen Kunst", in *Weissruthenien* (Berlin: Verlag von Karl Curtius, 1919).
[209] Vaclaŭ Lastoŭski, "Ustup," in *Sučasnaje bielaruskaje mastactva* (Minsk: Inbelkult, 1929), 6. Transl. from Belarusian.

> Viciebsk temporarily became a stop for a certain number of Russian artists, who temporarily brought the liveliness of artistic life to it, up to the extreme "left" styles of painting, and then they left without leaving a solid trace there. And, Viciebsk, by the way, was not yet a part of Soviet Belarus.[210]

In the future, artists and scholars of so-called "right-wing" circles, as Hlobus identifies them, promoted this argument (for instance, Siadura and Malcaŭ). They agreed that there was avantgardism (revolutionary art) in Soviet Belarus but considered it a temporary flaw, a mistake that might be improved to be "Belarusian." Ščakacichin stated, "in modern Belarusian art, there were almost no such extreme 'left' formalist styles as cubism, suprematism, or abstractionism."[211] He differentiated between three main directions of modern Belarusian art: realism (which dominated), so-called impressionism ("minor"), and neo-realism represented by the majority of the young Belarusian artists (Brazer, Filipovič, Kaštalianski, Halubkina, Zevin, Rucai, and others) who were engaged in formalist styles and movements (Cezanne's and Falk's schools and VKhUTEMAS classes). Ščakacichin "ignored" almost all artists from the Viciebsk People's Art School in Chagall and Malevich's period, referring to them as "Russian accidental artists," even ignoring their local origin. Writing about Viciebsk College after 1924, Kaspiarovič barely mentioned the history of its foundation as if 1918–1922 had not happened. And when he did, as in an article from 1925, he separated those artists from "Belarusian art.'"[212] Apparently, this kind of vision of the People's Art School history fit the approaches of Russian art historians and the arguments about "Russian" Viciebsk became officially one of the central reasons.[213] Indeed, "great art" was hardly possible in a "province," which is how Russian art historians perceived Belarus. Hlobus refers to a book about the Belarusian artist Benjamin Basaŭ (Benjamin Basov) written and published in Moscow in the

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[210] Mikalai Ščakacichin, "Sučasnaje bielaruskaje mastactva," in *Sučasnaje bielaruskaje mastactva* (Minsk: Inbelkult, 1929), 10. Transl. from Belarusian.

[211] Ščakacichin, "Sučasnaje bielaruskaje mastactva," 13.

[212] In a 1925 article devoted to the Viciebsk art and cultural field, Kaspiarovič referred to Chagall. Although he called him "one of the most well-known figures of Viciebsk local culture," the artist represented Jewish tradition. See, Mikalai Kaspiarovič, "Materyjaly da vyvučennia Viciebskaj krajovaj litaratury i mastactva," *Maladniak,* no. 6 (1927): 69–71. Mentioning Chagall, Kaspiarovič created distance between Chagall and Belarusian identification.

[213] Hlobus remembers that at the beginning of the 1990s, he and the Belarusian artist Mai Dancyh (Mai Danzig) worked on returning Belarusian cultural values. They thought that due to the collapse of the USSR, it would be possible to revive something from the history of the People's Art School. The success of the Belarusian Academy of Science, which returned a part of the collection from Luckievič's Museum in Vilnius, inspired them. "We didn't pretend on Malevich's or, I don't know, Lissitzky's paintings which cost a lot. But we thought that maybe some archival documents, the lists of the students, something which the scholars in Moscow or in St. Petersburg might consider less valuable. But we got a response that all of these are legally the cultural values of RSFSR" (Hlobus).

1980s.[214] The author states that since Basaŭ was born and grew up in a little Belarusian town Mscislaŭ, "he did not encounter with great art... Are you kidding me?" Hlobus exclaims. "There was a cathedral with frescoes from the seventeenth century and a real-size depiction of the organ!!!"[215]

In the 1930s, the authors of Belarusian art history from the 1920s were repressed (Ščakacichin and Kaspiarovič were arrested already in 1930, spent five years in camps, were released, but were arrested again several times. Kaspiarovič was shot in 1937, and Ščakacichin died from tuberculosis in 1940). Hereby, Belarusian art history was written in accordance with a Marxist-Soviet interpretation in which "'left twists" of the avant-gardists received negative assessments."[216] The first attempts to pay attention to the post-revolutionary period in Viciebsk happened in the 1960s. Lisaŭ mentions several publications which referred to Viciebsk as a significant stage for the formation of Belarusian art. The authors described the phenomenon mainly from the same ideological positions (it was formalism, *natsdemovshchina*, or local Jewish culture) without mentioning the artists' names. However, they "gave the reader a chance to know about the events that took place in Viciebsk to interpret on their own."[217]. The *Short Encyclopedia Dictionary of the Belarusian SSR* in 1980 included a brief note about the Viciebsk Art College that was founded on the basis of the re-organised People's Art School which referred to Pen's drawing classes.[218] If Pen's activity (and TEREVSAT or OKNA Rosta) was mentioned as a part of the cultural and educational space in Viciebsk, references to Chagall and Malevich were absent.

In the fourth volume of the *History of Belarusian Art (1917–1941)* published in 1990, an extended description of the role of the Viciebsk Art School was included but still with "careful" references to internationally known artists. This "version" travelled from one publication to another with a cautious and considerate "link" to Belarusian as a definition. After the Soviet Union collapsed, the names of so-called formalist artists appeared in education

[214] Maria Chegodaeva, *Benjamin Basov* (Moscow: Sovetskij khudozhnik, 1983).
[215] The description of Belarusian cities and towns as "provincial" is widespread in biographical publications. For instance, Lubov Dubenskaya, the author of the book about Nadzia Chadasevič-Léger (ch. 4.1.) permanently mentions "poor Belarusian villages" to describe where the artist was born ("Just imagine what life was there before the Revolution! [...] godforsaken backwater." Lubov Dubenskaya, *Rasskazyvayet Nadya Lezhe* [Moscow: Detskaya literatura, 1978], 8. Transl. from Russian). It is unlikely that the Moscow author visited other cities except for Minsk. But her "unintentional" perception of a country she did not know discloses the stereotypes of "provincial" as invented by "colonisers" in terms of "primitivism" and "barbarism" as it was identified by Mignolo. See, Mignolo, "DELINKING," 472.
[216] Lisov, "Sovremennyye otsenki roli i znacheniya Vitebska," 8.
[217] Ibid.
[218] *Bielaruskaja SSR: karotkaja encyklapiedyja: [u 5 t.]*. T. 3 (Minsk: Haloŭnaja redakcyja Bielaruskaj Savieckaj Encyklapiedyi, 1980), 138.

programs; it became possible to defend university diplomas on the topic. Several exhibitions of Chagall's works (from foreign collections) happened in Viciebsk and Minsk in the 2000s. However, as the former director of the Chagall Museum in Viciebsk Ludmila Chmialnickaja (Ludmila Khmelnitskaya) remembers, all these exhibitions were organised with the support of the French and German embassies and individuals. The Ministry of Culture of Belarus practically "ignored" these events.[219] Archipava notes that Chagall remained listed as an artist in the Department of Foreign Art in the Belarusian National Art Museum.

Other artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, Ferdynand Ruščyc (Ruszczyc), Vitald Bialynicki-Birulia, and Stanislaŭ Žukoŭski,[220] belonged to the Russian collection of the museum. Because they studied in the Russian Empire, "they were identified as Russian artists. The Belarusian collection started from 1917, except for Pen, Kruger and Alpiarovič... Jews who came to Belarus."[221] Generally, the museum's collection was based on the artworks by Russian artists because it was created, like in the museums of other Soviet Republics, "following the principle 'centre/periphery': Moscow sent works from the store-rooms of the Tretyakov Gallery and other Russian museums."[222] Most Belarusian art historians studied in Moscow and St. Petersburg; therefore, they accepted the "superior" role of Russian culture without doubts. In the 1990s, the interest in Belarusian art, especially in those artists who were born in Belarus and became well-known, had grown. But since almost all significant artworks were in other collections, Belarusian museums had no chance to get originals. Moreover, the state was not concerned at all.[223]

According to Archipava, the turning point happened in 2011, when Belgazprombank in Minsk bought works by the artists of École de Paris, then Chagall's painting "Lovers" (1981), which cost 650.000 dollars.[224] The exhibitions "The Artists of École de Paris" and "Ten Centuries of Belarusian Art" were organised at the Belarusian National Art Museum and became the most significant cultural events in the country. By 2020, the bank's collection

[219] Iryna Romanova and Alexander Friedman, "L' 'Éva-lution' ou comment le tableau *Éva* de Chaïm Soutine est devenu le symbole de la contestation au Bélarus en 2020," *Slavica Occitania*, 56 (2023): 13.
[220] Ferdynand Ruszczyc (1870–1936) was born in Belarus and lived there until the beginning of the twentieth century. He graduated from the Imperial Academy of Arts in Saint Petersburg. In 1904, he settled in Warsaw. Often presented as a Polish artist. Stanislaŭ Žukoŭski (1873–1944) was born in Hrodna province and graduated from the Moscow School of Painting. He was a member of the "Mir isskustva" group. Usually identified as a Russian-Polish artist. Vitald Bialynicki-Birulia (1872–1957) is presented now as a Russian, Belarusian, and Soviet artist. He attended the Murashko Drawing School in Kyiv; then, graduated from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. In 1947, he was elected into the USSR Academy of Arts. He lived in Moscow.
[221] *A Talk with Volha Archipava*. In detail, see ch. 3.
[222] Romanova and Friedman, "L' 'Éva-lution' ou comment le tableau *Éva* de Chaïm Soutine," 136. Transl. from Russian original.
[223] Ibid.
[224] In detail, ibid.

included more than one hundred artworks (by Chagall, Soutine, Bakst, Ruszczyc, Zadkine, and others) including the exemplar of "Malaja padarožnaja knižka" by Francysk Skaryna (1470–1552, a Belarusian humanist and translator, known as one of the first book printer in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania).[225] The bank sponsored a gallery at the centre of Minsk, where the collection was open to the public. A series of different cultural and educational events was organised to promote the collection and knowledge about well-known artists from Belarus. The collection acquired a special meaning during the 2020 presidential election campaign and the protest demonstrations that followed when the authorities arrested the collection for a while.[226] "Eva" by Soutine, the most expensive piece in the collection (1,8 million dollars), turned into a symbol of the protests—as "a female face of the revolution"; the special hashtag #evaluation was launched.[227]

After a while, the collection returned to the exhibition space. However, its legal status still needs to be clarified. According to the agreement, this collection cannot be moved from the territory of Belarus. However, it is a private corporate collection that belongs to the representative of the Russian Gazprombank, who is one of the principal shareholders of Belgazprombank. At this point, it seems that Belarusians can still only look at these artworks but cannot "have" them since the owner is "somebody from outside."

1.3. "But here we are—the vanguards"

Despite the role of informal artistic and scholarly contributions to the process of memorialisation of the avant-gardes in Belarus, their focus was not on the past. Nor did they want to confront Russian art scholars who determined the rigid canon of the Russian avant-

[225] The remarkable cultural "objects" from Belarusian history (many of which were "lost" during the First and Second World Wars, the Soviet period, and the waves of emigration) are still located mainly in private collections, unknown to the public and historians. Sometimes, they appear as lots in auctions. In June 2023, the non-governmental media *Naša Niva* published an announcement that the reliquary of St. Felician the Martyr (which was brought to Minsk in the eighteenth century and kept in the Cathedral Church there; it was "lost" in 1921 after the Bolsheviks occupied the church) would be sold by the Russian auction house Litfond for almost €20,000. "Its export and sale outside Belarus may have been illegal," the journalist concludes. "Praz sto hadoŭ na rasijskim aŭkcyjonie ŭsplyla relikvija z minskaha kafiedralnaha sabora," *Naša Niva*, 26 June 2023. Transl. from Belarusian.
[226] Viktar Babaryka (Victor Babariko), the former head of Belgazprombank and the person who initiated the creation of the collection, was the main opponent to the acting president Aliaksandar Lukašenka (Alexander Lukashenko). Babaryka was already arrested during the campaign before the election. In July 2021, he was sentenced to fourteen years' imprisonment; he is considered a political prisoner.
[227] See, Olga Shparaga, *Die Revolution hat ein weibliches Gesicht. Der Fall Belarus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2021); Almira Ousmanova, "Die Rolle der Frauen in der belarusischen Protestbewegung," in *Zeichen,* no.3 (Winter 2021): 20–3.

garde, denying any possibility for its (local) defragmentation (ch. 2.1.)[228]. Responding to the fact that Chagall and Malevich were included in the history of Russian art edited by Igor Grabar in 1958, Hlobus exclaims, "I didn't care about Moscow! Because there is New York, Paris, London (...) Grabar? They were never authorities for us... Malevich was." According to Malei, they did not aim to become Malevich's followers; it happened by accident. Or, more precisely, it was the only way for the "provincial" artists to be recognised in Moscow or Leningrad. Despite rich materials about exhibition culture in pre-revolutionary Belarus at the beginning of the twentieth century, which Lisaŭ has in his archive (he used only a tiny part for his dissertation), the scholar participates at international conferences mainly as a historian of the Viciebsk Art School. Describing the beginning of the 1990s, when so-called underground art became public and the artists who emigrated to the Western countries in the 1980s, e.g. Barys Zaboraŭ (Boris Zaborov) and Viktar Paŭloŭski, were exhibited even in Moscow, Hlobus ironically notes: "And Minsk artists joke that the road through Paris is the shortest way from Minsk to Moscow."[229]

However, the matter was not merely "external" recognition. Hlobus describes the hierarchy of the Belarusian Union of Artists in Soviet Minsk which was headed by a couple of "honoured" artists of the elder generation, who determined precisely what art, from their point of view, was and when art did not have the right to be called art at all (it was mainly about radical modernism and the avant-gardes).

> Why did we have to make all these changes? Because they [these "honoured" artists] ignored us as a generation ... our accounts, our aesthetic values. [...] We wanted to change everything here. And we called Chagall and Malevich to help us.

By "we," Hlobus means the artists of the unofficial art scene, who did not fit or did not want to fit into the canon of socialist realism, sharing more or less the same understanding of artistic values. They demanded the freedom of art and pluralism. As Archipava notes, "we don't know exactly the meaning of pluralism now, but at that time, it was very significant for the artists". They wanted to be accepted as artists, and the names of Malevich, Chagall, Soutine, and others helped.

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[228] This fact is also supported by Russian scholars' aggressive reaction to the wave of exhibitions titled the Ukrainian avant-garde and discussions about the decolonisation of Soviet art history, which were organised by Ukrainian scholars after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. See, e.g. E. Epner, "Forbidden, Forgotten and Eradicated. But Alive."

[229] Hlobus, "Minskiy avangard," 24.

Hlobus was one of those who identified the artists of Minsk's alternative artistic circles as "avant-garde." At the end of the 1980s, he published a series of articles in *Rodnik* (*A Spring*) magazine about Rusava, Kaškurevič, Martynčyk, and the "Galina" and "Forma" groups among many others. "It was one thing when it was underground—all these exhibitions, auctions, but another when it was possible to present, classify, and publish," Hlobus explains. By referring to the "avant-garde" Hlobus means "the work and fate of the artists and writers from whom I studied, whom I followed, because they walked ahead, in the vanguard."[230] He wrote another article titled "Minsk Rear Guard," describing the circle of artists of the official cultural discourse who served ideological (propaganda) purposes. They created the images of Communist leaders (mainly Lenin) that artists privately called "to make a lemon," but this field was very hierarchical. "The narrower the circle enchanted by totalitarianism, the more money, orders, prizes and titles are in it," Hlobus mentioned ironically.[231] The point was not their ardent belief in the ideas of Communism but conformism, ambitions, and self-benefits ("Just don't listen to them, because they will help demolish [Lenin] to build a new one, they don't care who"[232]) which allowed them to take control of the whole artistic field in Soviet Belarus. Artists mention that those who took power in local artistic governmental unions made the decisions to forbid, not exhibit, or ignore. Aleś Rodzin called these decisions "the pressure from ideological artists" (Rodzin). It was merely their personal preferences, and what was possible to exhibit in Moscow could often be "forbidden" in Minsk.

The reference to the definition of the avant-garde to describe the non-official Belarusian art of late Socialism raises numerous questions. Firstly, regarding the theoretical vocabulary, it would be more "correct" to speak about "neo-avant-garde" from the Western perspective, or "the second Belarusian avant-garde," referring to the Russian theoretical discourse[233]. However, since the theoretical basis for "the Belarusian avant-garde" of the interwar period was not established, Belarusian art historians prefer to identify this artistic dissent phenomenon after the Second World War as "unofficial" or "non-conformist" art. It was non-homogeneous and, when compared to the same artistic practices of other post-Socialist countries, characterised by a number of features.[234] Reference to the possible local history of the avant-

[230] Hlobus, "Minskiy avangard," 24.
[231] Adam Hlobus, "Minski ar'erhard. Natatki byloha afarmicielia pra bielaruskuju lieninijanu," author's personal archive. Transl. from Russian.
[232] Ibid.
[233] M. Grobman, "Vtoroy russkiy avangard", *Zerkalo*, no. 29 (2007). https://magazines.gorky.media/zerkalo/2007/29/vtoroj-russkij-avangard.html.
[234] Although the artists placed themselves in opposition to the system of art education at the Byelorussian State Institute of Theatre and Art, most of them graduated from the Institute and later had a part-time job in official institutions or combined membership in the Artists Union with participation in the informal movement.

gardes was an individual position and a decision mainly of the artists who were not afraid of the absence of "scientific methodology." Like the avant-garde writer Alieś Taranovič (Ales Taranovich) who wrote an article about the artist Todar Kopša (Todar Kopsha) identifying him as "a live history of the evolution of 'tutejšy' (local) avant-garde."[235] The author describes the audience of Kopša's exhibition as "avant-garde lovers."[236] Art critics from the state media still used the word 'avant-garde' following the Soviet tradition of art criticism—whether in the sense of "something bad" as it alludes to marginalised artistic practices of the 1910s and 1920s,[237] or, "experimental" since the critics did not have theory to interpret such art. However, the artists of the unofficial art scene in Soviet Belarus referred to the avant-garde to describe themselves in a sense, as Hlobus mentions, of forward and ahead.

Back to the performance *Kazimir's Revival*, except for the daytime show, one more version was performed in the space of the Palace of Arts at night. Only friends were invited. One of the witnesses, Ihar Hruša (Igor Grusha), who also filmed it, describes the performance as a ritual of "baptism of the Palace. Nothing of this kind had ever happened before. The artists were disrupting time and space, thus fulfilling one of their purposes—to destroy all the goals, and they did succeed in doing it"[238]. It was a personal perception of the action since the artists said nothing about it—"all had multiple layers of meaning and seemed almost mystical, but they were fully aware of what was encoded in every single sign"[239].

However, despite the mysticism around the performance and the historical moment of its realisation, this act of remembering attacked the present more than the past. *Kazimir's Revival* was not merely an illustration of the past or even a simple claim to be a part of the "great" art historical narrative. Thus, already in 1988 in Viciebsk, Rusava and Kaškurevič invited several other artists outside the city to perform a symbolic culmination—Kazimir had to be burned. It was not enough to turn Malevich into an effigy; a radical break was needed. And the artists burned the white cross-shaped coffin (Fig.2). Years later, Kaškurevič says that only in Moscow, where the performance was shown again in 1990, could the audience grasp the real ironic background of the action.

> It was necessary to step over this coffin, which was already boarded up and forgotten. It was necessary to do this exhumation again in order to pass through it finally. This performance was

[235] Aleś Taranovich, "Zametki o tvorchestve Todara Kopshi," *Rodnik*, no. 11 (1989): 20. Transl. from Russian.
[236] Ibid., 21.
[237] Arcimovič, "Freedom cannot be personal," 19.
[238] Qtd. in Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, ed. *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*, 165.
[239] Ibid.

> not a sign that everyone agreed with Malevich's ideas or took them seriously. By that time, everyone had already become an artist, and we made a performance that would send us back to where we were from. Not from tsarist times or revolutionary times, but here we are—the vanguards.[240]

Because of the atmosphere of perestroika, the young generation of artists opposed official artistic circles more openly and radically. They already referred not only to Chagall and Malevich but also to the Western avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices which became available in different publications and even exhibitions (for instance, artworks by Günther Uecker were shown in Moscow at the Centre House of Artists in 1998). Besides, this young generation had support from teachers at art schools and colleges, which were more "liberal" than at the Theatre and Art Institute. Andrei Radzionaŭ (Andrei Rodionov), the author of an article titled "A Party at School,"[241] describes the exhibition by four upper-class students of the Achremčyk Art School. They proclaimed themselves the PONI-BASH-88 group and wrote the manifesto "Admiraly sozhzhennykh materikov" (Admirals of burned continents), stating, "Sotsrealism died! We state, it will remain rubble."[242] Radzionaŭ, who presented himself as a "teacher," defended them and recalled, "to support the pupils and make possible that rare unexpectedness become a norm."[243]

Andrei Dureika (Andrei Dureiko, b. 1971, Hrodna), who studied at the Minsk State Art College named after A. Hlebaŭ at the end of the 1980s, tells how they learnt about VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Studios) and UNOVIS and were particularly fascinated by performative approaches and the concept of collectivity. "The times of perestroika were somehow similar to the revolutionary years at the beginning of the century," Dureika says, "and the atmosphere provoked us to go to public space and make use of actionism—both artistic and political."[244] Together with his fellow students, he created a series of actions and performances: *Barricade* as a protest against the College's conservative educational model in 1988, *Line Forming* with reference to Günther Ueker in 1989, *Forcing of the English Channel* in 1989, and others. In 1991, they prepared and performed—as a collective final diploma —the performance and exhibition *The Dutch Architect*, which alluded directly to the suprematist experiments of UNOVIS and particularly *Suprematist Ballet*. The text was

[240] Qtd. in Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, ed. *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*, 159.
[241] Andrei Rodionov, "A Party at School," *Rodnik,* no. 4 (1989): 24–5. Transl. from Russian.
[242] Ibid., 24.
[243] Ibid., 25.
[244] Qtd. in Arcimovič and Klinaŭ, ed. *Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch*, 226.

written as an introduction to the work in which a collective of authors (performers) explained the conceptual basis and the need for performance as a synthetic form. They defined theatre as "an organic (natural, harmonious, etc.) interweaving of perception, imagination and expression of the world that exists. [...] Our theatre can be called a CATHEDRAL. It is based on architecture, art, music, poetry and the actor/human being in their natural state, which is closely linked and intertwined."[245] The text ended with the epigraph:

> We are like the forefathers
> erase the square
> from our face

Developing the concept of decolonial imagination as an alternative to pragmatist world-making action, Madina Tlostanova and Terry Fly allude to a particular relationship between the so-called "colonised" and the Zapatists' slogan "the past is in front of us."[246] The scholars build their argument on Tlostanova's concept of *decolonial aesthesis* as a more complex way of thinking about (de)colonisation, which "starts from the experience of those who were not supposed to have an imagination, only serving as passive objects for the imaginative exercises of [colonisers' subjects]."[247] In this context, aesthesis means "a mechanism to produce and regulate sensations which is closely linked to the body as an instrument of perception mediating our cognition."[248] Tlostanova and Fly point out that access to ancestors' experience becomes "a necessity, a sensual response of resistance and of building of one's own existence anew in defiance of coloniality."[249] Therefore, reference to the past does not aim to repeat it or claim its authenticity. Instead, it discloses a variety of temporal modes (which Harutyunyan also highlights) as a means of dynamics and transformation.

In this regard, despite the irony as the background of *Kazimir's Revival*, the performance might embody what Tlostanova defines as decolonial aesthesis. It created a specific aesthetic regime of relations with the past which was not the goal but a fundamental condition for discovering an imaginative space for those *who were not supposed to have an*

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[245] *A draft of the introductory text for the graduation performance and exhibition "The Dutch Architect,"* Minsk Art School 28 June 1991. In the author's personal archive.
[246] Qdt. in Terry Fly and Madina Tlostanova, *A New Political Imagination. Making the Case* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 163. Zapatismo was the armed movement during the Mexican Revolution in the 1910s led by Emiliano Zapata. His ideas became one of the bases of decolonial studies.
[247] Fly and Tlostanova, *A New Political Imagination*, 164.
[248] Ibid.
[249] Ibid., 164.

imagination. Jacques Rancière associates such a mode of relations with the past with what he calls the aesthetic regime of art identification (ch. 5.3-4), which "does not contrast the old with the new." Instead, it represents "two regimes of historicity. [...] the future of art, its separation from the present of non-art, incessantly restages the past."[250]

Therefore, travel to the past in the framework of this research does not aim to write the history of the avant-gardes or to explore their traces in order to assert a right to write such a history. It is an inquiry of the avant-gardes in terms of neither the philosophical nor aesthetical dimensions of the phenomenon. According to Rancière, avant-gardes have been transformed from the modes of radical practices to nostalgia, and it remains merely open for new approaches from other sciences (ch. 2.2.). And the thesis is also not the research of nostalgia about "forgotten" or "lost." Instead, the study brings a perspective from the Belarusian cultural context (for this reason, such an "extended" introduction from the "present" was necessary) in order to fracture and shake the entirety of the avant-gardes as a critical discourse. It aims to disclose—spatially and temporally—an unstable, fragile, heterogeneous, elusive character of the avant-gardes that I theoretically develop in the next chapter.

[250] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 20.

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Ludmila Rusava[251]

[251] Ludmila Rusova, from ‘Strokes of Calm’, in *Naskvoz' / Through* (Minsk: Asobny dach, 1999), 270.

chapter two

Mapping the Theories

> The avant-gardes never move into an empty space but are always entangled in the rough edges of cultural exchange and appropriation.
>
> James M. Harding[252]

Opening this theoretical chapter, I would like to imagine how my perspective on the avant-garde would change if I started my journey by claiming that the avant-garde is *an elusive umbrella term* characterised by *transcultural multiplicity*, or *pluriversality* which was destined to fail. I suppose it would immediately allow me to bring the (overlooked) Belarusian context into the discussion. Besides, I would not doubt how "radically" avantgardish the artworks by Belarusian artists were if I correlated them with those cases which represent the history of the European (successful) avant-garde movements. It would be much easier to overcome the dichotomy of centre and periphery since, in terms of an *umbrella* and *failure* (the characteristics of the avant-garde), it does not matter anymore. Or does it? During the last few decades, several pivotal points turned avant-garde studies to a more productive level asking not about what the avant-garde was but what was ignored by previous generations of scholars.[253] Nevertheless, what I have described as my imaginative entry is more invented than real as if it was "only a turn rather than the road."[254].

Recent scholarship has drastically expanded the map of the avant-gardes in terms of locality, temporality and conceptuality. It should signify the slow overcoming of Eurocentric and male-dominated linear perspective as the primary lens through which the field was established. The approach of considering the avant-gardes as *elusive phenomena* (Harding)

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[252] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 23.

[253] Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monléon, eds., *Modernism and Its Margins. Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America* (New York: Garland, 1999); Hubert van den Berg, "The Life and Death of the Avant-Garde on the Battlefield of Rhetoric—and Beyond." *FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & The Arts,* no. 1, 2005*;* Harding and Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*; Sascha Bru and Gunther Martens eds., *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1906–1940)* (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Bäckström and Hjartarson, *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, and others.

[254] Paul Stubbs, "Yugocentrism and the Study of the Non-Aligned Movement: Towards a Post-colonial Historiography." *History in Flux*, 3, no. 3 (2021): 134.

indicates that something always remains on its margins—either from political or aesthetic points of view.[255] Nevertheless, even if I enter the subject from this perspective, like many other scholars, I should start from the beginning to grasp why such peripheral contexts as the Belarusian are still excluded. Is it merely a matter of criticism? Or was this exclusion a part of the avant-garde programs being deeply integrated into male-dominated modernity, which outside of the West, following Garcia's provocation, "has not completely arrived?"[256] Could it be that, as Anthony L. Geist and José B. Monleón question, "modernism challenges the established borders of centre/margin and generates new ones?"[257]

Some theoreticians challenge the efficiency of the etymological genealogy. In particular, Harding argues that this approach might lead to the generalisation of the concept. However, I presume that the same can happen with such tempting means as "multiplicity" or "pluriversality" which, without criteria, tend to turn into abstraction. The revision is essential, though I agree with Rossella Ferrari that it might shift to *the end point.*[258] But travel on edges is possible if the tension between the dominant and peripheral narrations about the avant-gardes is determined. I purpose to do it not to show how the dominant criticism was constructed based on the notion of modernity or where the roots of the current debates about the avant-gardes are. Instead, I claim that this revision allows me to intervene in the field in order to contextualise and locate my study.

2.1. What (was) the avant-garde in the singular?

In 2010, a special issue of *New Literary History* was published focusing on the question of "what the avant-garde is" since, according to the editors Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski, it remains a common matter for studies. However, the aim of the issue was "not to draw up a fresh list of definitions [...] but to explore the conditions and repercussions of the question itself."[259] It is time, Eburne and Felski state, to turn the debates about the avant-garde from the matter of its death, or failure, provoked, first of all, by Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974),

[255] See, the publications of the European Avant-garde and Modernism Studies series: *Realisms of the Avant-Garde* (2019), *Utopia. The Avant-Garde, Modernism and (Im)possible Life* (2015), *The Aesthetics of Matter. Modernism, the Avant-Garde, and Material Exchange* (2013), and others.
[256] Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 1.
[257] Geist and Monleón, ed. *Modernism and Its Margins,* xix.
[258] Rossella Ferrari, "On the Pluriversality of the Avant-Garde," 151–3.
[259] Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): v.

to its potential "for methodological and historical invention, and not merely a monument to the glorious past of radical art."[260] It is debatable if the editors achieved their aim since the issue mainly presents different approaches to interpreting the phenomenon from the European perspective than intervening in or retheorising the field (for instance, the feminist and non-Western approaches are overlooked). Nevertheless, this *what*-question does not indicate that discussions are only beginning, still looking for a multipurpose definition that can reconcile the scholars. Instead, as Mike Sell argues, we should be "resisting this question" because "our understandings of the avant-garde are tethered to perspectives [from what time and place we speak] that deplete our efforts to define, theorise, and historicize" the phenomenon.[261]

The issue opens with an article by Peter Bürger, whose theory, as Harding notes, influenced the field significantly and "continues to exercise an unparalleled influence on the shape of studies."[262] Such an entrance might seem paradoxical since Bürger only performs a recurrence of his primary ideas from 1974. He responds to some critical comments as if nothing happened during these forty years—neither in global politics nor criticism. In his following book *Nach der Avantgarde* (2014), he sustains this position. My question is not *why* Bürger did not use the opportunity to develop his theoretical approach according to new frames of the studies. Obviously, his theory was not the only one which might be characterised by its "limitations," as Bürger's opponents argue. Moreover, he admits that his theory is merely one among others.[263] But why did his method become the point of attraction for both critics and followers? Are there specific "limitations" that made Bürger's method prevalent and simultaneously caused the most critical and intense reactions?

In *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Bürger defines the avant-garde as an essential phase of development within the field of arts which should be analysed through certain categorial frames. He introduces the "historical avant-garde," a term which allows him to distinguish the avant-garde movements of the 1910s and 1920s—as the most radical and influential—from modernism and what he defines as post-war "neo-avant-garde" which failed because of its conformist character. Bürger's theory pivots on two fundamental consequences—*the attack on the institution of art in bourgeois society* and *the reintegration of art into the praxis of life*—that differentiate the historical avant-garde from modernism. These two principles are interrelated in the sense that "the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible

[260] Eburne and Felski, "Introduction," vi.
[261] Mike Sell, "Resisting the Question 'What Is an Avant-Garde?,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 754.
[262] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 10.
[263] Peter Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 696.

realization of a utopia in which art and life are united."[264] Bürger argues that this assault should be considered in terms of criticism which, referring to Marx, exists in two forms: *system-immanent criticism* as a part of a social institution and *self-criticism* which is directed against an institution at large. From this perspective, Bürger states, the historical avant-garde was an essential period in the development of art which "enter[ed] the stage of self-criticism."[265] It does not mean that the category of art as an institution appeared with the avant-garde. "It only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomy status of art in developed bourgeois society."[266]

Despite its consecutive and explicit character, Bürger's approach evidently demonstrates its geographical and conceptual limits.[267] As a theory, it seems too rigid to be applied to such *guerrilla-liked elusiveness* (Harding) as the avant-gardes which represent exclusions rather than rules. Besides, making a note about the function of history when "the interests of the rulers and those of the ruled have hardly ever been the same"[268], Bürger ignores the fact that, from the perspective of colonialism, the examples he uses to support his theory represents the art history of colonisers—"the rulers." And what about "the rest"? All these questions—because of Bürger's explicit argumentation—provoke a productive discussion even though West German scholar does not concur with it.[269] It might sound paradoxical, but the theory allows those spaces to be displayed where the theory does not apply. For instance, how do art institutions in bourgeois society function under colonial conditions? There were no art institutions in Belarus before the October Revolution apart from those that represented the dominant Russian culture (through education systems, exhibitions, and reviews) since "the coloniser" was not concerned with developing any cultural institutions on the colonised margins (ch. 3.1.). Or, how could (self)criticism (as a part of social institutions) be realised under the conditions of censorship and the direct involvement of art in Bolshevik propaganda? (ch. 5) By these and other questions, Bürger's theory assists in mapping the field of pluralities which might need their own categorial frame in order not to be turned into futile theoretical speculation or abstraction. The "limits" of a theory are needed to identify them as limits and to discover its "empty spaces." Whilst the flexible approach of multiplicity and pluralities needs

[264] Bürger, "Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde," 696.
[265] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 22.
[266] Ibid., ii.
[267] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996); Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*; Benedikt Hjartarson and others, ed. *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1925-1950* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2019).
[268] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde*, 6.
[269] Peter Bürger, *Nach der Avantgarde* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wiss., 2014), 7.

a stable opposite theory not to lose its object.

As Harding notes, there are other theories, particularly Poggioli's *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (1962) which is perhaps less quoted and criticised but has shaped the field even more because of its invisible agency. It was Poggioli's perspective, Harding argues, which tangled Western European modernism with the avant-garde and, thereby, constructed the field. Poggioli highlights a general and, at the same time, manifold character of the avant-garde that he intends to make the main frame for his scholarship. But he failed as he spoke about more common grounds that resulted from the Eurocentric focus of his speculations. Even considering the nineteenth century as a point of departure for the avant-garde extremely narrows the field.[270] As Guido A. Podestá points out, ignoring *national* borders and stating "something 'historical' in all these movements," both Bürger's and Poggioli's theories maintain that there was no avant-garde outside Europe because "this historical component was missing" there.[271]

Through studies of the "Russkij avangard" (Russian avant-garde)

While Eurocentrism as the dominant lens of avant-garde studies is being challenged and opened up for revisions, it's crucial to note the oversight in Western scholarship of the corpus of literature produced by Russian scholars. This neglect is not due to a lack of importance, but rather a geographical bias that often leaves 'the East' behind. In the Belarusian context, the prevalence of Russian criticism further hampers the discovery of other divergent avant-garde models. Whereas the Belarusian context is lost in the Western paradigm, in Russian scholarship it is deeply integrated as if any other embodiment of the avant-gardes was impossible.[272]

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[270] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 21.

[271] Guido A. Podestá, "An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance," *MLN* 106, no. 2 (1991): 399–400.

[272] Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine at least "provoked" Russian scholars to notice the imperial character of the concept of the "Russian avant-garde." The reference to "decolonisation" and "decentralisation" turns into a "topic" of discussions. However, the fundamental point of these approaches is mainly missed. A recent example is the round table titled "Avant-garde. Re-assembly Point" held in the frame of the international conference "Avant-garde as a philosophy of future" (organised by European University in St. Petersburg, Erevan, May 2023). Despite a wave of discussions and exhibitions about the Ukrainian avant-gardes and a demand to revise the history, the speakers and the frame of the conference generally ignored all these events as if nothing had happened. On the one hand, it could result from the censorship caused by the political regime in Russia. On the other hand, the frame of the discussion and the speakers' points make me doubt whether there was a desire to do this. Thus, the moderator, Illya Doronchenkov, points out the necessity of changing "the imperial optics," which means investigating the "margins" of the Russian Empire. He proposes changing "Russkij" into "Rossijskij" which, from his perspective, might signify a decolonial "turn," but, as he ironically notes, it remains the same in translation into other languages. At the same time, the art historian Andrei Rossomakhin agrees that there was definitely a "Russkij" avant-garde as a "common" phenomenon (referring to the Russian language) and "rossijskij," which could include other linguistic embodiments. It is indicative that, as the "accidental" speaker Lilit Sarkisyan from Armenia notes, preparing this conference in Armenia, the organisers did not invite local scholars to present on the

There is a vast range of studies in Russian, including monographs, collective publications, encyclopaedias, memoirs, and collections of archival documents about the Russian avant-garde (primarily in literature, painting, and architecture). Though, as Ekaterina Lazareva notes, referring to Gleb Pospelov, Russian criticism adopts the definition of the avant-garde from Western studies, where it was established as a theoretical concept.[273] The word "avant-garde" circulated widely in cultural and political fields in the Russian Empire and after 1917 in the Soviet Union but mainly in a military sense—as *advanced* and *ahead*. Andrei Krusanov mentions that "avant-garde" was prevalent in political and artistic circles in pre- and-post-revolutionary Russia (*avangard avangarda, boyevoy avangard, avangard molodezhi, avangard sela, avangard rabochego klassa v iskusstve* and others). He describes how it was applied in different social realms. For instance, in the 1900s, the phrase "the avant-garde of the Revolution" had a broad range of interpretations (depending on the speaker's social class). In twenty years, only the proletariat was considered the revolutionist avant-garde, and any reference to it was connected to Bolshevism. "[Avant-garde] was not merely a term. It was a myth of the time," Krusanov concludes.[274] At the same time, there were different artistic styles and movements—such as futurism, luchism, cubism, constructivism, and other isms—which were identified as *avantgardish* to stress their advanced character but in a social context (not in terms of their aesthetic strategies). "To be left in a political sense, like to be Bolshevist or Communist, referred to the avant-garde," Krusanov notes. "But 'left' and 'avant-garde' were not synonyms, that is why the phrase 'the left avant-garde' appeared [though] avant-garde art could be not only 'left' but 'right' as well."[275]

In contrast, Vladimir Markov, the author of the first history of Russian futurism published in the USA (1968), uses the term "Russian futurism" to describe a pre-revolutionary literary phenomenon which is now identified as the Russian literary avant-garde. Markov distinguishes futurism from the avant-garde, which referred to painting.[276] According to

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Armenian avant-garde. Doronchenkov responds that next time, they will definitely do so, and local scholars should tell "them" [Russian scholars] about it. Such a reaction contradicts his earlier statement about the need to focus on the "margins" as if they always remain "margins," where the "pure" avant-garde could not exist. EU ACADEMIC, "Kruglyj stol. 'Avangard. Tochka peresborki.' Moderatory: Il'ya Doronchenkov i Gleb Yershov," uploaded 14 June 2023, YouTube video. Transl. from Russian. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=on3A8pmTCyM&list=PLSKquVEbZTOwHkecjcbNrGaP4NrThUs7E&index=24.

[273] Ekaterina Lazareva, "Vtoroj avangard: k voprosu o terminolii," in *I posle avangarda - avangard* (Belgrade: Filologicheskij fakultet Belgradskogo universiteta, 2017), 95. See also, Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East European Art".

[274] Andrei Krusanov, *Russkij avangard: 1907–1932; v trech tomach. Tom 1* (Moscow: NLO, 2010), 8. Transl. from Russian.

[275] Ibid., 11–2.

[276] Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1968), 2–3.

Ekaterina Lazareva, in terms of art criticism, the avant-garde had come to Russian scholarship through the publication of Michel Seuphor (1955), Angelo Maria Ripellino (1959), Camilla Gray (1962),[277] Poggioli, and Bürger and was integrated into studies only in the 1970s. On the one hand, the fact that the avant-garde as a definition was appropriated by Soviet humanities can be explained by the orientation of Soviet scholarship towards *an imaginary idealised West* "invented" by artists and scholars who preserved the memory of Left or Revolutionary art.[278] On the other hand, the appropriation of the definition allowed for the generalisation and simplification of the avant-garde. It established its impermeable borders, which are still being moved from one publication about the Russian avant-garde to another. As for the definition of "the Soviet avant-garde," Krusanov notes that it was also introduced by the West to distinguish radical and experimental practices before and after 1917 on the territory of the Russian Empire and then in the Soviet Union. But this *Soviet* refers rather to the political regime than to the cultural multiplicity of Soviet republics,[279] which became a matter for the inverse process in post-Soviet studies.[280]

Krusanov outlines three possible contexts of the avant-garde—the social (a military term), the art critical (a definition with aesthetic criteria), and the historical (an event). In his research, he considers the avant-garde "as *the name* of the historical event in 1907–1932,"[281] i.e. the social movement in art. On the one hand, such a generalised definition allows him to escape many debatable points concerning criteria and analyses. On the other hand, it might be problematic in terms of the concept of an "event" which, according to Krusanov, covers (and homogenises) a twenty-five-year period. There are many other (often controversial) publications aimed at theorising the concept.[282] For instance, Boris Groys makes a direct link between the avant-garde and war: "Die moderne Kunst begleitet, illustriert, besingt oder

[277] Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1962). The books by Gray and Markov were known in the cultural circles of the Soviet Union. Despite the Iron Curtain, some scholars in Moscow got them and corresponded with the authors. See: Andrei Krusanov and Nikolai Firtich, eds., *Vladimir Fedorovich Markov—pervootkryvatel' i romantik: k 50-letiju izdanija knigi "Russian Futurism: A History"* (Saint Petersburg: Apollon, 2019); Henryk Baran, ed., *Avangard i ostal'noye. Sbornik statey k 75-letiyu A.F. Parnisa* (Moscow: Tri kvadrata, 2013).
[278] Lazareva, "Vtoroj avangard: k voprosu o terminolii," 94.
[279] Philip Cavendish, *The Men with the Movie Camera: The Poetics of Visual Style in Soviet Avant-Garde Cinema of the 1920s* (New York: Berghahn, 2013); Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet*.
[280] Palko, *Making Ukraine Soviet*.
[281] Krusanov, *Russkij avangard: 1907–1932*, 17.
[282] Yuri Stepanov, ed. *Semiotika i avangard: antologija* (Moscow: Kultura, 2006); Ekaterina Bobrinskaja, *Russkij avangard: granicy iskusstva* (Moscow: NLO, 2006); Yuri Girin, *Kartina mira epochi avangarda: avangard kak sistemnaja celostnost'* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013); Boris Groys, "Im Namen des Lebens," in *Am Nullpunkt: Positionen der russischen Avantgarde*, ed. Boris Groys (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), 11-22; Igor Chubarov, *Kollektivnaya chuvstvennost.' Teorii i praktiki levogo avangarda* (Moscow: Vysshaya shkola ekonomiki, 2014).

kritisiert den Krieg nicht nur, [...] sondern sie führt selbst Krieg [der] kennt viele Helden und Opfer—reale und symbolische. [...] den Krieg zwischen Leben und Tod."[283] But for Igor Chubarov, who introduces the concept of "kollektivnaya chuvstvennost'" (the collective sensibility), the nonviolent claim of the left avant-garde was the central point: "It is the art of transition [...] to the utopia of direct life-building as the production of both useful and beautiful things, as well as free social relations, not marked by the stamp of violence."[284]

However, whilst Bürger and Poggioli, as Podisto notes, ignore national borders and create the dominant European paradigm of the avant-garde but leave space for criticism, Russian scholars restrict these borders to *the Russian*. For instance, Girin questions the conceptualisation of the avant-garde as a European phenomenon and proposes to speak about its transnational character. But then, he shifts to Germany and Russia where the avant-garde, according to Girin, was embodied completely. In the end, he summarizes that "the Russian avant-garde was the most striking in every way."[285] The scholar supports this statement by mapping the development of the avant-garde in different regions. There is a page where avant-garde histories in "Russia, Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Eastern Europe, England, the US, and Latin America" are presented. According to this map, the avant-garde started in 1900 in Russia, Germany, and France. "Eastern Europe" was the last to join the movement. But if Latin America and an abstract Eastern Europe are present (as "the rest"), non-Russian countries of the Soviet Union are not even taken into account beyond the concept of the Russian avant-garde.

There were attempts to highlight different cultural vectors of the avant-garde within the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Corresponding to Alexander Parnis in 1969, Vladimir Markov notes that there was such a phenomenon as Ukrainian futurism, but he could not investigate it. "I don't understand Ukrainian enough, besides, it made my book more ambitious—I should include futurisms of other Slavs as well," he explains.[286] But this note is an exception. The 'mapping', like Girin proposes, dominates and produces not only the geography of the avant-gardes but directly influences the canon. Despite its heterogeneous character, as Ekaterina Bobrinskaya notes, the Russian avant-garde had common features which became the core criteria (e.g. utopianism, urbanism, formalism, a bond with science and machinery, a transgression of language norms, cosmism, radicalism, a concept of a new

[283] Groys, "Im Namen des Lebens," 11.
[284] Chubarov, *Kollektivnaya chuvstvennost.* Ch. Vvedenie, epub. Transl. from Russian.
[285] Girin, *Kartina mira ėpochi avangarda*, 33. Transl. from Russian.
[286] V. F. Pis'ma et al., eds. *Vladimir Fedorovich Markov— pervootkryvatel' i romantik*, 261. Parnis sent Markov a short history of Ukrainian futurism with a list of the names. Ibid., 255–8. Transl. from Russian.

vision).[287] And this *common* was testified by a vast corpus of manifestos, texts, artworks, and reviews produced by the artists and writers in the 1910s and 1920s.[288] But if we agree that the social and cultural context plays a significant role, these criteria are not always applied to those avant-gardes which were embodied on (cultural) margins. They can differ or be distinct from the dominant canon, which is not able to recognise them because of its implicit frame. Therefore, even if Bobrinskaya proposes to think about different vectors of the avant-garde by focusing on its marginal embodiments, she paradoxically refers only to the successful (within the field of the avant-garde) cases of Russian futurists, suprematists, and constructivists that became a very general place represented through a cohort of more or less the same names.[289] Perhaps, she would go beyond this map but she cannot—because of this dominant (singular) vision of the avant-garde. Possibly, this is also the reason why the phenomenon of post-revolutionary Viciebsk People's Art School and UNOVIS was conveniently inscribed into the history of the Russian avant-garde: it operated more or less within the same criteria (utopianism, formalism, radicalism, and suprematism). However, the official argument cites the political borders in 1919–1924 when the Viecebsk district was part of Soviet Russia. Other cases remain lost because the cultural features seem inaccessible for the existing canonical frame. Therefore, Markov's note about his lack of Ukrainian knowledge refers not only to language but also to an inability to enter the Ukrainian cultural context.

All these contradictions point towards an impasse for any ambitious attempt to typify avant-garde cases, which, on the one hand, started from different points of departure and integrated into different political and cultural contexts and, on the other hand, reached different objectives.[290] Therefore, writing the global history of the avant-gardes, like global art history,[291] is destined to fail. It can only oversimplify. And this simplification becomes a reason that the avant-garde projects in 'other' cultural contexts remain invisible because they do not fall into the existing patterns of criticism produced either in the West or in Russia.

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[287] Bobrinskaja, *Russkij avangard*, 5.

[288] See, Sergei Oushakine, ed., *Formal'nyj metod: antologija russkogo modernizma, in three volumes* (Moscow: Kabinetnyj učenyj, 2016).

[289] The book by Camila Gray played a crucial role for the unification of the field. She mapped the main names and movements (Natalia Goncharova, Michail Larionov, Burluks, Kazimir Malevich, cubism, suprematism, and others) which still travel from one study to another as commonplaces. From this perspective, Vladimir Markov's note about Russian futurism as a complex phenomenon (he creates relations between impressionism, symbolism, eco-cubism, Russian primitivism), still makes his research innovative in many senses.

[290] And it is not only about the avant-gardes. Thus, in order to decentralise the notion of modernism in Soviet countries, Lithuanian art historian Elona Lubyte introduced the term "Quiet Modernism" (*tylusis modernizmas*) which is applied to the modernist period of Lithuanian literature, arts, and architecture under Soviet rule and also as a metaphor for the period of liberalisation in the country. Elona Lubyte, *Tylusis modernizmas* (Vilnius: Tyto alba, 1997).

[291] Elkins, *The End of Diversity in Art Historical Writing*.

2.2. The shift to a performative-based approach. Nonsynchrony and pluriversality

According to James M. Harding and John Rouse, the editors of the book titled *Not the Other Avant-garde. The Transnational of Avant-garde Performance* (2006), the particular approaches to identifying the avant-gardes impacted their map, overlooking so-called "peripheral" avant-gardes. They explain that their book is not about theatre or performance in the avant-gardes, like the studies of Christopher Innes (1993), Arnold Aronson (2000), Sarah Bay-Cheng (2007), and others. After all, there are many doubts about the definition of theatrical avant-garde.[292] Instead, their volume is "a response to this antiperformative bias in the theorising of the avant-garde" which influenced studies for decades since the pioneers of the field "have overlooked performance as a pivotal category for defining the avant-garde itself."[293] Harding and Rouse explain that performance has been "ignored" because of scholars' literary background, and still this perspective dominates.[294] They argue that every avant-garde gesture should be considered *a performative act*—a complicated multimedia phenomenon which transgresses the borders of performance as a genre turning it into a linguistic, visual, sonic, architectural, and bodily practice. Sell develops this idea by arguing that "avant-gardes always challenge power *in situations*, which means that they must *enact* that challenge, *practise* that challenge, *display* their differences, *announce* their authority, *demonstrate* their relationship to the masses [...]. In other words, avant-gardes *perform* their challenges."[295]

Some scholars describe the performativity of the avant-gardes, referring to a performative turn in art and theatre studies.[296] The performative approach is broadly applied to investigate avant-garde manifestos and literary works.[297] But Harding and Rouse's claim purports to be a more radical intervention. Since geography is central to the study, the articles in *Not the Other Avant-garde* present the experimental activities of non-European artists—from the USA, Africa, Mexica, Argentina, India, Japan—which are usually identified as "the

[292] Robert Knopf and Julia Listengarten, "Introduction", in *Theater of the Avant-Garde, 1890-1950: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Robert Knopf (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 1-16.
[293] Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-garde,* 1.
[294] The first issue about the avant-garde was published as a special edition of *New Literary History,* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2010). The first *Journal of the Avant-garde Studies*—as "an interdisciplinary forum for a critical discussion of the experimental, the outrageous, and the unclassifiable in the arts and literature"—started in 2020.
[295] Mike Sell, "Introduction: Vectors of the Radical," in *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical*, ed. Mike Sell (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 7.
[296] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2004); Marijana Erstić, ed. *Avantgarde-Medien-Performativität: Inszenierungs- und Wahrnehmungsmuster zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verl., 2005).
[297] Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution. Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Susanne Strätling, *Die Hand am Werk: Poetik der Poiesis in der russischen Avantgarde* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017).

Others." The aim is not merely to include other geographies, since any cartography or chronology might look ineffective and speculative.[298] The editors argue that a performance-based approach implicates considering performance a *critical aesthetic category*. Such an approach overcomes the Eurocentric paradigm which prioritizes "a hierarchical ordering of aesthetic categories, [...] a reinforcement of European cultural prerogatives, and [...] a uniform linear conception of history."[299] According to Harding and Rouse, Eurocentrism makes any exclusion impossible and considers the avant-garde "an influential globally European cultural commodity."[300]

The Eurocentric approach is integrated into criticism more profoundly than it may seem. For instance, in 2010, a discussion "The Future of Avant-Garde Studies. A European Round Table" took place at the second conference of the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies hosted by the Institute of Art History of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. [301] The leading scholars of avant-garde studies were invited to discuss the future of the phenomenon: Peter Bürger (Germany), Piotr Piotrowski (Poland), Wolfgang Asholt (Germany), Éva Forgács (Hungary), Benedikt Hjartarson (Iceland), and the moderator Hubert van den Berg (the Netherlands). The fact that scholars from different countries spoke about the avant-gardes might signify an attempt to overcome the geographical tension, moving toward what Piotr Piotrowski calls "a horizontal geography."[302] But the speakers merely repeated the ideas they had developed earlier without making any effort to advance their approaches. A focus on Europe remained the basis for the talk. However, there were plenty of publications that appealed for a more radical step toward comprehension of the avant-gardes as a transnational (not only European) phenomenon in terms of its *deterritorialization*[303] and *provincialisation*[304]. The discussion supported the Eurocentric point of view, explaining that the concept of Europe includes not only its Western part but also Central and Eastern European countries which "appeared" after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989. In 2007, the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies (EAM) was founded. It focuses on "the

[298] See, Bert Cardullo, ed., *Theories of the Avant-Garde Theatre: A Casebook from Kleist to Camus* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013); Elkins, *Stories of art*.
[299] Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-garde,* 6.
[300] Ibid., 4.
[301] The text was published ten years later: Wolfgang Asholt et al., "The Future of Avant-Garde Studies: A European Round Table". *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies*, 1 (2020): 115-20.
[302] Piotrowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde," in *Europa! Europa?,* 49–58.
[303] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1993).
[304] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).

study of the avant-garde and modernism in Europe within a global setting, throughout the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries." Despite the Network's significance as a platform for criticism and historical revision, the limitation of the avant-garde to *European* borders remains a question.

In contrast, Harding and Rouse argue that decentralisation and retheorisation of the avant-gardes represent a more comprehensive process in which re-mapping is a result than an approach. It is not enough to take other cultural contexts into account since they often do not look *avantgardish* or *radical enough* if we think about the historical process from a liner Eurocentric perspective. As Podestá argues, "[i]n literature, to compare still means to study the influence of European paradigms on native texts, or to interpret 'ethnographic' texts in the light of Europe."[305] And thereby, "[f]oreign cultures were represented as having no historical narratives, 'national' principles, or traditions," he concludes.[306] But such a perspective does not only influence "other" cultures. On the edges of what is called Europe, modernity and the historical avant-garde also look like "merely a dialect" or "belated" (when compared to the canon), [307] as if peripheral countries always had to catch up with European development.[308] Therefore, discussions about the avant-gardes (modernism, post-modernism, modernity or post-modernity) in terms of the politics of time, like Peter Osborne (1995) claims,[309] raise the fundamental question: *which history* are we talking about*?* That allows us to slip out of the dominant discourse. [310]

Following the general framework of his previous publications, Harding evolves the theses of plurality and multiplicity in his monograph *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (2013). He considers "guerrilla-like elusiveness" a primary tactic of the avant-gardes that—as movements—might be distinguished from criticism. Such an approach expands the field by making it more open to complicated configurations and overlapping conceptual, cultural, and aesthetic layers. Speaking about failure in the context of the avant-gardes, for instance, Harding notes that this notion which refers to "the dominant model of cultural production and hence to empathise with the victors—is not a failure to be avant-garde. It is a call for a history written from the standpoint of the

[305] Podestá, *An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde,* 385.
[306] Ibid., 400.
[307] Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, "Introduction," in *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes*, 18.
[308] Tania Ørum, "The Post-War Avant-garde in the Nordic Countries," in *A Cultural History of the Avant-Garde in the Nordic Countries 1950–1975*, ed. Tania Ørum and Jesper Olsson (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 6.
[309] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2011).
[310] Harding and Rouse, *Not the Other Avant-garde,* 13.

vanquished vanguards."[311] It is not the examples which support theory (like in Bürger's work), but theoretical intervention follows the movements, or even biographies, considering theoretical impasses as a part of this intervention. Harding notes that even if the scholars of current studies of avant-garde (including Harding himself) accept such concepts as *nonsynchrony* and *multiple temporalities* that assist in discovering the cases of the avant-gardes beyond Eurocentric theory, it still refers to the ways of conceptualisation.[312] But this shift to "the consequent loss of a clear referent for the term *avant-garde* itself and for the accompanying [its] discourse" allows for *differences* in the avant-gardes from historical and geographical perspectives.[313] It opens a discourse of competition among avant-garde movements and destroys the existing hierarchy.

Describing the American avant-gardes which emerged after the Second World War, Harding introduces the concept of *hybrid vanguardism* as a means to identify the American avant-gardes and distinguish them (as *a counter-cultural current*) from the European model. While the American avant-gardes were mainly associated with resuscitation and repetition of the forms of the European movements, *hybrid vanguardism*, by contrast, helps "to blur the lines between the European avant-gardes and [...] experimental performance practices that took shape in the American post-war cultural milieu."[314] With this blurring, Harding argues, *hybrid vanguardism* resists Bürger's rigid differentiation between *the avant-garde* and *neo-avant-garde*. It might be that one American avant-garde is rooted in any European movement. But at the same time, this note of hybridity shows "a variety of avant-garde practices that emerged, coexisted, and intermingled in the post-war era."[315] According to Harding, context played a significant role in the process of appearance of artworks since

> the socio-political context of the spectators themselves [is] a decisive element of the production of art. [...] Inasmuch as the reception of a work constitutes the work itself, the different cultural identities of European and American spectators produced two very different conceptions of the avant-garde practice.[316]

The role of institutions, which represent the dominant discourse or are in opposition to it (alternative, or counter, institutions), depends on a social context as well; therefore, the

[311] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 166.
[312] Ibid., 12.
[313] Ibid., 17.
[314] Ibid., 62.
[315] Ibid.
[316] Ibid.

relations of institutions with the avant-gardes might differ. Thereby, the collaboration with these institutions (mainly alternative) is considered by Harding the "reciprocal support [which] cultivated a multi-layered form of hybrid vanguardism, blending art and academics, combining American and European traditions, and emerging from the interaction of artist and spectator"[317].

Harding refers to feminist approaches which are crucial for avant-garde studies. The point is not merely to look for women artists writing the history of women's avant-gardes but to rethink the silence of women in cultural histories in terms of political ideologies. Guided by the feminist critique of romanticism which raises the question of *the role of the artist as producer*, Harding tells the story of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein.* He draws attention to the fact that women artists or writers often made their works anonymous since it was almost the only opportunity for them to be "taken seriously" because of "a culture of male privilege."[318] The fact that women artists could not often sign their works makes authorship "a highly gendered category."[319] Harding argues that feminist critique of the avant-gardes should take two points into account. Firstly, the imitation of male art may be used to make them an acceptable artist (to a dominant cultural institution). Secondly, if female artists did not imitate, it would be complicated to discover them—because of the *failed* non-male style of their art. Therefore, the lens should be changed radically, becoming more elusive and flexible (ch. 4).[320]

Imitation as a strategy gets an additional meaning in my study, as it might also explain why artists who were born and lived in Belarus called themselves "Russians." Just as women who had to imitate the style of their dominating male counterparts, artists who voiced themselves from (subjected) margins had to consciously or unconsciously identify themselves with the dominant culture (with the colonisers) *to be taken seriously* (ch. 3.1.–2.). This strategy refers to what Bhabha calls *mimicry*. The scholar notes that mimicry is not done by choice but "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge."[321] It is an ironic compromise, Bhabha argues since it is about "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite.*"[322] But because of this

[317] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 70.
[318] Ibid., 22.
[319] Ibid., 107.
[320] For instance, Vladimir Markov attempted to include the activity of the artist Elena Guro in the history of Russian futurism. He noted that she "seems in many respects to be a stranger among early futurists. The only woman among the men, most of whom tried to be masculine, loud and colourful as possible in their verse and in their lives. [...] Guro not only poeticizes the city, but she worships nature [...] [She] may present a stumbling block for those who try to create a unified picture of Russian futurism." Markov, *Russian Futurism*, 14, 16, 18.
[321] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 122.
[322] Ibid.

ambivalence (*almost the same but not quite*), mimicry is a more complicated discourse than simply a strategy of fusion.

These and other questions are raised in the first issue of the *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* (2020). The publication opens with the transcription of the round table "The Future of Avant-Garde Studies. A European Round Table" (2010) described above. According to the editors' preface, this discussion happened ten years ago discloses "the salient absence of some obvious [for the current moment] issues,"[323] such as the relations between avant-gardes and nationalism including inter- and transnationalist dimensions, non-European geography and its interrelation with the European movements, the role of the avant-gardes for the reproduction of patriarchal structures, gender issues, anthropocentrism, and many others. Although, as I have mentioned, its relevance for the future of the avant-gardes is questionable, the discussion displayed "the salient absence," as the editors note. As a response to this roundtable, Rossella Ferrari refers to the concept of *pluriversality*, emphasising the necessity "of linking avant-garde criticism to the decolonial discourse."[324] According to Mignolo, pluriversality assists in overcoming the domination of Western discourse on abstract universality.

> [Pluriversality] rejects universality understood as abstract universal grounded in mono-logic. A universal principle grounded in the idea of the diversal (or pluriversal) is not a contradiction in terms, but rather a displacement of conceptual structures. Diversity as a universal project.[325]

All these new turns in terminology and references to different disciplines (sociology, philosophy, cultural studies, feminist studies, decolonial studies, and new materialism) indicate dynamic processes in avant-garde criticism that neither blur it nor lead to abstraction. The point is that there is no universal model since the notion of universality is elusive. Every journey—either to an imaginary "centre" or to a "margin" of the avant-gardes—should be done from the very beginning, aiming not to find an answer but to pose the right questions. Thus, after revising Harding's ideas, I doubted whether I could use them directly in my research. I suppose his way of thinking and criticism are fruitful to the study and guide in the right direction. At the same time, I clearly understand that we speak about different kinds of marginalisation since our geographies are located differently in terms of hierarchy. Being marginalised by European art history, Belarusian and American cultures were and are *not the same,* which I keep in mind

[323] Asholt et al., "The Future of Avant-Garde Studies: A European Round Table".
[324] Rossella Ferrari, "On the Pluriversality of the Avant-Garde."
[325] Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (New York: Duke University Press, 2011), 234.

even when referring to such tempting approaches as Harding proposes.

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Hence, there are a variety of definitions of the avant-gardes—*a phenomenon, project, concept, ideology*, *strategy, model, Weltausschaunung, force, mode of critique, extreme experience, radical practices*—including their different possible discourses (aesthetic, cultural, social, political, and historical). Having travelled through various attempts at identification, I could stay, for instance, with Sell's definition, which refers to power relations, a minority and culture. He points out that "[t]he avant-garde is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways, usually by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions."[326] All these vectors are very close to my study, including the notion of failure which is often associated with loss. But, as Judith Halberstam mentions, failure might be considered a critical strategy. She argues that it is possible to "recognize failure as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique."[327] Therefore, the notion of failure raises the question about the normativity of the avant-gardes in terms of their "success." At this point, failure is an advantage since it is debatable if the avant-gardes wanted to succeed by following the logic of the dominant culture.

But the more I dwell upon different statements, the more it makes no sense to lock the avant-gardes within a single definition since it will never be *enough*. Therefore, I escape any closed formulation by leaving this door slightly ajar, not because of this theoretical obstacle but rather *rhizomatous*—non-hierarchical, heterogeneous, multiple (Deleuze and Guattari)—essence of the phenomenon which prevents grasping it implicitly. The concept of the rhizome, as Harding also notes, is not only a metaphor for non-linear thinking, but it is also a method of decentralised conceptualization. At the same time, "the rhizome offers a much more compelling model for understanding the dynamics of the avant-gardes, and in particular for understanding their global dimensions."[328] But imagining the rhizome of the avant-gardes, I take into account not only the interrelations performed by the combinations of *abstract lines*

[326] Sell, "Introduction: Vectors of the Radical," 5–6.
[327] Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, Durham, 2011), 88.
[328] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 169.

or *lines of flights*[329]. I would also focus on empty spaces between these lines, which are parts of a rhizome. The relationships between these lines and emptiness open one more potential to perceive the elusiveness and dynamics of the avant-gardes.

My methodology will be built, therefore, on the following keywords:

rhizome hybridity elusiveness

failure

experience mimicry routes

asymmetry temporalities

pluriversality multiplicity

radicality (as a relative category)

geography

third space

The concept of *third space* plays a central role in the study as a strategy for "mapping" the Belarusian case of the avant-gardes. There are several approaches to the concept which are developed in different epistemological fields as it turned into a fruitful "interpretive methodology for critiquing dichotomies and binary categorizations."[330] In my study, I refer to a "third space" using Bhabha's interpretation of it as a "liminal space, in-between the designations of identity [...] the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, [...] that carries the burden of the meaning of culture."[331] The scholar develops the concept as a means to disclose the specificity of a particular cultural situation which can also be described through the categories of hybridity. However, according to Bhabha, hybridity does not allow one "to trace two original moments from which the third emerges."[332] As Bachmann-Medick concludes, "hybridity is a third space marked by a simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous that allows one and the same sign to be constantly reinterpreted, overwritten and cross-appropriated."[333] From my point of view, it is entirely a "case" of the Belarusian cultural context (ch. 3). Therefore, the concept of third space assists not only with grasping the cultural situation but also with explaining the "decolonial aesthesis" (ch. 1.3.) the context produces.

[329] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.
[330] Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 146.
[331] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5, 56.
[332] Qtd. in Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 146.
[333] Ibid.

Since my research is based on several biographies, I will also refer to the avant-gardes as *experiences* characterised by mutual relations between aesthetics and politics. By experience, I mean the extreme reintegration of the self (including the experience of the body) into the social and political realm. This reintegration is not about the intervention of art into life, as Bürger argues, that might change the location and role of art. The stories of the avant-gardists in the Soviet Union show that their ambition was much broader than just the reconfiguration of the institution of art. Instead, the whole world must be reshaped, and art was one of the means to reach this destination. But formalism, which is often considered an apparent characteristic of the avant-gardes, was not obligatory. The avant-gardist might apply formalistic methods or styles, but referring to these forms was not enough to be recognised as avant-garde (ch. 5). The artistic means of the artists could differ extremely, like their utopias, which, as Maria Todorova notes, "are not the same for different individuals or groups."[334] Still, both suprematist Malevich and "draughtsman" Ahola-Valo were avant-gardists because of *something over and behind* their works.

[334] Maria Todorova, *The Lost World of Socialists at Europe's Margins: Imagining Utopia, 1870s–1920s* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 1.

chapter three

In the Shadows of the Russian Revolution: The People's Art School in Viciebsk

> The Masses moved, and suddenly there was a dull, even hollow shout; the heart missed a beat; and nobody, nobody knew that it was: REVOLUTION!
>
> Moyshe Kulbak[335]

On 7–8 November (O.S. 25–26 October), 1917, in Petrograd (St. Petersburg, Petrograd in 1914–1924), the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, stormed the Winter Palace and arrested the Russian Provisional Government, which was formed after the February Revolution of 1917. This event is known by different names. The most common is the October Revolution; sometimes, scholars use the Bolshevik Revolution, the Red October, and, rarely, the October Upheaval (*perevorot*) or Uprising (*vosstanie*). Later, Soviet historiography fixed the name of the Great October Socialist Revolution. The definition of the Russian Revolution is mainly used to cover the chain of the different political events of 8–16 March (O.S. 23 February – 3 March), 1917 (the February Revolution) until 16 June 1923 (the end of the Russian Civil War).

In the iconography of *the Great October Socialist Revolution*, the images of the thousands of soldiers who assaulted the Winter Palace are one of the most famous visual representations of the Red October. For years, these images served to stress the large-scale character of the upheaval as if not only the whole city but all nearby countries were involved in the "action."[336] But these photographs belong to the documentation of another event. In 1920, on Palace Square in Petrograd, theatre director Nikolai Evreinov staged (as one member

[335] Here and elsewhere, there are quotations from the novel *Paniadzielak* (Monday, 1926) by the Belarusian-Jewish writer Moyshe Kulbak. The book tells a story of a Jewish teacher who lives in *one revolutionary provincial city*. Though there is no direct reference to October 1917 and the city is not named, scholars believe that Kulbak's story is located in Minsk between the end of WWI and the rise of Bolshevik power. See: Siarhiei Šupa, "Raman 'Paniadzielak': čas i miesca," in Moyshe Kulbak, *Paniadzielak* (Prague: Viasna, 2018), 137–41. Transl. from Belarusian.

[336] The photograms from the film *October* by by Sergei Eisenstein and Grigori Aleksandrov (1928) played the same function.

of "a collective author"[337]) a mass performance *The Storming of the Winter Palace* (Vziatie Zimnego dvortsa) to celebrate the Revolution's anniversary.[338] More than eight thousand participants were involved; and about one hundred thousand people watched.[339] The famous protected cruiser Aurora made pseudo-historical booms,[340] though it was simply a part of Evreinov's script. The aim of the performance was not to expose *history*—since it is "not the nature of theater to make a protocol of history"[341]—but to perform a mythology of "a total event" *that shook the World.*[342] Frederick O. Corney notes that the theatricalization of the Bolshevik Revolution was a significant part of its telling in order "to convey to the population the aesthetic and dramatic essence of October."[343] It aimed "to replace the population's tsarist historical memory with a new revolutionary memory."[344]

Despite the unchallengeable influence (from different perspectives) of the October Upheaval on the shaping of the avant-garde in the USSR, this chapter questions its role and effects on the political and cultural margins of the former-Russian Imperial territories. It is a contribution to what Corney calls "telling the tale of local Octobers" through the experiences of the "provinces."[345] The goal is to fracture the "universalised" image of the Red October as a general celebration of emancipation and modernisation because it merely arrived at the "margins" (as "a paper revolution").[346] I found such an "alternative" narration in remembrances and literary works of Belarusian writers and poets who responded to the political events immediately and/or reflected on their aftermaths. However, I keep in mind that it was also one alternative among possible others since the October Upheaval influenced the lives of various social and gender groups differently. For instance, I will refer only to pieces of literature written by men in 1917-1925 as this field was mainly male-oriented at that period. The situation

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[337] Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell Universiety Press, 2004), 77.
[338] Still, *Storming of the Winter Palace* is one of the most well-known and described. However, despite the large-scale and impressive character, already in 1918, the Bolsheviks referred to such a genre which they, as Geldern notes, "borrow" from Tsarist Russian traditions. James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
[339] See: Corney, *Telling October*, 75–82; Yuri Annenkov, *Dnevnik moich vstrech: cikl tragedij* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2005), 452–61; Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 43–6.
[340] Yuri Annenkov remembered that instead of three pseudo-historical booms, as scholars often described it, there were dozens since technicians could not stop the cannonade on time. Yuri Annenkov, *Dnevnik moich vstrech,* 458–9.
[341] Qtd. in Corney, *Telling October*, 76.
[342] John Reed, [1919], *Ten Days that Shook the World*, 1st ed. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1990).
[343] Corney, *Telling October*.
[344] Ibid., 10. See also, Erika Wolf, "Photographic Records of the Russian Revolutions: Myths and Documents", in Documentary Genealogies: Photography 1848-1917 (Sofia: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia), 219-27.
[345] Corney, *Telling October*, 131.
[346] Ibid, 28, 134.

changed radically in the mid-1920s when many female poets voiced themselves (ch. 4), confirming the assumption that different possible alternatives of perception of "the Great Event" can exist.[347] Therefore, my version merely highlights the need to write multiple histories of the Red October, taking into account the experiences of different groups and individuals.

Exploring the Russian Revolution as a time-extended political and cultural crisis, the chapter introduces Viciebsk as a particular place in the context of the Revolution. Telling the story of the People's Art School, or the Viciebsk Art School,[348] I focus on the relationship between artists and the city as *space*, which refers not only to a place but also to different ideologies, including artists' claims of what a Revolution might be. The situational moment of overlapping these ideologies in a particular site (the city of Viciebsk with its own history and specificities) produced a space of "possibilities and creativity" (ch. 3.1.) which I identify as the third space of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus.

3.1. "People without history." The notions of "tutejaść" and a "fluid form"

In her study about the transformations and evolution of futurism programs in Russia, Iva Glisic investigates the whole period of 1905–1921, i.e. the chains of different political events in Russia in which the Red October is significant but merely one among the others. Glisic argues that futurism was indirectly affected by the Revolution of 1905 in Russia and then by the

[347] In contrast to male (often depressive) poetry of those years, female poets enjoyed freedom and emancipation as a result of the Red October. For instance, see poems by Zinaida Bandaryna, Jaŭhienija Pfliaŭmbaŭm, Natallia Višnieŭskaja. Aksana Danilčyk and Viktar Žybul, eds. *Bliskavicy: antalohija belaruskaj žanočaj paėzii mižvaennaha peryjadu* (Minsk: Knihazbor, 2017).

[348] During the first years of its existence, the name of the school changed several times: Viciebsk People's Art School in 1918–20, Viciebsk State Free Art Studios in 1920–22, Viciebsk Art and Practical Institute in 1922–23, Viciebsk Art College in 1923–24, since 1924—Belarusian Art College and then Viciebsk Art College (GAVO, f. 837, the collection's description). I will use a more widespread and general one—the People's Art School, but in some English quotations, I leave the (original) word "College." One more significant note is the differentiation between the name of the Viciebsk People's Art School and the definition of the Viciebsk Art School. Aliaksandar Lisaŭ highlights obstacles to interpreting *the Viciebsk Art School* since this definition is often used by scholars to describe only the period of Chagall and Malevich which oversimplifies and generalises the phenomenon. One reason might be *historical* since some artworks by the artists of the school who participated in the First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin in 1922 were presented as "Schule von Witebsk". See, *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* (Berlin: Galerie van Diemen & Co, 1922; Köln: König, 1988), 21, 27. At the same time, the artworks by Malevich, Lissitzky, Ermolaeva, Kagan, Judin, Noskov, Malkin, and Zetlin were signed. However, Lisov argues that the Viciebsk Art School should be considered *an aesthetic and time-and-place phenomenon*, which "was institutionalised (formalised) in different art schools" since the end of the njineteenth century. Alexander Lisov, "Fenomen 'Vitebskoy khudozhestvennoy shkoly': narrativ ili ontologiya," *Iskusstva i kul'tura,* no. 4 (2013), 27. Transl. from Russian.

Japanese-Russian War (1904-1905). These events provoked the dynamics of social and political life in the central cities of the Empire. And "those individuals who would eventually become doyens of Russian Futurism" were intensely involved.[349] There might be a risk of homogenisation since futurism (as an umbrella term) conflates "different creative philosophies and practices."[350] Nevertheless, as scholars note, 1917 provoked the moment of transition from Russian to Soviet models of the avant-gardes.[351]

In Moscow and Petrograd, the reconfiguration of art institutions happened almost immediately after the October Upheaval. At the end of November 1917, Malevich headed the Kremlin Commission of Values Preservation, where the most valuable artworks (including those from the Hermitage) were kept. Later, another radical artist Vladimir Tatlin—as head of the Moscow Committee of the Department of Visual Arts (Moskovskaya khudozhestvennaya kollegiya Otdela IZO)—became the most influential person in Moscow cultural circles. Before 1917, there was no way to imagine that the artists of "marginalised" avant-garde circles could take such positions: "Never before and never after, such distinguished artists have risen so high in the hierarchy of government."[352] But neither Malevich nor other avant-gardists who agreed to collaborate with the Soviet authority—due to ideological, personal, career, or mercantile reasons, or merely because of economic collapse and starvation—could imagine how this collaboration would end. [353]

These dynamics expose that the avant-gardes in Russia had a history before 1917, and their programs were a part (even as a minority formation) of the Russian cultural landscape. By contrast, Belarusian culture was marginalised. There were almost no cultural and art institutions, and those that existed were forced to adapt to or mirror the Russian ones. At the same time, there was a possibility to turn to the West. Many artists, writers, and scientists realised their professional ambitions by moving to Western European countries.[354]

The situation of radical cultural marginalisation (or, rather, the intermission) was

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[349] Iva Glisic, *The futurist Files: Avant-Garde, Politics and Ideology in Russia, 1905–1930* (DeKalb: NIU Press, 2018), 10.
[350] Ibid., 9.
[351] See, Krusanov, *Russkij avangard: 1907–1932;* Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*.
[352] Sjeng Scheijen, *Avangardisty. Russkaya revolyutsiya v iskusstve. 1917–1935* (Moscow: KoLibri, 2020), 15. Transl. from Russian.
[353] Ibid.
[354] Remembering his life in Kursk with his family before he moved to Moscow and Petrograd, Malevich wrote: "Like a wolf wants the forest, I wish for Moscow or Petersburg, where the real art lives [...]. Outside these cities, nobody can become an artist by staying in the province" (Qut. in Scheijen, *Avangardisty*, 39). Although the cultural situation in Belarus might be considered 'provincial' (and it is the central explanation in some scholarship), I argue that it was more complicated and that the notion of a province is instead an artificial construct. Therefore, I will avoid such a reference by looking for another analytical frame.

provoked by the repressions that started after the failure of the Uprising of 1830–31, also known as the Polish-Russian War. It was an armed rebellion on the territories of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, and Right-bank Ukraine against the Russian Empire with the primary demand to regain the borders of 1772, when the Western territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth were annexed to Russia. The rebellion was stifled, resulting in mass repressions. The process of russification started. Educational institutions closed, including the Art School at Vilnius University, one of the most important cultural centres for Belarusians at that time. As some scholars note, it affected the cultural field in Belarus incredibly since a new generation of Belarusian artists was almost completely dependent on Russian artistic institutions. The Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg became a required step for the artists of the Russian Empire.[355] A second and more radical wave of russification happened after the defeat of the Uprising of 1863 headed by Kastuś Kalinoŭski. Written Belarusian language in Latin was forbidden. These two suppressed uprisings resulted in waves of migrations of Belarusians (mainly intellectuals and members of the upper class) to the West.[356] As for educational art opportunities, there were several schools where it was possible to study art professionally: the Vilnius Drawing School (1866–1915), classes by Wojciech Gerson in Warsaw (1871–96) and the Kyiv Drawing School by Mykola Murashko (1875–1901). Only in 1897, the artist Yehuda Pen started his classes in Viciebsk (ch. 3.3.). The artist Jakov Kruger opened the first professional drawing school in Minsk in 1906.

The Vilnius Drawing School and the multicultural city of Vilnius played a crucial role for many artists who moved from Belarus—via Vilnius—to Poland, Germany, or France; some of them returned to Belarus (like Jazep Drazdovič or Leŭ Alpiarovič). Recently, Lithuanian scholars have investigated the school's remaining documents (the primary part of the archive was destroyed), unfolding its history from a multicultural perspective. According to the curators of an exhibition about the school's history, it was established by the authority of the Russian Empire "for training artists to paint icons in Eastern Orthodox churches"[357] and, more importantly, to assist in the program of russification. The supervisor of education in Vilnius district, Ivan Kornilov, stated, "Educational institutions must imperceptibly serve for the purpose of moral and, thus, ultimate merging of inhabitants of the Western region with the

[355] Kler Le Foll, *Vitebskaja khudozhestvennaja shkola (1897–1923)* (Vilnius: European Humanities University, 2007), 18–9. Transl. from Russian.
[356] For instance, the mother of future famous French surrealist poet and publicist Guillaume Apollinaire, Angelika Kostrowicka, was born near Navahrudak, Hrodna Governorate. Because her grandfather participated in the 1863 Uprising, her family had to emigrate.
[357] *Académie de Vilna—Vilnius Drawing School. 1866–1915* (Vilnius: The National Gallery of Art, 2017), 303.

remaining part of Russia. These are our noble aims and achieving them is the basic duty of the Vilnius Educational District."[358]

In 1866, the Vilnius Drawing School was founded. However, despite its submission to the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, the programs created by Ivan Trutnev, the artist and the founder of the school, were more liberal. The school was open to persons ten-years-old and older of any social class and gender. It attracted students from the whole Severo-Zapadnyj kraj (the territory of Belarus). Many of the students were Jews called *litvaki* (Litvaks)—a special term that identified the Jews who spoke Yiddish and lived in today's Belarus, Lithuania, Latvia, and part of Ukraine.[359] Although litvaki are often associated only with Lithuania, many of them came to Vilnius from Belarusian territories.[360] The names of Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Michel Kikoine, Ossip Zadkine, Faïbich-Schraga Zarfin (the Litvaks artists) are well-known as they belonged to the phenomenon called *École de Paris*. They and many other artists were born in villages and towns in Belarus and finished the drawing schools in Viciebsk, Vilnius, or Minsk; then, they moved to Paris. The myth about this French city as a cultural, not anti-Jewish centre was even epitomised in a Jewish common saying—"Azoy gluckor wi a yid in Paris" ("Happy like a Jew in Paris").[361]

Hereby, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Belarusian territories represented the margins of the Russian Empire where *people without history* lived, [362] "located in a time 'before' the 'present.'"[363] Artists had to choose the East (St. Petersburg, Odessa, or Moscow) or the West (Krakow, Warsaw, Berlin, Paris) if they wanted to start or continue their artistic careers. Even those artists who returned to Belarus after graduation from the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg were culturally marginalized. For instance, Ivan Chrucki (Ivan Khrutsky, 1810–1885) who is called a founder of the classical genre of stilllife in Belarusian painting. His biography demonstrates the complexity of the ideological situation in Belarus between two uprisings (in 1830 and 1863). He was born into the family of a Uniatepriest in the

[358] *Académie de Vilna—Vilnius Drawing School*, 304. See also, T.R. Weeks, *Vilnius between Nations, 1795–2000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), ProQuest Ebook Central, 59-95.
[359] Mathias Niendorf, "Litwaken. Stationen jüdischen Lebens in Litauen (1388–1944)." In *Jüdische Welten in Osteuropa* (2005), 101–26,
[360] See, Antanas Andrijauskas, "Litvak art in the context of the 'École de Paris.'" *Lituanus* 58, no. 1 (2012): 9–28. About the reasons for "universal" territorialisation of Jewish culture see, Elissa Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews: The Bolshevik experiment in Minsk* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013).
[361] Alexander Lisov, "'Schastliv kak yevrey v parizhe": khudozhniki parizhskoy shkoly iz Belarusi, Litvy, Latvii," in *II Starptautiskā Zinātniski Praktiskā Konference „Māksla Un Mūzika Kultūras Diskursā"* (Rezekne: Rezekne Academy of Technologies, 2013).
[362] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe*.
[363] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 3.

village Ula in the Viciebsk district.[364] In 1827–36, he studied at the Academy of Fine Art in St. Petersburg, where he was awarded and became a member of the Academy. After the suppression of the uprising in 1831, one of the points of the repression policy was to convert the Uniate Church to Russian Orthodoxy. The father of Chrucki crusaded against the incorporation and was exiled for a couple of years; he died in 1840. The artist decided to end his career in St. Petersburg and return to Belarus, though there were no sources of income. Chrucki moved to Vilnius for several years to decorate a Russian Orthodox monastery and a church. Finally, the artist came back to Belarus; he lived in his house "quietly" till his death.

But more often, the artists born on Belarusian territories easily "adapted." Like Leon Bakst (1866–1924), who was born into a Jewish family in Hrodna (in western Belarus). Since his childhood, Bakst had been living with his grandfather in St. Petersburg. Despite his Jewish roots, he graduated—as an extraordinary talent—from the Academy of Fine Art and became famous—as a Russian painter and scene and costume designer in collaboration with Sergey Diaghilev's ballet group. Leon Bakst never returned to Belarus, nor did Chaim Soutine (1893–1943), who was born in Smilavičy in the Minsk district in a low-income Jewish family. Despite his father's disapproval, he attended Jakov Kruger's classes in Minsk. In 1909, Soutine enrolled in the Vilnius Drawing School. Soon, he moved to Paris. In contrast to Chagall, Soutine did not leave any memoirs about his homeland and his youth; he never met his family again.[365] Belarusian territories remained for him (like for many others) a point of departure, a transit zone, where he did not have any chance to achieve what he succeeded outside.

Tutejšaść as a response

The location had a special meaning for the people who settled in Belarus since they only had the right to their very *local history*, which usually meant a place of birth (a city, a town, a region). Circulated through literature since the end of the nineteenth century, the trope of *ja tutejšy* (I am local; I am from here) became canonical for Belarusian culture for decades.[366]

[364] The Uniate Church originated within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth following the Union of Brest of 1595–6 which attempted to reconcile Ruthenian Orthodox structures with the Papacy. Following the partition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1772–95), the church was mostly dissolved within the territory that was annexed by the Russian Empire, with most of the church eparchies being forcibly converted to Russian Orthodoxy.
[365] The artist Faibich Zarfin, who was born in Smilavičy and grew up with Soutine, remembers how in 1936 he met Soutine in Paris. Soutine's parents asked him to find their son since there was no news from him for a long time. See, Yuri Abdourahmanov, *Faibich Schraga Zarfin. O Sutine o Smilovichakh o sebe* (Minsk: Nauchniy mir, 2020).
[366] Gapova, "Kroja kraja Evropy"; Alexander Pershai, "Localness and Mobility in Belarusian Nationalism: The Tactic of Tuteishaść," *Nationalities Papers,* 36, no. 1 (2008): 85–103.

Exploring the peculiarities of "Belarusianness," Per Anders Rudling argues that until the beginning of the twentieth century, the fact that Belarusians could not understand the question "who you are?" did not mean that they "lacked an identity." Instead, they "had several identities" with "a local identity as tutejshy" on the top.[367] But what did this locality mean? Indirectly, such a form of identification—a reference to the place of birth—was also central, for instance, for Chagall, who highlighted Viciebsk as his imaginary homeland. Remembering his trip from Paris, he writes: "At the train station in Vilna [Vilnius], I said to my French female companion: 'Look, this is Russia. [...]' But is this Russia?! To tell you the truth, I've never even seen Russia. I've never been to Novgorod, or Rostov, or Kyiv. What have I seen? Only Petrograd, Moscow, Liozno, and Viciebsk. Viciebsk is a special story. A poor, wonderful city. A sad city. [...] Is it Russia? It is just my city. A city I invented myself."[368] But in the Belarusian tradition, *tutejšaść* refers not only to the literary place (geography) but also to a more complicated mode of "differentiating between 'us' and 'them.'"[369]

Tutejšaść, literary, *localness,* but more precisely *from-here-ness,*[370] was a central trope in Janka Kupala's poetry. Kupala was one of the leaders of Belarusian literature from the 1910s to the 1930s. In 1922, he even wrote the play titled *Tutejšyja* (People from Here, or Natives). The play was forbidden in Soviet Belarus as Soviet censors concluded that it focused on the "nationalistic theories of 'originality' and other anti-Bolshevik attitudes"[371] since Bolsheviks were represented as invaders, like Polish and German soldiers. *Tutejšyja* returned to the stage only during perestroika and was turned into a symbol of national revival.[372] *Tutejšyja* tells the story of one family who lived in Minsk at the end of the 1910s. From a geopolitical perspective, it was a turbulent period in Belarusian history. During the First World War (1914–1918), the Russian Revolution and the Polish-Soviet War (1918–1921), Minsk was temporarily occupied by the German army, the Polish troops, and then by the Bolsheviks; soon after, the Polish forces returned. Finally, the Bolsheviks took the city and, in 1919, proclaimed the Socialist Soviet Republic of Byelorussia.

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[367] Per Anders Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism: 1906–1931* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 43.
[368] Marc Chagall, ch. "Tol'ko ogromnoye rasstoyaniye" in *Moya zhizn* (Moscow: Ellis Lak, 1994), http://www.lib.ru/MEMUARY/SHAGAL/my_life.txt. Transl. from Russian. Evidently, referring to "Russia", Chagall meant the Russian Empire. However, this quotation discloses the primary role of the place of birth (Viciebsk) for the artist to identify himself beyond the state borders.
[369] Pershai, "Localness and Mobility in Belarusian Nationalism," 86.
[370] Ibid.
[371] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theatre and Drama*, 64.
[372] Tania Arcimovich, "Belarus," in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance*, ed. Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz (London: Routledge, 2023), 25–30.

The main characters identify themselves as tutejšyja but in different ways. For the protagonist Mikita Znosak, it is a tool that allows him to fit into shifting political realities. Znosak learns German and Polish; he has different kinds of personal identifications. He wants to be ready to meet any guest—whether from the West or the East. Simon Lewis explains such plasticity in terms of "the *identity-effects* of [the physical and epistemological] forms of violence on the local people."[373] He points out that Kupala expressed precisely "the ways in which individuals change their behaviours, their speech patterns, and their cultural self-identification in response to external pressures."[374] This is what Bhabha calls "the splitting of the individual" as a reaction to the colonial situation.[375] But for other characters—Znosak's mother, the teachers Janka Zdolnik and Alienka, tutejšaść means not only a strategy for survival but also resistance, like mimicry. It indicates belonging to defined groups of people, first of all, in terms of class—to the oppressed (peasants) but not to the oppressors (nobility). "Belarusian nationalism, therefore, had peculiar origins in the gaps between national and social identity," Lewis concludes.[376]

But if the characters of Kupala's play expose the political attitude of the author who aimed to grasp the colonial situation of Belarusian culture, there might be one more mode of tutejšaść when the reference only to locality—*from here*—allows escaping rigid forms of any national identity as a political category. This aspect is perfectly shown in the story of the Iwanowski family, who lived on the modern territory of Belarus in the late-nineteenth century close to the present-day Belarusian–Lithuanian border. There were five siblings—Jerzy, Wacław, Tadeusz, Stanisław, and Helena. Even though Polish was the primary language in the family's daily life, the cultural trajectories of the five children differed. Jerzy became a successful statesman in the interwar Polish Republic. Wacław, named Vaclaŭ Ivanoŭski, is well-known as one of the leaders of the Belarusian cultural community of the early twentieth century. Tadeusz as Tadas Ivanauskas was a zoologist and worked in Kaunas and Vilnius. Stanisław lived in Vilnius and identified himself as a Pole. Helena Iwanowska studied at Newnham College in Cambridge and produced the first known English translations of Belarusian literature. Comparing two generations of the Iwanowski family, Lewis concludes that this kind of cultural identification was typical in Belarusian territory at that time, and neither biological identity nor ethnic origin could play any significant role for the inhabitants.

[373] Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions,* 43.
[374] Ibid.
[375] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 121-131.
[376] Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions*, 5.

The scholar argues that "historical identities in Belarus have been pluriform rather than monadic and national, and correspondingly, that no single paradigm of nationalism theory can capture the specifics of the Belarusian case."[377] The concept of hybridity is fundamental for this comprehension.

As Doris Bachmann-Medick notes, the origins (biological or ethnic) do not assist "in understanding culture or cultural self-conceptions. They have been replaced by 'place' and 'displacement.'"[378] From this perspective, marginal, border, and overlapping zones, including interstitial spaces ('Zwischenräume'), are more "culturally productive."

> In this model cultures are produced liminally and are configured on their borders or in border situations. Revealingly, 'location' here refers to cross-border migration movements and multiple voices instead of a 'container' of supposed cultural authenticity that is based on fixed lines of tradition.[379]

These ideas are perfectly epitomised in the Belarusian tutejšy as a hybrid identification which refers not, as Bachmann-Medick points out, to "a mere mixing of cultures. In a more precise and provocative manner, it is grasped as a translational situation, a boundary-crossing, an in-between space and an 'activity of displacement.'"[380] Therefore, it is not a synonym for indigenous; the essential difference is that the people called themselves tutejšyja. It was a Belarusian response not only to the question of *where culture is located* temporally and spatially but also to people's own *secret of invisibleness* that empowers them "to look without being seen."[381]

"... And it flows like a river"

As far back as a hundred years ago, the Belarusian philosopher and poet Ihnat Abdziralovič (the real name is Ihnat Kančeŭski, 1896–1923) theorised the features of the Belarusian case in his main publication "Adviečnym šliacham. Daśliedziny bielaruskaha svietahliadu" (Taking the eternal way. Studies of the Belarusian worldview). Abdziralovič was born in Vilnius into the family of a court clerk. In 1913, he finished school in Vilnius and was admitted to the St.

[377] Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions,* 8.
[378] Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns*, 141.
[379] Ibid., 142.
[380] Ibid., 143.
[381] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 68.

Petersburg Institute of Technology. Soon, he left the institute and moved to the history and philosophy department at Moscow University, where he graduated with a diploma as a teacher of literature. During the First World War, Abdziralovič was conscripted into the military service of the Russian Imperial Army and served in Romania. After the February Revolution, he joined the Ukrainian national regiment, agitating soldiers for the program of revolutionary socialism. Then, he left the front and finished the cooperative program at Schanyavsky Public University in Moscow (Moskovskiy gorodskoy narodnyy universitet imeni A. L. Shanyavskogo). In 1918–19, Abdziralovič lived in Minsk and worked in different cooperative organisations in the economic sector. In 1919, he moved to Vilnius being, as Ivan Novik describes, disappointed with Bolshevik ideas.[382] Abdziralovič taught cooperative programs, participated in geographical and scientific groups (particularly, the Belarusian Science Society), and wrote poems. He died of tuberculosis at the age of twenty-seven.

In 1921 in Vilnius, Abdziralovič published the essay "Adviečnym šliacham. Daśliedziny bielaruskaha svietahliadu". In this outline (nakidy), as the author calls it, Abdziralovič gathered his central ideas about the need for Belarusian independence as a fundamental condition for developing culture. And the topos in-between plays a crucial role in Abdziralovič's speculations. "[Belarus] is actually a field of struggle between two orientations of European Aryan culture—Western and Eastern."[383] He mentions that Belarusian culture might be seen as "unimpressive" and "indefinite" for those who look from the outside and compare. However, such a model of culture does not signify "an inability for the creation of one's own forms of life". Instead, the negation of a definite model—since Belarus still balances "between the West and the East"—can be considered a strategy that creates culture in a situation of crisis, when "lofty ideals disappear leaving despair and hopelessness."

Abdziralovič criticises both models of culture—Western European and Eastern European (as he calls Russian)—because they both colonise Belarusian culture: Russia from the East and Poland from the West. "And so there is violence against our souls because we accidentally found ourselves between both seas," he wrote. Abdziralovič considers Eastern European (Moscow) imperialism to be more radical and total, like a monolith, while the Western European model of imperial culture is split into many interrelated fragments. But the

[382] Ivan Novik, "Aproč Abdziraloviča: charaktarystyka žyccia i tvorčasci Ihnata Kančeŭskaha," *Žurnal Belorusskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Filosofija. Psicholohija,* no. 2 (2019): 15–22. Transl. from Belarusian.

[383] Here and elsewhere, I. Abdziralovič, *Adviečnym šliacham Daśliedziny bielaruskaha śvietahliadu*, Bielaruskaja Palička, Bielaruskaja eliektronnaja biblijateka, 16 November 2022. Transl. from Belarusian. https://knihi.com/Ihnat_Kanceuski/Adviecnym_slacham.html.

main reason for his critique and his appeal that "we need to look for other ways" is based on "the compressive violent soulless forms" of both models. He shows how these rigid forms of culture were historically constructed through the establishment of different ideologies, institutions, disciplinary practices, slogans, and doctrines that transformed into the Philistinism of the West or the Bolshevik movement in the East. He concludes:

> As soon as the idea hides in the rigidity of the form, there is no way out; it rots and disappears [...] Not dead forms but a human being is a creator of his life. He creates all forms of life, they are dependent on a human being, and no man must remain under the dead power of decayed forms: religion, morality, laws, and general beliefs. [...]
>
> You can embalm not the living but only corpses. Nature proves that the unity of form and essence is a required condition for life. There must be a form; life cannot do without it. Only the infinite, eternal has no form. The essence of material life lies in form. And it flows like a river [...]
>
> The content of the future, the content of the individual and social ideal lie therefore in adapting the forms of life to this changeability and fluidity, in the search for elastic, fluid, changeable forms of life.[384]

Referring to Heraclitus's formula "Omnia fluunt, omnia mutantur" (All things change; all things flow) and Bergson's ideas of fluidity,[385] Abdziralovič develops the concept of "fluid and changeable forms" (ciakučych, zmiennych form) as a crucial condition for creation. And the potential for creation, Abdziralovič states, is the basis of humanity. He does not believe in social creativity since dominant classes control these social forms, slowing down their proliferation. Besides, social creativity needs more conducive circumstances. He calls the revolutionary mode—a radical attempt to vanquish "the inertia of concerned classes"—*abnormal*, *inharmonious,* and *uneconomical* because of the cost to human lives. Abdziralovič argues,

[384] Abdziralovič, *Adviečnym šliacham Daśliedziny bielaruskaha śvietahliadu*.

[385] Probably, he means the book *Creative Evolution* by Henri Bergson, published in 1907. Tatiana Shchyttsova (Tatiana Shchittsova) points out that there might be a direct reference between Abdziralovič's idea of creativity and Bergson's theory. Tatiana Shchyttsova, "'The attitude of modernity' of Ignat Abdzyralovich. The Belarusian borderland as an exemplary ground for philosophical universalization," in *Grenzen im Denken Europas Mittel- und osteuropäische Ansichten*, ed. Madalina Diaconu and Bianca Boteva-Richter (Wien: new academic press, 2017), 225–70. However, it shows rather that Abdziralovič formulated his theory in dialogue with circulated ideas and thoughts.

> The masses must have a continual opportunity for creativity, but such an opportunity cannot be achieved in modern times. Only a creative individual, a gathering of creative individuals, can ensure social creativity. The creativity of the multitude is based on the creativity of individuals. [...] Unfortunately, all that is currently being done in civil life and has its most intense embodiment in political work is far from achieving social creativity and recalling a creative individual.[386]

There is no reference to how this essay might influence Belarusian cultural and artistic circles. However, the idea of "a third way" was widespread in literary works. For instance, the poet Biadula-Jasakar wrote the poem "Try šliachi" (Three Paths) in 1917:

> One to the west to Warsaw,
> Another to the east to Moscow,
> And the third...
> ... far off, to the very sun.[387]

Moreover, Abdziralovič's pen name was borrowed from the novel *Dzvie dušy* (Two Souls) written by the Belarusian writer Maksim Harecki in 1918–19. According to the Belarusian publicist and historian Anton Adamovič, "this novel completes the picture of the negative reaction to the Revolution of 1917 expressed by Belorussian writers in 1917–1918—a reaction which, except for a brief spurt of enthusiasm following the February Revolution, was uniformly oppositional."[388] The protagonist Ihnat Abdziralovič represents the Belarusian intellectual community of that time. Since the old political and cultural system is crushing, he must make a choice between the Whites or the Red; either he is Russian or Belarusian. The realm of familiar identities breaks. The metaphor of two souls appears.

These links show that Ihnat Kančeŭski followed the issues discussed in Belarusian intellectual communities, developing and reformulating them. Nevertheless, his ideas did not find support from Belarusian national political groups. They turned into "an individual projection," being "more a symbolic than an actual agenda of nation-building."[389] The reason

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[386] I. Abdziralovič, *Adviečnym šliacham Daśliedziny bielaruskaha śvietahliadu*.
[387] Qtd. in Anthony Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature: (1917–1957)* (Munich: Inst. zur Erforschung der UdSSR, 1958), 26.
[388] Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature*, 37.
[389] Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds., *A History of Modern Political Thought in* East Central Europe, 177. Abdziralovič's essay was also forbidden by the Soviet authorities. It returned to Belarusian intellectual discourse only at the end of the 1980s (the first re-publication happened in 1988) and became one of the most significant works of Belarusian thought of the twentieth century.

might be, as Novik explains, the more *cultural* than *national* orientation of Abdziralovič's program. Though the Belarusian experience is fundamental to the philosopher, he avoids national discourse; there is no reference to *the nation* at all. Novik identifies it as "mistrust of external definitions and categories according to which society is divided."[390] He refers to Abdziralovič's statement in *Naša dumka* newspaper in 1921:

> Only when the people, divided into antagonistic religious, national and class camps [...], begin to respect not group values but human essence, a real, and not only in projects and words, understanding between artificially divided groups is possible.[391]

Despite alternative ways of thinking about culture from a local perspective (which resists a globalising vision of the need for a rigid form of culture), it remains to be seen how these patterns of fluidity and shapelessness proposed by Abdziralovič might be realised and performed in aesthetic forms as specific features of Belarusian culture. What does this in-betweenness mean, for instance, regarding the avant-garde projects in Belarus? Is it merely about the influence of the Western or Eastern forms?[392] Or, we could imagine rather fluid and elusive forms as an eventual project that alludes to Tlostanova's mode of "decolonial aesthesis." From this perspective, Abdziralovič's approach does not propose particular criteria but categories which allow us to move beyond the existing "canons" of the avant-gardes.

3.2. The liminal space of the Revolutions

> Something has started in the revolutionary city. [...] And he heard and saw, he saw blood pouring everywhere. Hasty steps of the crowd were heard from afar, there was the smell of foreign, wild bodies, and eyes flickered here and there.
>
> Moyshe Kulbak

Returning to "the Great Event," which was a fundamental condition for the avant-garde movements in the Soviet republics, it is necessary to keep in mind that the Red October "was

[390] Novik, "Aproč Abdziraloviča," 18.
[391] Qtd. ibid.
[392] Faber, *Die ukrainische Avantgarde zwischen Ost und West.*

only the beginning of a long revolutionary fight," as Glisic notes.[393] As for the Belarusian territories, it was not so much the beginning as a continuation. Before the Russian Revolution started in February 1917, Belarusian territories were directly involved in military actions during the First World War. Towards the end of 1915, Western and part of Central Belarus was occupied by German forces. And the meaning of the February and then October Revolutions was essential because they helped to stop the war. This was one of the most significant expectations of the people, and not only in Belarus. For instance, Erwin Piscator, the founder of the Political Theatre in Germany, who served in German military forces in 1916–17, wrote:

> So wie der Tag und die Nacht kamen, so stand an ihrem Anfang und an ihrem Ende für den Soldaten das Wort Friede. Immer sprach man davon. Er bildete das Regulativ alles dessen, was man tat. Er war das Ende und die Rettung. Je länger er auf sich warten ließ, um so mehr ersehnte man ihn. Doch um so weniger wußte man, woher er kommen und wer ihn bringen sollte. Und als man darauf keine Antwort geben konnte, hoffe man auf Wunder. Diese Wunde kam: es war die Nachricht von der Revolution in Rußland. Es gewann an Glanz, als mit der zweiten Revolution der Funkspruch ‚An Alle' kam.[394]

Later, Piscator mentioned that nobody could imagine the results of the Red October, but for him as for a socialist who participated in political demonstrations in Berlin in 1919 (in "der 'Hochburg des Bolschewismus'"), it was the only way: "[...] sahen wir die Rettung der Welt nur in der äußersten Konsequenz: organisierter Kampf der Proletariats, Ergreifung der Macht. Diktatur. Weltrevolution. Russland war unser Ideal."[395]

The ideas of revolutionary socialism were also widely circulated in the Belarusian territories, and, in the beginning, these programs did not refer to Bolsheviks only. Class emancipation was one of the primary goals of most Belarusian political groups, but, at the same time, the demand for autonomy remained fundamental. It was a reason these groups and politically involved writers and artists interpreted the February Revolution as a milestone. Significantly, the Russian Provisional Government abolished restrictions for ethnic groups in the Russian Empire including Jews. In his memoirs, Chagall describes how he served in a military office in Petrograd, and the Germans were advancing. The artist worried, "I begged [Kaiser] Wilhelm: 'Please be happy with [conquering] Warsaw, with Kovno, but don't move

[393] Glisic, *The Futurist Files*, 57.
[394] Knut Boeser, ed., *Erwin Piscator: eine Arbeitsbiographie in 2 Bänden*, Teil:1. Berlin 1916–1931 (Berlin: Edition Hentrich, Frölich u. Kaufmann, 1986), 12.
[395] Ibid., 15.

on Dvinsk, don't push into Vitebsk.'"[396] Soon after, the Russian soldiers retreated, and Chagall continues:

> And I was writing the same military papers, registering them all, until thunder roared—the February Revolution. The first thing I realized was that my business with the passport people had come to an end.[397]

However, while the central cities in Russia were directly involved in the February Revolution[398], Minsk lived its own life.

> From the message of the senior factory inspector of the Minsk province. 8.03.1917:
>
> The first news about the fall of the old government began to spread in Minsk on March 1 and 2. On the 3rd, more definite and reliable information was received, and local authorities immediately began to organise the measures necessary to maintain order in the city. [...] On March 4 and 5, crowded groups of people and soldiers appeared on the streets, and small scattered demonstrations began, on the 6th, according to the decision of the Provisional Committee, a solemn celebration of the renewed Russia took place ... [...] All the time, despite the massive crowd of people, exemplary order was maintained. After that, according to the announcement of the Provisional Committee, all manifestations ceased and the external life in the city went back to normal. (From the report of the senior factory inspector of Minsk province, 8 March 1917)[399]

Nevertheless, life in Minsk was not the same. The formation of the new government in Petrograd and the declaration of a new political direction, particularly the promise of autonomy for the marginal nations, provoked the political landscape in Belarus. As Uladzimir Liachoŭski and Andrej Čarniakievič note, "the collapse of tsarism in February 1917 gave Belarusians new chances and opportunities, but also created new serious challenges that had to be answered."[400] On May 28, 1917, the first issue of the newspaper *Volnaja Belarus* (Free Belarus; the first Minsk newspaper in the Belarusian language) was published. Founded by the Belarusian

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[396] Qtd. in Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: A Documentary Narrative (*Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 155.
[397] "Shots were fired, attacks were prepared, weapons were laid down, people surrounded," Chagall wrote. Ibid., 157. About the role of the October Revolution for the emancipation of Jews see, Andrew Sloin, *The Jewish Revolution in Belorussia: Economy, Race, and Bolshevik Power* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).
[398] See qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 157.
[399] In Aliaksandar Smaliančuk, ed., *Historyja Bielarusi k. XVIII- pačatku XXst. u dakumientach i materyjalach*, (Vilnius: European Humanities University, 2007), 272–3. Transl. from Russian.
[400] Liachoŭski and Čarniakievič, "A Chto Tam Idzie?": 112. Transl. from Belarusian.

National Committee (founded by the Belarusian national organisations in March–July 1917), the issue opened with an article by Jazep Liosik, the Belarusian linguist, publicist and one of the leaders of the Belarusian national movement:

> The Great Russian Revolution opened the doors to freedom not only for people but for folks, offended and subaltern nations including us, Belarusians. Sincerely welcome the freedom of the Russian State, we who suffered a long time also tend to a new life. [...] We are confident that there will be no second chance if we miss the moment. [...] The old order ended and there is no way to go back to the past. [...] The doors to the bright future opened—to the great building of brotherhood, freedom, and consent.[401]

Recognizing the February Revolution as a pivotal moment for the country, the Belarusian National Committee made efforts to gather representatives from Belarus who were to be part of the Russian Provisional Government. At that time, the demand was for autonomy, not yet independence. In response to the October Upheaval in Petrograd, the October 30, 1917 issue of *Volnaja Belarus* began with a list of candidates and an explanation of the importance of participating in the election. Details about the October Revolution were provided on the last page titled "The Last News. Arrest of the Government":

> On October 24, the Bolsheviks provoked the uprising in Petrograd. [...] On October 26, the Russian Provisional Government was arrested in the Winter Palace... [...] Instead of the social revolution, the anarchy and the blood Civil War started. There is no news about what happened or is going on now in Petrograd. [...] On October 28, Minsk was isolated from Petrograd, and there was no news from there." The Counsel of Peasants' and Workers' Deputies declared they took power in the city. Posters with this information were everywhere, the machine guns were situated on Volnasci (Freedom) Square (near the Cathedral), and patrols drove around the city, but it was almost peaceful.[402]

The Military Revolutionary Committee of the Western Front was organised by Minsk Bolsheviks almost immediately. At the same time, the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic was formed. On December 5, 1917, the Rada organised the First All-Belarusian Congress that gathered 1,872 delegates from all regions of Belarus. Minsk Bolsheviks were aware of the proclamation of autonomy. They banned the gathering, calling the Rada's

[401] Jazep Liosik, *Volnaja Belarus,* no. 1 (1917): 2. Transl. from Belarusian.
[402] Untitled. *Volnaja Belarus,* no. 27 (1917): 4. Transl. from Belarusian.

activities illegal. Nevertheless, in 1918, there were two governments in Belarus—one Soviet and the other Belarusian Democratic. The German forces advanced at the end of February, and the Bolsheviks left Minsk. The Rada took this opportunity to announce the First Constituent Charter (Pieršaja Ustaŭnaja hramata) which stated the right to Belarusians' full self-determination. After the Brest Peace Treaty in March 1918, the German military forces left Minsk. The Rada announced the complete independence of the Belarusian People's Republic (BPR)[403].

As a response, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Byelorussia was proclaimed by the Byelorussian Bolsheviks on January 1, 1919, in Smolensk. However, some Bolshevik leaders in Belarus did not support the idea of autonomy for Belarus, arguing that "the Belarusian oblast within the Russian state would be enough."[404] In some versions, it was Lenin who supported the idea of autonomy for Belarus, because "the Russian state needed a 'buffer' and that was the role the Byelorussian Republic was assigned to play."[405] The Soviet-Polish War started; Belarusian territories were occupied again—by Polish troops, then by Bolsheviks soldiers. Since the BPR did not find extensive international support, nor did it have the real infrastructure (army, treasury, etc.), the Bolsheviks took power. After the Treaty of Riga which ended the Soviet-Polish war, the Bolshevik government consolidated its power completely. According to the agreement, almost half Belarus (its Western part) was included in Poland, while Eastern Belarus was under Soviet authority.

Despite the diverse political landscape in Belarus during the Russian Revolution (as Ihnat Abdziralovič noted, "Belarusians practically got to know almost all directions of political thought"), culture was paralysed, in contrast to what happened in Moscow, Petrograd, or Kyiv. Adamovič notes that the February Revolution provoked the Belarusian National Revolution, and Belarusian writers did not accept the October Upheaval and Bolshevism during the first post-Revolutionary years. While there were almost no responses to the February Revolution—only several poems "expressed optimism" because of the fall of Tsarism,[406] the Red October caused rejection and anxiety about the future. The artistic circles were depressed and disorganised. The socialist Harecki wrote *Dzvie Dušy* with the motif of political disappointment and confusion from the results of the Red October since the promised liberation did not come.

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[403] In detail about the formation of BPR and the events before and after, see, Siarhiej Šupa, *Padarožža ŭ BNR*.
[404] Nelly Bekus, *Struggle over Identity: The Official and the Alternative 'Belarusianness'* (Budapest: CEU Press, 2010), 70
[405] Ibid.
[406] Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature*, 24.

"Die Melodie der Internationale ist schön, aber bisher weckt sie in meinem Innern keinerlei Vorstellungen von Leid oder Freude einer 'internationalen' Menschengemeinschaft. So lange ich eine solche Gemeinschaft unter den Nationen nicht gesehen habe und nicht kenne... [...]. Fremde, die von ihrem eigenen, keineswegs überwundenen Nationalgefühl erfüllt sind, mit Internationale lediglich auf den Lippen und deren Fiktion im Kopf, mit fanatischer Unbarmherzigkeit daran gehen, aus unserer weißruthenischen Nation Dung zu bereiten, um darauf ihre fiktive Internationale heranzuzüchten. [...]"

"Iraida Auhenauna! Warum nehmen Sie sich das alles so sehr zu Herzen? Mir scheint, das ganze Unglück besteht in der Diskrepanz zwischen Theorie und Praxis. Denn sagen Sie mir doch bitte, gestattet die kommunistische Theorie, dass die Moskauer oder irgendwelche anderen Kommunisten die Weißruthenen gewaltsam russifizieren? Ist die Theorie der Internationale schuld daran, dass jetzt bolschewistische Kommissare aller Nationen das weißruthenische Volk regieren, nur keine weißruthenischen? Ist sie etwa schuld daran, dass in unserem berühmten Gebietsexekutivkomitee der Westarmee und der Westfront Armenier, Letten, Juden, Polen, Moskowiter sitzen, nicht aber wir Weißruthenen?"[407]

Just a few people from the Belarusian intellectual and artistic circles joined the Communist Party immediately after the October Upheaval. Adamovič calls the first years of Soviet domination in Belarus "years of 'inside emigration.'" However, "there was not merely inside emigration in Belorussian literature, but also the inside emigration of Belorussian literature."[408] For instance, in the poem "Fly Away!" (1920), Janka Kupala urges readers to leave the space he calls "disastrous mould." According to Adamovič, this flight "was not a mere expression of feelings but was actualized in almost all the works of Belorussian writers."[409] References to folklore, tales, allegory, and irony—to emigrate "into the world of fantasy"—were the main features of the literary works of that period. [410] Furthermore, the division of Belarus into two parts became a drama for cultural circles. One of the leaders of Belarusian literature, Jakub Kolas, wrote:

Can we forget those boundaries
Which they have fixed without us?
Deep are the wounds, oh, and fresh still!
The fire of vengeance is not quenched.

[407] Maxim Harezki, *Zwei Seelen*, trans. Norbert Randow (Berlin: Guggolz, 2014).
[408] Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature*, 50.
[409] Ibid., 51.
[410] Ibid., 56.

Who has divided us? Foreigners,
Rouges from dark paths.
To hell with their boundaries! To the devil with their frontiers!

"To the Belarusian people", 1921[411]

Belarus was rigidly divided; the border was placed near Minsk which remained under Soviet governance. It was not allowed to move without special permission —either from the East to the West or vice versa. The time of contrabandists flourished. Seduro notes that the resumption of cultural work on Belarusian territory became possible only after the Treaty of Riga.

> Belarus lay in ruins. School buildings were destroyed, furniture were stolen or broken, textbooks and books were burned [...] population was evacuated to the depths of Russia from areas of military events [...] such was the terrible image of the country.[412]

The Belarusian Government of the BPR was formed in exile. But most Belarusian cultural leaders, scientists, writers, and artists remained in the Soviet part. They were forced to admit the win of the Bolsheviks because the first repressions and censorship—as "effective means of silencing the counternarrative" of the Red October[413]—had already started. [414] Searches and temporary arrests happened everywhere, but Bolsheviks needed local cultural and educational forces to agitate and realise the (changeable) course of the Party. They launched the politics of *korenizatsiia* (indigenization) aimed to integrate local representatives into government institutions. [415] In 1923, the VII Congress of the KP(b) in Minsk adopted a resolution "On the national issue" to stimulate Belarusian leaders and activists to join the Bolshevik movement. According to the resolution, "the bourgeoisie of the oppressed nationalities" used "the slogan of the unity of the nation" for its own interests. Therefore, the Soviet Byelorussian State had to involve Belarusians in local government, "strengthening cultural and educational work in native (Belarusian, Jewish, Russian, and Polish) languages.

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[411] Qtd. in Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature*, 53.
[412] Uladzimir Siadura, "Dolia belaruskae kul′tury pad savetami," in *Dolia belaruskae kul'tury pad savetami: 1920–1991 gg*., ed. A. E. Taras (Riga: Inst. Belaruskaj Historyi i Kul′tury, 2012), 18. Transl. from Belarusian.
[413] Corney, *Telling October*, 47.
[414] For instance, the Belarusian writer Fabian Šantyr was shot in 1920. He advocated for the complete independence of Belarus. In 1918, he wrote the article "The Need for Belorussian National Life and for Self-Determination of the People." Adamovich calls Šantyr "the first victim of Bolshevik terror in literature." Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature,* 48.
[415] Marková, *The Path to the Soviet Nation*.

Belarusian culture, suppressed by tsarism, should be revived [but with special attention] to the correct development of work in the Belarusian language and the prevention of unhealthy deviations in it."[416] An amnesty was announced for former opponents of the Party. Siadura remembers,

> The dictatorship of the proletariat opens a free way for cultural development [...] The Belarusian working people can now freely build their culture in their native language. [...] We need hundreds or thousands of cultural workers connected with the region, who know its nature. As well as economy, history, languages and at the same time, who able to take part in communist construction[417].

In the mid-1920s, Bolshevism in Soviet Belarus was transformed into national Bolshevism; the Belarusian National Communist movement appeared. Many cultural makers and leaders—either from the West or Russian and Ukrainian cities to which they evacuated during the wars—returned to Belarus, trusting the Bolsheviks' promises. They believed in them not only because of the failure of the national democratic program. As Nelly Bekus explains, the "ideological conflict between the internationalism of class struggle and the idea of national revival in the Belarusian case did not play a great role due to the coincidence of the concepts of nationality and class."[418] And "it was mostly democratic, socialist leaning, and anticolonial, employing ethnicity, language, and culture as vehicles for agency and political empowerment."[419] Those who returned, including the writers and cultural leaders who initially did not accept the Bolsheviks, were involved in building the culture of the new Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, as the state was officially called in 1920. The dilemma described by Harecki in his novel was seemingly solved, and Belarusians finally represented themselves. However, it was a quasi-liberation which ended with mass repressions in the 1930s against almost all leaders and cultural makers involved in Belarusian national Bolshevism.

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[416] "Po natsional'nomu voprosu," in *Kommunisticheskaya partiya Belorussii v rezolyutsiyakh i resheniyakh s'yezdov i plenumov TSK (1918–1927)* (Minsk: Izdatel'stvo Belarus, 1973), 94, 96. Transl. from Russian.
[417] Siadura, "Dolia belaruskae kul′tury pad savetami," 20.
[418] Nelly Bekus, "Nationalism and socialism: 'Phase D' in the Belarusian nation-building," *Nationalities Papers* 38, no. 6 (2010): 832, DOI: 10.1080/00905992.2010.515973.
[419] Rudling, *The Rise and Fall of Belarusian Nationalism*, 20.

Exploring the concept of liminality, Bjorn Thomassen points out that "political revolutions represent clear-cut liminal situations in large-scale settings."[420] He refers to Victor Turner who suggested that "liminality served not only to identify the importance of in-between periods, but also to illuminate the human reactions to liminal experiences: the ways in which personality was shaped by liminality."[421] The notion of in-between has both temporal and spatial dimensions. It might be a moment, a period, or even an epoch. But "liminal places can be specific thresholds; they can also be more extended areas, like 'borderlands' or, arguably, whole countries, placed in important in-between positions between larger civilizations."[422] Thomassen specifies liminality as "a paradoxical state [...]. At the level of the individual, it is the destruction of identity, while at the level of society it involves the suspension of the structure of social order" with the aim "to return to conditions of stability and normality."[423] As a result, a new identity for the individual can appear or "new common bonds are formed through the cathartic experience of communitas."[424]

The Russian Revolution, as a continuous process, reverberated across numerous spaces and cultures, leading to the emergence of previously 'oppressed' identities and the formation of new collective bonds. The processes of reformation and reconfiguration commenced simultaneously in Ukraine, Belarus, Poland, Lithuania, and other regions on the periphery of the Russian Empire. However, the liminal spaces that were engendered, and the eventual outcomes (a return to stability and normality), varied significantly. While certain Central and Eastern European nations declared and achieved independence, that served as a catalyst for local avant-garde movements,[425] other countries, such as Belarus, were integrated (with autonomous rights) into the territory under Bolshevik control, eventually joining the USSR in 1922.

Hereby, the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus as a cultural "pure" phenomenon were possible in Soviet Belarus only after this transition period. However, I argue that it started precisely from the liminal in-between space of the Russian Revolution—particularly in Viciebsk. Remembering 1917, Chagall wrote: "Russia was covered with glass. Lenin would turn Russia upside down, the way I turn a picture upside down [...] Everybody is there [in

[420] Bjørn Thomassen, *Liminality and the Modern. Living Through the In-Between* (London: Routledge, 2016), 201.
[421] Ibid., 201.
[422] Ibid., 91.
[423] Ibid., 92.
[424] Ibid.
[425] Kosiński, ed. *A Lexicon of the Central-Eastern European Interwar Theatre Avant-garde*.

Moscow or Petrograd] and I—in Vitebsk."[426] And already in September 1918, between the declarations of two different Belarusian States (BPR by the nationalists and SSRB by the communists), Chagall was appointed as Plenipotentiary for the Affairs of Art in the Province of Viciebsk. The letter, signed by the Russian art historian Ivan Punin who headed the Department of Visual Arts of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment (IZO Narkompros) in Petrograd, announced that "Chagall has a right to organise art schools, museums, exhibitions, lectures and presentations about art," and the local authorities of the whole Viciebsk district should "render [him] complete assistance to achieve these goals."[427] In the following years, Chagall turned his hometown into one of the centres of revolutionary and avant-garde art, where such artists as Ivan Puni, Ksenia Boguslavskaya, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, El Lissitzky, Vera Ermolaeva, Kazimir Malevich, Robert Falk, and others worked.

In the same years, the Polish avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński, who was born in Minsk, also supported the revolutionary movement. He attempted to establish and run the branch of UNOVIS in Smolensk.[428] But Viciebsk became the distinctive place. The historical moment (the First World War and the Russian Revolution) and the *particular* location of the city (as a provincial transit city from St. Petersburg to the Western European countries and a boundary space *between* cultures) produced a special kind of liminality where the avant-gardes in Belarus began.

3.3. Viciebsk: Towards revolutionary art

Founded officially in 974 and located in the north-eastern part of modern Belarus, Viciebsk is one of the oldest cities in the country. It was a major trade city in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In the nineteenth century, Viciebsk was incorporated into the Russian Empire and stagnated. Since 1886, when a railway was built connecting the city with St. Petersburg, Riga, Kyiv, and Odesa, Viciebsk revived and started rapidly developing, becoming a cultural centre of the Viciebsk province. Theatre companies, artists, and writers from the entire Russian Empire visited the city. In contrast to Minsk, Le Foll notes, Viciebsk was more culturally active and developed; there were libraries, theatres, including a

[426] Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 159.
[427] GAVO, f.1821, o.1, d.8, t.1, l.238.
[428] Alexander Lisov, "Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg," in *Celebrating Suprematism. New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 126–43.

cinematograph, a circus, the Viciebsk private museum, and its own philharmonic orchestra.[429]

The city's multiculturalism resulted from different historical stages and was visibly embodied in its religious buildings. There were several Catholic, Orthodox, and Lutheran churches (as a heritage of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Russian Imperial periods) including dozens of synagogues. At the turn of the twentieth century, Jews represented most of the city's population since the delimitation of the Pale of Settlement *(certa osedlosti)* located nearby, which was established in 1791 under the rule of Catherine the Great. Moreover, Belarusian territories became a new homeland for many Jews because of the tolerant policy of dukes of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.[430] As scholars note, during the waves of large-scale anti-Jewish pogroms in the Russian Empire in 1881–1906, the Belarusian territories rarely appeared on this anti-Jewish "map."[431] However, it does not expose the complete tolerance of non-Jewish local communities but rather its scale.[432] Despite the international policy of the new Bolshevik authority after 1917, violence continued. At the beginning of the 1920s, Jews suffered from scaled pogroms in several districts of the Viciebsk province (Nevelsky, Velizhsky, Gorodotsky and other uyezds). According to the reports of the Jewish Communist Party, dozens of Jewish families in Usvyat city were killed, and their houses were burned[433].

Nevertheless, Viciebsk remained a unique place in the region. Lisaŭ describes it as a place where Jews, Belarusians, Poles, and Russians lived together peacefully.[434] Ilya Repin, the Russian artist and the founder of the realist school, called the city "Russian Toledo" because of its multicultural and multireligious landscape. Repin wrote: "The region is friendly; the people are diverse. There are Belarusians (a dominant tr[ibe]), Poles, Lithuanians, Jews!"[435] He had a summer residence nearby, and local artists often visited him, including the artist Yehuda Pen, who decided to settle in Viciebsk. This fact became a pivotal point for developing the artistic landscape of the city. As Grigory Kasovsky notes, it is impossible to understand *the poetics* of the People's Art School without the role of Pen "as a certain historical-cultural phenomenon."[436]

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[429] Le Foll, *Vitebskaja khudozhestvennaja shkola*, 47–8.
[430] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 13–14; Niendorf, "'Litwaken.' Stationen jüdischen Lebens in Litauen," 105–6.
[431] Gur Alroey, "Patterns of Jewish Emigration from the Russian Empire from the 1870s to 1914," *Jews in Russia and Eastern Europe* 2, no. 57 (200,): 24–51.
[432] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 30.
[433] GAVO f.56, o.6, d.67, l.155-156.
[434] In Le Foll, *Vitebskaja khudozhestvennaja shkola*, 47.
[435] Qtd. ibid., 49–50. Despite the imperialist character of this statement—e.g. "Russian Toledo" and "tribe," it exposes the notion of the city's difference that is quite significant for its comprehension.
[436] Grigory Kazovski, *Khudozhniki Vitebska. Iyeguda Pen i yego ucheniki* (Moscow: Imidzh, 1989), 13. Transl. from Russian.

Yehuda Pen (1854–1937) was born in Novo-Aleksandrovsk (today Zarasai, Lithuania). As a youth, he moved to Dzvinsk (Viciebsk province). Soon, he went to St. Petersburg to enrol in the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts but failed because of his Jewish origin. Nevertheless, he stayed in the city, where he could live "only illegally, constantly paying a 'tribute' to yard-keepers lest they should inform the police."[437] He got permission to attend a class by the Russian painter Pavel Chistyakov. Finally, Pen was enrolled and graduated from the Academy in 1886. In 1897, the artist opened the Drawing and Painting School in Viciebsk, which became one of the central places for the first level of artistic education for many artists. Marc Chagall, Osip Cadkin, David Yakerson, El Lissitzky, Solomon Yudovin, Polina Khentova, and many others attended Pen's classes. Pen was a follower of realism, but his students turned into artists of different styles and methods—from realism to avant-gardism; many of them became world-known. The artists from Viciebsk also appeared around Tatlin, who was Malevich's irreconcilable opponent.[438] Tatlin's two main assistants Iosif Meerzon and Tevel Shapiro, who participated in creating the Monument of the Third International, were Pen's students. Meerzon also attended Malevich's class in Viciebsk and was actively involved in UNOVIS.[439] After the reorganisation of the People's Art School in 1923–24, Pen worked privately. In 1937, he was killed in his apartment in Viciebsk. Most likely, it was not a political but domestic murder, but the crime was unsolved.[440]

During the Second World War, the military staff was placed in Viciebsk which was turned into an army city and hosted many refugees from the western territories. The city kept this status after the Revolutions of 1917 until the end of the Russian Civil War. After the Red October, many artists and writers visited Viciebsk or even moved there. For instance, Nikolai Malko, a conductor from Petrograd, came to Viciebsk in 1918 and organised the symphonic orchestra, which he led for the next three years. The music and art theoretician and polymath Ivan Sollertinsky, who was born in Viciebsk but left it in his early childhood, lived there in 1919–20. The philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin moved there in 1920, organising a philosophical research group called the Bakhtin Circle. One reason for the city's popularity was economic conditions. While there was hunger in most cities nearby, Viciebsk—a Western-frontline city—was supplied with food and other consumer products. The artist Ahola-Valo, who came to Viciebsk in 1920, remembered:

[437] Kazovski, *Khudozhniki Vitebska*, 17.
[438] Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 204.
[439] Ibid., 205–6.
[440] Kazovski, *Khudozhniki Vitebska.*

> There is hunger in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Students and teachers came to Viciebsk. Because of the Western front, there are a lot of food stores here. People have better food rations than it was somewhere in the realm. [...] Chaliapin sang at the Viciebsk Theatre. A sugar cube was the price for a ticket. When the ticket seller counted the cubes and there were not enough, Chaliapin said: "I won't sing until there are all cubes." He counted the sugar cubes carefully, like money. Then, he received the missing cubes and began to sing.[441]

Chagall's return to Viciebsk marked a pivotal moment in the city's artistic prosperity. It was not a mere sentimental journey to his "joyful, gloomy city".[442] Chagall embarked on a mission to *revolutionise* the city's cultural and artistic landscape, driven by tumultuous times. In a 1920 letter to Pavel Ettinger, he expressed,

> I got the idea of organising an art academy on my return from abroad, when I was working on the "Vitebsk Series" of studies. At that time there was still a lot in Vitebsk ... columns, pigs and fences, but the artistic talents slumbered hidden somewhere. I tore myself away from my palette, rushed to Petrograd and Moscow and the school was set up.[443]

However, before his vision could materialise, Chagall was called upon to contribute to the commemoration of the Red October anniversary in Viciebsk. This was a crucial part of a monumental propaganda plan initiated by Lenin and ratified by a special decree in the spring of 1918.

> From Lunacharsky's memoirs:
> – Anatoly Vasilievich, Lenin said to me, you probably have several artists who have something to give, and who must be very poor.
> – Of course, I said, there are quite a few such artists in Moscow and Leningrad.
> – I mean, Vladimir Ilyich went on, sculptors and, perhaps, even poets and writers. [...] You remember that Campanella in his Civitas solis talks about the walls of his Socialist fantasy city with painted murals, which should teach young people science and history and awaken their feelings of Citizenship; in short, they contribute to the education of new generations. [...] I

[441] Saana Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria. Taiteilija Aleksanteri Ahola-Valon dramaattiset vuodet Valko-Venäjällä 1919−1930* (Hämeenlinna: Elpo-kustannus, 2021), 49, 89–90. Transl. from Finnish.
[442] Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 88.
[443] Christoph Vitali, ed., *Marc Chagall: the Russian years 1906–1922* (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1991), 73.

would call what I have in mind monumental propaganda[444].

Investigating the various narratives about the October Revolution, Corney points out that the organisation of mass spectacles, which covered whole territories controlled by the Bolsheviks was not simply a celebration of their victory or promotion of Bolshevik ideas to the masses. It might be considered a crucial part of engineering the Red October's effect. However, it was "*revolutionary* imagination, rather than specifically Bolshevik aspirations," Corney concludes.[445] During the first years after the upheaval, as Anton Dzianisaŭ notes, Bolsheviks had no plans for how these "celebrations" might look from an ideological point of view. "Different forms of public celebrations of major holidays were piloted,"[446] which explains why the authorities often invited radical artists to decorate the celebrations. The artists who contributed to the creation of revolutionary mass performances "were inspired by the drama and passion of revolution."[447] But such active participation did not mean a conceptual involvement in Bolshevik ideas. For many of them, it was an opportunity to embody their own revolution. Thus, Nikolai Evreinov, the author of *Storming of the Winter Palace*, went to Tiflis (Tbilisi) after the October Upheaval, where he spent about two years. Then, he returned to Petrograd with a public presentation "Will of Theatre." "At that time, it was still possible to speak about 'the will of theatre,' and not only about 'a will of the party and government,'" the artist Yury Annenkov noted.[448] Evreinov did not advocate for the new political order, since, in a few years, he left Soviet Russia and spent the rest of his life in Paris. Instead, he used this unique opportunity for his own artistic performance with the implicit support of the authorities.[449]

Apparently, Chagall had the same intention. Despite economic crises, he could get

[444] A. V. Lunacharsky, "Lenin o monumental'noy propagande," in *Vospominaniya i vpechatleniya* (Moscow: Sovetskaja Rossija, 1968), 197–200. http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/vospominaniya-i-vpechatleniya/. Transl. from Russian.
[445] Corney, *Telling October*, 73.
[446] Anton Denisov, "Voyennyy parad i politkarnaval. Organizatsiya i provedeniye massovykh prazdnikov v st olitse BSSR v 1919–1925 gg," *Trudy BSTU* 6, no. 1 (2023): 74. Transl. from Russian.
[447] Corney, *Telling October*, 73.
[448] Annenkov, *Dnevnik moich vstrech*, 452. Transl. from Russian.
[449] According to Annenkov, who made a stage design for the performance, they had access to all resources they needed for such a grandiose spectacle. Ibid., 453–55.

thousands of metres of fabric to decorate the city.[450] Involving almost all artists in Viciebsk,[451] he tended to occupy the whole city to turn it into a space for his own revolutionary performance. While the Bolsheviks promoted the idea of revolutionary art as a means of agitation and, later, social engineering (ch. 5), Chagall claimed:

> We are also celebrating the anniversary of Revolutionary Art. [...] The art of general Revolution is hiding behind the inaccessible "Art for art's sake." [...] Art ceases to play the role of illustration and serving somebody. [...] Proletarian Art is not an art for proletarians or an art about proletarians. Let us remember once and for all: it is the Art of proletarian painters. [...] The proletarian painter is constantly struggling against routine and leading the masses after him.[452]

Katerina Clark examines the "thrall of 'revolution'" experienced by some avant-gardists through their belief that these political events provoked the situation for radical changes in art. They connected these changes with "the acquisition of a 'new vision' (novoye zreniye)" as a means of assisting them "to 'see' and therefore 'be' a new."[453] In contrast to Malevich, Chagall did not consider this new vision in terms of the dictatorship of a particular style or technique. Instead, this *new* art will be created by "proletarian artists" as a new class aimed to destroy the old academic hierarchy (and it was the primary condition but not the style). Chagall stated that art should provoke a situation of new seeing and being, and, in this way, it will contribute to the fundamental revolution of the society, including "high rise of culture and Art."[454]

In *Vitebskij listok* (Viciebsk Page) newspaper, the short plan of the anniversary celebration was announced. It had to consist of different events lasting three days—public

[450] Even before the celebration, Chagall was criticised for such a waste. From the article 'Let Us Not Be Ridiculous' of 19 October 11918: "[T]his Commission, at a time of extreme shortage of cloth in the country, has contrived to rub in the eyes of the working class with red ribbons, for which they plan to spend 20 thousand *Arshins* of cloth to be painted in red for the city of Vitebsk alone! Did the organisers of the festivities consider that 5 thousand pairs of underwear could be made from this cloth?." Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 253–4).

[451] In *Viciebskij listok* newspaper of 22 October 1918, Chagall called out: "All artists, decorators and painters are required to appear every day at the commission for the decoration of the city of Viciebsk for the October festivities to register and be assigned various tasks as requested by the commission. Those who do not appear will be considered conscious evaders." Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 255.

[452] Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 29–32.

[453] Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 30.

[454] Harshav, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, 29.

meetings, manifestations, theatre and film demonstrations, and concerts.[455] Due to a lack of funds, a scheduled theatre carnival and fireworks were cancelled.[456] Chagall was only responsible for the "decoration," since all scripts of those celebrations were almost the same for every city.[457] But, according to media reports, Chagall's contribution to the celebration was "the most successful."[458] The buildings were decorated with huge panels—"Vpered, vpered bez ostanovki" (Forward, forward without stopping), "Dorogu revolyutsionnomu teatru" (Make Way for Revolutionary Theatre), "Mir khizhinam, voyna dvortsam" (Peace to Huts and Wars to Palaces) by Chagall; "Slava trudu" (Long live labour) by Yakerson and others. The motifs of Chagall's paintings—green-faced Jews, goats, horses, clowns—were the basis for the panels. For instance, the banner "Privet Lunacharskonu" (Regards to Lunacharsky) was based on Chagall's "Progulka" (A Walk) with the sailing flight of Bella, his wife. In 1920, Moscow critic Anatoly Efros wrote that artists covered all fences and signboards with "Chagall's cows and pigs." Electrical lights were used for city illumination and "the evening of November 6 burned with an unforgettable fire."[459] It was a glorious public celebration with the participation of sixty thousand people:

> In Vitebsk, Marc Chagall (Commissar of Art Marc Chagall!) painted Chagallesques on all banners and raised a flag above the city, showing Chagall himself, riding a green horse, flying above Vitebsk and blowing a horn: "CHAGALL—TO VITEBSK."[460]

However, the citizens, as the newspapers reported, were confused by this "revolutionary art"—"[t]he bright unusual hues, the new manner of painting, and combinations of colours, the unintelligible conception"—and asked for explanations.[461] Already on 7 November, Chagall published the article "Art on the Anniversary of October" in *Vitebskij listok* to defend his ideas:

> But some will object to us and say: So why are you a minority? No one, at least in our city, literally no one understands you, we are baffled by your works—while our political Revolution

[455] Qtd. in Valery Shishanov, "Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo Vitebska 1916–1918 gg. v mestnoy pereodicheskoy pechati," in *Malevich. Klassicheskiy kvadrat 14* (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2014), 37–8. See also, GAVO f.56, o.1, d.29.
[456] Ibid., 40.
[457] Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920*; Denisov, "Voyennyy parad i politkarnaval."
[458] In Shishanov, "Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo Vitebska," 41. Transl. from Russian.
[459] Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 259.
[460] Ibid., 243.
[461] Ibid., 255.

> is supported by a majority. [...] Yes, the creators of Revolutionary Art always were and are now minority. [...] But we shall not remain a minority! Not in vain does the earth tremble! The majority will join us when two revolutions, the political and the spiritual, systematically uproot the heritage of the past with all its prejudices. But whether the majority will be with us now or later—this does not stop us. Stubborn and imperious, obedient to the inner voice of our artistic conscience, we offer and impose our ideas, our forms—the forms and ideas of the new Revolutionary Art; we have the courage to think that the future is with us.[462]

Evidently, the debates about Chagall's decoration persisted for a month and culminated in the announcement of a public debate titled "Menshinstvo v iskusstve" (The Minority in Art) to be held in the District Court in Viciebsk on 7 December 1918. Chagall intended to deliver a report about revolutionary art, which will be discussed in an open discussion. However, this public debate was abruptly cancelled; as Chagall observed, his opponents withdrew their participation in weeks.[463] Despite this setback, he maintained his optimism, convinced that the acceptance of such art was merely a matter of time. In the newspaper *Iskusstvo kommuny*[464], he wrote:

> The city of Vitebsk has stirred. In this provincial 'hole' [...], in the days of October, many-planted revolutionary art was swaying. From the moment of arrival in Vitebsk, it was possible to mobilise all hidden scant artistic forces of the city and the province. [...] But the philistines will be even tomorrow. And not only the philistines. I confess with pain: the advanced revolutionary comrades, even they bombarded us with incomprehensible questions aggressively [...].[465]

Despite the excitement, the October celebration was simply the first step to realising Chagall's most ambitious plans—the foundation of *an art academy* (as he called it in the draft) and the Modern Art Museum in his hometown. A few days after the celebration, the city's authority allocated a building (a former mansion) at the centre of Viciebsk on Bucharynskaja Street. On 16 November 1918 in *Vitebskiy listok*, Chagall announced the foundation of the People's Art School, which would "fulfil the long-felt need for an artistic cultural-educational center [...]. The task of the Art School opening in Vitebsk is first of all to execute in reality the

[462] Harshav, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, 29.
[463] In Shishanov, "Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo Viciebska," 55.
[464] Petrograd, no.3, 1918.
[465] In Shishanov, "Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo Viciebska," 55.

foundations of a true Revolutionary Art."[466] Months early, he had already presented a report on the school's structure, program, and budget. Chagall defined the basis for education as "the genuine artistic and Revolutionary trend in art, without any admixtures of academism and routine."[467] He refused to follow the programs of other colleges in the Russian Empire, which "have died a natural death together with Tsarism" to create a unique art education model:

> An exclusively revolutionary and truly artistic nest in the provinces [...] especially for the needs of the poorest classes of the city and the whole Western Land. [...] Admission to the School is open to all regardless of age, but first of all for workers and peasants and the poorest of the people *free of charge*, while others will pay tuition.[468]

In December, Narkompros RSFSR confirmed the board of the school. Mstislav Dobuzhinski, a graphic artist and a member of the "Mir iskusstva" (World of Art) group, became the official director;[469] Chagall was only one of the executives. Nevertheless, he was responsible for almost everything, including the school's budget. He remembered:

> Wearing a Russian smock, with a leather case under my arm, I looked every inch the Soviet civil servant. Only my long hair, and the pink marks on my cheeks that came off my pictures, betrayed the painter. My eyes blaze with administrative fire. I am surrounded by boys— pupils I'm preparing to turn into geniuses in twenty-four hours. I struggle to get the grants the school needs, to procure money, paints, equipment. I am continually making arrangements to get them exempted from military service. I was always out on errands. My wife deputized for me in my absence. I went to the Goubispolkom meetings to ask for subsidies from the town. While I was explaining my project, the president of the Soviet deliberately fell asleep. He only woke up at the end of my account, and then he asked: "What do you think, Comrade Chagall, is it more important to have an emergency repair done to the bridge or to give money to your School of Fine Arts?" Every time I received grants, thanks to Lunacharcky's support.[470]

The support of Anatoly Lunacharsky, who, after the Red October, became People's Commissar of Enlightenment (Minister of Education and Culture), played a crucial role in the

[466] Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 256.
[467] Qtd. in ibid., 247.
[468] Qtd. in ibid.
[469] He took this position only for several months. In detail, see, Alexander Lisov. "M.V. Dobyzhinski v Vitebske," in *Malevich. Klassicheskiy kvadrat* 12 (2010): 36–56.
[470] Qtd. in Vitali, ed. *Marc Chagall: the Russian years*, 35, 37.

realisation of Chagall's plans. Lunacharsky had known the artist since the Paris period when they met before the First World War. Soon after, Lunacharsky wrote an article "Marc Chagall. Iz tsikla 'Molodaja Rossija v Parize'" (Marc Chagall. From the series "Young Russia in Paris"), calling the artist a "young Hoffmann from a slum around Vitebsk. [...] a Remizov of the brush, a Remizov of the Pale of Settlement."[471] Lunacharsky did not accept the aesthetics of the avant-garde, and after the Revolution, he rounded up mainly artists and theorists who confronted these ideas (e.g. Igor Grabar and Alexander Benua; ch. 5.1.). Nevertheless, he had to invite avant-garde artists to get the support of wider artistic communities. As the art historian Nikolai Punin wrote in 1921, "Few knew and few felt the loneliness that surrounded the Bolsheviks in the first months."[472] Like many other artists, Chagall had no illusion about Lunacharsky's aesthetic preferences; instead, it was a win-win deal. Chagall wrote:

> The Narkom, Lunacharsky, receives me smilingly at his office in the Kremlin ... [...] Now [about Lunacharsky's visit to Paris] I was aware that my art was unlikely to agree with him. I said to Lunacharsky: "Whatever you do, don't ask me why I painted in blue or green, and why you can see a calf inside the cow's belly, etc. On the other hand, you're welcome: if Marx is so wise, let him come back to life and explain it himself." [...] I have a feeling he has always had an unpleasant memory of this visit, and always will. And now he solemnly confirms me in my new functions.[473]

3.4. The People's Art School (1919–1923)

Officially, the school was opened in January 1919. According to the students' questionnaires of 1921,[474] there was no age and nationality limit, as Chagall planned. But, in addition to general biographical questions (parents, income, education, and others), students had to mention their political views. Most of them identified themselves as non- party (bespartijnyj), which indicates the formal character of these early inquiries.[475] The question of nationality appeared later, for instance, in 1925–26, students and employers had to mention it.[476]

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[471] Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 215.
[472] Scheijen, *Avangardisty*, 134.
[473] Vitali, ed. *Marc Chagall: the Russian years*, 34.
[474] Earlier inquiries were not saved.
[475] GAVO, f.837, o.1, d.1.
[476] GAVO, f.837, o.1., d.6, l.83-84.

The school consisted of several studios and classes for different disciplines: drawing, painting, sculpture, and applied arts, headed by invited artists who came to the city in different periods. In 1919–22, Ivan Puni, Kseniya Boguslavskaya, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, Alexander Romm, Vera Ermolaeva, Nina Kogan, El Lissitzky, David Yakerson, Abram Brazer, Solomon Iudovin, Robert Falk, Pen, and Chagall himself taught in the school.[477] Some special courses were devoted to the history of art and the "theory of methods of modern Left Art." Apart from the educational process, the students were involved in other activities, such as theatre productions and mass performances. Later, Vera Ermolaeva opened the student theatre studio.

Another one of Chagall's projects—the Museum of Modern Art[478]—was founded by the end of 1919 and opened to the public in the summer of 1920. In November 1919, Chagall initiated the first exhibition of local and Moscow artists.[479] The program included lectures and discussions about art. Part of the exposition was added to the museum's collection.[480] During the first years of its existence, the museum collected about one hundred twenty artworks (paintings by R. Falk, K. Malevich. M. Chagall, A. Lentulov, A. Ester, N. Altman, M. Larionov, A. Rodchenko, W. Strzemiński, and others). Although Chagall attempted to get a designated space for the collection, it was placed in the building of the People's Art School.[481] After the reorganisation in 1923, the collection was partly destroyed and misplaced.[482]

A new period of the school started in October 1919, when Malevich came to Viciebsk. Chagall and Lissitzky (who initiated this invitation) arranged for him to get an apartment, meals, and a studio.[483] Additionally, despite the lack of paper, Malevich could publish some of his theoretical works.[484] Before he began teaching classes, he gave public lectures promoting

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[477] The list of classes in November 1919 was Ermolaeva (painting), Kogan (preparation), Yakerson (sculpture), Chagall (painting), Malevich (painting/drawing), Pen (painting/drawing), Lissitzky (graphic and printing), GAVO f.101, o.2, d.4, l.104.

[478] Chagall presented the description of this project in his report of August 1918 (qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 250).

[479] *Vitebsk: Klassika i Avangard: Istoriya Vitebskogo khudozhestvennogo uchilishcha v dokumentakh Gosudarstvennogo arkhiva Vitebskoy oblasti (1918—1923)* (Viciebsk: Viciebskaja obl. tipograpija, 2004), 235.

[480] Initially, the artworks by Moscow artists had to pass to the Viciebsk province Museum, but, due to a lack of resources, they were moved to the Museum of Modern Art which was placed in the building of the People's Art School. *Vitebsk: Klassika i Avangard*, 55–6.

[481] *Vitebsk: Klassika i Avangard*, 232–3.

[482] Irina Vakar et al., eds., "Malevich v Vitebske. 1919–1922. Dokumenty," in *Malevich. Klassicheskiy kvadrat* 10 (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2008), 37.

[483] Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet*, 39.

[484] Just a few months after arriving, he published his essay *On the New Systems of Art.* During the Viciebsk period, Malevich published *Suprematism: 34 Drawing* (Viciebsk: Unovis, 1920); "On the 'I' and the Collective," "Toward Pure Performance," manifestoes "Unom 1" and "Declaration" in the *Unovis Miscellany №1*, "Unovis" in the Viciebsk journal *Iskusstvo* (Art) of 1921, no.1; God is Not Cast Down (1922). Additionally, he wrote in other worksViciebsk—*From Sézanne to Suprematism* (Petrograd: 17 Gosudarstvennaja tipografija, 1920) and *On the Question of Fine Arts* (Smolensk: Gosudarstennoje izdatelstvo, 1921).

the ideas of suprematism. Soon, he became a central figure of the school with a special salary.[485] In the beginning, Malevich called Viciebsk "deportation" and waited to return to Moscow.[486] However, in 1920, the artist wrote that he stayed in Viciebsk "not for the sake of food but for the work that needs to be done in the provinces."[487]

In January 1920, the school celebrated its anniversary. The program lasted several weeks and included an exhibition, artistic meetings, and premieres of the futuristic opera *Victory Over the Sun* (Pobeda nad solntsem), directed by Vera Ermolaeva, and *Suprematist Ballet* (Suprematicheskiy ballet), directed by Nina Kogan (ch. 4.3). After some days, the UNOVIS (Utverditeli Novogo Iskusstva, the Affirmers of the New Art) was officially proclaimed.[488] Described as "a collective," "a commune," "an organisation," and "a sect," the group had symbols, costumes, an anthem, and rituals.[489] UNOVIS aimed to unite artists, poets, actors, and writers—"everybody, who would like to contribute to World enrichment by new forms"—cubism, futurism, and suprematism.[490] Malevich called it "the new party in art,"[491] which was followed by "the army of new meaning with the essence of modernity."[492] As Romm noted in 1921, it was these utopian programs—the conquest of the world space, building in the Universe, the radical rebuilding of the material aspects of life—which "attracted artists-adolescents to UNOVIS."[493]

The years 1920–21 were extremely productive for UNOVIS. However, the group had turned into a laboratory, unable to occupy the whole city's space as Chagall did in 1918. Sometimes, UNOVIS members decorated public buildings (cafes, libraries, canteens); they also created speakers' rostrums. They "invented" such special objects as agittrams (agitation trams) and agitboats (agitation boats) with suprematist symbols and revolutionary billboards. Ahola-Valo mentioned this tram as one of his first impressions of the city. But as Pen's student

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[485] GAVO f.837, o.1, d.58, l.91. For instance, in February 1921, the highest rate for the studio's executions was 6528 rubles (Ermolaeva, Pen, Kogan). Malevich got 80000 rubles according to his personal rate confirmed by Gubnarobrasom (Viciebsk: klassika, 92).
[486] Scheijen, *Avangardisty*, 237.
[487] Qtd. in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 184. In a year, Malevich wrote: "I left Moscow for the city of Vitebsk to offer up all my knowledge and experience. The Vitebsk studios are not simply standing still, like those in most provincial cities; they have taken a progressive stance." Qtd. ibid.
[488] In some publications the name is translated as "the Champions of the New Art." Before UNOVIS, there were several attempts to unite artists who share avant-gardist (mainly cubist and suprematist) views on art. In the middle of January 1920, Molposnovis (Molodyje possledovateli isskustva) was founded by young artists. During the celebration of the anniversary, they united with artists of the old generation changing the name to Postnovis. And then, on 14 February, UNOVIS was manifested (Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 108; Kotovich, *UNOVIS*, 15.
[489] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 109–12.
[490] Ibid., 109.
[491] Qtd. in ibid., 78.
[492] Kazimir Malevich, "K chistomu deystviyu," in *UNOVIS, no. 1 Vitebsk 1920. Prilozheniye k faksimil'nomu izdaniyu*, ed. Tatyana Goryacheva (Moscow: Skanrus, 2003), 57. Transl. from Russian.
[493] Tatyana Goryacheva, "K publikatsii al'manakha 'Unovis No1,'" in *UNOVIS, no. 1 Vitebsk 1920*, 17.

in 1920–21, he described UNOVIS as a small circle of artists that he observed from a distance.[494] In June 1920, UNOVIS participated in the all-Russian conference of teachers and students of art in Moscow. The Viciebsk delegation presented the concept and program of UNOVIS as "A Unified School of Art" and was successful.[495] The exhibition of the members' artworks caused a wave of UNOVIS branches to emerge in Perm, Ekaterinburg, Saratov, Samara, and Odessa, including already-existing schools in Orenburg and Smolensk.[496]

While Malevich and the UNOVIS members basked in their success in Moscow, Chagall made the bold decision to leave Viciebsk once and for all. Scholars have pointed to a conflict between Chagall and Malevich as the main reason for his departure. This interpretation is based on Chagall's own resolute words: "I shall be silent about my friends and foes. All their masks are piled up in my heart like lumber."[497] Additionally, Romm remembered that upon Chagall's return from Moscow in May, his studio was renamed "Malevich's studio."[498] But, as Shatskikh notes, Chagall had already made an attempt to move to Moscow in 1919.[499] It is more likely that he was determined to focus on his art, rather than being burdened with administrative tasks. He stayed in Viciebsk until June 1920, and then, "a founder of the best provincial art school in Russia," as the Petrograd newspaper *Zhizn iskusstva* acclaimed him, Chagall, left the city. [500] In a 1920 letter to Pavel Davidovoch Ettinger, he wrote,

> Now at last "artists have the upper hand" in the town. They get totally engrossed in their disputes about art, I am utterly exhausted and ... dream of "abroad." After all, there is no more suitable place for artists to be (for me, at least) than at the easel, and I dream of being able to devote myself exclusively to my pictures.[501]

Alienation by space

Almost two years after Chagall's departure, Malevich also left the city after the school's graduation ceremony.[502] Most graduates were members of UNOVIS and followed Malevich to

[494] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 108.
[495] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 151.
[496] Lisov, "Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg."
[497] Qtd. in Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 159.
[498] Schejen, 247
[499] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 72.
[500] Qtd. in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 72.
[501] Qtd. in Vitali, ed., *Marc Chagall: the Russian years*, 74.
[502] Still, there is no exact date of Malevich's and Ermolaeva's departure. Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet,* 66–7.

Petrograd.[503] The fruitful period for experimental art in Viciebsk was over, but the wave of criticism of UNOVIS activity had started already in 1921. In *Iskusstvo* magazine, Romm, who previously supported the foundation of the school, published an article mentioning "the UNOVIS dictatorship" which affected the educational process. Particularly, he claimed that it led to the absence of classes about impressionism, classicism, and neoclassicism.[504] It was not merely a single or local attack on UNOVIS or personally, on Malevich, who was criticised by artistic circles in Viciebsk as well as in Petrograd and Moscow.[505] Instead, general pressure against radical formalist movements began. Lunacharsky published his essay "Revolution and Art" to welcome artists in service to the Revolution. At the same time, he called left artistic movements (first of all, futurism) *anarchist* but *not communist.*[506]

In 1921, the reorganisation process of the school started, but one more year was needed because new regulations on artistic education affected the pedagogical system. One change was immediately introduced—admission fees for students had to be a source for the school's budget. Malevich wanted to leave Viciebsk already as he was invited to take a position in VKhUTEMAS.[507] But this plan failed, and Malevich remained in Viciebsk. He taught, conducted public lectures,[508] and published books. In August, he was arrested and spent several days in prison.[509] Lisaŭ argues that the arrest was a result of a conflict between local authorities and Malevic because of the latter's aggressive promotion of his pedagogical system for which the artist was charged with the destruction of the school.[510] More likely, it was connected with the general atmosphere of military communism and its censorship, repressions, arrests, and use of control as "effective means of silencing the counternarrative [to Bolshevism]."[511] In 1921, Chagall's sister, who worked as a censor in the post office, was arrested. She told Chagall's wife's family (Rosenfelds) about the military censorship. After release, she moved to Petrograd.[512] In March 1921, the special paper "About the censorship of spectacles" (with the

[503] According to the report, ten students graduated from the school: seven followed "the left movement" and got a diploma of "a free artist," and three persons graduated from painting class with a diploma of "a master with the right of teaching." *Vitebsk: klassika*, 157.
[504] Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet*, 57.
[505] Aleksandr Lisov, "Kazimir Malevich v belarusskoy khudozhestvennoy kritike 1920–1930-kh godov," *Iskusstvo i kul'tura*, no. 2 (2011): 60–70.
[506] Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet*, 58–9.
[507] Malevich discussed this plan with Lissitzky who was in Moscow at that moment. Vakar et al., "Malevich v Vitebske," 62–3.
[508] Including his famous "Bog ne skinut: iskusstvo, tserkov,' fabrika" (God is Not Cast Down: Art, Church, Factory) which was turned into a publication.
[509] Vakar et al., "Malevich v Vitebske," 68–9.
[510] Aliaksandar Lisaŭ, "Janka Haŭrys: 'pryrodny bielarus' u asiarodku viciebskich suprematystaŭ," Arche 124, no. 3 (2014): 197.
[511] Corney, *Telling October*, 47.
[512] GAVO, f.2222, o.7, d.98, l.58.

notion of "in secret"[513]) introduced the total control of theatre, cinema, exhibitions, and other cultural public events with the right of pre- and post-censorship.[514] Cultural events were taxed, except for those which were intended for political agitation.[515]

Economically, these years were also difficult. The school's budget was radically reduced. Later, Janka Gaŭrys (Ivan Gavris), a student who took the position of the acting rector after Ermolaeva's departure, reported:

> In 1921–1922, the institute existed under too complicated economic conditions. The professors starved. Due to hunger, Malevich got tuberculosis. They sold their private stuff. The institute was devastated because of the lack of resources. There was no support from [central and local authorities]. The institute was left to the mercy of fate. The group of executives—Kogan, Moshkov, Malevich—together with Ermolaeva ran away to Petrograd since there was no hope for improvement of material conditions.[516]

Gaŭrys's name (1890–1937) is often mentioned in passing in the school's history, although he played a crucial role in its preservation. He was like a ghost who followed almost all stages of the school's existence till its complete reorganisation in 1923.[517] Gaŭrys was born in the village of Kuchčycy in Minsk province. During the First World War, he served in the military and, with military units, came to Viciebsk, where he took part in the October Upheaval. Soon, he was transferred to the reserve and enrolled into the People's Art School in 1919. He was also a student of the Viciebsk Teaching Institute. He attended Ermolaeva and Malevich's classes and was a member of UNOVIS, acting as chairman. In 1920, he wrote "A Short History of the Origin of UNOVIS" and "Notes about UNOVIS movements," which were published in the first issue of the *UNOVIS Almanac*. In 1921–23, he taught technical drawing in the school. After his teachers departed, Gaŭrys took the position of acting rector. There was a real danger that the school would be liquidated. Several attempts were made to replace the school with the College of Music.[518] At that moment, the school occupied only a few rooms and had lost the museum's space.

Gaŭrys, with unwavering determination, repelled all these attacks, staunchly defending

[513] It meant that the document had to not be published and served only for limited groups of officers.
[514] GAVO f.1319, o.1, d.7, l.25.
[515] Ibid, l.126.
[516] In *Vitebsk: klassika*, 187. Transl. from Russian.
[517] Lisaŭ supposes Gaŭrys became a member of the administration assisting with different organisational issues because he was one of the oldest students of the school (about thirty years old). Lisaŭ, "Janka Haŭrys: 'pryrodny bielarus,'" 192.
[518] GAVO, f.246, o.1, d.310.

the school and its rich history. Despite losing its original space on Bucharynskaja Street, the school found a new home in a former synagogue. A new rector, Mikhail Kerzin, arrived in Viciebsk province from Petrograd and had previously taken charge of the sculpture class at the People's Art School in Velizh. He distanced himself from what he deemed as "extremely left movements in art," which, in his view, were "a product of the decay of bourgeois society, and by no means a healthy germ of a new proletarian art." Instead, he advocated for the school to be infused with proletarian content, which would naturally find its own form. According to Kerzin, the teachers of such "proletarian content" were his former colleagues—Mikhail Ende and Valentin Volkov, the followers of realism in art from Petrograd. The last witnesses of the attempts to "revolutionise" art in Viciebsk—Gaŭrys, Pen, Yudovin, and Minin—were dismissed as "unnecessary and useless."[519]

When Viciebsk province became part of the BSSR in 1924, Gaŭrys actively and sincerely participated in the programs of Belarusisation (he knew Belarusian and was invited to teach). He returned to realist painting and participated in All-Belarussian Art Exhibitions (since 1925). But, as Lisaŭ argues, he did not reject formalism completely.[520] Gaŭrys remained a cautious defender of Chagall and Malevich to the very end. In 1928, he published "Figurative Art in Vitebsk" to explain the school's suprematist experiments. Gaŭrys pointed out that the formalist method ("radically left movements"), which was at the centre of the school's pedagogical system, gave students an essential base for professional development in realism, impressionism, or design.[521] In 1937, Gaŭrys was arrested as a Polish spy and shot near Viciebsk.[522]

During the 1930s, the pressure and critique of formalist schools, deemed bourgeois, escalated. Consequently, the memory of the revolutionary artistic experiments in Viciebsk in 1918–22 was suppressed for decades. However, the origins of the school, and the indelible influence of Chagall, Malevich, Lissitzky, and others, continued to shape the city's mythology, even under the mandated programs of socialist realism (Ch. 1).

When Chagall wrote in 1920 that finally "artists have the upper hand" in the town, it might have seemed that he could reshape the city's space according to his vision. But did Chagall see the embodiment of his proletarian artistic revolution? Or, did his *dream* fail, and

[519] GAVO f.256, o.1, d.310, l.145.
[520] Lisaŭ, "Janka Haŭrys: 'pryrodny bielarus.'"
[521] Ivan Gaŭrys, "Vobraznaje mastactva ŭ h. Viciebsku," in *Viciebščyna: niepieryjadyčny orhan Viciebskaha akruhovaha tavarystva krajaznaŭstva*, ed. Mikalai Kaspiarovič, (Viciebsk: Tavarystva, 1925–1928), 172. Transl. from Belarusian.
[522] The fact that Gavris was born on the territories which after 1921 was under the Polish authority, was enough for the charge. In detail, Lisaŭ, "Janka Haŭrys: 'pryrodny bielarus.'"

he faced a space which rejected him? Perhaps the reason was not only *the provinciality* of a place that might not need the avant-gardes in contrast to cultural "centres," like Moscow or Petrograd, as this notion of *a province*, *a hole*, *a deportation* travelled from one memoir to another including Chagall's own. It seems that the avant-gardes "failed" here since they miscarried the negotiation process with the space of the city.

One of the most repeatable facts from the school's history is how Malevich and Lissitzky created a "stage design" for the anniversary of the Unemployment Committee at the end of 1919 (before the manifestation of the UNOVIS group). The artists decorated the Committee's building with suprematist figures and designed a curtain, flags, and posters. Lisaŭ notes that it was "the first collective action of Viciebsk artists characterised by the visual language of suprematiya and a step to the foundation of UNOVIS."[523] In 1920, the Russian filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein came to Viciebsk for a few days and was amazed:

> The streets here are covered with white paint on red bricks. And green circles are scattered across the white background. Orange squares. Blue rectangles. It is Vitebsk in 1920. A brush by Kazimir Malevich walked along its brick walls.[524]

Definitely, it was one of the (visible) reasons that the activity of the school is mainly considered an avant-gardist phenomenon that determined the city's cultural landscape, creating a myth of the local triumph of the avant-gardes.[525]Although UNOVIS was significant, it was merely a part of the school, whereas Pen's class was one of the most popular among students.[526] Gaŭrys pointed out that there were three principal directions (before Chagall left): colour expression, forms and dynamics (Chagall); cubism and suprematism (Malevich); figurative art and rejection of any leftist movements (Pen and others)—"propaganda was carried out from all sides."[527]

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[523] Alexander Lisov, "Pervyy suprematicheskiy proyekt oformleniya Vitebska," in *Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo v sisteme obrazovaniya* (Viciebsk: Gosudarstvennaja tipografija, 2006), 311. Transl. from Russian.
[524] Sergei Eisenstein, "Zametki o V.V. Majakovskom," in *Majakovskij v vospominanijakh sovremennikov* (Moscow: Gosudarstwienno Izdatelstwo Khudozhestviennoy Literatury, 1963), 279. Transl. from Russian.
[525] For instance, Shatskikh describes the school in 1920–22 solely through UNOVIS actions. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 207.
[526] See the list of students in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 317–23. At the end of her fundamental, from the perspective of art history, publication which is still the basis for most studies about the topic, Shatskikh presents the chronology of the cultural life in Viciebsk that shows its diversity during the first post-revolutionary years (the chronology is published only in the Russian version of the book: Alexandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk. Zhizn iskusstva. 1917–1922* (Moscow, Jasyki slavyanskikh kultur, 2001). Lisov also notes that it has to be taken into consideration that the activity of Malevich and the suprematists did not specify the life of the city. Lisov, "Fenomen 'Vitebskoy khudozhestvennoy shkoly,'" 26.
[527] Gaŭrys, "Vobraznaje mastactva ŭ h. Viciebsku," 169.

In addition, according to archival documents, it also seems that the revolutionary (from the perspective of art) activity of the school was marginalised, often facing obstacles and a lack of understanding from local authorities, colleagues, and the public.[528] Chagall's idea for the magazine *Revolutionary Art* as a space for debates about art from different perspectives did not succeed. There was only one issue published in 1919.[529] Therefore, in contrast to the *grand* celebration of 1918 prepared by Chagall, the celebration of the anniversary of the Unemployment Committee in 1919 was not an artistic large-scale appropriation of the space but rather a "local", almost inconspicuous intervention.

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Analysing *policies of spatial appropriation*, Erika Fischer-Lichte notes that theatre's move to the streets was rooted "in a general critique of the theatre as a bourgeois institution."[530] She calls this strategy an attempt

> to shift the threshold between the theatre and other domains of everyday life, create shared communities between actors and spectators, and institute a participatory form of democratic activity. [...] the appropriation of new spaces was a typical response to the crises generated by the modernization of society and theatre.[531]

The appropriation of space by the Viciebsk artists, including streets, squares, and vehicles, might also be considered in terms of *critique* and *response*. But did they attempt to create a community? The performance *Storming of the Winter Palace* involved the audience in the (collective) action directly to give them "the impression of a powerful organism" (Derzhavin) and to "manifest themselves externally [...] they themselves are their own spectacle" (Lunacharsky), becoming a means of political engineering.[532] By contrast, public interventions performed in Viciebsk created a provocative situation aimed not to manipulate but to emancipate. The audience faced something out of the ordinary and unexpected that broke up

[528] *Vitebsk: klassika*, 55–6, 80, 82.
[529] Alexander Lisov, "Vitebskiy sbornik 'Revolyutsionnoye iskusstvo' 1919 goda," in *Izobrazitel'noye iskusstvo v sisteme obrazovaniya* (Vitebskiy gosudarstvennyy universitet im. P.M. Masherova, 2009), 168–72.
[530] Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Policies of Spatial Appropriation," in *Performance and the politics of space: Theatre and topology*, ed. Erika Fischer-Lichte and Benjamin Wihstutz (New York: Routledge, 2013), 219.
[531] Ibid.
[532] Qtd. in Corney, *Telling October*, 77.

their routine, as Chagall claimed.

It was not simply the artist's fantasy to put green horses on fences or Malevich's visualisation of the suprematist system on the facades; it was an attempt *to alienate*. Or, more precisely, as Viktor Shklovsky formulated it in 1917, *to defamiliarise*. The essence of Shklovsky's technique of *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) consisted not in "how" (in a material sense) but in the combination of images which created "a special perception of the object [...] a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it."[533] Making things *strange* meant, Shklovsky stated, differentiating the processes of "seeing" and "recognizing." Due to the "shift of focus from reality to the perception of reality,"[534] the emancipation of the gaze could be possible if the automatization of "knowing" was troubled. Viciebsk citizens and authorities were frustrated by such "decoration" which provoked them to act—but how? Were they turned into *a festival community* in terms of Wagner's ideas which, according to Fischer-Lichte, might "realize the utopia of a 'free and lovely public life'"[535]? It is unclear whether the Red October created any space for such a public life.

However, the year 1918 was exceptional in this sense since, as Scheijen argues, it was the culmination of the avant-gardes.[536] It might sound provocative because in historiography, the Soviet avant-gardes were only at the beginning, and the 1920s became the most intensive period for many avant-gardists to produce their most significant works and theories. But the point is not the end of the avant-gardes but the shift to their other embodiments. The transitional period was slowly ending. According to some scholarship, contributions to the creation of Soviet subjectivity became a significant matter for the Soviet avant-gardes of the 1920s. These programs were deeply integrated into Soviet ideology and balanced between artistic freedom and government service to be destroyed in the 1930s. Although Kachurin presumes such a transition already happened within the formation of UNOVIS and Malevich's development of the suprematist system,[537] I argue that the space of Viciebsk still allowed artists to escape any direct involvement in politics, whether Bolshevik or "nationalist" (ch. 5.3–4). Instead, they endeavoured to embody Chagall's idea that "art lived and will continue to live by its own laws."[538]

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[533] V. Shklovsky, "Art as Technique", [1917], (2020), retrieved from https://commons.erau.edu/db-hu-300-fall2020/11.
[534] Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 33
[535] Fischer-Lichte, "Policies of Spatial Appropriation," 222.
[536] Scheijen, *Avangardisty*, 142.
[537] Kachurin, *Making modernism*, 53–7.
[538] Harshav, *Marc Chagall on Art and Culture*, 28.

The third space of the avant-garde

One of the most controversial points of the People's Art School's history is its representation as *an extraordinary embodiment of the Russian avant-garde*, or Russian modernism. It should be taken for granted, without any doubts, not only because of the existing political borders. Moreover, in those years, due to ideological matters and wars, the borders of Belarus were remade several times. Therefore, I argue that the reasons for such an absolute statement are rooted in the power of knowledge production, which strives toward the creation of a narrative about the *only* contender for "great" history. Another argument to detach the Belarusian cultural space from the Viciebsk People's Art School is the artists' ethnic or national identity, because they were primarily not 'Belarusians.' Some scholars pay special attention to the Jewish origin of most of the school's teachers and students as a determining factor.[539] However, as Valery Shishanov notes, ethnic identity could not be taken as the primary argument due to the school's "mixed representation of movements, nations, aims." [540]

Harshav describes Chagall's identity as "a cluster" of Jewish, Russian, and French identities. And the missing Belarusian aspect is irrelevant as the idea of a "Belarusian" identity was problematic at that time. The scholar notes that although Yiddish was the artist's "basic language," Chagall's "first language of culture was Russian," because he read and wrote in Russian, and it was the language of instruction in the People's Art School.[541] This is one of the main arguments to prioritize the school's Russian identity. But at that time, it seemed "natural," since Yiddish, as well as Belarusian, was totally marginalised due to Russian Imperial politics, whilst Russian was "a language of privilege."[542] Being Russian could mean (for both Belarusians and Jews) belonging to a recognizable cultural tradition and geopolitical territory, or, in Bhabha's categories, to perform *mimicry*. In his diary and letters, Chagall often marked the imaginary character of such an identification (e.g. "to be honest, plainly I didn't see Russia"), and in 1944 he concluded, "in my imagination, my country was as large for me as our courtyard."[543]

Not just Chagall's identity could be described as "a cluster of diverse and often

[539] Kazovski, *Khudozhniki Vitebska*; Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*; Le Foll, *Vitebskaja khudozhestvennaja shkola*.
[540] V. Shishanov, "Penovskij 'Svat' sosvatal evrejskoje, russkoje I belorusskoje iskusstvo," *Mishepocha* 12 no. 2 (2002), http://mishpoha.org/nomer12/a38.php. Transl. from Russian.
[541] Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 6–17.
[542] Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions*, 5.
[543] Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 96.

unbridgeable cultural affinities."[544] Many artists were more "travellers" than "natives,"[545] which, according to Clifford, does not mean the replacement of one figure by the other. Rather it shows the complicated nature of identities, especially within imperial territories. As Elissa Bemporad points out, Minsk was more Jewish at that time, it was even a historical centre for Jews.[546] But, apparently, it was not enough to turn the city into a centre of revolutionary art which aimed at deterritorialization. Such an intention needed a place where different cultural contexts and environments would overlap but without dominating—"the space between a range of contradictory places that coexist."[547]

Hence, both these approaches narrow the comprehension of this cultural phenomenon. Any attempt to link the school with nationality and ethnicity or with political borders fails because of the liminal character of the place during those years. From historical, political, economic, and cultural perspectives (including a particular character of the Belarusian culture as hybrid), Viciebsk became an *ideal space* to embody the *routes/roots* dynamics where contradictory places could coexist. For a "moment," which was produced by a chain of different events and environments, the city turned into *the place in-between*, opening itself to artists who sought to make "the very act of going beyond," which, according to Bhabha,

> signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future [...] The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bounding with the past and the future, no longer as a synchronic presence... [rather] to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.[548]

In addition to its meaning for the transnational history of the avant-gardes, the post-revolutionary Viciebsk Art School became a site of departure for the avant-gardes in Belarus. It was the time-and-place where the story began. Many artists who studied at the school during

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[544] Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times*, 9.
[545] In 1924, the German avant-garde artist Kurt Schwitters wrote, "What is, for example, the German nation? A more or less incidental or deliberate community of people, the majority of which speak German, who have lived, worked, collaborated, fought together for some time due to historical contingencies, who celebrate the same feasts and who call themselves the German nation to distinguish themselves from other nations [...]. The geographical border, laid down by treaty, determines to which nation a person belongs. [...] I come from Hanover. I can say: 'My national sentiment is limited to Hanover town excluding the neighbouring town Linden. Or to Waldhausen-Straße, and to be more explicit the left side, where I live. My enemies live across the street. I place my machine gun in front of my house and shoot all passers-by'" (Qtd. in Lederballe Pedersen, "Conditions of Homelessness," 219).
[546] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 1.
[547] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 68.
[548] Ibid., 6.

Chagall and Malevich's period but remained in Soviet Belarus participated in the cultural building of the new Belarusian state in the 1920s. Some of them, including those who became students of the Viciebsk Art College after 1923, retained the school's avant-gardist history (Livshits, Ščamialioŭ, and Azgur). The "ghosts" of that period played a significant role in the formation of artistic identity even for those who followed (socialist) realism.[549] The history of the Viciebsk Art School of 1918–22 became an essential means for decolonising the Belarusian cultural narrative in artistic circles during perestroika. However, it failed, turning into an invisible, silent site (ch. 1.2.).

[549] Lisov, "Sovremennyye otsenki roli i znacheniya Vitebska kak tsentra khudozhestvennogo obrazovaniya," 7–12.

chapter four

Trajectories of Displacement.
The Avant-Garde(s) as Male History

> We started from the premise that women had always been involved in the production of art, but that our culture would not admit it. The question to be answered is: Why is *this so*? Why has it been necessary for art history to create an image of the history of past art as an exclusive record of masculine achievement?
>
> Griselda Pollock[550]

In the preface to the collective investigation of women's history in the Dada movement, Ina Boesch begins with a group photo of Parisian Dadaists. Almost all of them were men. The only female figure is the writer Cèline Arnauld, who was one of the active members of the group from the very beginning, including her contribution to the Parisian Dada manifesto. However, several years later, Tzara did not even mention her name in his version of the history of dadaism. There might be several reasons, one of which is that "er sie als Künstlerin nicht mehr ernst nahm."[551] As Ruth Hemus explains, the first histories of the movements were written by "the male dadaists themselves," which influenced how these stories were told.[552] The exclusion and forgetting of women in dadaism are merely one example among many others.[553] We see many women in photos from different art movements (including modernism and the avant-gardes)[554]. However, the female figures are usually not named and if they are, no other information is provided. Most readers might only suppose that she was a lover or a model, but definitely not *a producer*. Almost nobody usually asks (except for "curious" feminist scholars)

[550] Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 2003), 33.
[551] Ina Boesch, "Vorwort," in *Die Dada: wie Frauen Dada prägten*, ed. Ina Boesch (Zürich: Scheidegger&Spiess, 2015), 2.
[552] Qtd. in Patricia Allmer, "Feminist Interventions: Revising the Canon." In *Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. D. Hopkins, (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2016), 367.
[553] Ibid.; Katy Deepwell, ed., *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).
[554] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 2.

who *she* was[555].

Such a "forgetting" happened with the names of dozens of female artists of the post-revolutionary People's Art School in Viciebsk. Some female names, mainly of teachers, are at least mentioned, for instance, Vera Ermolaeva and Nina Kogan (because of their administrative functions) or Ksenia Boguslavskaya and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson (mainly because they were the wives of Puni and Jakerson). Female students who made up more than one-third of the student population, have practically "disappeared" from the school's history. However, primarily female students attended classes taught by Malevich, Kogan or Ermolaeva and represented the most ardent followers of cubism and suprematism (Fig.3).

The main task of this chapter is to trace some of the "vanished" female names from the history of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, including the Viciebsk Art School. I explore both common points of women's biographies and the differences between their paths that allowed them to remain in history or, in contrast, left them "forgotten." At this point, the notion of "success" with its range of synonyms—recognition, achievement, victory, and breakthrough—has a particular meaning. Since this identification in the art system relates to acceptance, presence, publicity, and institutionalisation, it might be considered a conditional criterion, in other words, a historical construction.[556]

Demonstrating how many still "undiscovered" sites every art phenomenon has, this chapter disputes the ability of the existing "canon" *to tell a story.*[557] Discussing several obstacles scholars might face in the process of reconstructing women's biographies, I argue that the feminist approach of *storytelling* aims not merely to extend "history." It is a strategy to trouble the existing male-oriented "canon" that contributes to creating multidiverse and plural "epistemic spaces" as the fundamental matter of transnational feminism.

4.1. To become a producer under the given conditions

Criticising limited opportunities for female artists in Western countries, Linda Nochlin cites the case of women in the Russian Empire and then the USSR. The scholar underscores several aspects which, from her point of view, made the artistic field in those territories more accessible

[555] See, Almira Ousmanova, "Zhenshchiny i Iskusstvo: Politiki Reprezentatsii." In *Gendernyye Issledovaniya* (Saint-Peterburg: Aleteyya, 2001), 465–92.
[556] Hildtrud Ebert and Claudia Feest, "Einleitung," in *Erfolgreiche Künstlerinnen: Arbeiten zwischen Eigensinn und Kulturbetrieb*, ed. Susanne Binas (Essen: Klartext-Verl., 2003), note 13.
[557] Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms*, 1.

to women. Firstly, they already played "the unusually important role [...] in the intelligentsia and the related radical political movements in 19th-century."[558] Soon, women were highly valued "among left-wing intellectuals,"[559] which might be considered a result of a particular policy of the woman's question by social democrats and the development of pre-feminist discourse in the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire and then by the Bolsheviks.[560] Already in September 1917, the Russian Provisional Government declared women's right to vote. According to the Bolshevik program, women also had to be emancipated, like other groups oppressed by the liberal order. In 1918, the first Bolshevik Constitution authorised civic and political women's rights that approved the new authority as one of the most progressive governments. In 1919, Inessa Armand and Alexandra Kollontai organised *Zhenotdel*—a special department for solving women's issues.[561] But, did it influence the visibility of women in art if the Imperial Academy of Art in St. Petersburg opened its door officially only in 1890?[562] Is it enough that several names of female artists were presented to speak about the inclusion of women into a narrative of art history, which is, according to Pollock, "an organised discipline defined by what it is and how it can be spoken of?"[563]

Indeed, the history of Russian modernism and Soviet avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s includes a number of female artists who became known as producers during their lives or posthumously (e.g. Zinaida Serebryakova, Olga Rosanova, Alexandra Exster, Natalya Goncharova, Varvara Stepanova). Presenting a collection of the Russian avant-garde by George Costakis, the art historian S. Frederick Starr mentions "eine beträchtliche Anzahl Frauen" as a peculiarity of the phenomenon.[564] But looking through the lists of female artists in different publications and catalogues, it is obvious how few of them are represented in the

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[558] Linda Nochlin, "Women Artists after the French Revolution," in *Women Artist: the Linda Nochlin reader*, ed. Maura Reilly (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 119.
[559] Ibid., 119.
[560] Irina Yukina points out that "works written by women about women in history, literature, politics, economics (about women's labour) were a social order by [feminist] movement, developed as its cognitive practice and formed feminist discourse" in pre-revolutionary Russia. Irina Yukina, "Formirovaniye feministskoy ideologii v poreformennoy Rossii (vtoraya polovina XIX—nachalo XX vekov)," in *Zhenshchiny v istorii: vozmozhnost' byt' uvidennymi*, ed. Irina Chikalova (Minsk: BGPU, 2002), 229–30. Transl. from Russian; Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910–1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002); Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[561] Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, 204–9.
[562] The women could attend lectures at the Academy earlier, but the practical classes of the nude figure were closed to them. Often, they went to Paris where they could attend such classes and then pass the exam at the Academy. The names of several female artists are known from the nineteenth century, but they were privileged women of the upper class.
[563] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 15.
[564] Frederick S. Starr, "Einleitung," in *Russische Avantgarde aus der Sammlung Costakis*, ed. Margit Rowell, Angelika Zander Rudenstine, and Kestner-Gesellschaft (Hannover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1984), 17.

collections.[565] This estimation of "about ten" women tells us the story of an exception—as if the involvement of women in art was something "atypical of [women] sex" that merely reproduces "the idea that women and art are incompatible."[566]

In describing the contribution of these artists to the avant-gardes, the scholars mainly focus on their activity in applied arts such as design, textile, and fashion (Popova, Stepanova) or scenography (Popova, Ekster). On the one hand, as Nochlin asserts, "dedication to the applied arts constituted a revolutionary challenge to the whole masticatory, reactionary ideology of traditional 'high art'"[567]—the division which happened several centuries earlier to create the opposition between an artist and an artisan with the sex as one of the factors.[568] Besides, studying *things* women made is also a way to construct their stories.[569] At the same time, the manifestos of *proizvodstvennoje iskusstvo* (productive art) and the integration of art into praxis were conceptualised in public mainly by male artists.[570] Therefore, despite a possible "revolutionary" contribution to the deconstruction of the art system, it is unlikely that it was the main reason female artists were tolerated in applied art fields. Such a distribution of artistic labour raises doubts about whether agit-design and fashion really attracted these female artists or if they concentrated on decorative arts because this field was accessible to them.[571]

Is it by accident that there were almost no (recognisable) female artists in sculpture and monumental art? What about the lack of female theatre or cinema directors from that period? Moreover, those female artists that existed were always presented as an exception, supporting

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[565] Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art 1863–1922*; Margit Rowell, Angelika Zander Rudenstine, Kestner-Gesellschaft, eds. *Russische Avantgarde aus der Sammlung Costakis*; Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Mjuda Jablonskaja. *Women Artists of Russia's New Age: 1900–1935.* ed. Anthony Parton (New York: Rizzoli, 1990); Bettina-Martine Wolter, ed., *Die große Utopie: die russische Avantgarde 1915–1932* (Frankfurt am Main: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1992).

[566] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 58.

[567] Nochlin, "Women Artists after the French Revolution," 118.

[568] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 51.

[569] Maureen Daly Goggin, ed., *Women and Things: 175–-1950. Gendered Material Strategies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[570] Except for the clothes and fashion section. See, Maria Zalambani, *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve: Avangard i revolyutsiya v Sovetskoy Rossii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, Nasledije, 2003). As F. Roginskaya, the author of the article "Zhenshchina i khudozhestvennoye proizvodstvo" ("Women in Art") published in 1930, mentioned, the role of women in art was always huge, but because of the patriarchal order, they worked in the sphere of productive art, firstly, folk art. However, despite the claim of the emancipation of art, the same hierarchy existed in the USSR with a rigid division between "universalised pure" art and folk art (crafts), which was usually identified as "national arts." F. Roginskaya, "Zhenshchina i khudozhestvennoye proizvodstvo", *Iskusstvo v massy*, no. 3 (1930): 6. Transl. from Russian.

[571] We can also mention the field of photojournalism in the USSR. According to Erika Wolf, many women worked in this field, more likely, because this realm was not considered as art for a long time. However, the names and biographies of most of these female photographers are almost lost. Zimmerli Art Museum, "Dr. Erika Wolf on 'Women with Leicas' in Early Soviet Photojournalism," uploaded 2 October 2021, YouTube video, 1:05:00-1:08:00. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ytzlzlcjomg.

the idea of "incompatibility" not only in terms of creativity but also of competition and struggle as a condition for artistic survival.[572] Investigating the path of Haja (Hanna) Kagan, one of the "forgotten" female artists from the Viciebsk Art School, Ala Pihalskaja (Alla Pigalskaya) speculates why Kagan discontinued her suprematist experiments and switched to ceramics. In addition to ideological pressure to shift to socialist realism (which Kagan may have resisted), Pihalskaja highlights the hierarchical structure of avant-gardist groups in which the conflict between a student with her or his teacher might be a necessary condition for artistic autonomy. Therefore, she concludes, "a shift to ceramics art which was traditionally associated with female artists, might be a compromise way of conflict-free emancipation, liberation from the influence and authority of a teacher or eluding the totality of socialist realism."[573]

We could mention the name of Asja Lācis, who developed the project of proletarian theatre for children and agitprop. It is unlikely, however, that her name would be included in the history of the revolutionary theatre if she had not been connected to Benjamin, Meyerhold, Piscator, and Brecht. Lācis remembered how Benjamin proposed to write down her program, "But my theses were presented in an immensely complicated manner in his first version. The program was read in the Liebknecht House, and everyone laughed." She returned the text to Benjamin and asked him "to write it in a more comprehensible way. So that's how the second version of the 'Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater' originated."[574] It is unlikely that Lācis could not write by herself. Rather, she doubted her ability to do it in the "right" way.

Therefore, notwithstanding "a substantial body of literature on the topic of women artists," which was has published in recent decades,[575] the women of the avant-gardes in the USSR remain "Amazons" or "Scythian riders," as the futurist poet Boris K. Livshits called them in 1933.[576] They could be anybody, except, referring to Nochlin's program essay, *great*

[572] The names of the Soviet female sculptors Vera Mukhina and Sarra Lebedeva are the most well-known. Miuda Jaablonskaya states that Mukhina's composition "Worker and Collective Farmworker" which "crowded the Soviet Pavilion in Paris [...] crowded not only the achievement of the Soviet state but also the achievements of two generations of Russian women" for the right of artistic expression. Mjuda Jablonskaja. *Women Artists of Russia's New Age*, 234. However, Mukhina's biography (she was born in 1889 into an old merchant family and studied in Kyiv, Moscow, and Paris) merely supports the idea of a particular pattern for women to become an artist, which I develop below.

[573] Ala Pihalskaja, "Čamu niama viadomych mastačak UNOVISA? Chaja Kahan i Jaŭhienija Maharyl," *Mastactva*, no. 2 (2020): 32. Transl. from Belarusian.

[574] A. Lācis; W. Benjamin, and A. Brinkmanis, "Signals from Another World".

[575] Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms*, 1.

[576] Benedikt Livshits, *Polutoraglazyy strelets* (Moscow: Izdatelstvo pisatelej, 1933), 143. In his memoirs, he called only Olga Rosanova, Alexandra Ekster, and Natalya Goncharova Amazons, but this "identification" turned into a general "historical" term in Russian avant-garde studies. See, for instance, Georgy Kovalenko, ed., *Amazonki avangarda* (Moscow: Nauka, 2001).

artists since this identity as well as *genius* belonged to the male realm.[577] But how did these "about ten" or a few more women "succeed" in entering the art field? What did they have in common, regardless of the time and place where they were born?

Exploring the paths of Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo, and Eva Hesse, the scholar Reinhild Feldhaus identifies two commonalities in their biographies. Firstly, they were recognised after their death. Secondly, all of them were the wives of famous male artists.[578] The lives of the "lucky" women in the former-Russian Empire were almost identical. Most of them were under the protection of "remarkable" male artists. Class and economic conditions also significantly impacted their trajectories.[579] These women belonged to the middle class or artistic families, received good educations (including in Western art academies), and could easily move to central cities (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kyiv, Berlin, Paris) which was necessary to gain professional status as an artist. As Rosemarry Bettorton notes, the migration into a city signified for women "a move from private feminine space [family] into the public sphere [...] and towards new social identities."[580] Take, for example, Polina Khentova (1896–1933), who was born in Viciebsk into a manufacturing family, and attended Pen's school before enrolling in the Academy of Art in Brussels. Before the First World War, she lived in Paris and Munich and then went to Moscow. She participated in the city's artistic life and was a member of different groups. In 1919, she came to Viciebsk for a while. As some scholars suppose, for that reason, El Lissitzky, who was unrequitedly in love with Khentova, accepted an invitation from the People's Art School. Later, Khentova joined the Kultur Lige in Kyiv.[581] In 1921, she moved to Berlin and then to London. She married the British artist Edmond Xavier Kapp and became a sufficiently "successful" artist.

Consequently, the status of an artist's wife and/or class privilege were not just obligatory but required for women to enter artistic circles. After the Bolsheviks came to power, the situation changed. The privilege was transferred to those with worker or peasant roots. But, as Chadasievič-Léger and Dziadok-Biembiel's stories show, despite the possible routes for

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[577] Linda Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," in *Women artists: the Linda Nochlin reader*, 42–68.
[578] Reinhild Feldhaus, *Der Ort von Künstlerinnen im Diskurs der Avantgarde: zur Rezeption von Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo und Eva Hesse* (Berlin: dissertation.de, 2009), 14.
[579] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses,* 17; Deepwell, ed., *Women Artists and Modernism*, 9.
[580] Rosemary Betterton, "Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures in Britain and Germany 1890-1920". In: *Women Artists and Modernism* (Manchester Manchester University Press, 1998), 20.
[581] The Kultur Lige was founded as a socialist Jewish organisation in 1918 in Kyiv. It aimed to promote Yiddish language literature, theatre, and culture. Many remarkable writers and artists of Jewish origin were members. Harriet L. Murav, Gennady Estraikh, and Myroslav Shkandrij, ed. *Building Modern Jewish Culture: The Yiddish Kultur-Lige* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2023).

women from the "periphery," a marriage (or relationship) with a male artist remained a necessary condition for inclusion in art history. But this did not always guarantee a happy end for their professional ambitions.

The Paths of Nadzia Chadasievič-Léger and Volha Dziadok-Biembiel

Nadzia Chadasievič (1904–1983) was born into a low-income family in the Belarusian village Asiecišča in the Viciebsk district. During the First World War, her family moved to the Tulsk District in Russia, where she finished college. Then, she attended the drawing school in Belovo, the Kemerovo District. At the beginning of the 1920s, she came to Smolensk and became a student of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, who had already opened the UNOVIS branch in the city and became the leaders of the avant-garde in Poland later. [582] Malevich visited Smolensk several times during her studies, and Chadasievič attended his lectures. According to her, Malevich's idea of the end of painting created a strong impression, but she could not accept it completely: "A man becomes poor without painting!"[583] In 1921, after the Treaty of Riga, she decided to move to Poland. Since Chadasievič was officially Catholic, she could "prove" her Polish roots (Catholicism automatically referred to Polish identity), and she left the Bolshevik-controlled territory. Nonetheless, later, she stressed her Belarusian origin, which underlines the notion of identity as a "political" (or "analytical", as Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper develop it) category at that time.[584] Her family did not support her decision, and she likely left them without them knowing. Enrolling in the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw, Nadzia explained the absence of her birth certificate: "I do not have the original of my birth certificate as my parents did not want to allow me to go to Poland and the certificate was in their possession, so I left without it."[585]

[582] Lisov, "Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg," 126–43.
[583] Qtd. in Dubenskaya, *Rasskazyvayet Nadya Lezhe*, 33.
[584] Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'", T*heory and Society* 29, no.1 (2000): 1-47. Chadasievič-Léger's "national" belongingness is not a matter of the study; however, these kinds of documents from those times should be considered carefully because of the "moving" political borders and ideological confrontation. Thus, the reference to Catholicism was already a reason to be allowed to leave Soviet Belarus. But even after, on the Polish site, a person had to prove that she or he did not serve the Bolsheviks. For instance, the document at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw confirmed that "Miss Wanda-Nadzieia Chodasiewiczówna is Polish-Catholic and right-thinking with regard to the Polish state." Qtd. in Karolina Zychowicz, *Nadia konstruktorka* (Krakow: TAiWPN Universitas Kraków, 2019), 99. Transl. from Polish. Natallia Hardzienka also points out the 'applied' character of "national" identity after WWII when many (anti-Soviet)Belarusians called themselves Poles not to be repatriated from Western Europe to their country of origin (BSSR). Natallia Hardzienka, "Bielaruskija pieramieščanyja asoby (DP) u Vialikaj Brytanii", *Belarusian Historical Review* (2006). www.belhistory.eu/archives/1452.
[585] Qtd. in Zychowicz, *Nadia konstruktorka*, 100. Transl. from Polish.

During her studies, Chadasievič met her future husband—the artist Stanisław Grabowski who provided for her financially after they married in 1924. In a year, they moved to Paris. Chadasievič applied for a scholarship for a study trip, but only her husband got it.[586] She enrolled at the Académie Moderne in Paris and became a student of Fernand Léger, who invited her to teach at the Academy. Chadasievič remembered her relationship with her husband as "torturous." He was constantly making rows and getting angry at her progress. She describes how she sold her first painting "and he wasn't happy. We were both artists and suddenly I, a woman, got such a big fee."[587] That evening, she celebrated her success alone. In 1932, they divorced. Chadasievič married Lèger in 1950 after the death of his first wife. Despite her extensive artworks including monumental mosaics and panels, Chadasievič-Léger is included in art history as an artist of an unclear identity (Belarusian, Russian, Polish, or French) who is associated with male artists—as the wife of Léger, a student of Malevich and also but less so of Strzemiński (and what about Kobro?)—as if this is the only way to value her art.

However, her biography looks entirely "successful" compared to most other women's. Moreover, she included the names of male artists in her biography herself, stressing how more "significant" they were than her.[588] The fate of Volha Dziadok-Biembiel (Olga Dedok-Biembiel) was different. She is known as the wife of the Belarusian sculptor Andrei Biembiel, one of the founders of the Byelorussian socialist realism canon and the (co)author of several significant monuments in the BSSR. Sometimes, she is mentioned as the mother of Alieh Biembiel, the philosopher and Soviet dissident. But rarely do art historians write about her as a sculptor.

Volha Dziadok (1906–1974) was born into a poor peasant family in Homiel. The teacher at the school noticed her talent for drawing and strongly recommended further developing her skills. Then the February Revolution happened. "We have accepted the revolution with enthusiasm. The Tsar abdicated the throne! The Republic. Freedom. Everyone put on their red bows," she wrote.[589] Then, the German troops came, and later, the city became part of Western Ukraine for a time.[590] But as a young girl, she did not even notice these events since she felt "under the protection of her parents" and merely wanted to be an artist.

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[586] Zychowicz, *Nadia konstruktorka*, 102.
[587] Dubenskaya, *Rasskazyvayet Nadya Lezhe*, 84.
[588] Ibid.
[589] Here and elsewhere, Olga Dedok-Biembiel, *Vospominaniya* (Minsk: Propilei, 2006). Quotations from the manuscript. Transl. from Russian.
[590] In March 1918, Homiel was occupied by German troops and became part of Chernihiv District of the Ukrainian State, soon the Ukrainian People's Republic. At the beginning of 1919, the Red Army came to the city, and it became a part of the RSFSR (as the centre of the Homiel District). In 1926, the city was included in the territory of the BSSR.

> And certainly, no less than Leonardo da Vinci. “And if I am to be a loser, I will be an art teacher at school,” I said, not believing for a second that I really could be a loser. [...] But we are at the Hermitage then. I am ruined and crushed completely. I'll never ... I'll never paint like this in my life! I am not a genius, not Leonardo da Vinci, I am a person miserably lacking in talent, who has never seen paint, who cannot hold a pencil. And I haven't touched a pencil in a year since the Hermitage.

Despite her self-doubt (“I have ‘no worldview,’ no categorical judgments, no definite views, no personality, no ‘I’”), Dziadok decided to take a risk. She applied to the sculpture department at the Petrograd State Art-Educational Studios (the former Imperial Academy of Arts). She diligently prepared and was among the few women admitted. It was the mid-1920s, and the education system in the USSR was open not only to people of any nationality and class but also to women. She wrote, “I am accepted. Because I am a daughter of a worker by birth.” Dziadok met Andrei Biembiel, who was a fellow student. He was born in Velizh (which at the time was in the Viciebsk district but is now in Smolensk oblast in Russia) and studied in Kerzin’s Studio at the People’s Art School. They married, and Dziadok became pregnant in her last year of study. She could end her studies with a diploma or take a break, return to the Institute later, and then officially graduate. She chose the latter: “I needed and wanted to learn more.” At the time, she believed that she could manage it.

> A clash of dreams and prose, frustration with family. The clutter of housework—alone with two babies and no housemaid. The inability not only to grow up but even to touch art, the loss of professionalism and the consequent disdain of a stronger friend, who was the reason for my wallowing in the kitchen and diapering.

Soon, Andrei Biembiel won a project for low reliefs in the House of the Government in Minsk and became one of the most successful sculptors of the BSSR. The time of need ended. In the 1930s, they had the typical lifestyle of privileged Soviet cultural workers—a house-studio at the centre of Minsk, dinners in restaurants, recreation in Crimean sanatoriums, nurses, and housekeepers. However, Dziadok did not return to art.

> But there was no time for me at all. I remembered the clay with pain in my heart. It turned out that I had fallen away from my work, and no light was ahead of me. Andrei begged me not to think about it, saying that the main thing now was for him to get back on his feet and prove

himself, and then he would create the conditions for me to work.

It did not happen. Sometimes, Dziadok helped her husband with his work ("Andrei made me an apprentice"). He did not see her as an autonomous artist but as his assistant or, perhaps, the future author of his biography. She blamed herself for her cowardice:

> I was wrong: the worldly formula "to keep the father for children," to give them at least the appearance of a family... No, it didn't work. I should have done my best to separate. But I didn't want publicity, I wanted to save my husband's good name. That's one. Secondly, what could I do with my ill mother and two children, and I could not give anything for their excellent education? [...] So I gave up.

Remembering the first years of her marriage, Dziadok mentioned her mother: "I grew dull from continuous work [...]. My mother cried for my fate ..." as if there were no other way. At the same time, her mother did not share her idea of keeping a nurse or housemaid. "My mother came," Dziadok writes. "She immediately sent the housekeeper out of the house. I found it difficult again." Therefore, the role of a female artists' mother in reproducing social norms (e.g. visions of being "a good wife" or "good mother") must also be considered.[591] So, a girl who dreamed of being no less than da Vinci became a wife, a mother, and the sculptor of several compositions and low reliefs but somewhere on "the edges" of her biography.

In a certain sense, the different routes of Dziadok-Biembiel and Chadasievič-Lèger represent typical biographies of female artists. At the same time, it is essential to differentiate between women's experiences and recognise their multivocality (through their life-writing), focusing on different aspects of their marginalisation.[592] A problematic aspect that complicates women's inclusion in art history is a scarcity of documents for reconstructing their biographies.

For instance, exploring the case of Elizabeth Siddall, Griselda Pollock shows that letters and diaries created by W. M. Rossetti, a member of the Pre-Raphaelites who "constructed himself as a careful, pedantic recorder"[593], became the basis for unfolding not only his story but Siddall's as well. Despite her artistic activity, she is still known only as his muse. Unlike

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[591] Deepwell, "Introduction," in *Women artists and modernism*, 11–12. Describing her first marriage and the scandals with her husband, Nadzia Chadasievič also mentioned her mother, who said: "Endure. You are a wife now." In Dubenskaya, *Rasskazyvayet Nadya Lezhe*, 58.
[592] Martina Pachmanová, "From Within, From Without: Configurations of Feminism, Gender and Art in Post-Wall Europe," in *A Companion to Feminist Art*, ed. Robinson, H. and Buszek, M. E (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), 111–26.
[593] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 141.

him, she did not leave a record. Moreover, artworks made by women often remain unattributed or "missing" as a result of misspellings, different spellings, or inconsistent identification. Thus, Nadzia Chadasievič-Lèger is also known as: Nadia Khodasevich-Lèger, Wanda Chodasiewicz, Wanda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska, Nadia Chodossiewitsch, Nadezda Chodosevic, Nadia Khodossievitch-Léger, Nadia Petrova, Nadezda Petrovna Leze, Nadzeja Patrouna Chadasievic-Leze.[594] This list does not include Cyrillic spellings. The identification of artists of Jewish origin is also often complicated because of Yiddish and Russian versions of their names, like Moise and Marc, Leib and Lev, or Haja and Hanna. And another "transformation" could occur due to changes in cultural context. For instance, after Polina Chentova, the artist from Viciebsk, moved to Germany and then to England, her surname was transformed into Khentoff because there was no female version of the name in German; she had to be registered with her father's surname.

In addition to the numerous archival documents, Chadasievič-Lèger left a memoir and had an active public life until her death. Dziadok-Biembiel also wrote a diary, but it was published only after her death by her family.[595] Who knows how many unpublished notes are kept in family archives? Dziadok's diary is a unique document not only because it witnesses the epoch—the 1920s and 1930s and life under Nazi occupation of Minsk in 1941–44 when Dziadok remained in the city with her two children.[596] In contrast to Chadasievič-Léger's memoir, which was prepared for the public from the beginning (and may include some mythologisation),[597] Dziadok-Biembiel did not "censor" the final edition before publishing.

One more significant point is "language" since, as feminist scholars note, the process of writing was and still is the way a woman discovers herself. This process implicates the search for a proper language which can represent *her* experience.[598] Exploring the phenomenon of women's memoirs, particularly the text by Paluta Badunova, a key female political figure in the Belarusian national movement of the early twentieth century, Elena Gapova notices that

> "Memoirs," as any document of private life, is evidence: of events and their cultural and semantic context; in this case, the text fixed an attempt to tell "what is impossible to tell," what is forbidden to tell, id est, to force through the "impossibility" of telling. The nature of this

[594] Zychowicz, *Nadia konstruktorka*, 98.
[595] Elena Gapova, "O (ne)vozmozhnosti zhenskoy avtobiografii. Predisloviye," in Dedok-Biembiel, *Vospominaniya*, 3–12. Transl. from Russian.
[596] Exeler, *The Ghosts of War*.
[597] The book is non-fiction written by Lubov Dubenskaya and based on records which Nadzia Chadasievič made special for this publication in 1974–77.
[598] bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999).

> impossibility is complicated. It refers to the (Belarusian) language that the author uses, to an attempt to create a language of love, and to the phenomenon of "women's writing" ("women's voice").[599]

A break with language norms (sometimes the reason that women's memoirs are not accepted and considered "bad literature" written by a "wrong hysterical language") signifies women's exclusion from the field of speech, which, as a political realm, belongs to men. Intervening in this field, even in intimate writing, a woman learns not only to voice but even to "identify herself" by looking for a language (which was invented by and for men) that enabled her "to tell her story.[600]

Nevertheless, as Polock underscores, analyses of private as well as public documents like records, transcripts, registers, etc., should be done carefully since it might "not necessarily produce an alternative version."[601] Besides, the archive should be considered "part of a system of representation by means of which the past seems to be left, deposited in the present."[602] Both Chadasievič-Lèger's and Dziadok-Biembiel's memoirs show this. The aim is, therefore, to place "this more extended range of historical materials [...] in a theoretically informed framework of the social, economic and ideological practices" of a period.[603] But what if there are no recorded traces? Does "no traces" mean nothing existed? How far can feminist approaches advance art history? Do we need to move forward or completely change direction?

4.2. Female artists of the People's Art School

The history of female artists at the Viciebsk Art School is another example of how art history can turn a phenomenon into an exclusively male achievement, ignoring and forgetting facts or leaving them behind as insignificant. As a matter of fact, the first post-revolutionary decade was a productive period for women in art and literature in Soviet Belarus. The Belarusian literary scholar Aksana Danilčyk notes that in contrast to the end of the nineteenth century, when women preferred to take male pen names, already in the 1920s, "they tended to

[599] Elena Gapova, "Lyubov' kak revolyutsiya, Ili 'Nesmotrya na Gramshi' Poluty Bodunovoy," in *TRAVMA:PUNKTY*, ed. S. Oushakin and E. Trubina (Moscow: NLO, 2009), 820. Transl. from Russian.
[600] Ibid., 821.
[601] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 138.
[602] Ibid., 139.
[603] Ibid., 138.

underscore their gender."[604] Every collective publication had to include a few female authors. Sometimes, male publicists took female pen names because there was a lack of women, especially at the beginning of the 1920s.[605] After several years, the situation changed radically. Dozens of female poets and writers voiced themselves that Danilčyk describes as *a particular literary phenomenon.*[606]

As for the activity of the People's Art School, the number of women among the students was the highest during the first post-revolutionary years.[607] Except for the Bolshevik women's policy and the location of the school (ch. 3.3.), many of these women had Jewish origin. Even in orthodox Jewish families, women were encouraged to get secular education to become educated wives and mothers. This explains why their parents allowed their daughters to attend Pen's studio early or the People's Art School after the Bolshevik Revolution[608]. This did not automatically indicate the success of the Bolshevik women's emancipation policy within Jewish communities. To the contrary, Bemporad asserts, this policy failed because Jewish women's involvement in politics existed mainly in theory[609].

However, these different reasons gave women access to art education like never before. The school's register of students in 1921 includes twenty-four women out of sixty-six total students:

> Gertrude Lepe (18 years, painting class), Sonja Gandel (16 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Tzila Ezrohi (16 years, Kogan's class), Natalia Silich (13 years, Kogan's class), Anya Sundikova (14 years, painting class), Riva Pruss (15 years, Kogan's class), Polina Vasilek (18 years, not specified), Eugenia Magaril (19 years, cubism class, UNOVIS member), Haya (Hanna) Kagan (20 years, Kogan's class), Bella Kaldobskaya (16 years, Ermolaeva's class), Sofia Levina (19 years, cubism class), Lyuba Lifman (19 years, cubism class), Tatyana Meerson (15 years, Kogan's class, UNOVIS member), Zina Osnos (16 years, Kogan's class),

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[604] Aksana Danilčyk, "'I nie dbaj ab cichim ščasci.' Bielaruskaja žanočaja paezija mižvajennaha pieryjadu," in *Bliskavicy: antalohija belaruskaj žanočaj paėzii mižvaennaha peryjadu*, ed. Aksana Danilčyk and Viktar Žybul (Minsk: Knihazbor, 2017), 9. Transl. from Belarusian.
[605] The Belarusian poet Uladzimir Duboŭka remembered that during the preparation of *Aršanski Maladniak* magazine, he as an editor noticed that all authors were men. "I then crossed out my name under some article and wrote Hanna Aršanica." In Seviaryniec, *Uladzimir Duboŭka*, 108. Transl. from Belarusian.
[606] Danilčyk, "'I nie dbaj ab cichim ščasci,'" 9.
[607] For instance, the register of the students after the reorganisation of the school in 1924 shows many fewer female students. There were nine out of the total number of eighty-three. GAVO, f.837, o.1, d. 6, l.83.
[608] See: Shaul Stampfer, "Gender Differentiation and Education of the Jewish Women in Nineteenth-Century Eastern Europe", in *From Shtetl to Socialism Studies from Polin,* ed, Polonsky, A. (Liverpool University Press, 1993), 187 – 211; Iris Parush, *Reading Jewish Women: Marginality and Modernization in Nineteenth-Century Eastern European Jewish society* (Brandeis Univ. Press, 2004).
[609] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews.*

> Lilya Ryndzyunskaya (15 years, painting class), Sima Rivinson (18 years, Malevich's class), Tzivia Rosengolts (50 years, painting class), Nina Chuikina (13 years, painting class), Lilya Gilina (18 years, painting class), Mina Dyatkina (20 years, painting class), Ekaterina Ivanovskaya (13 years, Kogan's class), Natalya Ivanova (20 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Anastasia Girutskaya (23 years, Malevich's class, UNOVIS member), Reveka Geltzer (16 years, painting class)[610].

Based on their specialisation, most female students studied cubism and suprematism. The list of UNOVIS members included more female artists than are represented in the existing registers (F. Belostotskaya, Fanya Yakovlevna, Gurovich, Emma Ilyinichna, L. Klyatskina).[611] At the same time, Frida Rabkina and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson are not included in these lists at all, although they were enrolled at the school in 1919. Therefore, there were evidently more women among students.[612] But, due to the lack of documents,[613] only the paths of a few of them can be reconstructed, which may also be caused by a "selective" historical approach, Stalinist repressions in the 1930s, and the Holocaust during the Second World War.[614]

Even the rest of the "traces" of these female artists demonstrate the intense artistic lives they had. Eugenia Magaril and Haya Kagan were Malevich's most well-known female students. However, their biographies and contributions to the Soviet avant-gardes are primarily overlooked.[615] Magaril's and Kagan's artwork was shown at the UNOVIS exhibitions in Moscow and Petrograd. In 1922, they graduated from the People's Art School and enrolled at the Higher Art and Technical Institute in Petrograd. Eugenia Magaril (1902–1987) was born in Viciebsk and studied under Chagall and then Malevich. She attended Mikhail Matyushin's course in Petrograd, and he remembered her as a "spontaneously gifted" student.[616] She was a member of Matyushin's collective KORN (Extended Vision Collective), which experimented

[610] GAVO, f. 837, o.1, d.1.
[611] Klyatskina is mentioned only in the transcript of the "experimental drawing" event which took place on 27 March 1920. See, *UNOVIS Almanac,* no. 1 (1920).
[612] According to Ahola-Valo, who came to the school in 1920, there were "only girls and first-year students." Qtd. in Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 11. Transl. from Finnish. Apparently, Valo's memoirs should be considered carefully as he often presented facts mistakenly; for instance, he denied Chagall's role in the school's foundation and called him "a student." Ibid., 117. However, his perception of the school supports the fact that there were many female students.
[613] There are many reasons for such a lack (developed further). In some cases, only one mention remains, for instance, the only records of Meerson's and Gandel's activities are their artworks, which were published in the UNOVIS almanac. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 130.
[614] Many Jewish artists, actors, and writers of Soviet Belarus perished either in the 1930s or in ghettos during WWII. Their archives might have been lost or burned, or are still kept by families.
[615] Pihalskaja, "Čamu niama viadomych mastačak UNOVISA?."
[616] Nikita Nesmelov, ed., *Professor Mikhail Matyushin i yego ucheniki: Katalog vystavki* (Saint Petersburg: Muzey Akademii khudozhestv, 2008), 215. Transl. from Russian.

with space, light environment, and colour. At the same time, she collaborated with Malevich at the GINKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture). Magaril survived the siege of Leningrad and after the Second World War, she became a member of the Union of Artists, taught children, and participated in exhibitions. The life of Haya Kagan (1902–1974) is less known. She was born in the Viciebsk district and was also Malevich's student. Her works were shown in the group's exhibition in Berlin (the First Russian Art Exhibition in 1922) and Amsterdam (1923).

Nevertheless, not all students and teachers were originally from Viciebsk. Natalya Ivanova (1900–1979) and Klara Rosengolts (1870-1961) were also students of Malevich and Ermolaeva. Ivanova came to Viciebsk with her family during the First World War. Her father was the conductor Nikolai Malko and headed the Viciebsk Symphony Orchestra in 1918–21. After they left Viciebsk, she did not continue with suprematist painting, focusing instead on decorative arts. Klara (Tzivia) Rosengolts was born in Rostov-on-Don and moved to Viciebsk after marrying a wealthy widow. In addition to her husband's two children from his previous marriage, they had five children together. Three of them died during the Civil War in Crimea; one served in the Bolshevik authority but was arrested and shot in 1938. The last one was repressed in 1937. Their daughter Eva was born in Viciebsk and studied in Falk's studio in Moscow. She became an artist but was exiled to a camp in Siberia but later rehabilitated in 1956. In Viciebsk, Rosengolts attended Pen's studio and then enrolled in the People's Art School. She was almost fifty years old. However, as Shatskikh mentions, she became "a genuine follower of Malevich."[617] Describing their paths, the scholar underscores that both artists gave up "their own creative endeavours" for "the responsibility and duties incumbent upon them as daughters, wives, and mothers." At the same time, their artwork shows that "both women were extraordinarily gifted."[618]

Frida Rabkina (1903–1953) and Elena Kabischer-Jakerson (1905–1990) are usually mentioned in connection with their marriages (Rabkina's husband was Lev Zevin, a student of Chagall and Malevich). They were born in Viciebsk, attended Pen's school and then became students at the People's Art School. Rabkina studied under Chagall and Falk and later moved to Moscow with her husband. She was a member of different artistic groups and participated in exhibitions. After the Second World War (Zevin died on the frontline in 1942), she mainly taught and worked in textile design. Elena Kabischer, the graphic artist, painter, and sculptor, joined UNOVIS and created cubist and abstract paintings and compositions. In 1921, she

[617] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 133.
[618] Ibid., 131.

married. After several years, her family moved to Moscow. Kabischer joined VKhUTEMAS and attended Falk's class. In the 1930s, she had to adapt her style to Soviet ideological requirements. After her husband died in 1949, Kabischer finished her artistic career and lived in Moscow.

Vera Ermolaeva and Nina Kogan might seem "lucky" since they were not "forgotten" and even "found" their place in the history of the school.[619] However, they are not recognized as artists but as managers and teachers at the school and as Malevich's ardent followers. Meanwhile, in addition to their teacher's experience and theoretical contributions,[620] Kogan and Ermolaeva produced two remarkable performances—*Suprematist Ballet* and *Victory over the Sun*—which have a particular place not only in the history of avant-gardism but also in performing arts more generally. [621]

When discussing these performances, scholars usually focus only on the historical background of *Victory over the Sun* which is associated with the authors of the first version and was staged in 1913 in St. Petersburg. Initially, the performance was created by Alexei Kruchionykh (the libretto), Velemir Khlebnikov (the prologue), Mikhail Matyushin (music), and Kazimir Malevich (visualisation, stage design, and costumes), and the evening of its premiere is identified as an important moment for Russian futurism.[622] Malevich defined this performative experience as "the first step of a new path on the deathly dreary, decrepit theatre stage."[623] However, despite the general task of reconstructing the first version, Viciebsk's production might be considered a unique event. It was based on the text by Kruchionykh and Khlebnikov but performed without music (because of a lack of singers) with a new stage design and costumes by Ermolaeva (Malevich designed only the figure of Futurist Strongman). Ermolaeva also led the conceptualisation process and rehearsals with the school's students, who were involved in decorationg and performing. It is unknown why Malevich delegated the

[619] Tatyana Goryacheva, "Nina Kogan. Istoriya sud'by," in *V kruge Malevicha. Soratniki, ucheniki, posledovateli v Rossii 1920-1950-kh*., ed. Irina Karasik (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 65–72ю Transl. from Russian; Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*.

[620] Ermolaeva and Kogan not only led their classes but also developed their own study programs. *UNOVIS almanac*, no. 1 (1920) included articles "Suprematic Ballet" and "The Beginning of Abstractionism in Painting" by Kogan and "About the Study of Cubism" by Ermolaeva. Additionally, they continued teaching after they departed from Viciebsk.

[621] Malevich's costumes from 1913 proclaimed the beginning of what he soon called suprematism. The (post-Suprematic) line engravings of 1920 by Ermolaeva took on special significance in the artist's biography. In 1923, Lissitzky published a series of lithographs "Figures from the Opera 'Victory over the Sun'" conceptualising the idea of kinetic art. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 95–6.

[622] Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 38.

[623] K. Malevich, "Teatr," 1917, Kazimir Malevich, online platform. Transl. from Russian. http://kazimirmalevich.ru/t5_1_1_12#s1.

performance to Ermolaeva. Shatskikh calls him "the opera's sponsor."[624] The idea to repeat it probably came from discussing how UNOVIS might make itself more visible in public. Malevich needed a "loud" event like the premiere of 1913. Although there was little time to prepare, Ermolaeva handled it. But it was a *different* performance because of the different author, structure, performers, and, more crucially, place, and historical conditions. As Shatskikh points out, the "accent on the 'future' reveals the fundamental difference between Petersburg and Vitebsk productions."[625]

The only review of that evening titled "Vitebsk butedlyane" (Butedlyanin, a character in *Victory over the Sun*, was invented by Khlebnikov) stressed the originality of stage design and costumes but described the performance as rather perplexing. "The sun may have taken offence at the Viciebsk 'Butedlyans' and left them in the dark for a year to wean them off the cock-crowing that took place in this performance," the author concluded.[626] A year later, the artist Mikhail Kunin wrote, "the experience of *Victory over the Sun* certainly provides enough that there is no place for Suprematism in the theatre."[627] In a certain sense, these "reviews" misjudged both performances, because the scholars refer to them to prove the secondary character of the later production. Or was it not the main reason for this kind of conclusion? How, in general, can objectivity be measured?

4.3. Revising the canon

Despite the expanded corpus of materials about the Viciebsk People's Art School, the number of female artists' names is limited to the "known". Moreover, the scholars who trace these women's biographies usually do so in terms of the "canon," comparing them with their male peers (Malevich, Lissitzky, Jakerson, and others). For instance, Shatskikh, who devotes several pages of her scholarship to underscoring the role of female artists in the life of the People's Art School, mentions that only some of these women could realise "their God-given talents. [...] However, their ability to cultivate their talents was thwarted by the roles assigned to them as women, and as a result, they were only partially able to realise their artistic vision of the

[624] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 97.
[625] Ibid., 98.
[626] Valery Shishanov, "'Vitebskiye budetlyane' (K voprosu ob osveshchenii teatrl'nykh opytov UNOVISa v Vitebskoy periodicheskoy pechati)," in *Malevich. Klassicheskiy kvadrat 12* (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2010), 60. Transl. from Russian.
[627] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 100.

world."[628] Despite the importance of the role of the family in artists' life, Shatskikh indicated the "limitations" these female artists a priori had. Writing about Nina Kogan, Tatiana Goryacheva also indicates the artist's "modest giftedness" and "mediocrity," and how she was "ready to serve others selflessly."[629] The reason for such a conclusion is unclear.

In another publication, Goryacheva points out that Kogan merely imitated Malevich's ideas. At the same time, the scholar criticised the artist for "relative learning of Malevich's theory," since the transformation of the figures in Kogan's *Suprematist Ballet* happened in a different order.[630] But what if it was Kogan's idea to destroy the order? What if she was not such a "diligent" student as Goryacheva describes her? At this point, *Suprematist Ballet* must be understood as more than a student's attempt to go beyond their teacher's program. Instead, it was an intrusion of female experience into a male-oriented canon in order to shatter (proposing an alternative way) its only possible form of embodiment.

Such approaches indicate the role of criticism in framing female artists' productions.[631] Additionally, they problematise the language in which the history of female artists should be written to avoid reproducing "the canon," which makes it almost impossible to describe female artists as producers without comparing them to men. As Nochlin argues and Pollock develops, the point is not to discover female "great artists," since this aim will always fail. Generally speaking, this definition does not make sense. It simply supports the hierarchical male-dominated system of arts in which female artists were tolerated and taken seriously only if they mirrored the existing canons. For instance, in cubism and suprematism, female artists easily adjusted themselves to "the canon" by defusing sex differences.

Therefore, a particular approach is necessary to disclose these sex differences even in abstract arts. Referring to Julia Kristeva, Rosemary Betterton develops the concepts of linear and monumental time. She argues that "while linear time corresponds to the paternal principle, [...] female/maternal subjectivity is linked both to repetition and eternity through biological rhythms." At this point, female art should be characterised by *cyclical* and *monumental* types of temporality "which are traditionally connected to the female."[632] But female modernist and avant-garde artists had to adopt male principles "in order to represent themselves within

[628] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, 131. My emphasis.
[629] Tatyana Goryacheva, "Neutomimaya Nina Osipovna Kogan po prozvishchu Bakunina: Kogan, Miturich, Malevich, Khlebnikov," in *The Many Lives of the Russian Avant-Garde. Nikolai Khardzhiev's Legacy: New Contexts*, ed. Dennis G. Ioffe and Frederick H. White (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Pegasus, 2019), 239. Transl. from Russian.
[630] Goryacheva, "K publikatsii al'manakha 'Unovis no1'", 41.
[631] M. Bucur, *Gendering Modernism: A Historical Reappraisal of the Canon* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 77-103. ProQuest Ebook Central.
[632] Betterton, "Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures," 26–7.

history."[633] The question of whether they could "succeed" in this adaptation or if this strategy caused the limitations they were always accused of having. Harding argues that *the notion of erasure* has a special meaning in this sense since it refers to "many ways in which women have found opportunities to perform only by submitting to conditions that ultimately perpetuate the structures of their own repression."[634]

From this perspective, the avant-gardes remained the same, paraphrasing Pollock, a "particular and gendered set of practices"[635] based on the "myths" (as historical and social constructions) of male suffering and creativity that were turned into the universal canon. Art has sex; however, "the difference of men's and women's experience of the social structures of class and the sexual divisions within our society" is ignored, as Parker and Pollock state.[636] They reformulate Nochlin's summary,[637] specifying:

> Each woman's work is different, determined by the specific factors of sex, class and place in particular historical periods. Women have made their own interventions in the forms and languages of art because they are necessarily part of their society and culture. But because of the economic, social and ideological effects of sexual difference in a western, patriarchal culture, women have spoken and acted from a different place within that society and culture.[638]

And even "marginalised" avant-gardes were based on the same order. This marginality remained a privilege for male artists (as their field of "suffering"), while female artists experienced twofold exclusion.[639]

For this reason, feminist scholars do not focus on the differentiation between modernism and avant-gardes since "many artists who claimed to be part of a radically new avant-garde were, in fact, much like the political avant-garde of that period (from Mussolini to Lenin), traditional in their understanding, representation, and performance of gender norms."[640] Both phenomena (modernism and avant-gardes) merely reproduced the male canon

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[633] Betterton, "Women artists, modernity and suffrage cultures," 27.
[634] James M. Harding, *Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), 3.
[635] Pollock, *Vision and Difference, 71.*
[636] Parker and Pollock, *Old Mistresses*, 48.
[637] Nochlin, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists," 67.
[638] Ibid., 49.
[639] Feldhaus, *Der Ort von Künstlerinnen im Diskurs der Avantgarde*, 36; Harding, *Collage Events, Feminist Artists, and the American Avant-Garde*, 4–5.
[640] M. Bucur, *Gendering Modernism*, ix. See also, Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery". *The Art Bulletin*, 90, no. 4 (2008): 531-548.

of art history and pivoted on "Eurocentrism and masculine supremacy"[641] in which a woman is "a marginalised 'Other.'"[642]

> Art history is not just indifferent to women, it is a masculinist discourse, partly to the social construction of sexual difference. As an ideological discourse, it comprises procedures and techniques by which a specific representation of art is manufactured.[643]

Hence, the goal is not merely to discover and add the names of female artists to avant-garde art history (that slowly but happens). The canon must be changed. Or, more precisely, deterritorialized, meaning the deconstruction of any unification or universalism to escape a trap to invent a new canon.

Developing a transnational feminist approach to art history as a tool to "reject universal discourses of mastery and domination in all of their forms," Marsha Meskimmon underlines the necessity to avoid seeking "in women's art some monolithic "female essence.'"[644] Instead, what she calls "art's histories"—as "radical practices of materialisation that can enable multiple epistemic worlds to flourish"[645]—might be opened for every personal (not only female) experience, especially those that were ignored for centuries. As the projects "with and through, [but] not just *about* art,"[646] art's histories aim to claim "the existing discipline politically."[647] And *storytelling* remains a fundamental means of this political performance. According to Pachmanová, historical narratives are not only "usable tools in the legitimation of violence and oppression" but "also an important vehicle for legitimation of difference and autonomy."[648]

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[641] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, xix.
[642] Deepwell, "Introduction," in *Women Artists and Modernism*, 5.
[643] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 15.
[644] Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms*, 3.
[645] Ibid., 1.
[646] Ibid., 2. Here, she refers to Sara Ahmed's and Jackie Stacey's approach to explore an object of research as "a point of departure for a different way of thinking. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, "Introduction: Dermographies", in *Thinking Through the Skin*, ed. by Sara Ahmed, Jackie Stacey (London: Routledge, 2001), 1.
[647] Pollock, *Vision and Difference*, 1.
[648] Pachmanová, "From Within, From Without," 114.

chapter five

Revolutionary, Left, and Proletarian in Translational Mode

> The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. Furthermore, the autonomy they can enjoy or the subversion they can claim credit for rest on the same foundation.
>
> Jacques Rancière[649]

This chapter challenges the concept of the "revolutionary" in Soviet culture, particularly its explanation(s), motion, and possible embodiments in different cultural contexts beyond the existing centre/periphery framework (in terms of "imitation"). Moving toward and through the history of TEREVSAT (the Theatre of Revolutionary Satire), which was founded in Viciebsk in 1920, the chapter examines the definitions of *revolutionary art*, *left art*, and *proletarian culture* as the pivotal matters of debate in 1917–22.[650] If the term "avant-garde" was used mainly in the military (vanguard) sense, these definitions specified those arts which later (not all but some of them) would be identified as the Russian and/or Soviet avant-garde. However, despite government support for avant-garde art, the main ideologists of Bolshevism criticised such forms of art, not considering them "revolutionary." At the same time, the notion of revolutionary art (and theatre) circulated widely in artistic circles which struggled to interpret it properly. For a short period after the October Upheaval, it was possible not only to speak about the will of theatre, as Annenkov mentioned, but also to explain *revolutionary*, *proletarian*, and *left* differently, as opposed to the official versions.

The corpus of publications which claimed to define revolutionary art is quite broad and can be divided into two primary sections depending on who wrote the text: artists (writers) or politicians.[651] Despite artists' disagreements over a proper understanding of the revolutionary

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[649] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 14.
[650] See, Zalambani, *Iskusstvo v proizvodstve*.
[651] Bowlt, ed., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*; William G. Rosenberg, ed., *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia, Parts 1 and 2* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990).

in art, they had a common framework. Almost all of them determined new art as a particular sphere of "actions" which pretended to be *a form of knowledge.*[652] New art could intervene, challenge, and influence life radically. On the contrary, Bolshevik leaders considered art "a supplement" to the ideas of the Bolshevik revolution since, as Trotsky stated, "the place of art is in the rear of the historical advance."[653] However, because of the specificity of the transitional years, the notion of required art was still developing that opened horizons for discussions and allowed for different perspectives and modes. At the end of the 1920s, the institutionalisation of cultural policy locked art into the formula of socialist realism.

The second part of this chapter explores the position of the body (as a primary analytical category) in revolutionary theatre after 1917, aligning it with the social and political programs of that period. It delves into the politics of the body in the performing arts of the 1920s in Soviet Russia and Soviet Belarus, arguing that avant-garde projects could not be directly transferred from one context to another due to the peculiarities of the cultural situation. Instead, these ideas were displaced, refracted, or, more precisely, *translated*,[654] according to the context of their embodiment. Some features might remain the same due to their *untranslatable* (transcultural) character, as the "common ground" of the avant-garde. However, as Clark notes, "for every general trend to be found among certain avant-gardists, the very opposite can also be found among others."[655]

Hence, this chapter aims to highlight the role of contradictions as a foundation for the varied, often controversial, artistic landscape of the period, including at the "margins." It also raises questions about the criteria (or theory) for recognizing avant-gardes beyond the existing "canon" which is primarily based on visual characteristics. The first half of the chapter intervenes in the contexts of Russian and Soviet, revealing how the Belarusian Soviet context was shaped by the processes in the so-called centre. The aim is not to distinguish boundaries between "agitation" and "revolutionary" or distinctions between "revolutionary" in the centre (as a "source") and periphery (as a "copy") since these bounds were elusive and often overlapped. By understanding the relationship between the artistic and political realms as agile and interpenetrating, it reveals the more dynamic (in-progress) character of the avant-gardes (including their "local" dimension) in the Soviet Union.

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[652] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 35.
[653] Leon Trotsky, "Revolutionary and Social Art," in *Bolshevik Visions: First phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, 280.
[654] Bachmann-Medick, ed., *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective*.
[655] Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 29.

5.1. An ideological struggle for definitions

When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, they had neither a precise cultural strategy for the current moment nor visions for the future location of art and culture in the Bolshevik state.[656] According to Lunacharsky, Lenin, who considered art and culture a potential fourth front of the revolutionary struggle, declared such general points as accessibility of art to the public and preservation of cultural heritage to "on its basis build socialism."[657] Lenin criticised the *so-called left, bohemian art* (what we call the avant-gardes today) and rejected its role in creating proletarian art, because "art should serve the people, lead to the development and raising of the masses."[658]

The ideologist of Bolshevism and main engineer of the October Upheaval, Lev Trotsky, developed these ideas in articles and speeches published under the title "Literature and Revolution" (1923). According to him, revolutionary art was an intermediate stage to socialist art "for which no basis has as yet been made [but it] will grow out of the art of this transition period." But if socialist art is a future matter, "there is no revolutionary art as yet" Trotsky also stated.[659] Like Lenin, he considered formalist movements a demonstration of bourgeois mysticism and decadence which could not be part of revolutionary thinking. He paid particular attention to futurism as a European phenomenon that was initially closely connected with political programs. However, in Russia it "originated in an eddy of bourgeois art."[660] But since futurism was only in the early stages when the Worker's Revolution happened (with "its childish habits [... and] yellow blouses"), it joined the revolution. Although "[a] Bohemian nihilism exists in the exaggerated Futurist rejection of the past, but not proletarian revolutionism. [...] [Therefore] it does not feel itself to be a part of the revolutionary tradition."[661] Trotsky gave futurism a chance as a potential artistic formation. However, it had to be reformed to adapt to a proletarian, revolutionary agenda as "all the active forces are concentrated in politics and in the revolutionary struggle, everything else is shoved back into the background and everything which is a hindrance is cruelly trampled underfoot."[662]

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[656] Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action. Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (Macmillan Education UK, 1993), 8; Lynn Mally, *Culture of the future: the proletkult movement in revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), xvi-xvii.
[657] A.B. Lunacharsky, "Lenin i ego otnoshenie k iskusstvu". Transl. from Russian.
[658] Ibid.
[659] Leon Trotsky, "Revolutionary and Social Art," in *Bolshevik visions*, 275–6.
[660] L. Trotsky, "Futurism," in L. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, transl. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005).
[661] Ibid.
[662] L. Trotsky, "Proletarian Culture," in *Literature and Revolution*.

The People's Commissar of Narkompros, Lunacharsky, had almost the same views on art, although he was more critical of futurists (as a radical direction of formalism, he linked it to bourgeois art), not giving them a chance for "rebirth." Like Lenin, he allowed classical forms of art that focused special attention on music and theatre.[663] Nevertheless, in the early post-revolutionary years, he supported the career advancement of various artists including radical formalists. In the article "The Revolution and Art," Lunacharsky explained that such support had to involve artists in an agitation process since commissions and purchases which replaced "the rich Maecenases and patrons [...] fell, in particular, to those artists who agreed willingly to work for the Revolution in the theatre, in poster design, in decorations for public celebrations [and others]."[664] He considered art in terms of agitation, which, in contrast to "clear, cold, objective propaganda," appeals to "the feeling of the audience and readers and has a direct influence on their will."[665] Therefore, art might be "simply the ceaseless propagation of a new faith, a propagation springing from profound knowledge."[666]

One more ideologist who, in contrast to major Bolshevik leaders, advocated for the role of culture in the revolution was Alexander Bogdanov. He has been a key figure in the Bolshevik Party, conceptualising the program of proletarian culture. In 1910, he wrote that the basis of the socialist society should be *tovarischestvo* (comradely cooperation)—a conscious collective which would appear when the working class wins and social classes are abolished.[667] He noted that a significant point of the struggle for socialism was not only opposition to capitalism. The creation of a new socialist proletarian culture is needed in the new society. Bogdanov stressed the role of art in this culture because new art could "awake [the masses] to the struggle and teach and lead forward to the brave future."[668] In 1917, on the eve of the Red October, he founded the Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organisation (Proletkult), which turned into a movement that consolidated local cultural societies and artists. During the first conference of the cultural-educational organisation in Petrograd on October 16–17, the Proletkult declared its autonomy from the Bolshevik Party and its aim to "arm the working class with knowledge and organise its emotions with the help of art."[669] Asking about the possibility of proletarian

[663] Generally, theatre was considered crucial media during the transitional period of Bolshevism. See, Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917–1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 18-46.
[664] Anatoly Lunacharsky, "The Revolution and Art," in *Russian Art of the Avant Garde*, 193.
[665] Ibid., 191–2.
[666] Ibid., 192.
[667] Alexander Bogdanov, *O proletarskoj culture. 1904–1924* (Leningrad: Izdatelskoe tovarishchestvo "Kniga," 1924), 94. Transl. from Russian.
[668] Bogdanov, *O proletarskoj culture*, 99.
[669] Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 12.

art, Bogdanov noted that "art is one of the ideologies of a class, an element of its class's consciousness," and every form of art, even if it is far from "economy" or "politics" could be "a moment of social class or estate, hence an element of a public force of a class of an estate."[670] Bogdanov accepted only the realism method. He was against both avant-garde forms and any national concept of art. He concluded, "art is an educational tool" which is more effective than science

> as a tool of management of the masses, as the language of vivid images was better and more popular for the masses. [...] Proletarians need collectivist art which would bring up people to solidarity, comradely cooperation, the close brotherhood of strugglers and builders which are united by common ideas.[671]

At the same time, there were plenty of artistic manifestos published in different magazines (or were presented in exhibitions), which also laid claim to new art. These debates were not a result of the Russian Revolution. According to Krusanov, the politicisation of artistic vocabulary has been developed since the beginning of the twentieth century. After the Red October, such debates became a natural part of the artistic landscape. Therefore, the similar vocabulary of politicians and artists—appealing to *new*, *revolutionary*, *collectivity*, *reformation, subversion, propaganda, agitation*, and, especially, *the new world* as the aim—was not a result of the expansion of Bolshevism. It simply signifies the very politicised atmosphere of that period, where controversies and discord were possible.[672]

The first point that radically differentiates artistic and political approaches to revolutionary art was the location of art in the social hierarchy. In opposition to politicians who highlighted the utilitarian purpose of art, artists identified it as autonomous (but integrated into praxis) space—as "a worldview" (Stepanova), a "purely philosophical movement" (Malevich), a "creative but not a reproductive phenomenon" (Rozanova), "a tool for discovering" (Rodchenko), and "the dynamic space" (Lissitzky).[673] The concepts of productivist art (*proizvodstvennoje iskusstv*o) and applied art (*prikladnoje iskusstvo*) were developed during the first post-revolutionary years by different groups of artists. The ideologist of LEF, Boris Arvatov, wrote, "Proletarian art will put at the forefront the real, conscious, scientific but

[670] Bogdanov, *O proletarskoj culture*, 105, 107.
[671] Ibid., 118–19.
[672] A. Krusanov, "Termin 'levoye iskusstvo' v khudozhestvennoy zhizni Rossii pervoy treti XX v" *Chinese Journal of Slavic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2022): 51–69. https://doi.org/10.1515/cjss-2022-0010.
[673] See more: Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde;* Oushakine, *Formal'nyj metod: antologija russkogo modernizma.*

nevertheless free recreation of the forms of reality itself."[674] And after the proletariat wins, "Art organically coincides with productive labour [...] as a natural result of the development of productive forces."[675]

The notion of the left in artistic manifestations had to stress the changes in art that might become a foundation for radical social and political reforms. Such differentiation between the left as radical and the right as conservative came from the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789, when the location of confronted parties (on the right, in the centre, or on the left) turned into an identification of their political position.[676] Although leftism in art indicated an orientation toward radical aesthetic changes, it did not implicate a common understanding of the method. It was developed in a range of collective manifestations and individual programs, which were often opposed to each other while also being identified as leftist. For instance, in 1922, Arvatov wrote that leftism in art was usually associated with the subversive manifestations of futurists who "furiously destroyed everything, including themselves."[677] In a year, LEF—as "a cultural formation of revolutionary artistic technical intelligentsia [...] an advanced force"—was founded to appropriate the notion of the left as productive, true Marxist art.[678]

Toward a revolutionary theatre

The phenomenon of revolutionary theatre as a crucial element of the avant-gardes in the Soviet republics was also characterised by negotiations. According to Robert Leach, the revolutionary theatre was not "the avant-garde as such,." Instead, it refers to "that part of the avant-garde which was essentially politically motivated."[679] Walter Benjamin (1935) claimed that "politicising art" was Communism's response to the aestheticization of politics by fascism.[680] But such politicisation did not refer automatically to the avant-gardes. During the first post-revolutionary years, avant-garde practices were broadly appropriated by Bolshevism and turned into a visual code for the Revolution, since this kind of aesthetics correlated with the

[674] Boris Arvatov, *Ob iskusstve* (Moscow: izdatelstvo 'Federatsija,' 1930), 8. Transl. from Russian.
[675] Ibid., 25, 27.
[676] Krusanov, "Termin 'levoye iskusstvo,'" 52.
[677] Qtd. in S. Oushakine, "Spectres of a Marxist: Boris Arvatov and His Art of Insubstantial Presence," *The Russian Review*, 82 (2023): 3. https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12393.
[678] Arvatov, *Ob iskusstve*, 50. See also, S. A. Oushakine, B. Arvatov, "Laboratories for Organizing People: Selected Essays on Art and Byt," trans. E.V. Pavlov. *The Russian Review* 82 (2023): 17–49. https://doi.org/10.1111/russ.12394.
[679] Robert Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2005), xi.
[680] Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*, 42.

ideology of building *something new* in contrast to the *old.*[681]

Exploring Soviet revolutionary theatre, scholars place Vsevolod Meyerhold at the centre as its "unquestioned leader,"[682] since the debates he provoked and techniques he discovered were extremely influential to theatres in other Soviet republics. Such an approach completely ignores other cultural and historical contexts, connecting the mode of revolutionary theatre only with such a radical avant-gardist as Meyerhold (ch. 6.2.). Moreover, he did not represent the whole field of revolutionary theatre (in terms of its experimentalism and transformation) even in Soviet Russia (see also the contributions of Nikolai Evreinov, Evgeny Vakhtangov, and Alexander Tairov). However, Meyerhold was one of the first (and few) artists who supported the Bolsheviks after the Revolution. According to his future step-daughter Tatyana Esenina, "he experienced a kind of rebirth."[683] However, as Annenkov commented, he tended merely to exploit political changes for his own artistic benefit. The newspaper *Nasha gaseta* (Our newspaper) reported: "The ranks of the Bolsheviks have been joined by the ultra-modernistic Mr. Meyerhold, who for some unknown reason has acquired the title of 'Red Guard.'"[684] In 1918, Meyerhold became a member of the Communist Party of Russia. Two years later, he founded the program "October in the Theatre" to engage theatres in Bolshevik politics. With Lunacharsky's endorsement, Meyerhold headed the theatre department of Narkompros. At the same time, like other avant-gardists, he did not get complete support from other political leaders. Several times, the theatres he led were closed due to a lack of subsidies. Trotsky wrote, "I do not know whether the stage needs biomechanics at the present time, that is, whether there is a historical necessity for it."[685]

Despite its Marxist orientation, the program of Proletkult was also criticised. The author

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[681] In 1922, Arvatov wrote: "A lot has been written about the dominance of Futurism during the first years of the revolution. This phenomenon was explained in different ways: some said that Soviet authorities had to enter into a *mésalliance* with the 'left,' since only they supported the October Revolution; others talked about an emotional analogy between the left in art and the left in politics; all kinds of other things were said, too, including some scepticism about young artists partiality and dependence. [...] First and foremost, we must establish one historical fact: artists from both camps were negotiating with Soviet authorities. Both brought to the table their projects and plans; both were willing to collaborate with the proletarian revolution. Why, then, did the left come out ahead? 2. If we look at the plans presented by the right (with Benois as its leader), we see that all those plans were reduced to one thing—the preservation of art monuments and cultural heritage. [...] But the leftist artists were. 3. After rebelling against the past in the name of the future, the leftist artists fought on the artistic front against the very same social groups that the revolution with the proletariat at its head fought against economically and politically. [...] The left helped the revolution. But this help was purely negative. As long as it was necessary to fight against the counter-revolution, as long as destructive tasks were the order of the day, leftist artists were not only useful collaborators but also the only ones." Qtd, in Oushakine, "Spectres of a Marxist," 3–4.

[682] Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, xi.

[683] Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre: An Introduction*, 61.

[684] Qtd. in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), 152.

[685] Leon Trotsky, "Revolutionary and Social Art," in *Bolshevik visions*, 281. About Meyerhold's location in a dynamic field of ideological changes during the 1920s, see: Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre*, 53-101.

of the introduction to Bogdanov's "Proletarian Culture" pointed out that, although he did not support the Proletkult, this book had to be published to collect and present ideas which must be systematically revised.[686] The concept of a *new socialist theatre*, proposed by Bogdanov's follower Platon Kerzhentsev, was also criticised. Theorist and diplomat Kerzhentsev became one of the leaders of the Proletkult movement. In 1918, he published the book *Tvorcheskij teatr* (Creative Theatre) in which he formulated the main principles of new theatre in the Bolshevik state.

First of all, Kerzhentsev opposed those forms of bourgeois theatre which required the intellectually passive audience to maintain this passivity as a guarantee of their bourgeois welfare. Such relations between the audience and theatre mirrored the political system in capitalist countries, which did not require any participation from citizens in political life. Kerzentsev wrote, "In politics, a special group of politicians dominates and controls, while the entire broad mass is called upon to be passive."[687] He mentioned Antuan, the Meiningen Theatre, Max Reinhardt, Marinetti, and the Moscow Art Theatre which attempted to renew and reform theatre. However, according to Kerzentsev, all these attempts did not lead to rebuilding since they were based on the same differentiation between actors and the audience. Therefore, the first step toward the new socialist theatre had to be the destruction of this differentiation but not mechanically, like Meyerhold or Reinhardt. Although architecture mattered for the creation of a new type of theatre, it was not enough to destroy the stage. Instead, the new theatre had to provide a space which a) welcomes an active audience; b) educates such an audience. The point is not to create one more educational hierarchical system but to radically start from another type of relationship between actors and spectators. For that purpose, new socialist theatre, Kerzhentsev claimed, might be founded and developed not by traders, theatre directors, or groups of actors but by "a commune—a city, a village, a district, a factory, a factory village, a Soviet, the mass itself."[688] He mentioned the spectacles of the pageant movement in England,[689] free theatres in Germany, and special theatres of workers in other Western European countries which tried to make theatre more accessible to poor classes. But these theatres did not implicate the reconfiguration of the whole social system.[690] Or it was merely about the cost of tickets. However, the main issue is that new theatre is not theatre for people

[686] In Bogdanov, *O proletarskoj culture*, 9.
[687] P.M. Kerzhentsev, "Theatre of Today," in *Tvorcheskiy teatr*. 5-ye izd. (Moscow, Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoye izdatelstvo, 1923). http://teatr-lib.ru/. Transl. from Russian.
[688] Kerzhentsev, "Socialistic theatre," in *Tvorcheskiy teatr*.
[689] See also, Fischer-Lichte "Policies of Spatial Appropriation."
[690] Kerzhentsev, "People's Theatre," in *Tvorcheskiy teatr*.

but people's theatre because it is rooted "in the creativity of the very masses."[691]

> Going to the theatre, the spectator of the future will not say, "I am going to see a play" but "I am going to participate in a play," and he will really be "co-acting," he will not be a spectator quietly looking on and clapping languidly but a "co-artist" actively participating in a play.[692]

The socialist theatre does not need a permanent company of actors. It is a *communal theatre*, a theatre of co-living without any hierarchy, and amateur (*lubitelstvo*) to resist any attempt to create such a hierarchy.[693]

> The theatre of improvisations will be revived (a kind of "mask theatre"), in which an auditorium of two to three people will create plays, scenes or grandiose "charades," freely fantasising in their work. There will be performances under park's trees, at a quiet crossroads, on a mobile stage. Favourite fragments of tragic or opera productions will be repeated by a randomly gathered celebratory crowd somewhere in the open air.[694]

Describing socialist theatre, Kerzentsev highlighted that it is a matter of the future, since such a theatre could appear only in a socialist society. According to him, the year 1923 (when the fifth edition of the book was published) was still transitional. He proposed steps that might be taken to approach that future. Different types of district and factory theatres including clubs (a gathering spot for leisure and informal education in cities and villages) had to be created and based on the principle of the amateur. Such theatres had to perform their spectacles on stage and on the streets, moving from one place to another. True socialist theatre should appear, firstly, on the margins and then move to central cities. The origins of actors were significant since proletarian theatre could not be performed by bourgeois actors. The creation of the proletarian actor as a representative of a new class is the main task because "there will always be psychological boundaries separating [bourgeois actor] from the proletariat."[695] New studies as laboratories for a search for the forms of socialist theatre had to cover the whole country to "attract to our theatrical work young people who are more flexible, less inhabited,

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[691] Kerzhentsev, "Theatre Reformists," in *Tvorcheskiy teatr*.
[692] Ibid.
[693] There were two common definitions of non-professional theatres in the Soviet context: *lubitelstvo,* which is close to *amateur* (the Latin *amare*) and *samodejatel'nost'* (like "do-it-yourself"). The term *lubitelstvo* usually was used to mention that this theatre is made badly. Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*, 2–3.
[694] Kerzhentsev, "Creation of proletarian theatre," in *Tvorcheskiy teatr*.
[695] Kerzhentsev, "The Proletarian Theatre," in *Bolshevik visions*, 127.

and more likely to be influenced themselves than to exert influence on a workers audience."[696] Kerzentsev's program also implicated the reformation of theatre architecture and repertoire.

Despite the lack of initial support when Kerzentsev presented the book in 1918, he asserted the success of the program within five years. Even after the defeat of the Proletkult movement at the end of the 1920s, amateur theatres (such as theatres of worker youth, the agitprop brigades, factory and student theatres) continued to play a crucial role in the cultural policy of the USSR until its end[697]

5.2. The Theatre of Revolutionary Satire in Viciebsk

Viciebsk was one of the first cities which actively responded to the call to found if not proletarian than revolutionary theatre (in terms of its service to the Bolshevist agenda). In 1919, the Theatre of Revolutionary Satire was founded and became a model for similar *terevsats* across all Soviet republics. Its founder, Mikhail Pustynin was a Russian poet and satirist who collaborated with the Viciebsk newspaper *K oruzhyju* (To the Weapon). He wrote short, rhymed satiric tales which told readers the news from the battlefront, explained new political direction, and criticised the bureaucracy. Due to a shortage of paper, almost all newspapers were closed, and Pustynin moved to the local department of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA). Its special branch, OKNA ROSTA (ROSTA windows), was responsible for visual agitation. As an expansion of Viciebsk ROSTA, Pustynin began developing new performative agitational genres such as the agit-povozka (agitation wagon), agit-evenings, model ROSTA rooms (exhibitions), and oral and light newspapers. For instance, if an oral newspaper staged the news and was called *a daughter of the future,*[698] the light newspaper showed the news written on glass which was illuminated by a magic lantern.[699] Sometimes, the light newspapers were demonstrated before the main performances in theatres. They presented the latest radio messages and slogans about the current political situation. All these forms of agitation were balanced between newspaper, theatre, and rally genres. Sometimes, it raised

[696] Kerzhentsev, "The Proletarian Theatre," 128.
[697] See, Mally, *Culture of the Future*; Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*.
[698] I. Amskiy, "Dorogu ustnoy gazete," *Zhurnal Vitebskogo otdeleniya ROSTA*, no. 1 (1921): 21. Transl. from Russian. See, M. Pustunin, "Budem krichat' na vsyu Ivanovskuyu," ibid., 17–20. There was a special form of oral newspaper—hospital oral newspapers. They were created with the materials which were collected in hospitals, the board of the newspaper prepared a special scenario in the forms of dialogues, songs, and duties which were used by dramatic and music groups of hospitals. They were very popular with the hospital audience as it was a new kind of attraction. The repertoire was changed weekly.
[699] "Deyatel'nost' agitotdela VITROSTA," ibid., 13–14; "Nasha svetovaya gazeta," ibid., 15.

questions about which department (theatre or propaganda) should subsidise them.[700]

TEREVSAT became another form of agitation developed by Viciebsk ROSTA, which, according to Pustynin, had to be a revolutionary response to the political inertness of most theatres: "Everything from the revolutionary furnace must be swept up to the stage."[701] In contrast to the Proletkult, TEREVSAT consisted of professional actors, and not only local ones. Many professionals from other countries found a temporary home in Viciebsk during the First World War and the Civil War. The texts were written by Pustynin himself. Mikhail Rasumny, who was well-known as an actor in Krivoje Zerkalo Theatre (Distorting Mirror Theatre) by Nikolai Evreinov in Petrograd, managed TEREVSAT. The evening started with a report and the latest news; then, the actors arrived on brooms and sang "The anthem to the red broom." The program consisted of several issues and lasted up to an hour and a half.[702] There was no role specialisation; Pustynin defined a universal actor who could dance, sing, and transform into any character. Some scholars call Chagall a stage designer for TEREVSAT performances.[703] But as local archivists have recently proven, Chagall did collaborate not with Viciebsk but with Moscow TEREVSAT, founded later in 1921.[704]

In the beginning, TEREVSAT did not have its own stage and travelled from one place to another. The productions were performed on the streets, squares, and even on the agittram. Although critics called TEREVSAT "poor" in terms of repertoire and performance—it was rather "agitka in the form of theatre spectacle"—the Viciebsk audience liked it. [705] In 1920, TEREVSAT got its own building and was invited to perform in Moscow, where the company remained and became Moscow TEREVSAT (finally, they received regular salaries). Since the scripts for their spectacles were published in a special magazine, "terevsat" became one of the most popular forms of revolutionary theatre in all the Soviet republics. By 1922, almost all terevsats were closed or disbanded. Meyerhold's Theatre of Revolution was founded on the base of Moscow TEREVSAT.

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[700] M.P. "Vse khorosho, chto khorosho konchayetsya," ibid., 11.
[701] Mikh. Pust. "Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry," ibid., 31. Transl. from Russian.
[702] For instance, the program of 12 February 1920 consisted of: 1. A sentence about Broomback; 2. At the crossroads, a dramatic exercise by M. Pustynina; 3. Antana and Kolchak— the very dramatic polka; Denikino cinema. 4711 metres; 5. A Letter of greeting; 6. Chastooshkas of the day; 7. Blockades popular image. In Volkova, A. V. et al., eds., *Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry v Vitebske*. (Viciebsk: Gosudarstvennyy arkhiv Vitebskoy oblasti, 2018), 61. Transl. from Russian.
[703] Shatskikh, *Vitebsk. The Life of Art*; Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*.
[704] Chagall had to prepare the stage design and costumes for the spectacle *Comrade Khlestakov*, written by D. Smolin as an adaptation of Gogol's *The Government Inspector*. But the performance did not take place. Ludmila Khmelnitskaya, "Marc Chagall i Terevsat," in *Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry v Vitebske*, 31–46.
[705] Svetlana Myasoedova, "Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry kak sotsiokul'turnyy fenomen: ot politicheskogo rayka k rkvolyutsionnomu teatru," in *Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry v Vitebske,* 9. Transl. from Russian.

Describing the aesthetics of TEREVSAT's performances, scholars directly connect it with the forms of popular theatre.[706] It was like political *balagan* (booth and farce) based on parodies, *chastushki*, folk dance, gymnastics, and animated *lubok* (cheap popular images). Special forms of theatre animation, *poster-like animated cartoons* called "tantomoresques," were developed.[707] They were painted on boards and screens with holes for the actors' heads and arms for them to stand behind and reanimate painted figures in comic ways. For instance, in "Tri Vityazia," the artist Mikhail Holodov used a picture of the same name by Victor Vasnetsov which was very familiar to the mass audience. These methods made TEREVSAT famous. Although the period of such theatres ended in 1922, their aesthetics influenced the development of Soviet Estrada (variety). The famous agitprop collective "Sinyaya Bluza" (the Blue Blouse), founded a year later, was also rooted in TEREVSAT.[708] Katovič proposes to analyse the TEREVSAT's activity through such categories as space-and-time, deconstructed structure, and improvisation to highlight its experimental, even avant-garde character.[709] But, to what extent was it *avantgardish*?

As scholars emphasise, the radical turn in performing arts and theatre was rooted in the time of the avant-gardes in the 1910s and 1920s when the relationship between dramatic texts and the positions of spectator/actor was radically changed over several decades.[710] From this perspective, it seems that Kerzentsev and Bogdanov's artistic and theatre programs, the description of TEREVSAT performances, responded to these issues thoroughly. Although there was no notion of aesthetic criteria, these programs might have seemed avantgardish in terms of the radical reconstruction (even deconstruction) of the art and theatre milieu since they proposed ways to reconfigure space and time, occupying non-theatrical sites and unfolding the narration in multiple time dimensions. These forms of theatre refused traditional approaches to staging and performing, declaring a new relationship between actors and the audience. The creation of a new type of community called the *kollektiv* (collective) was one of the primary tasks that had to determine political changes in society, and, in this way, take steps toward the creation of *the (kind of) new world*. However, was it enough to be identified as the avant-gardes?

In responding to this question, Kleberg, for instance, differentiates between amateur

[706] Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*; Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*.
[707] Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre,* 78.
[708] It was one of the leading agitprop theatre collectives in the early Soviet Union. See, ibid., 159–64.
[709] Tatyana Kotovoch, "Terevsat, ostryj klinok," in *Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry v Vitebske,* 25–30.
[710] Erika Fischer-Lichte, ed., *Theater-Avantgarde: Wahrnehmung, Körper, Sprache* (Tübingen: Francke, 1995); Gerald Siegmund, *Theater- und Tanzperformance: zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2020).

and artistic fields. She argues that "whereas Proletkult was a mass movement with an established ideological line and an organisation that paralleled that of the Bolsheviks or the trade unions, the avant-garde was a limited group of individuals who shared above all a professional interest in cultural policy."[711] But is such a differentiation feasible? Could a precise boundary between avant-garde and not-avant-garde practices be drawn? Is it a matter of (un)conscious ideological involvement? Can the reference to professionalisation be questionable since not all artists graduated from academies or institutes? Or was it a matter of individualism versus collectivism?

To substantiate her conclusion, Kleberg describes the confrontation between avant-garde circles and the Proletkult, although this was only partly the case. The Proletkult programs attracted many artists. For instance, David Burlyuk, Sergei Tretyakov, and Sergei Eisenstein joined the movement. The spectacle *The Mexican* by Jack London directed by Valentin Smyshlyev and Eisenstein was created—like a circus with real boxing—in one of Proletkult's studios in 1921. As Leach notes, referring to the theatre director and critic Samuil Margolin, the artists came to Proletkult "seeking an 'agitational-dynamic' theatre, which would 'emancipate dynamic action from the demands of subject."[712] Soon, the studio was transformed into the First Worker Theatre of Proletkult, whose repertoire consisted of spectacles written and produced by professional writers, artists, and directors (including Eisenstein's works).

The foundation of this first Proletkult theatre might be considered a result of what Lunacharsky meant when, in the autumn of 1921, he emphasised that "in the current year it is necessary to intensify the rapprochement between the avant-garde of the proletariat—the Russian Communist Party—and the avant-garde of the intelligentsia—the workers in the sphere of culture."[713] At the same time, Proletkult did not face support from official Bolshevik circles due to political reasons, whereas Bogdanov's opposition to Lenin was merely one among others.[714] Trotsky stated,

> That is why terms like "proletarian literature," "proletarian culture" are dangerous, because they fictitiously push the cultural future into the narrow framework of the present day, falsify perspectives, violate proportions, distort scales and cultivate a most dangerous coterie arrogance. But if we abandon the term 'proletarian culture,' what about ... Proletkult? Let us

[711] Kleberg, *Theatre as Action*, 15.
[712] Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 66. See the chronology of Proletkult, ibid., 67.
[713] Qtd. in Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 55.
[714] John Biggart, "Bukharin and the Origins of the 'Proletarian Culture' Debate," *Soviet Studies* 39, no. 2 (1987): 229.

stipulate that Proletkult means proletarian culturalism, i.e. the persistent struggle to raise the cultural level of the working class. The importance of Proletkult does not diminish one iota from this interpretation[715].

Already in 1920, Proletkult lost their political autonomy and resigned themselves to the Party's control.[716] In 1922, the movement did not receive financial support. The debates about "proletarian culture" involved most politicians and lasted for several years.[717] In a year, Bogdanov was arrested but released, after which he concentrated mainly on science and writing. The reason for the decline of the Proletkult as a cultural ideology was a political struggle between different groups of Bolsheviks. Although Bogdanov lost his primary position, the framework of Proletkult remained developed in different forms of amateur theatres.[718]

To turn back to the question of whether Proletkult and TEREVSAT referred to the avant-gardes and what role professional artists and amateurs played in it, it is necessary to mention that, moving through these texts and descriptions, it is impossible to understand entirely what the authors meant and what kind of performances they did; how they intended (if they did) to reconfigure relations with reality and what reality it was. Any attempt to find a clear answer might fail because of the impossibility of experiencing these performances. Such key categories as space, time, the audience, and the body could probably allow us to grasp the very essence of the embodiment of these programs. But it is necessary to remember that these "experiments" were caused by different reasons, which were rarely artistically conceptualised. The travelling character of TEREVSAT performances and "paper" decorations resulted from the war when the lack of everything caused improbable creativity. Defining the reasons for the idea of the oral newspaper, Pustynin wrote that "the blockade [...] The Entente does not give us paper for newspapers—we emerge victorious from new troubles."[719] The actor Razumny portrayed his work in Viciebsk in 1919:

We artists of Dom Prosveshcheniya (House of Enlightenment) are sent once a week to play at

[715] L. Trotsky, "Proletarian Culture," in *Literature and Revolution*.
[716] By 1920, the Proletkult included about four hundred thousand members; more than eighty thousand actively participated in studio work; about sixteen magazines were published. According to Biggart, it was a reason Lenin worried about the legal status of the Proletkult and its autonomous position. Biggart, "Bukharin and the Origins of the 'Proletarian Culture' Debate," 232. In the resolution of 1920 about the Proletkult, Lenin stated that "(1) Not special ideas but Marxism. (2) not the invention of a new proletarian culture, but the development of the best models, traditions [...] from the point of view of the Marxist world outlook." Ibid., 233.
[717] Biggart, "Bukharin and the Origins of the 'Proletarian Culture' Debate," 229–46.
[718] Mally, *Revolutionary Acts*.
[719] Pustunin, "Budem krichat' na vsyu Ivanovskuyu," *Zhurnal Vitebskogo otdeleniya ROSTA*, 19–20.

> Trotsky's club. There are some pieces of cardboard there, a room, and nothing else. Sometimes we get two chairs. [...] They gave me (in the club 1-Maya) one torn chair and a broken table. All this against a background of green rags with one electric bulb, and we had to play two comedies.[720]

Therefore, due to the overlapping combinations of "random" things which seemed mismatched before (street performing, "poor" decorations, direct communication with the audience, amateurism, styles of popular theatre which met support from the people), something *divergent*, unconventional to mimetic principles of art, appeared. It might be considered in terms of revolutionary theatre (as the representation of the October Revolution). But what about the aesthetic mode which Ranciere proposes for thinking not only in terms of emancipation "from any specific rule, from any hierarchy of the arts, subject matter, and genres" but also the destruction of "the mimetic barrier [...] that separated [artistic] rules from the order of social occupations [...] when form is experienced for itself?"[721]

The revolutionary territory as a dynamic space

When searching for criteria which could assist in grasping the essence of the Soviet mode of the avant-gardes, many contradictory matters arise, as if this realm resisted being clearly understood. In particular, there was a conceptual misunderstanding among avant-gardists and even a complete rejection of each other's methods. For instance, Shklovsky, who contributed to revising literary theory, did not accept Meyerhold's constructivist performances, which, as I argue later, responded to *defamiliarization* in performing arts. Similarly, Shklovsky attacked the amateur movement and Proletkult, writing,

> Nobody knows what to do with amateur groups; they multiply like infusoria. Neither lack of fuel, nor lack of food, nor the Entente—nothing can delay their development.
> These millions of collectives cannot be shut down—you cannot forbid a man to rave; they are a rash of disease, and as such—they deserve the attention of a sociologist.
> But they cannot be used to build a new way of life.[722]

[720] Myasoedova, "Teatr revolyutsionnoy satiry kak sotsiokul'turnyy fenomen," 14.
[721] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 18–19.
[722] Viktor Borisovich Shklovsky, *Gamburgskiy schet: Stat'i—vospominaniya—esse (1914–1933)* (Moscow: Sovetskiy pisatel, 1990), 72, 74–5. Transl. from Russian.

This "conservative" viewpoint on theatre might be explained by the same "conservatism"—from the avant-gardists' perspective—in literature, since Shklovsky developed his theory following examples in Tolstoy's prose. According to him, it was Tolstoy who consistently used the means of defamiliarization.[723] At the same time, Shklovsky did not refuse the technique of Dziga Vertov's Cine-Eye, calling his films, in particular, *Shestaya Chast Mira* (A sixth part of the world), "poetic cinema" where "formal aspects replace the sense."[724] However, formalism, which was soon condemned for its anti-realist purposes, was rooted in realism that necessitates looking for another orientation instead of styles, schools, or genres.

Or how can we understand that Eisenstein, who was related to the Soviet avant-gardes, considered his experiments with the audience not in terms of emancipation but manipulation? The theatre experience first in Meyerhold's studio and then in Proletkult provided Eisenstein with a laboratory for testing the spectator's perception of whom he identified as *material* since the "guiding of the spectator into a desired direction (or a desired mood) [is] the main task of every functional theatre."[725] Describing the aim of the spectacle *Night* (Noch) by Martine, Meyerhold also pointed out that "Agitspectacle is the main task" of this performance. "The theatre mobilises all available resources for the achievement of the most agitational effect on the audience," the director concluded.[726] At the same time, Meyerhold was one of those "revolutionary" theatre directors, who, already in 1907, asserted the idea of *a spectator as a fourth cocreator,* which contributed significantly to the transformation of the traditional theatre structure.[727] Was this shift the result of a simple transformation of Meyerhold's programs under Bolshevik rule? Or, were these and many other "contradictions" inherent in that field which was later identified as the avant-gardes, indicating the heterogeneous and plural character of the phenomenon?

In chapter three, I mentioned the phenomenon of a new type of spectator (as an active audience). The differences—between the spectator as *a material* (Eisenstein) and *a cocreator* as a fundamental category for the aesthetics of performativity (Fischer-Lichte)—went not merely between the *Bolshevization* of art (in terms of engineering) and art as an autonomous space, since this boundary was eluding. Exploring the relations between the Soviet avant-

[723] Shklovsky, "Art as Technique".
[724] Viktor Shklovsky, "Poeziya i proza v kinematografe," in *Poetika kino. Perechityvaya poetiku kino* (Moscow: Kinopechat, 1927; Saint Petersburg: Rossijaskij institut istorii iskusstv, 2001), 90–2. Transl. from Russian.
[725] Sergei Eisenstein, "Montage of Attractions," in *The Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (New York: The Meridian Books, 1957), 230.
[726] Vsevolod Meyerhold, "Zemlya dybom," in *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy. Tom 2. 1917—1939* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), 51. Transl. from Russian.
[727] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Die Entdeckung des Zuschauers: Paradigmenwechsel auf dem Theater des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: Francke, 1997).

gardes and ideology "as a system of ideas and views,"[728] Nina Gurjanova suggests thinking about the experiments of the artists with the audience's perception in terms of a search for "new mechanics of interaction with the viewer."[729] She differentiates between two methodological tools: provocation as an active mode (Shklovsky's defamiliarization) and manipulation as suppression (Eisenstein's montage theory). However, I argue that this notion of *communication*, or interaction (Fischer-Lichte identifies it as a shift from internal to external form of theatre communication[730]), plays an essential role in understanding the differences between the Bolshevik's purposes of manipulation and artistic goals. Eisenstein or Meyerhold's "manipulation" was a method not to engineer "the collective man," although they might believe that they embodied the ideas of the Revolution and followed Bolshevism directly. Instead, such a manipulation (since it operated within the realm of art) aimed at almost the same provocation on the path to what Rancière identifies as *an emancipated spectator*—a spectator who claims the knowledge and the power to act, challenging "the opposition between viewing and acting."[731] It does not mean that the artists intended such a "provocation". For instance, analysing the documentary *Mekhanika golovnogo mozga* (Mechanics of the Brain*)* by another Soviet film director Vsevolod Pudovkin, Margarete Vöhringer proposes to consider the space of film a "laboratory". But despite the task of presenting Ivan Pavlov's studies of classical conditioning (what the director had to do), "not only *what* we see was staged but also *how* it is possible to see it. […] through the juxtaposition of the film studio and the laboratory, Pudovkin questions the 'reality' of both spaces and points to the artificiality of these two ways of viewing life—science and cinema."[732] At what moment did the transgression from the *utilitarian revolutionary tasks* the director had to perform to *revolutionary art* happen? Where is this transitional line located?

What might be productive in grasping the essence of similarities and differences between (non)avantgardish/revolutionary/agitational is Ranciere's way of disclosing the three regimes of identification of the arts. He identifies a mimetic (representative) model as *the poetic regime*, which "defines proper ways of doing and making as well as means of assessing

[728] Nina Gurjanova, "Avangard i ideologija," in *Avangard i ideologija: russkie primery*, ed. Kornelija Ičin (Belgrade: Filologičeskij Fak. Belgradskogo Univ., 2009), 11. Transl. from Russian.
[729] Ibid., 16.
[730] Fischer-Lichte, *Die Entdeckung des Zuschauers*, 11.
[731] Jacques Ranciere, *The emancipated spectator* (London: Verso, 2011), 13.
[732] M. Vöhringer, "Stsepleniye. 'Mekhanika golovnogo mozga' Vsevoloda Pudovkina: kino kak refleksologiya. Leningrad/Moskva, 1925–1926," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika: Nauka, iskusstvo i metodiki eksperimentov nad vospriyatiyem v poslerevolyutsionnoy Rossii*, trans. K. Levinsona and V. Dubinoy (Moscow: NLO, 2019). https://play.google.com/. Transl. from Russian.

imitations,"[733] and, in this way, mirrors the hierarchical structure of the social and political order. The ethical regime operates only with images (as *the facts*) without any regulations over who has a right to produce them and how to assess them. This mode does not pretend to be political despite the possible ideological character (political content) of these images. The aesthetic regime is a more complicated mode of relationship between doing, making, distributing (of sensible) and perceiving in terms of the communal but not authorship. This means that the meanings are not determined by an author but are constructed by all participants in the process of artwork creation (including spectatorship).

The "communal" notion plays a particular role in these speculations since a claim of the collective and a new type of collectivity travelled from one manifestation to another. Despite its close connection to "community" as a fundamental category of new theatre, it was radically, as Oleg Kharkhordin argues, not the same in the Soviet context. He notes that the Russian *kollektiv* can be translated as a collectivity. However, it should be discovered as "a very culturally specific phenomenon, existing almost exclusively in Soviet society."[734] Kharkhordin mentions that the word "kollektiv" officially appeared in Russian dictionaries only in the 1930s, although it was already used in publications, newspapers, and regulations. At the same time, *kollektivism* came from the translations of French socialists and was even considered a synonym of socialism for a while. In Soviet times, kollektivism referred to "the principle of the comradely cooperation of labourers, according to which the private interests of an individual were "consciously" subordinated to social ones."[735] Referring to Robert C. Williams, Kharkhordin highlights the connection of the term kollektivism with "the proletariat as a collective body" and with "an attempt to create a new religion [...] the higher cause of communism."[736] In the two-volume publication *Religion and Socialism* (1908–10), Lunacharsky wrote:

> This human religious need—to find happiness in knowing oneself to be part of a greater whole, this yearning to elevate and expand your life by means of a very particular experience when the borders of personality collapse, and vital energy spills over the border of the body into the great force of the cordially intimate and incessantly loved element force.[737]

[733] Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* 16.
[734] Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 75.
[735] Ibid., 76.
[736] Ibid., 79–80.
[737] Qtd. in ibid., 80.

It explains why, for instance, Kerzentsev, the author of such an inspiring theory as Creative theatre, proposed the nationalisation of all theatres in Soviet Russia to control and subject them to Bolshevism, as if it was merely a replacement of one (aesthetic) dictatorship by another (political).

A careful reading of all these texts and manifestations is essential to link the concepts of kollektiv and kollektivism directly to the Party. Apparently, the avant-gardists who used almost the same vocabulary also referred to the coexistence of individuals but not the masses. Being inspired by fascinating theories of building the new world, their idea of October might differ from that which aimed to replace "one religion with another." Therefore, when Asja Lācis stated that she "wanted to be a good soldier of the revolution," changing her "life in line with it,"[738] the following question arises: What revolution did she mean? The theories merely presented possible projects; they stimulated individual imagination by tracing different embodiments of the "new world." And if the mode of a delayed future in the Bolshevik programs allowed them to manipulate (since they were going to "the brave future" but this future had not yet come, and it never came), the artists would not only imagine. They approached the future, embodying it in an imaginary "as if" space.

Nevertheless, it is not a matter of the differentiation between the political and aesthetical realms. Instead, they are always in negotiation which pushes us to think not in the categories of movements (avant-gardes or modernism), but in terms of moving through a *singular* story. This is why Ranciere proposes the analytical frame of the regimes of the arts instead of such common "notions" as modernity and the avant-garde, since they "confuse two very different things: the historicity specific to a regime of the arts in general and the decisions to break with the past or anticipate the future that takes place within this regime."[739] He considers modernity as *a mask* of the essence of the aesthetic regime as "it traces [...] a simple line of transition or rupture between the old and the new, the representative and the non-representative or the anti-representative. [...] the transition to non-figurative" that "reduce artistic modernity to the emptiness of its self-declaration."[740] As for the avant-gardes, which Ranciere splits into two main ideas—*subjective political orientations on the historical evolution* and "the invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come"—it could approach the vision of bounding the aesthetic to the political "by transforming politics

[738] Lācis, "Signals from Another World."
[739] Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 15.
[740] Ibid., 19.

into a total life programme."[741] Despite the failure of such a direct connection between politics and arts that, according to some scholars, "paved the way for totalitarianism," Ranciere points out that the problem is rather the split of the political (as strategical) and aesthetical concepts, which were the essence of the avant-gardes.[742]

The controversial point is the aesthetic dimension, which Ranciere identifies as "a specific sensory experience that holds the promise of both the new world of Art and a new life for individuals and the community."[743] Following his reflections, it might seem that aesthetics belongs only to the aesthetic regime. But what about the aesthetics of the mimetic or ethical modes? Does it mean that if I propose to think about TEREVSAT *not precisely* as an avant-garde project or not avant-garde at all, its productions did not have avant-garde aesthetics? Could we say that the aesthetic dimension was entirely missed in the revolutionary arts that focused merely on the representation of Bolshevism? Or does it show a deadlock of any pure model or category?

Ranciere does not respond to these questions directly; instead, he develops the possible *interplay* between the regimes which can be realised in "three major scenarios."[744] In doing so, he reveals a more complicated mode of the (co)existence and articulation of these regimes, which are always related—as if the precise boundaries between them exist. At the same time, they are ready to disappear. However, Ranciere states that such *a romantic blurring of borders* might come to "the dead-end of art. [...] The claim may be made purely for art's own sake, but it may also be made for the sake of art's emancipatory power."[745]

This is probably what Herbert Marcuse means when he argues that "the political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension."[746] The scholar considers revolutionary art in several senses: as a representation of "a radical change in style and technique" and as a mode of visualizing inequality between oppressors and oppressed and, in this way, it opens "the horizon of change (liberation)."[747] Art might not be revolutionary "because it is [created] for the working class or for 'revolution'" but only if it is "content having become form."[748] Marcuse concludes, "the radical qualities of art [...] are grounded precisely in the dimensions

[741] Ranciere, *The Politics of Aesthetics,* 24–5.
[742] Ibid.
[743] Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 115.
[744] Ibid., 119.
[745] Ibid., 129.
[746] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward A Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Beacon Press, 1979), ix.
[747] Ibid., xi.
[748] Ibid., xii.

where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behaviour while preserving its overwhelming presence."[749] Despite Marcuse's focus on Marxist aesthetics which is, as he mentions, based on "the totality of the prevailing relations of production,"[750] the approaches by two philosophers might disclose both similarities (the domination of the aesthetic approach) and differences (Marcuse's particular focus on the notion of revolutionary in terms Marxism).

Therefore, I argue that the territory of the revolutionary, proletarian, left, and avantgardish was a dynamic space which existed and developed in a mode of permanent negotiation and communication between different agencies of revolution(s), producing what Ranciere calls the "heterogeneous sensible." This term means that there should be boundaries between the revolutionary as an avant-garde mode and as a means for propaganda, but these boundaries are a) permanently in motion, b) are characterised by flexibility, surmountable, and c) ready to disappear at once. In other words, this territory is placed (not as a clash) between two of Ranciere's formulas—"a new life needs a new art" and "the new life does not need art."[751] And the criterion of aesthetics—as an emancipatory mode (alluding to both Ranciere and Marcuse)—remains fundamental. It allows us to explore a single case instead of movements. And, in this way, it becomes possible to explain, for instance, why both Malevich and Aholo-Valo were avant-gardists since the matter was not a form, media, or even the final destinations in which they differed radically but the emancipatory mode as the underpinning of their ambitious projects.

[749] Ibid., 6.
[750] Ibid., ix.
[751] Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, 124.

5.3. The revolutionary body: Meyerhold's biomechanics

> Der Körper als soziales Gebilde steuert die Art und Weise, wie der Körper als physisches Gebilde wahrgenommen wird; und andererseits wird in der (durch soziale Kategorien modifizierten) physischen Wahrnehmung des Körpers eine bestimmte Gesellschaftsauffassung manifestiert. Zwischen dem sozialen und dem physischen Körpererlebnis findet ein ständiger Austausch von Bedeutungsgehalten statt, bei dem sich die Kategorien beider wechselseitig stärken.
>
> Mary Douglas[752]

In her study of the arts in 1920s Soviet Russia, Margarete Vöhringer proposes to investigate avant-garde works not from the perspective of the autonomy of art but "to determine the relationship between them and theories, utopias and discourses, which were widely spread at that time."[753] This approach might seem contradictory to the previous chapter, which pivots upon art autonomy. However, I argue that it correlates with Ranciere's ideas entirely as it also discloses relations between the arts and the sciences.

Vöhringer describes the 1920s as the period of "an experimental culture." She explains that "the October Revolution of 1917 gave an impulse to a fundamental re-building of all disciplines, which the new authority considered necessary" for the building of the new state system. The result was a "complicated interdisciplinary situation" which should provoke social changes "to lead to a certain new future."[754] Almost the same "interdisciplinarity" happened with artistic identity. The boundaries between artistic, political, and scientific overlapped, and artist-proletarians, artist-constructors, artist-politicians, artist-scientists, and artist-engineers emerged. Arvatov wrote,

> It is about [artworks] radical transformation [...] the transformation of the artist from a meditative illusionist to a fiery fighter and creative worker of the working class. [...] alongside the artist-builder, the proletariat will create another new type of artist-politician.[755]

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[752] Qtd. in Gabriele Brandstetter, *Tanz-Lektüren: Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (Freiburg i. Br.: Rombach, 2013), 31.
[753] Vöhringer, "Eksperimental'nyye praktiki v nauke i iskusstve," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.
[754] Vöhringer, "Russkiy avangard kak eksperimentalnaya kultura," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.
[755] Arvatov, *Ob iskusstve*, 14–15, 27–8.

The most significant part of the Soviet program in the 1920s was the manifestation of the new man with a particular focus on the body "as a physical site for spiritual transformation."[756] According to David L. Hoffmann, "the creation of the New Man, with a healthy body and pure mind, was intimately connected with the creation of the perfect society, one made up of harmonious individuals."[757] Related to the achievements of social science and medicine, the programs of this (re)building were rooted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when the concept of *anatomo-politics of the human body* (Foucault) was formulated.[758] Based on various European theories, the vision of the new man as a foundation for a new society had also been the focus of Russian philosophy and literature of the second part of the nineteenth century. For instance, the most popular "prototypical New Man" of that time was Rakhmetov, the character from the novel *Chto delat?* (What is to be done?) by Nikolai Chernyshevsky. By transforming both his morals and body—becoming stronger and more disciplined—Rakhmetov turned himself into a revolutionary who embodied the ideal human character.[759] The focus on physical culture became "an essential element in the construction of socialism and the creation of the New Soviet Man."[760]

Both the sciences and the arts were considered vehicles for the realisation of the program of the New Soviet Man. Vöhringer mentions the First Russian Pilot Conference of the Organisation of Labour and Production, which was held in Moscow in January 1921. Although the conference primarily focused on the sciences' achievements and potential, the speakers agreed that the role of art was quite important in this process. Soon after, artists were welcome in all state and science programs. The role of the artist was transformed from "the mouth of revolution" (Lunacharsky) to "a psycho-engineer, a psycho-constructor."[761]

Meyerhold was one of these so-called psycho-engineers. Emphasising the need to transform almost all theatre components (repertoire, dramaturgy, architecture, space, and the body), he created a model of the revolutionary theatre that became canonical for theatres throughout the Soviet Union for the decade. His fundamental system of physicalised acting called *biomechanics* contributed to the reformation of the twentieth-century theatre system, and it is still one of the basic methods of actors' physical training.

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[756] Liliya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008), 5.
[757] David L. Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge: Physical Culture and the New Soviet Man," in *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identities* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2002), 231.
[758] Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge," 229.
[759] Ibid., 231; Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society* (London: Routledge, 2014), 22.
[760] Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge," 228.
[761] M. Vöhringer, "Eksperimental'nyye praktiki v nauke i iskusstve," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.

Biomechanics, in contrast to Konstantin Stanislavsky's psychological theatre, was a manifestation of Meyerhold's vision of theatre as *physical action.*[762] It drew upon the theory of emotions by American philosopher and psychologist William James, which prioritized physical reaction over emotional response, the study of reflexes by Russian neurologist Vladimir Bekhterev, and the system of optimization of labour by American mechanical engineer Frederick Taylor. Meyerhold, who likened the actor to an acrobat, used the algebraic formula: $N=A^1+A^2$, "where N is the actor, A^1 is the constructor who has a plan of realisation, and A^2 is the body of the actor, the performer who embodies the plan of the constructor."[763] This approach required actors to discipline their bodies to respond immediately to the tasks of acting, with physical training forming the basis for the embodiment of emotions and feelings. As Leach observes, "Meyerhold was able to demonstrate how if an actor takes up a sad posture, he begins to feel sad, and the emotion is shared by an audience."[764]

Biomechanics was not only a system of exercises that should assist actors in disciplining and controlling their bodies. In his lecture "The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics," Meyerhold summarised central ideas about the function of the actor, emphasising the role of biomechanics in the creation of a new theatre.

> In the past the actor has always conformed to the society for which his art was intended. [...] In future the actor must go even further in relating his technique to the industrial situation. For he will be working in a society where labour is no longer regarded as a curse but as a joyful, vital necessity. In these conditions of ideal labour art clearly requires a new foundation.[765]

The idea of *labour as pleasure* in Meyerhold's report refers to one of the key matters of the post-revolutionary ideological agenda. Speaking at the First Russian Pilot Conference of the Organisation of Labour and Production in 1921, Alexander Bogdanov asked about the methods to get "maximum productivity with maximum pleasure from work" from a Russian worker.[766] One effective means of productivity was Taylorism, the industrial management system proclaimed by the American engineer Frederick Taylor in 1911. It was based on the idea that the efficiency of production is increased if the process is divided into smaller tasks.

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[762] Leach, *Makers of Modern Theatre,* 3.
[763] Meyerhold, "Akter budushchego i biomechanika," in *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy. Tom 2,* 387–8. See also: Meyerhold, "Otzyv o knige A.Y. Tairova 'Zapiski rezhissera,' 1921–1922," in *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy. Tom 2.* (Moscow: Iskusstvo), 37–43. Transl. from Russian.
[764] Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre,* 100.
[765] Qtd. in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 243.
[766] Vöhringer, "Eksperimental'nyye praktiki v nauke i iskusstve," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.

Although Taylorism was primarily oriented toward and welcomed capitalistic production, some Soviet leaders promoted it as a tool to create a socialist working class.

The program of the Science Organization of Labour *(*Nauchnaja organizatsija truda*)* was already proclaimed by Trotsky, Bechterev, and Bogdanov in 1921. The Resolution stated that "the necessary basis for the scientific organisation of labour is the studies and results of psychophysiology, reflexology, hygiene of labour process and human fatigability that makes it possible to comply not only with the requirements of economising production but also the interests of workers."[767] In 1923 in Moscow, the Central Institute of Labour was founded by the poet and revolutionary Alexei Gastev. The aim of the Institute was not only to increase labour efficiency but also to create "the best worker."[768] Therefore, according to Vöhringer, "the principle of 'energy balance of a worker' was the main difference between Soviet NOT and American Taylorism,"[769] because in socialist society, as Bogdanov stated, the proletariat should demonstrate maximum joy through work.

Biomechanics responded to these requirements completely as the program was oriented towards both actors as a new working class and the audience of new proletarians. Meyerhold proclaimed:

> The work of the actor in an industrial society will be regarded as a means of production vital to the proper organization of the labour of every citizen of that society. [...] The methods of Taylorism may be applied to the work of the actor in the same way as they are to any form of work with the aim of maximum productivity. [...] This means that one must not fritter away 11/2–2 hours in making up and putting on one's costume. The actor of the future will work without make-up and wear an overall [*prozodezhda*], that is, a costume designed to serve as everyday clothing yet equally suited to the movements and concepts which the actor realizes on the stage. The Taylorization of the theatre will make it possible to perform in one hour that which requires four at present.[770]

However, the Taylorisation of biomechanics aimed not only to transform the whole theatre system. Instead, like many other avant-garde leaders, Meyerhold examined biomechanics as a method "to achieve the New Man who is capable of any form of labour."[771]

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[767] Vöhringer, "Eksperimental'nyye praktiki v nauke i iskusstve."
[768] Vöhringer, "Genealogiya: garvardskaya psikhotekhnika, nemetskiye pribory i russkiye psikhologicheskiye profili," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.
[769] Ibid.
[770] Qtd. in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 243–5.
[771] Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge," 230.

The body (like) a machine

The machine was one of the main symbols of the 1920s that epitomised the idea of progress. Scholars have focused on "the image of the human-machine hybrid"[772] and "the symbiosis of body and machine [...] the body as machine/motor,"[773] which was widespread in some Western European and Soviet countries in the 1920s and 1930s as this image was directly connected with productivity.[774] Like many other avant-garde artists, Meyerhold was inspired by this vision since modernisation (first of all, industrialization) was considered a significant sign of progress which might "definitely" lead to a better future (for men). In 1922, Meyerhold staged *Velikolepnyy rogonosets* (The Magnanimous Cuckold) by F. Crommelynck (stage design by Lyubov Popova) and *Smert Tarelkina* (Tarelkin's Death) by A. Sukhovo-Kobylin (together with Eisenstein, costumes by Varvara Stepanova). In these two performances, the idea of biomechanics in combination with constructivist stage design principles (Popova's utilitarian construction and Stepanova's uniform-like-constumes) was realised in the most visible way. Speaking about *The Magnanimous Cuckold*, Meyerhold asserted that "there is no doubt that the entire 'Left Theatre' not only dates from this production but to this day bears traces of its influence."[775] Describing the culture of future theatre, Meyerhold noted,

> The communist drama is rooted in a physical culture of theatre that follows the principles of movement. It is based on biomechanics and kinetics in contrast to doubtful principles of psychology as outdated pseudo-science. [...] We need the body culture, the culture of body expression, which develops the only means of artistic production.[776]

Nevertheless, the disciplined body was not the aim but the method. Composed of several exercises, biomechanics had to train actors in principles of behaviour and a way to construct a role, but not the acting itself. Meyerhold criticised theatre directors who used physical culture as the system of actor training, focusing on the body as the goal. This approach indicated the missing complicated character of acting, because "the body is a machine, and the person working it is a machine-operator."[777]

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[772] Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge," 230.
[773] Anson Rabinbach, *The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1.
[774] Ibid., viii.
[775] Qtd. in Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 245.
[776] Meyerhold, "Teatral'nyye listki. O dramaturgii i kul'ture teatra, 1921 g.," in *Stat'i. Pis'ma. Rechi. Besedy. Tom 2*, 28. Transl. from Russian.
[777] Qtd. in Leach, *Revolutionary Theatre*, 100.

This statement signifies the fundamental difference between the avant-garde manifestations and Bolshevik politicians' and scientists' framing of Soviet ideology. For instance, the Central Institute of Labour aimed to achieve "the symbiosis of man and machine [...] robot-like producers with perfectly disciplined minds and bodies."[778] At the same time, as Vöhringer notes, "the artists of the 1920s envisioned the new communist society as a quasi-artistic experiment" and art as the method became a tool "to emancipate the automatic perception of an oppressed worker and to turn him into 'an educated proletarian.'"[779] Changing the modes of perception was the central goal for many Soviet avant-gardists, who soon realised that their interdisciplinary experiments "[could] become a political tool that is not only able to disseminate ideology and propaganda but also to construct society."[780]

Exploring depictions of the body in Soviet posters and biomechanics, Rancière notes that a shift to modernism was a transition "from the paradigm of representation [the poetic regime] to that of a direct performance [the aesthetic regime]."[781] Hence, the avant-garde arts might be "destined to shape a new sense of action and community. [...] They contribute to the construction of the new sensorium."[782] From this perspective, Meyerhold's biomechanics should not train disciplined bodies to incorporate them into the ideology by simply reproducing it. According to Rancière, as the *active* practice in which activity is "the privilege of the free man,"[783] biomechanics aimed to embody

> a direct performance of community [...] It is the acrobat who cares for no efficiency extraneous to his performance. Or it is the new mime, the mechanical mime whose gestures don't imitate the efficiency of the machines but their endless repetitive and meaningless movement.[784]

This might be a reason that, although biomechanics could be considered "in terms of social engineering,"[785] it differed from most methods of the political and scientific programs because it aimed to emancipate both the actor who had to become a free person and the audience who was provoked to see *the thing*.[786] Incidentally, biomechanics was not accepted by the

[778] Hoffmann, "Bodies of Knowledge," 230.
[779] Vöhringer, "Istoriografiya, arkhivnyy material," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.
[780] Ibid.
[781] Jacques Rancière, "Doing or Not Doing Politics, Aesthetics, Performance," in *Thinking-Resisting-Reading the Political: Current Perspectives on Politics and Communities in the Arts*, vol. 2, ed. Anneka Esch-van Kan et al. (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2013), 101.
[782] Ibid., 104.
[783] Ibid., 102.
[784] Ibid., 112–13.
[785] Ibid., 113.
[786] Shklovsky, "Art as Technique".

Bolsheviks since it did not fit in a pattern of ideological manipulation, creating zones of resistance to such a manipulation.

In the 1930s, many avant-gardists were repressed, and some of their methods were turned into means of control and propaganda.[787] This explains why their artistic experiments are often described as utopian programs (of impossibility). However, Vöhringer asks if it would be more productive to investigate political and conceptual causes of the failure of the avant-garde instead of depreciating its value as utopian ideas. She argues that the avant-garde in the Soviet Union "was not a movement of non-executed theories and utopias, instead of experimental practices."[788] Indeed, many of these experimental practices served as political propaganda. For instance, Dziga Vertov, the director of such ideological movies as *Entuziiazm: Symfoniia Donbasu* (Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Donbas, 1931) and *Tri pesni o Lenine* (Three Songs about Lenin, 1934) wrote in 1923 that it was cameras (kinoks, or the Cine Eye) that "make the viewer see in the manner best suited to [camera's] presentation of this or that visual phenomenon."[789] The Cine Eye became the main character, and manipulation might be interpreted as its primary task. Vertov continued: "I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it. Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility. I am in constant motion."[790] However, if we think about this "I" not only in terms of manipulation but also as a provocation to turn a viewer into this "I," it might explain that despite "ideological concordance," Vertov was tolerated by the Soviet authorities without enthusiasm. Perhaps the ideologists saw the potential of the inverse effect of Vertov's films to induce the ability to see. And what would Soviet proletarians see if they could?

5.4. The body of the "Belarusian Revolution." Travelling in translation

The model of the revolutionary theatre, particularly Meyerhold's programs, became canonical for theatres throughout the Soviet Union. If we look at photos from the performances *Days Fuse* by TRAM (Theatre of Working Youth) in Leningrad and *Khudjum* by the Dramatic Theatre of Uzbekistan in 1926, we see almost the same stage design construction with a collective of actors dressed in semi-athletic or working clothes and performing almost the same choreography of gestures and moves, alluding to Meyerhold's biomechanics principles. Until

[787] See, Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade*.
[788] Vöhringer, "Psikhotekhnika v nauke i iskusstve," in *Avangard i psikhotekhnika*.
[789] Dziga Vertov, "'Kinoks. A revolution," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. and transl. Kevin O'Brien and Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 16.
[790] Ibid., 17.

the mid-1930s, allusions to Meyerhold were highly valued. Several theatre directors from non-Russian socialist republics—Les Kurbas in Ukraine, Sandro Akhmeteli in Georgia, and Leŭ Litvinaŭ in Belarus—were called "Meyerholdites" that stressed their leadership in local theatrical scenes.[791] Despite the visual similarities, such a comparison did not refer to any aesthetic program or even a common comprehension of the revolution, which was determined by the very local cultural context. And, while, as Shklovsky mentioned, there were "millions" of amateur groups in Moscow, the theatrical field in the newly formed Byelorussian state was only beginning to institutionalise.

In 1920, the First Belarusian State Theatre (Pieršy Bielaruski Dziaržaŭny Teatr, BDT-1) was officially opened. The foundation of BDT-1 was based on the Minsk Municipal Theatre. Before its opening, there were several theatre groups in Minsk (the Belarusian Theatre, the Belarusian Proletarian Theatre, the Belarusian Soviet Theatre) and, generally, the Belarusian theatre had its own long history[792]. However, BDT-1 was announced as "the first state theatre." Later, the statement that the Belarusian theatre appeared due to the Bolshevist authority and the influence of Russian culture became one of the fundamental arguments for the Soviet historiography to consider Belarusian theatre (like other arts) "peripheral" and "secondary."

In 1921, in Moscow, the Belarusian Drama Studio, which had a Jewish section, was founded to develop the professional skills of actors from Soviet Belarus. More than thirty young people (both amateurs and professionals) got the opportunity to study theatre at one of the cultural centres of the Soviet Union. According to one of the students, Stefania Staniuta (the future People's Artist of the USSR), there was an "intensity and richness, dynamics of art development" concentrated in Moscow at that time.[793] The experimental theatre productions of Alexander Tairov, Mikhail Chekhov, and, especially, Vsevolod Meyerhold had an impact on the students.[794] Biomechanics as part of the educational program was taught by Irina Hold, Meyerhold's daughter. Although the training was not the main direction of the educational process, its influence was strong. The Studio was managed by Valentin Smyshlyaev, a member of Proletkult who worked in different experimental studios. According to Staniuta, Smyshlyaev developed the model of synthetic theatre, but Meyerhold's principles also influenced his

[791] After 1936 when the campaign against formalism started, it became dangerous to reference Meyerhold. Due to the change in the Soviet ideological course, it has borne a negative connotation. The definition 'meyerholdovshchina' referred to the imitation of Meyerhold's methods and then to pseudo-revolutionary and bourgeois styles. Meyerhold was arrested in 1939 and shot within a year.
[792] Francišak Aliachnovič, *Bielaruski teatr* (Vilnius: vyd-nie Bielaruskaha Hramadzianskaha sabrańnia, 1924); Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama.*
[793] Aliaksandar Staniuta, *Stefanija* (Minsk: Bielaruś, 1994), 34. Transl. from Belarusian.
[794] Ibid., 38–9. See also, Piotr Malčanaŭ, *Teatr—majo życcio* (Minsk: Bielaruś, 1984), 39.

performances. For instance, the Belarusian folk drama *Tsar Maksimilian*, his first work with the students, was staged as a circus show—"like circus constructivism. [...] At that time, it was related to revolutionary art, as a search for new forms, a challenge to old traditional principles of art."[795]

In 1926, the Second Belarusian State Theatre (Druhi Bielaruski Dziaržaŭny Teatr, BDT-2) in Viciebsk was founded by the Studio's graduates. The spectacles of the Moscow period (*Tsar Maksimilian* and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) became part of the repertoire. The Viciebsk newspaper announced that it will be "an experimental theatre" with experimental methods of acting.[796] Nevertheless, at the opening, the Chairman of Political Education and Enlightenment of the BSSR Safija Šamardzina (Sofia Shamardina) noted,

> BDT-2 must remember that there is no place for the slogan "art for art's sake" in our proletarian state. The collective must have strong connections with life, must become an educator of the people, like a propagandist of both high and working cultures [...] The theatre must remember that its activities have not only cultural and artistic but also political significance.[797]

This meant that the theatre had to find a balance between experimental (avantgardish) models of theatre and those forms which the local audience perceived as more conventional. Obviously, in "central" cities with dozens of theatres and studios, the field for experiments was broader. In Viciebsk, theatres' aesthetic mode had to correlate with the interests of the local authority, performing, first of all, ideological tasks.

Nevertheless, the idea of "revolutionary art" attracted directors from other Belarusian theatres. In *Kaval-Vajavoda* in 1923 (written and staged by J. Mirovič, BDT-1), the actors' bodies were organised in a coordinated collective movement; they were expressive and disciplined. The stage design was made by Oskar Mariks (Askar Maryks) according to constructivist principles.[798] The actors' bodies were dressed in national costumes because the play was based on a Belarusian folk story. The choreography of the bodies had to signify the revolutionary character of the spectacle. In Molière's *Mieščanin u dvaranstvie* (*Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*) staged in BDT-1 in 1924, Mirovič used other "revolutionising" means.

[795] Staniuta, *Stefanija,* 41.
[796] Qtd. in Andrei Maskvin, *Belaruski teatr 1920–1930-ch. Adabranaja pamiac'* (Minsk: Lohvinau, 2016), 212. Transl. from Belarusian.
[797] Ibid., 217.
[798] Oskar Mariks (1890–1976) was born in Lviv. He graduated from the Academy of Art in Prague. He also studied in Warsaw, Vienna, and Lviv. He came to Minsk in 1920 and was a member of the revolutionary artistic group Pramien (ch. 6.3.). He is considered a founder of the Belarusian school of scenography.

Reorganising the stage architecture, a special platform was built on the proscenium to destroy the division between the stage and spectators (all actors appeared from the audience). In the beginning, a man dressed in Belarusian national costume came to the stage and explained the main principles of the spectacle. He also announced the beginning and the end of each act. The main character, Jourdain, was dressed in a modern suit from the Minsk Sewing Factory Minshvei and studied spelling with the Belarusian grammar written by Jazep Liosik, one of the most significant figures of the Belarusian national movement of 1910–1920. The letter to Marquis Jourdain concluded with the phrase "With Communist greetings."[799]

Following the image of the revolutionary as a direct reference to Bolshevism, which was associated with progress, mechanisation, proletarianization, and efficiency, it might seem that Mirovič's methods were merely an attempt to combine this revolutionary vision (conventionally, Meyerhold's principles) with the local national discourse that was alien to the "truly" revolutionary and avant-gardis theatre. This method of *localisation* might be considered a desire to locate revolutionary principles. Does it signify that the model of the revolutionary theatre—as a travelling idea—lost its primary (avantgardish) sense after being transferred to Soviet Belarus? Was it a formal adaptation of the visual (leftist) code of the revolution, a blank copy of the original, a "displacement,"[800] aiming to adapt the Party's demands for a "truly" revolutionary art? Do we need to differentiate between the revolutionary and the local? Or, did they overlap, creating a hybrid revolutionary mode between different revolutionary projects regarding its "origin point" (ch. 3.1-2.)?

Siadura, in his account of Belarusian theatre history, positions the canonical revolutionary theatre as an extension of Belarusian culture, primarily referencing Russian theatre. He asserts that the development of national forms of representation was a key objective for Belarusian culture. In a study by critic Alexander Voznesensky, Siadura outlined four tendencies, which were "struggling to dominate the experimentation within the Byelorussian Theater."[801] The first model for theatre was the *psychological realm*, which was rooted in Stanislavsky's system of the "art of experiencing" and involved the evolution of a character from internal experience to representation. The model of *aesthetic theory* encompassed a comprehensive concept of theatricality that presented "the truth in terms of theater conventions rather than the truth of life in the real world around it."[802] This was exemplified in performances

[799] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama*, 56–8.
[800] Bachmann-Medick, ed., *The Trans/national Study of Culture*.
[801] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama*, 68.
[802] Ibid., 69.

by Alexander Tairov, Nikolai Evreinov, and productions by Meyerhold before 1917. The third model was *the revolutionary theatre*, which was founded on the adoption of labour principles and focused on the body. Siadura also posits that this form of theatre influenced the use of a screen over the curtain. However, he concluded that it was not more than *a fashionable tendency* in Belarusian theatre. Despite the prevalence of this third model, the Belarusian theatre managed to avoid "the destruction" caused by the (pure) revolutionary theatre because it was of secondary importance.

Siadura posits that the Belarusian theatre was founded on the principles of *synthetic theatre*, a fusion of all three models, with a particular emphasis on the significant role of music inspired by music halls, cabarets, and circuses. Dramaturgy also played a crucial role in the influence of the revolutionary theatre. For instance, *Kastuś Kalinoŭski* (written and staged by Mirovič, stage design by O. Mariks) narrated the story of the Belarusian Uprising of 1863 and was staged in the traditions of psychological theatre. In contrast, *Krasnyja maski (Red mask*, written by Lunacharsky and staged by Mirovič) adhered to constructivist principles (stage design by O. Mariks). According to Siadura, such "adaptation[s]" of classical plays was "the result of the influence of the so-called revolutionary theater, which destroyed all classical styles and models and introduced agitational devices extraneous to art."[803]

Siadura's critical approach to revolutionary art is explained by his nationally oriented perspective on art. He considered theatre a vehicle to develop a national imaginary and "its immediate tasks [...] were connected with national [in a rigid sense] culture."[804] From this perspective, his point of view presented the same conventional ideological program as Bolshevism, in which the regime of the arts should have a mimetic function that represents and promotes a particular political program (in his case, "nationalism"). Therefore, if Soviet theatre historians excluded the theatrical activity of UNOVIS from the history of Belarusian theatre because it did not correlate with the program of socialist and proletarian theatre, these performances were also ignored in Siadura's alternative version, being, from his point of view, "alien" to the Belarusian mode of theatre and art. Nevertheless, Siadura highlights the political meaning of the struggle for a theatrical style at that time which was, from my point of view, also a struggle for the representation of a particular body on the stage. The body of the actor became *a surface* where different concepts, aesthetics, and ideologies of the time overlapped (e.g. *Kaval-Vajavoda*). And there is no doubt that such embodiments were politically

[803] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama*, 58.
[804] Ibid., 67.

motivated. In terms of cultural emancipation, they could be determined as *actions* (Ranciere) since these manifestations allowed Belarusian culture to "emerge into the rest of the world."[805] The very local features turned into *the manifestation of locality,* although these performances were epitomised mainly within the mimetic regime.

This notion of the synthetic might refer to hybridity as a particular mode of negotiation, or even mixing, between cultural and ideological spaces. Nevertheless, as Bachmann-Medick notes, hybridity can also simplify negotiation because it operates through dichotomies—e.g. the self/the other, coloniser/colonised, whilst

> Concepts and theories are *only* generated through travel. [...] The magic word "mobility" is thus, powerless unless the theories and concepts we work with become "localized." [...] Perhaps, we should investigate the routes travelled by the category of hybridity itself with a more critical eye—and hereby reach a point at which the importance of the category of "translation" becomes apparent.[806]

Bachmann-Medick argues for the idea of "concepts in translation" instead of "travelling concepts" that might contribute to the historicization and contextualisation of knowledge. This approach resists understanding translation in terms of travel "from the 'original' to the 'translation.'"[807] According to Andreas Langenohl, it questions "the relationship between what is translated and into what something translated."[808] Therefore, the regime of *in translation* "as a mode of travel"[809] refers to *communication, interaction, and media*[810]. From the perspective of translation rather than travel, the notion of revolutionary art and theatre also assumes a more complicated vision, because there was no singular, primary idea of the revolutionary which — travelling from the centre to the periphery—reflected, transformed, and even colonised local cultural contexts. Instead, it is about a multidimensional mode of communication (like two-way and multilane streets). In other words, it is a matter of understanding a) the local contexts of the revolution (what revolution did happen here); b) the modes of communication between different forms of revolutionary theatre that might result in different but simultaneously

[805] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama*, 40.
[806] Doris Bachmann-Medick, "From Hybridity to Translation. Reflections on Travelling Concepts," in *The Trans/National Study of Culture. A Transnational Perspective,* ed. Doris Bachmann-Medick (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 121, 123.
[807] Doris Bachmann-Medick, "The Trans/National Study of Culture. A Translational Perspective," in *The Trans/National Study of Culture*, 13.
[808] Andreas Langenohl, "Scenes of Encounter: A Translational Approach to Travelling Concepts in the Study of Culture," in *The Trans/National Study of Culture*, 94.
[809] Ibid., 93.
[810] Bachmann-Medick, "The Trans/National Study of Culture," 13

existing models which also interacted and overlapped.

At the same time, the translation mode, as Bachmann-Medick notes, provokes the question of untranslatability, which is located in-between cultures. Or, regarding avant-gardism, this untranslatability alludes precisely to those avant-gardes which are known as the transnational network based more or less on the same aesthetic criteria.

To summarise, despite different perspectives and even topics developed in this section, my primary aim was to challenge the homogenous view of the avant-garde field in the USSR (from aesthetic and ideological points of view). There was no one vision of revolutionary/proletarian/avantgardish/left, but many existed because of the diverse cultural and artistic landscape at that time. The "modes" of revolutionary depended on space/time relationships and the meaning of "revolution" which was determined by local (ideological) situation (ch. 3). All these "terms" and the avant-garde itself were contextually determined. For this reason, we need not a theory to recognise the avant-gardes or differentiate art as an emancipated mode from "ideological agitation" but an approach (like, for example, Ranciere's model) which allows a) for contextualisation; b) for thinking not within a movement but toward particular artwork.

At the beginning of the 1920s, Soviet cultural politics were decentralised (including the policy of korenizatsiya). The local authorities of the Soviet republics had an opportunity to adapt the general program of the Communist Party to regional (revolutionary) needs. As for the arts, the ideas which can be identified as "travelling" (revolution, revolutionary art, left art, etc.) were realised instead in an "in-translation" mode. They did not move *from* and *to* but were in the process of communication and interconnection, resulting in varied (aesthetic) embodiments. Meanwhile, *something untranslatable* appeared in-between—in cracks and fractures—often seized by the dominant cultural narratives (whether by Bolshevism or nationalism). Despite possible local (or national) versions of the avant-gardes, these untranslatable models respond more precisely to the emancipated potential of the avant-gardes (as a transcultural program), which refuse to serve any ideology.

chapter six

The (Un)Performed Avant-Gardes

During the 1920s, less and less space remained for the autonomy of art because the Party intended to bring avant-garde programs under their control following, as Trotsky explained, "the Marxist understanding of the objective social dependence and social utility of art."[811] But the establishment of state control happened sporadically and was not centralised. There was still a field of possibilities for those artists who started as the so-called Soviet avant-garde generation, like, for example, the protagonists of this chapter—Leŭ Litvinaŭ and Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo. However, it was already a time of (hybrid) forms of avant-gardes (as a mode of compromise and negotiation with dominant ideologies). Therefore, I argue that the avant-gardes could not be performed completely, particularly on the "margins" where, as Ahola-Valo explains, artists learn to balance "between two fires," as he called nationally oriented groups and the Bolsheviks (ch. 6.3.). Before I unfold the paths of these two prominent artists, I must explain how it became possible to trace them since it was not enough that these materials merely existed. The chain of encounters, serendipities, and relationships between individuals were needed for archives to speak.

6.1. Discovering archives that (do not) want to tell a story

As was previously mentioned, archives play a particular role in Belarusian studies (like in any "peripheral"/"marginalised" study). Due to the repressions of the 1930s, many documents were burned by their owners or NKVD agents. During the Second World War, archives were moved (whether to Russian cities by the Soviet army or to Germany by Nazis) and remain "lost." Sometimes documents were "lost" because they were not evacuated.[812] Many manuscripts and memoirs remain unpublished and uncatalogued. For instance, according to the list of

[811] Qtd. in Gurjanova, "Avangard i ideologija," 8.
[812] For instance, Lisaŭ says that nobody planned to evacuate the documents from the Viciebsk State Archive when WWII started as they were "less valuable." "Only the archives of NKVD and the Party were moved." *A Talk with Alexander Lisaŭ*. Conducted 30 July 2021. Transl. from Russian.

documents created by Litvinaŭ's son, many materials about his father remain with the family (e.g. photos, letters, and folders titled "cosmopolitism/Stalinism").[813] Some families do not even know *what* they have. When discovering the history of the futurist group Belaruskaja litaraturna-mastackaja kamuna, Viktar Žybul describes how documentation "survived" during the purge of the 1930s. In 1938, the leader of the group, Paŭliuk Šukajla, was arrested and later killed in 1939. His wife hid manuscripts at the button of a laundry basket, where NKVD agents did not find them. After seventy years, Žybul met the poet's descendants in Moscow where they lived and asked about possible materials. They showed him these documents that allowed Žybul to uncover one more page of the history of Belarusian futurism.[814] Many materials are kept in nongovernmental foreign archives, which lack the financial support to describe the collections, like, for example, the Francis Skaryna Belarusian Library and Museum in London, which was founded by Belarusian anti-Soviet immigrants in 1971.[815] Belarusian histories are still waiting to be "discovered".

Accordingly, Leŭ Litvinaŭ's story must begin with the fact that, for many decades, he was known in the public discourse of Belarusian theatre only as the author of the performance *Paŭlinka*, a comedy in two acts written by Kupala in 1912.[816] The comedy was staged in Tomsk in 1944, where BDT-1 (later renamed Janka Kupala Theatre) was evacuated during the Second World War. The performance was shown in Minsk almost immediately after the city was liberated from the Nazi army. Since then, *Paŭlinka* has opened nearly every theatre season and been included in school programs as "a classical (boring) piece." My "discovery" of Litvinaŭ, who I also knew only as *Paŭlinka*'s author, happened in 2017 when I was researching experimental theatre in BSSR of the Thaw period.[817] I found that the Belarusian State Archive-Museum of Literature and Art (Bielaruski Dziaržaŭny Archiŭ-Muziej Litaratury i Mastactva, BDAMLM) held several items of documents about Litvinaŭ, including an original manuscript by his son Igor Litvinov, which was unpublished, and, therefore, practically unknown even to local historians. This manuscript was a great surprise for me because it placed Litvinaŭ almost

[813] When describing the materials, Igor Litvinov begins with the order of the table boxes where folders are arranged thematically. He also mentions the folders and place (BDAMLM) where the materials should be transferred.
[814] Žybul, "Futurystyčnaja mara belarusaŭ," 107.
[815] The library's archive includes documents of organisations and personalities in the Belarusian diaspora from around the world from different historical periods. Due to a lack of resources, most of these materials still need to be catalogued and described. The same happens with the materials of the Belarusian Museum named Ivan Luckievič in Vilnius (founded in 1921).
[816] Tania Arcimovich, "Spiektakĺ Paŭlinka (1944–2021) Ĺva Litvinava jak prastora baraćby za pamiać," *Studia Białorutenistyczne* (2022): 159-175.
[817] Tania Arcimovich, *Belarusskij eksperimentalnyj teatr v period ottepeli. Mezhdu modernizmom i avangardom* (Vilnius: European Humanities University, 2020).

at the centre of the experimental theatre field in the 1920s and 1930s. I contacted his grandson Rustem Litvinov, who provided me with additional information and sources. When I started my PhD research, one more serendipitous event happened. The Belarusian scholar, Inna Gerasimova, a specialist on the history of Jews in Belarus who now resides in Wiesbaden, called me when she found out that I was interested in Litvinaŭ's biography. She told me about her meeting with Litvinaŭ's family in Kazan a few years ago. With the permission of Litvinaŭ's son's wife, she took the family archive and promised that all documents would be transferred to Minsk after she completed the research. She asked me to do this because, due to her age, she could not travel such a long distance. After finishing my work with the archive (with her and Litvinaŭ's grandson's permission), which included letters, autobiographies, notes, his son's manuscripts, and others, I transferred these hundreds of pages to the BDAMLM in Minsk.[818]

Despite a lack of documents about Litvinaŭ's early artistic years (1910s and 1920s—the period I was most interested in), his story allowed me to develop the idea of unperformed and contextualised avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus. Moreover, the gaps in his story provoked plenty of questions about how history can be written or imagined through correlation and analyses of primary and secondary sources with the context of space and time (Pollock's approach, ch. 4.3.).

The same approach (and good fortune) was necessary for working with materials about Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo, whose twisted biographical route represents the complexity of the political and cultural situation after the October Revolution in Soviet Belarus. From the perspective promoted by James Clifford,[819] one might say that Ahola-Valo's biography is an "ideal" subject because it represented "a collective experience in some (extra)ordinary way."[820] Documents about Ahola-Valo's life are dispersed across different locations where he lived and worked (mainly in Viciebsk, Minsk, Odesa, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Helsinki, Hämeenlinna, and Malmo). The main complication for researchers is language because the documents are written in Russian, Belarusian, Finnish, and Swedish. It is a matter of not just local bureaucracy. The essential corpus of the materials includes notes, diaries, and documents written in one of these four languages Ahola-Valo knew well. Thousands of records are kept

[818] Since I worked with documents from the family archive and do not know how they are catalogued in BDAMLM, I mention only the type of document and family archive as a source.
[819] James Clifford, "'Hanging Up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners': Ethnobiographical Prospects," 1978, in *Biography in theory: Key texts with commentaries*, ed. W. Hemecker and E. Saunders (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH., 2017).
[820] Edward Saunders, "Provincializing the Biographical Subject: James Clifford's Manifesto for a 'Less Centred' Biography" in *Biography in theory: Key texts with commentaries*, ed. W. Hemecker and E. Saunders. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH., 2017), 198.

in the Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo Foundation (AAVF) in Hämeenlinna, founded in the 1990s. Additionally, there are tens of film cassettes of interviews Ahola-Valo gave in Finnish before his death. These materials became the foundation for Finnish scholars to write biographical books about the artist, and some of his diaries were also published.[821] Nevertheless, because of the different languages Ahola used, Finnish scholars who manage the collection cannot read all the documents. And if they can, like Olga Ruoho, they do not have direct access to the documents in Belarus and Russia which are necessary to scrutinise the social and cultural contexts.[822] For this reason, the archive is partly (because of the Finnish language) inaccessible to Belarusian scholars.

Therefore, the sub-chapter about Ahola-Valo became possible when I gained access to several sources. The first part comprises the materials I collected during my research trip to Hämeenlinna in March 2022. I spent several days in the Ahola-Valo Foundation archive, going through the tens of boxes with thousands of pages, guided by Risto Suvanto, the head of the archive and a close friend of Ahola-Valo. (I worked with the documents in Russian and Belarusian; Fig. 10) It was one more "serendipitous" moment since the Ahola-Valo Foundation is a private initiative and it was the personal decision of Suvanto and the scholars Saana Saarinen and Olga Ruoho to contact me, answer my questions, and share their materials.[823] Another source of this chapter is Saarinen's publication *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria* (*Belarus before Stalin's terror*), which is based on Ahola-Valo's interviews and memoirs regarding his life in Soviet Belarus. Valo's personal perception of the events allows for the reconstruction of not only the missing parts of his story but also the ideological "framework" of those years. This additional perspective extends the existing narratives about Ahola-Valo's traces in Soviet Belarus written by Belarusian scholars. In the first place, it is necessary to mention Ludmila Nalivaika's publications. She was one of the first scholars to discover Ahola-Valo's heritage at the beginning of the 1990s (after the collapse of the USSR when it became possible to travel abroad) and identified his works of the 1920s as an essential part of

[821] See e.g., *Ahola-Valo, Aleksanteri: Koulupojan päiväkirjat, 1-7* (Hämeenlinna: Elpo, 1988–2020); Saana Saarinen, *Vallankumouksen suomalainen silminnäkijä* (Hämeenlinna: Elpo, 2017); Saana Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*; Risto Suvanto, *Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo ja viisas rakkaus* (Hämeenlinna: Elpo, 1994) and others.

[822] At this point, the article "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen" by Olga Ruoho who lives in Tartu and has been working on Ahola-Valo's biography for many years is the most multidimensional, in terms of sources the scholar refers to and the ways of interpretation.

[823] I worked with two corpora of documents. One is the folders and pages which are not catalogued and kept in boxes. I will give a general description of the file. Another part is the materials which are digitised and titled. In this case, I use the original title of the file. For instance, see the next footnote.

Belarusian culture.[824] Years later, Anton Dzianisaŭ explored the documents in the National Archive of the Republic of Belarus and reconstructed the story of the project "The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind" built in Minsk in 1930. My work with the archives in Viciebsk provided me with additional materials regarding Ahola-Valo's stay in Viciebsk. Though the artist left many versions of his biography, memoirs, notes, and explanations, the documents from these institutions are necessary to examine the complicated relationship between the artist and his memory. Sometimes, he confused dates and details or told stories that sound rather fictional.[825] The boundary between real and imaginary is diffuse.

Nevertheless, more than access to these documents was needed to unfold these stories. An intersection of different micro-events guided me to a particular point. The methodology, as an intimate corporeal mode of communication between the materials and me, was essential and involved more than simply reading them. As Anette Hoffmann argues, work with audio materials "explores our current understanding of the colonial archive" as it troubles the privileged position of voicing and its value.[826] But in terms of hierarchy, listening also refers to another kind of relationship with archives—not as an active speaker/interpreter but as a sensible listener. "Listening to history" also means metaphorical action, or experience, which I tend to make my prime orientation.

6.2. Leŭ Litvinaŭ (1899–1963). On the edge of the revolutionary theatre

> My whole life has been spent in Belarusian theatre-building and it certainly worries me how I am presented in history. I would like the student to answer the question about directing Belarusian theatres in his lifetime and after its end to say a few warm words about me who has already invested 30 years of hard work in Belarusian theatre and has done something useful even by the current account of historians—an account which in many ways does not correspond to the truth of life and is often ill-intentioned.
>
> Leŭ Litvinaŭ[827]

Leŭ Litvinaŭ (original name Leib Mordukhovich Gurevich) was born into a modest Jewish

[824] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.2_26-46B, Venkielteksti30A.
[825] For instance, how he saved a group of soldiers from the horde of wolves in the winter of 1920 (in Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria,* 53-6) or his trip to Valday hills in 1921 (ibid., 144-65).
[826] Anette Hoffmann, *Listening to Colonial History. Echoes of coercive knowledge production in historical sound recordings from Southern Africa* (Basel: Erschienen, 2023), 34.
[827] From a letter to his wife, 1949. The family archive. Transl. from Russian.

family in Minsk in 1889. His parents—Sofia and Mordukh—got a divorce in the early 1920s as his mother could no longer tolerate her husband's infidelity. (Mordukh died in the mid-1930s; Sofya perished in the Minsk ghetto in 1942.) Litvinaŭ first studied at a cheder—a traditional primary religious school for Jewish boys. As his son Igor notes, "If the Revolution hadn't happened, my father's dream would have been limited to a place of a pharmacist."[828] Like Chagall, Litvinaŭ was enabled by the October Revolution to change his "Jewish" path. In 1934, he said:

> Maybe, at this moment somewhere in a Minsk drugstore, I would be selling castor oil for 10 kopecks [...] and this vocation of mine, who I am now, would perish if the wheel of history were to follow the same direction. But the proletariat led by the Party had turned this wheel radically, and together with the young republic, I represent what you know about me.[829]

During the First World War, Litvinaŭ moved to Balashov in Saratov province to be with his aunt, who made clothes for a gymnasium director's wife. Therefore, young Litvinov could continue his education, and he became interested in theatre. He experienced the Red October in Balashov and returned to Minsk in 1918. Soon after that, he was appointed to the theatre department of Minsk Narkompros. At the same time, Litvinaŭ was involved in amateur theatre groups; in particular, he ran Turgenev's theatre studio, where he staged his first play *Ogni Ivanovoj nochi* (The Midsummer Night's Lights) by Herman Zuderman. He took the name Litvinaŭ (Litvinov) from Turgenev's novel *Dym* (Smoke) as it was the protagonist's name.[830] At that time, he began to write poems and plays. In 1919, Litvinaŭ became a member of the Belrabis (the Belarusian section of the Trade Union of Art) board and managed the theatre section of the LitBel art department. Igor Litvinov remembers that

> only in those turbulent years when the old was being destroyed and the new and unknown were being built, a 20-year-old youth from a poor social background could get this job, without skills or knowledge but talented with an exuberant flight of fancy and enormous energy.[831]

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[828] Igor and Rustem Litvinovs, *Khronika Litvinovykh* (Kazan: Raketa, 2018), 22. Transl. from Russian.
[829] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.128. Transl. from Russian.
[830] The Russian writer Ivan Turgenev wrote the novel *Smoke* in 1867, after the abolishment of serfdom (krepostnoe pravo) and the Uprising of 1863 in the Russian Empire. The novel was criticised by Russian authorities, nobility and Slavophiles for its "anti-Russian" attitude since the author stated (through the voices of the characters) many controversial ideas and doubted the political programs proposed by either revolutionists or conservators. Being not directly involved in these political debates, the main protagonist Litvinov came to Western Europe to learn new agriculture technology to bring them to his father's farm in Russia.
[831] Litvinovs, *Khronika Litvinovykh*, 23.

Due to the Polish-Soviet War, Litvinaŭ moved to Ekaterinburg, where he continued his theatre activity. In 1921, he returned to Minsk—"as a futurist: he had hair down to his shoulders, painted his lips and wore fringed trousers."[832] He collaborated with different theatre studios and staged mass performances—such as *Gapovshchina* and *Trud i kapital* (Labour and capital). The latter was created together with Beitler and Mirovič, who headed BDT-1 soon after. *Trud i kapital* was performed on a cycle track, involving almost all the city's amateur theatre studios. It was based on Mayakovsky's poems and the slogans of OKNA ROSTA (ch. 5), which described how the Red Army defeated the White and Polish armies. The performance also included pantomime and revolutionary songs[833]; in the end, a wooden statue of the "Capital" was burned.[834] In the Karl Marx Club in Minsk, Litvinaŭ founded the group "Sinyaya bluza", organising cabaret-like evenings based on his texts. During the first post-revolutionary years, he staged more than ten performances, including, *Revizor* (The Government Inspector) by Gogol, *Zhan i Madlena* (Les Mauvais bergers) by Mirbeau, and *Tsygany* and *Poltava* by Pushkin. Some of them were based on his own scripts—*Perepolokh na tom svete* (Trouble in the world beyond), *Trest reznikov* (*Rescuers trust*), *10 dney, kotoryye potryasli trest* (10 Days that Shook the Trust), and others.

In 1923–1926, he studied in the Jewish section of the Belarusian Drama Studio in Moscow (ch. 5.3.). Founded in 1922, this section aimed to prepare a company for the Jewish theatre in Minsk and was managed by the director Mikhail Rafalsky.[835] Except for acting training, Litvinaŭ (together with fellow students Viktor Golovchiner, Benedikt Nord, and

[832] Ibid., 25. His son mentions that Litvinaŭ led a group of Minsk futurists. Still, there is no more information about the existence of such a group in the city at that period. Probably, describing him as a futurist, his son meant the eccentric lifestyle of his young father. Or, there might be a small group of several persons, e.g. Litvinaŭ's friends, who announced themselves as futurists to be "in fashion." According to the Belarusian literary historian Viktar Žybul, the discourse of literary avant-gardes was formed in Soviet Belarus in the mid-1920s. Since Russian futurism as a phenomenon was split into several movements already, there might be that futurism in Belarus was rather associated with different experimental forms of literature. Viktar Žybuĺ, "Avanhardysckija napramki ŭ kantekscie ŭschodnieslavianskich litaraturnych suviaziaŭ 20–30-ch hh," *Viesnik BDU*, no. 3 (2003): 3–8. The same interpretation of Futurism was in Ukrainian literature. For instance, as Shkandrij mentions that to be a futurist alluded to a style of "self-promotion, self-indulgence, and egotism" at those times. Myroslav Shkandrij, "The Rape of Civilization: Recurrent Structure in Myroslav Irchan's Prose," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 25 (2000), 67.

[833] Alieś Esakoŭ, "Tvory Majakoŭskaha na scene," in *Majakoŭski ŭ Bielarusi*, ed. J.A. Sadoŭski (Minsk: Dziaržaŭnaje vydaviectva BSSR, 1957), 49.

[834] Denisov, "Voyennyy parad i politkarnaval," 75.

[835] Mikhail (Moshe-Aharon) Rafalsky was born in Kyiv. In Kharkiv, he founded the theatre Unzer Winkl (Our corner) performed in Yiddish. The theatre came to Belarus during WWI and stayed in Viciebsk. After the October Revolution, Rafalsky came to Minsk. He headed the Jewish section of the Belarusian dramatic studio, and then BelGOSET. In 1934, he was granted Honoured Artist of BSSR. In 1937, he was arrested (as "a Polish spy") and shot.

Abram Eisenberg, future well-known theatre directors) became a production assistant in the studio's spectacles. According to Gerasimova, the experience of working with Moscow theatre directors who were known for their different artistic styles was a milestone of professionalisation for these young directors.[836] Litvinaŭ worked with Aleksei Dikiy, Boris Glagolin, and Vasily Sakhnovski. As Igor Litvinov notes, from that period, his father assimilated the techniques of left theatre (Glagolin, Hold, Meyerhold, Vakhtangov) and Stanislavsky's system. He tended to theatricality and spectacularity while simultaneously underscoring the significance of theatre's social orientation.[837] In 1926 in Minsk, the studio's Jewish graduates founded the Yiddish-speaking Belarusian State Jewish Theatre (BelGOSET). As Bemporad points out, in contrast to Moscow GOSET, whose repertoire was based on classical Jewish literature, the theatre in Minsk "came under the influence of the extreme left proletarian culture," staging texts "by contemporary Soviet writers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike ... [hence] BelGOSET distanced itself from Jewish themes."[838] Litvinaŭ joined the company (as an actor and director).

In 1927, Litvinaŭ staged the performance *Fuenta avehuna* by Lope de Vega, which became emblematic both for the director and the theatre (Fig. 4-5). Alexander Tyshler created the stage design, and it was the artists' first scenography before he became well-known for his avantgardish style. The performance was highly rated at the All-Union Theatre Olympics in Moscow in 1930. The theatre critic Mendel Model identified Litvinaŭ's style as "synthetic theatre" describing it as "a combination of staging and acting," music and visuality, "dance and physical elements, light, and make-up."[839] Like in his early works, Litvinaŭ remade the play. He wrote new episodes and cut others, and this became a significant element of his method. He called the process "reassembl[ing] the play."[840] As the scholar Maria Lipatova underscores, Litvinov *imagined by scenarios.*[841]

The next performance *Jim Kuperkop* by Samuil Godiner (stage design by A. Tyshler, Fig. 6) was based on a story of confrontation between American capitalism and the labour movement. It was staged as a political pamphlet in constructivist stage design in which the "ideal" capitalist worker, Jim Kuperkop, was personified through a mannequin in opposition

[836] Inna Gerasimova, "Rezhisserskaya shkola belorusskogo GOSETa," in *Natsional'nyy teatr v kontekste mnogonatsional'noy kul'tury*, ed. A. A. Kolganova (Moscow: RGBI, 2018), 73.
[837] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.115–116.
[838] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 74.
[839] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.101.
[840] Lev Litvinov, "V evrejskoj gosudarstevennoj studii," *Trybuna mastactva* 8, 13. Transl. from Russian.
[841] Maria Lipatova, "Istoriya podgotovki spektaklya "Ovechiy istochnik" v BelGOSETe: Osmerkin i Tyshler," *Natsional'nyy teatr v kontekste mnogonatsional'noy kul'tury,* 103.

to a living worker who represented the "participant of the communist movement."[842] Igor Litvinov identified *Jim Kuperkop* as his father's most "leftist" work that might stress the very formalist style of the performance.[843] Although, as Modell noted, there were "elements of the influence of expressionism, formalist admiration for the beauty of American skyscrapers, foxtrots, and *homantrotaŭ,*[844] of the urbanism of a big capitalist city," it did not depreciate the significance of the performance.[845] In those years, Litvinaŭ founded the Jewish travelling theatre (1929–1932), performing productions all over the country. The first version of his most significant and debatable performance—*La Jacquerie* by Prosper Mérimée—was staged here.[846] In 1934, the performance was reconstructed and developed in BDT-1 (stage design by Meer Axelrod, Fig. 7).[847]

Therefore, when Litvinaŭ came to BDT-1 in 1932, he was one of the most significant figures of Belarusian Soviet theatre and well-known as an actor in BelGOSET. He wrote theoretical articles and reviews which were published mainly in Jewish magazines. The fact that Litvinov was invited to BDT-1 shows that the authority of the BSSR appreciated him since every such assignment was politically motivated. In 1934, the Deputy Head of Narkompros BSSR Dunets noted:

> We took Comrade Litvinov as a great, experienced worker with a school and great culture. It is what [BDT-1] needed. [...] We know Litvinov's mistakes in the past and it's our fault that we didn't remind him about it often enough.[848]

More likely, Dunets meant *Jim Kuperkop*, for which Litvinaŭ was criticised. Nevertheless, as the director accepted his "mistake," the authority believed that he could reform the theatre, which, from the ideological point of view, was "in crisis."

Litvinaŭ came to BDT-1 to replace Mirovič, who led the theatre for almost ten years and was highly rated by Moscow critics. In 1930, *Izvestija* (News) newspaper reported that

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[842] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.102. Transl. from Belarusian.
[843] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.121.
[844] Probably, "homantrotaŭ" (homantroty) is the author's metaphor for Belarusian "homan" ("tumult") and English "trot."
[845] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.103.
[846] In detail, Vladimir Maltsev, "Zhakeriya" P. Merime v stsenicheskoy peredelke L'va Litvinova," in *Natsional'ny teatr v kontekste mnogonatsional'noy kul'tury: arkhivy, biblioteki, informatsiya* (Moscow: RGBI, 2018), 90-105.
[847] Tyshler was one of the most productive artists of BelGOSET. However, some performances were designed by other artists who related to avant-gardism (constructivism), e.g. Meer Axelrod, Alexander Labas, Solomon Gershov, and Issachar Ber Ryback.
[848] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.19. Transl. from Russian.

BDT-1 became "a very bright revolutionary theatre. [...] The years of study are already behind when ethnographic plays and classics, Russian and West-European, were staged. Now the theatre is definitely taking up new Belarusian drama, responding to the demands of the era of renovation."[849] Despite a leading role in the theatre and an attempt to follow a changeable and mutable political course, Mirovič had to leave BDT-1 and take a position at the Theatre of Work Youth in Homiel.

The primary reason for this was the anti-nationalist (*anty-nacdemaŭskaja*) campaign in the BSSR (and other non-Russian Soviet republics) which began at the end of the 1920s.[850] The first Secretary of KP(b) of the BSSR, Konstantin Gey, stated that "local Belarusian chauvinism is epitomised [...] in what is known as a national-democratic movement [which] struggles for capitalistic reconstruction and is oriented on the West."[851] These reports resulted in a chain of actions to discover any demonstration of nationalism in art, theatre, literature, and science. Some artists and authors were merely criticised, others were fired, and Belarusian art and culture educational programs were removed from schools and universities.

The campaign culminated with the fabricated case of the Union for Liberation of Belarus (1930) in which dozens of scientists and cultural leaders were charged with treason, arrested, and exiled. Janka Kupala was one of the artists called "an ideologist" of "the Union." He did not admit guilt and attempted to commit suicide. This fact was discussed during a closed meeting of the Buro of the Central Committee of KP(b) of the BSSR. His attempted suicide was considered "a form of polit.[ical] protest against the struggle with a counter-revolut[ionary] organisation."[852] The participants of the meeting ruled that Kupala and others had to prepare public statements to blame those who were arrested and the national-democratic ideology in general. The so-called "penitential letter" was one of the most widespread "genres" during the Great Purges and later. In a few weeks, *Zviazda* newspaper published an article by Kupala in which he admitted his mistakes. He concluded:

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[849] Qtd. in BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.39, l.9. Transl. from Russian.

[850] As a symbolic point for its departure in theatre, historians call the range of public debates about the dominant style which were titled "Teatralnyja dyskusii" (Discussions about Theatre). The main issue was how much theatre could remain "national" in terms of its proletarian agenda. (In detail, Siadura, "Dolia belaruskae kultury pad savetami," 80–2; Maskvin, *Belaruski teatr 1920–1930-ch*.) Soon, many of those who supported the idea of "Belarusianness" were arrested, exiled, or even shot (M. Zarecki, T. Hlybocki/U.Siadura, Z. Žylunovič, and others).

[851] Siadura, "Dolia belaruskae kultury pad savetami," 82.

[852] Qtd. in Vital Skalaban and Viačaslaŭ Seliameneŭ, eds. *Kupala i Kolas, vy nas hadavali.* Dakumenty i matėryjaly, u dzvjuch knihach. Vol. 1. 1909-1939 (Minsk: Litaratura i Mastactva, 2010), 127-128. Transl. from Russian.

> Breaking categorically and irrevocably, ideologically and organizationally, with Belarusian national-democracy, as with some morbid dream that captured me for many years of my conscious life, I sincerely wish that this bitter experience of mine will serve as a science for that part of the Belarusian intelligentsia, which still has not completely freed itself from the national-democratic husk, which has not finally come to the conviction that only by working under the leadership of the Communist Party, this vanguard of the working class, only by devoting its energies to socialist construction, will it not be marked by life as a disgusting reminder of the slave past. All the strength—to the socialist construction on the industrial and collective farm soil of Soviet Socialist Belarus, blooming with new fiery colours![853]

The "purges" also happened in the BDT-1. Mirovič's performances that referred to Belarusian history (or, as it was called, *idealised the past of Belarus*) were removed from the repertoire. He was accused of discrepancy with the course of the Party and, therefore, despite all his achievements, had to be replaced. From an article in *Rabochij* (Worker) newspaper in 1934:

> Litvinov came to the BDT-1 at that time when the theatre was lagging far behind the tasks set by the rapid growth of socialist construction, at that time when the theatre was largely under the influence of nationalist trends.[854]

From the Bolshevik's point of view, Litvinaŭ who was "far" from Belarusian national programs, perfectly fit the role of a new leader of the national theatre. He was already a "Soviet Belarusian Jew" (Bemporad), who, like many others, accepted the revolution and the Soviet system as the only "option to become part of its elite and open the path to potential success in Soviet society. But success had a price [...] those who did not conform to the views and codes of belief of the new Soviet system would suffer the consequences."[855] Evidently, Litvinaŭ was very aware of what was happening around him. In 1934, during a discussion about *Žakieryja* when his colleagues attacked him, Litvinaŭ explained,

> When I joined the theatre, I set myself the task of restructuring the theatre. In the political field (in terms of repertoire selection) I did not plan any restructuring because the theatre, after the Party shattered *natsdemov* [national democrats], was on the right track. From year 28, the

[853] In Smaliančuk, ed. *Historyja Bielarusi k. XVIII- pačatku XXst. u dakumientach i materyjalach*, 112. Transl. from Belarusian.
[854] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.33, l.1. Transl. from Russian.
[855] Bemporad, *Becoming Soviet Jews*, 3–4.

> theatre started on the road of Soviet themes. [...] What was left for me to do in the ideological and political field? To uproot the remnants of *nacdemovshchina* and consolidate the basic line of the Soviet repertoire. [...] The creative method needed a radical overhaul and that was my programme.[856]

Litvinaŭ still believed in the autonomy of art. Sincerely inspired by the vision of theatre as a *kommuna*, he tried to involve actors in the work process and emphasised the role of self-education. The actress Galina Makarova wrote, "Who were we without Litvinov? He accustomed us to a book instead of cards."[857] In the following years, Litvinaŭ staged several plays at BDT-1: *Placdarm* (The Battle Zone) by Myroslav Irchan, *Baćkaŭščyna* (The Fatherland) by Kuźma Čorny, *Nedarasl* (The Minor) by Denis Fonvizin, *Kaniec siabroŭstva* (The End of Friendship) by Kandrat Krapiva, and *Žakieryja* (La Jacquerie, scènes féodales) by Merimee. *Žakieryja* became one of the iconic performances in his biography. However, it was the main reason that Litvinaŭ was accused of formalism in 1936 when the article "Muddle Instead of Music" in *Pravda* newspaper launched a campaign against formalism throughout the Soviet Union. A special discussion took place in BDT-1, aimed at judging a self-critical analysis of the whole repertoire of the theatre. Nevertheless, Litvinaŭ turned into "object number one" of this critique. In his performances, in particular, in *Žakieryja*, his colleagues found "hostile" elements they called—"*meyerkhol'dovshchina*" (a link to Meyerhold) i "*sinebluznichestvo*" (a similarity to the "Blue Blouses") that already referred to a pseudo (or even counter)-revolutionary style.[858]

Nonetheless, it seemed that *Žakieryja* was merely an excuse. As the transcription of the discussion in 1934 shows, even the process of its preparation caused resistance among most of the actors, who did not understand or did not accept Litvinaŭ's method and style, calling him a dictator. The head of Narkom for Education of BSSR Chernushevich noted "the unhealthy atmosphere" around the director: "There is a mood to drive Litvinov out."[859] Some colleagues defended him, for example, the director of Maxim Gorky Russian Theatre, A. Rozhkovsky, who concluded: "There is a danger in this discussion that the fight against formalism can turn into the fight against any form in theatre; however, there can be no theatre without form."[860] Trying to escape repression, Litvinaŭ was the first one to call his performances "mistaken."

[856] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.569, l.2. Transl. from Russian.
[857] Qtd. in Gerasimova, "Rezhiserskaja shkola," 78.
[858] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.570, l.24–25.
[859] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, s.17. Transl. from Russian.
[860] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.570, l.35. Transl. from Russian.

In all these transcriptions, it is almost impossible to find any reference to the political reality of the time. On the one hand, one person who made a transcription obviously censored it; on the other hand, people censored themselves. One must read *between* the lines to understand the tension and atmosphere of anxiety and fear, which more likely dominated. Nevertheless, Litvinaŭ attempted to rebuff and even claim "common sense." In 1936, he pointed out,

> The important thing is to get the artist to change his work and his method, not out of fear, not because of administrative pressure or even faith in the authority of the critics, but so that the artist can reflect internally on what has been done that he himself wants to do differently. Then that would be a realignment. We don't need a frightened and stunned Shostakovich, scurrying around the piano keyboard in search of realistic keys. We need Shostakovich who has been taught a great lesson by the Party, who has told him he is talented, but who has lost his way and gone over to the wrong side. I want to believe that Shostakovich understood that.[861]

Considering this and other "statements," it is significant to keep in mind "the background." More likely, Litvinaŭ's claim was not like Shostakovich who had to accept his "mistakes" but a subversive atmosphere of persecution which made any art completely impossible.

In 1938, Meyerhold's theatre in Moscow was closed. Two years later, he was shot, and it became clear that any association with his name carried a death sentence. In 1937 in the BSSR the culmination of repressions against artists, writers, poets, and scientists occurred on the night of 29–30 October when more than a hundred were shot. There is no official statement why and when exactly Litvinaŭ left BDT-1. In his autobiography, he wrote that he worked in the Opera and Ballet Theatre in Minsk (1938–1940) and the Jewish Theatre in Kyiv (1940–1941). During the Second World War, he was evacuated to Sverdlovsk and led the local theatre, staging agitspectacles of anti-war and anti-Fascist characters. Soon, he joined BelGOSET in Novosibirsk. In 1943, in Kolpashevo, a small city in the Tomsk region (probably, during a tour across the district), he wrote a poem called "Privet, Narymu!..."(My regards to Narym) in which he praised the Soviet authorities, emphasising the historical role of Stalin: "Be healthy, father! Be healthy—the terror of enemies! / The cry is rushing: 'Be healthy, our STALIN!'"[862] At that time, "repentance" and praise were the only ways to survive and stay in the profession. Almost every poet and writer who survived the Great Purge wrote such "texts."

[861] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.570, l.13. Transl. from Russian.
[862] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.10. Transl. from Russian.

A year later, Litvinaŭ was invited to the Janka Kupala Theatre, which had been evacuated to Tomsk. After the war, the theatre returned to Minsk. Although officially Litvinaŭ was appointed as an artistic director, his position was rather "secondary."[863] During the following years, Litvinaŭ staged more than ten plays and ran the theatre studio. At the end of the 1940s, there a new campaign against formalism began alongside a wave of anti-Semitism (known as the anti-cosmopolitan campaign). In 1948, Solomon Mikhoels, the artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater, who served as the chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee during the Second World War, was killed in the centre of Minsk. A year later, BelGOSET was closed. Due to vicious articles and reports, Litvinaŭ—as "a formalist"—had to leave the Janka Kupala Theatre again. His son wrote that "one had to live at that time to understand what such identification meant then."[864] He quoted his father's letters: "It is no longer possible to live and work in the existing environment. [...] I am in despair, I am losing strength in this unbearable atmosphere of anger."[865] The campaign did not lead to fatal consequences. Litvinaŭ was not repressed and not even deprived of awards (in 1934, he was awarded the title of Honoured Artist of the BSSR; in 1946—Honoured Worker of Arts of the BSSR). He moved to Kazan, where he headed the Kazan Dramatic Theatre. In 1953, Litvinov became an Honoured Artist of the Tatar ASSR. He never came back to Belarus and died in 1963.

"On the edges" of the Revolutionary theatre

There are only a few publications that focus mainly on the late period of Litvinaŭ's biography. Despite his prolific activities after the Russian Revolution and during the 1920s, there are almost no documents that would allow the reconstruction of those years in detail. We can only speculate about what kind of texts he wrote, what performances he staged, how he adapted or assimilated the ideas of left theatre, and what his vision of revolutionary art was. Describing those years, his son notes,

> Dreams about theatre ... a motley mix ... He followed the spirit of youthful rebellion and young rebelliousness that pervaded the musty life of urban philistinism ... hence his left-oriented form,

[863] In his 1950 letter to one of the official services, he asked about improving living conditions as he and his family were still living in a hotel in Minsk, having moved there in 1944 ("A letter to Abrasilov," Litvinovs family archive).
[864] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, s.11.
[865] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.12.

emphatically satirical acuity and the agitational character of his first productions.[866]

Litvinaŭ's professional formation began in the Jewish section of the Belarusian dramatic studio in Moscow, where he tried different aesthetics and methods. He was a production assistant on *Plutni Skapena* (*The Impostures of Scapin*) by Molière, which was staged "under the influence of Meyerhold's biomechanics and *Turandot* by Vakhtangov."[867] The studio's next performance, *Venetsianskiy kupets* (*The Merchant of Venice*) by William Shakespeare, was realised by the principles of Stanislavsky's psychological theatre. Litvinaŭ promoted the idea of theatre as a spectacle independent of literature. For every performance, he created his own script. The performative structure, the actors' bodies, scenography, and music were means for creating a performance that was equally "synthetic action." Theatricality and the grotesque played an essential role for Litvinaŭ. It was one of the reasons that he failed to transform the style of the BDT-1, which was mostly based on psychological theatre. In 1934, he noted:

> My attempts at referring to [grotesque] failed during the rehearsals ... There was some kind of fear of being ridiculous, unwillingness to understand the tasks and resistance. The bourgeois character of the actor regarding the form, philistinism, and a fear of anything new showed up.[868]

As mentioned above, *Žakieryja* was one of the most significant and controversial of Litvinaŭ's performances in BDT-1. Litvinaŭ identified it as "a big and abrupt turn" both for BDT-1 and himself.[869] He deconstructed the original text, adding new monologues and songs. According to his scenario, the text was translated into Belarusian in the form of prose and free verse. Therefore, it turned into a new artwork, telling the story of the peasant rebellion 1358 in France as a heroic and romantic struggle for freedom and justice to pave the way to a new fair world. Litvinaŭ created a particular character—Jannet, a country woman who became the voice of the revolution and the memory of its victims. During rehearsals, he changed the structure, transformed the scenography (adding or removing details), and proposed new *mise-en-scenes* that the actors often did not accept—as if they could not keep pace with the changes. According to Litvinaŭ, he aimed to create *a poem* on the stage. The spectacle was based on *music* as a mix of tempo, rhythm, and actors' actions. Outlining the rebellious people as the protagonists, he

[866] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.108.
[867] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.97.
[868] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.569, l.2. Transl. from Russian.
[869] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.569, l.6.

used synchronisation to turn a group of actors into one collective character, which Malcaŭ identifies as "a solid entity," whose symbolic gestures created a visual (plastic) rhythm of the rotated scenes—"like poetic tropes."[870] The performance became a challenge for the actors to manage their bodies on the stage. Litvinaŭ's assistant Leŭ Rachlienka stated that "before this work, the actor followed the body, *Žakieryja* allowed this to change."[871]

Despite political pressure and a lack of artistic freedom, all these details disclose Litvinaŭ's attempt to emancipate theatre from the literary-based approach. Litvinaŭ's synthetism was more than a simple combination of different media. Instead, he created a performance in close communication between media, going beyond the mode of representation and shifting the focus to embodied action. However, he failed, or, more precisely, he could not succeed completely. Firstly, he needed the actors to follow and trust him, as in Meyerhold's theatre or, probably, in BelGOSET. In 1933, he emphasised that the BDT-1 company could be divided into three groups. The first one was passive; the second group was in the middle; and the third were those who sought the new and were the minority. At the same time, Litvinaŭ was not supported by local critics, who could not understand and interpret his experiments beyond dramatic texts. The authors of existing reviews compared *Žakieryja* with the original text, ignoring the details which they probably did not recognise.

Generally, critique at that time in the BSSR was completely literary-orientated and ideologically motivated. Since Litvinaŭ was alien to both national and "Soviet" models of theatre, it might explain his "disappearance" from narratives of Belarusian theatre history. He was almost never mentioned in Niafod's official Byelorussian historiography. As for Siadura's *The Byelorussian Theatre* (1955), which was focused on the national model of theatre, Litvinaŭ is presented as a "formalist" who "favoured the constructivism and biomechanics of the left-wing theaters [and] apparently rejected all the past accomplishments of the [BDT-1]."[872] There was almost nobody, like Ivan Gaŭrys in Viciebsk, who could explain and defend Litvinaŭ's art for the historical discourse of Belarusian culture. And even if there was somebody, this critic had to change his reviews according to the frequently changing official ideology. For example, Model mentioned Litvinaŭ's multi-sided talent in 1934, but a few years later, accused him of being a hostile formalist.[873]

Nevertheless, it was a "miracle" that Litvinaŭ could even stage *Žakieryja* in 1934. It

[870] Maltsev, "Zhakeriya" P. Merime v stsenicheskoy peredelke L'va Litvinova," 93.
[871] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.569, l.22.
[872] Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theatre and Drama*, 110.
[873] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.34.

probably became possible since he, like others, learnt to play a game with censorship in which it was often more important what you said or how you explained something than what you meant and how you did it. The definition of truly socialist art and theatre, the method of socialist realism, was so evasive that it allowed artists to play this "game." More likely, *Žakieryja* was his very last attempt to claim artistic autonomy. The time for the avant-gardes had ended years before, and such an artist as Litvinaŭ, who was at the beginning of his artistic career at the end of the 1920s (he called himself "a young director"), had no chance to perform his "avant-garde" completely. Would it be possible to find any "emancipated" space in his situation when it was unsafe even to pursue an unrecognisable field since it might be interpreted as being adverse to Soviet ideology? Litvinaŭ had to balance between a desire for the autonomy of art as the means for emancipation and the Party's regulations. He did it partly and survived. Les Kurbas in Ukraine and Sandro Akhmeteli in Georgia could not and were shot in 1937.

Speaking about the avant-gardes in terms of their *edge-to-centre relationship*, Harding argues that "a point of origin" in this sense mostly plays a symbolic role as it raises another question about what he calls "the cutting edge" (the multisided space) as a "rear."[874] Although the avant-garde projects in Soviet Belarus correlated with the innovative processes in the "centres" (being often determined by those processes), I propose that it indicates neither the imitated (as less avantgardish) character of the projects of "local avant-gardes" nor the "ideological corruption" (Harding) of the dominated culture (how Siadura, for instance, interpreted revolutionary art). As I argue in chapter five and as Litvinaŭ's "unperformed" avant-garde also shows, the avant-gardes, as aesthetic and conceptual programs, could not be merely transferred beyond the peculiarities of the cultural situation (in a broad sense), because the concept of "a rear" refers to the edge where something is not only kept or degraded but also mutated.

It is worth noting the contradiction in Litvinaŭ's identification as the "Belarusian Meyerhold", a title that seemingly supports the centre/periphery approach but, upon closer examination, reveals the complex dynamics of this relationship. The fact that his son called him the "Belarusian Meyerhold" underscores the existence of such a hierarchy, since the only way to be accepted was to be placed in this centre-oriented logic. This identification had to stress the role and significance of his father in the Belarusian theatre which could "be taken seriously" only through such a comparison. However, Litvinaŭ's infatuation with mass

[874] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 139.

performances, agitforms of theatre, and constructivism represented the typical experience for almost every avant-gardist (or revolutionary artist) in the USSR at that time.

Incidentally, Litvinaŭ himself did not understand why Meyerhold was so frequently referenced. He stated, "I was often called Meyerholdian. But it is not true. I admire the genius of Meyerhold, but as an independent artist, I have my own vision. And following my works, that's far from it."[875] At the same time, Model underscored the influence of Vakhtangov's theatre synthetism on Litvinaŭ.[876] Litvinaŭ also mentioned Vakhtangov, emphasising the kinship of ideas between him and the Russian director, who died in 1922:

> I would rather consider myself a Vakhtangovian and that's why I want to lead the theatre. [...] I mean Vakhtangov after October, a revolutionary with the inclusion of the best of Stanislavski's system. Vakhtangov is some kind of equilibrium between poles like Meyerhold and Stanislavsky.[877]

At the same time, in 1969, the Belarusian critic Barys Bur'an noted that, at the end of the 1920s, Litvinaŭ was compared with Kote Marjanishvili (Konstantin Mardzhanov) and later with Stanislavsky.[878] Such different reviews reveal the complexity of the time—as a necessary conformism— when artists and critics had to react immediately to fit into the "current" ideological pattern, ready to dissociate from those who were identified as "enemies."

Litvinaŭ's dramatic story discloses the limitations of the framework of the existing avant-garde theories which are based mainly on "correlated" visual criteria. At this point, his performances would always be considered *an echo* of Soviet Russian artistic trends—focusing on similarities with well-known forms of the avant-gardes and ignoring those details which do not "suit." However, when writing any local history, the question might not be what we know about the avant-gardes. Instead, one must ask what we do not know and what it is possible to know if we go beyond the comparisons and attempts to fall the cases into the existing pattern. According to Harding, "the history of the vanguards will always be half-written and half-theorised until it is also written from the perspective of the unsuccessful and vanquished."[879] This means that instead of considering the peripheral models of the avant-gardes as a continuation or a result of the movements in "the centres" (no matter in the West or in the East),

[875] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.570, l.6. Transl. from Russian.
[876] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.568, l.101. Transl. from Russian.
[877] BDAMLM, f.126, v.1, sp.570, l.6–7. Transl. from Russian.
[878] Kote Marjanishvili was a Georgian theatre director and a significant contributor to the pre-revolutionary Georgian and Russian and then Soviet theatre; BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.35, l.1–2.
[879] Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 25.

every local case of the avant-gardes should be placed on the map as a singular phenomenon and, at the same time, considered part of existing (or imaginary) artistic networks. This method is what Meskimonn identifies as *transcanon*—an "approach to storying worlds and worlding stories"[880] beyond Eurocentric universalism and, in this way, materialising pluriversal and multidimensional histories.[881]

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I was looking at a photo of a group of men and women dressed in grey civilian costumes (Fig. 8). They are standing near a monument and smiling. According to the description, the photo was taken during a tour of the Kazan Dramatic Theatre in Moscow in the mid-1950s. Looking like an ordinary Soviet theatre worker, Litvinaŭ was one of those smiling people. After Stalin's death, the rehabilitation process began after a few years but was selective and fragmentary. Meyerhold was already rehabilitated in 1955. However, speaking at the theatre meeting in Moscow in 1958, Niafiod still criticised Meyerhold, calling him a leader of formalism and mentioning his negative influence on Belarusian theatre.[882] According to Niafiod, Litvinaŭ was Meyerhold's follower, therefore, he headed formalism in the BSSR and destroyed national theatre. "And it happened not only in Byelorussia. Such 'cranks' were in Ukraine and Uzbekistan, and they promoted Meyerhold's school everywhere and harmed art," Nefed concluded.[883] He was surprised that his colleague from Armenia called Akhmeteli and Kurbas the most significant leaders of Georgian and Ukrainian art. "I was curious what other Georgian and Ukrainian scholars think about this—is it so?" the Byelorussian critic worried.[884] Although Niafiod could not influence art histories in other republics, he made the existence of any "positive" research on Litvinaŭ nearly impossible for decades. This is an example of asymmetrical, often inverse, modes of knowledge production in different cultural contexts under Soviet rule: What was possible in one place could be forbidden and unimaginable in others.

This inconsistency might be the reason that even after Stalin's death, Litvinaŭ was very careful with his public statements and letters. He avoided any "intimate" reflection about political situations. In his notes, he delineated some of his professional ideas about acting, the

[880] Meskimmon, *Transnational feminisms and art's transhemispheric histories*, 3.
[881] Ibid., 54.
[882] BDAMLM, f.471, v.1, sp.83.
[883] BDAMLM, f.471, v.1, sp.83, l.14. Transl. from Russian.
[884] BDAMLM, f.471, v.1, sp.83, l.15. Transl. from Russian.

audience, and theatrical forms, following the framework of social realism which remained the only path for art. Even in the 1980s, when Igor Litvinov wrote his book about the 1920s and 1930s, he described his father's artistic activity, reiterating that Litvinaŭ conformed to socialist realism completely. His son was sceptical about any references to formalism. Several times, he mentioned attempts to brand Litvinaŭ as a "formalist," associating it with "straightforwardly scant" leftism.[885] However, he stated that if Litvinaŭ was "a leftist," it was merely because he "was able to use the techniques of psychological theatre while retaining a keen interest in Stanislavsky's system [but] he remained [...] a supporter of Meyerhold and Vakhtangov at their best."[886]

According to his son, his father's fundamental concerns were, "the central problems of affirming socialist realism [and] *the intense search for maximum theatrical embodiment and psychological depth in order to convey to the audience the socialist idea of [the spectacle] in Belarusian [theatre]*." [887] Meanwhile, revising articles his father wrote in 1937, Igor Litvinov noted that "it is not complicated to imagine what an unscrupulous scholar can prove by relying on the articles of 1937."[888] But he did not realise that he himself had played the same "game" of quoting his father's selective statements, being already ideologically influenced by a particular "period," whether he wanted to be or not.

6.3. *Belarusian Finn* Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo (1900–1997)

Rarity! I am selling my talent for nothing
Everyone will receive his portrait in 15 minutes
With full similarity for 500,000 rubles

Finnish artist Ahola
[Minsk, the 1920s][889]

Although Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo is identified as a Belarusian Finn or Finnish Belarusian, he spent only ten years in Soviet Belarus (Fig. 9). But this period played an essential role in his biography. Later, he permanently underscored his "Belarusianness" since the years in Belarus

[885] BDAMLM f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.168
[886] BDAMLM f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.142.
[887] BDAMLM f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.166, his underlining and style.
[888] BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.60, l.35.
[889] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 5_116A-156B, Venkielteksti152B. Transl. from Russian.

were pivotal for his productivity and the formation of his artistic method.[890]

Ahola (he took the penname Valo later) was born in the Finnish village Impilahti in the Republic of Karelia (the Grand Duchy of Finland; today, it is a part of the Russian Federation) on 27 January 1900. His mother, Ida, died when he was two years old. His father Pekko did low-paid work to support the family of two boys (Aleksanteri had a younger brother Felix). Then, the family moved to St. Petersburg, where Pekko's sisters looked after the children. Ahola remembers his aunt beating them. His father married again when Aleksanteri was five or six years old. His "new mother," as Ahola called her, did washing for rich families. Often, she took him with her. Once, on an icy day when he was tired, he sat down on the railway lines they followed. His "new mother" became angry; she pulled the child by his foot along the lines. His nose was hurt. Afterwards, he had to spend a couple of weeks in a hospital treating his face and the scarlet fever he got. Then, he spent time in the house of "unknown men." They played cards, smoked, and quarrelled. Ahola stated, "Why do people live so? [...] After this hard period I experienced, I started to reflect upon life early, and actually, I turned into a young-old man losing joy but with the thirst for knowledge."[891]

Ahola stated that, because of the shock, he remembered all the facts of his life. Describing the list of his works made between 1910 and 1920, he mentioned several remembrances of "flagrant wickedness," when he, as a 9-years boy, was beaten by his "new mother". He told his father about this several years later. Because of the traumatic experience, he strongly believed in art as a means of improving life—"I should learn all my life to do that, what can help people to live better and lighter."[892] He calls this period of his life "the time of preparing for early old age,"[893] mentioning that he did not have a childhood—"it was a nightmare rather."[894]

One more shock for the child happened on 22 January 1905, known as Bloody or Red Sunday (according to the Julian calendar—on 9 January). On that day, peaceful demonstrators who came to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present a petition to Russian Tsar Nicholas II were shot by soldiers of the Imperial Guard. According to Ahola, he was there accidentally and witnessed the violence and dead bodies. This "image" affected him extremely. Since then, Ahola said, he aimed to resist violence in any form—"to become a fighter for justice."[895]

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[890] Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen," manuscript.
[891] AAVF, Venäjänkielinen vihko Minsk 1925, 4. Transl. from Russian.
[892] AAVF, Venäjänkielinen vihko Minsk 1925, 5.
[893] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti21B. Transl. from Russian.
[894] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti10J. Transl. from Russian.
[895] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti21B. Transl. from Russian.

Ahola's father Pekko strongly influenced him. When Pekko was a teenager, he ran away from slavery, together with his brother. They settled in St. Petersburg, working as chimney sweeps because this field was occupied mainly by Finns. The workers organised a working union, and Ahola's father translated the *ISKRA* newspaper into Finnish. He met his future wife Ida. Soon, the police arrested Pekko when Valo was seven years old. The family was deported to Vyritsa, where his father participated in underground political groups. In Vyritsa, Ahola-Valo got private lessons from Lyudmila Kuzmina, a doctor and revolutionary. Additionally, the eight-year-old boy organised (with his father's support) a school for children of the district based on a system of self-education. There were no teachers; children taught each other. The program comprised literacy, mathematics, history, natural history, geography, applied skills for girls and boys, economy, drawing, music, theatre, and others. The list of pupils includes the names of 168 children who probably might have attended the school.[896] Since then, Ahola has been starting to write his diary; he wrote his first autobiography at this time. He read many fictional and historical books, for instance, about Bruno's death "for his discovering the Universe" and even about the diseases of horned cattle.[897] Later, he decorated his apartment in Viciebsk with pictures of the persons who supported him morally, such as the founder and first Chief Scout of the worldwide Scout Movement, Robert Baden-Powell, the writers Charles Dickens, Lev Tolstoi, Nikolai Gogol, the navigator Christopher Columbus, and the scientist Giordano Bruno. Ahola quotes his father's speech from their last meeting in 1918. "Remember my word, Ali, how difficult it would be for us during the coming fight between two worlds, never lose courage because we are invincible. 'We' means the International of All Workers."[898] Pekko died in 1919 from typhus. Ahola kept his father's notes and documents and published some of them. In his notebook from 1926, he briefly describes the chronology of his early life, focusing on his artistic achievements:

> 1906—paper cutting of domestic animals' figures; 1908—first compositions, drawings from illustrations, signboards; 1909—drawings from photos, caricatures, signboards; 1911—drawings of household things, signboards; 1912–13—didn't draw because of different jobs; 1914—didn't draw, preparation to escape the family[899].

In 1915, he moved to St. Petersburg where he continued his self-education while

[896] AAVF, 9.3_264-268, Venkielteksti268A/268C-J.
[897] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti16I. Transl. from Russian.
[898] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B. Transl. from Russian.
[899] AAVF, the scratch pad of 1926. Transl. from Russian.

working as a chimney sweep. He wrote in this period: "I visit the museum of St. Petersburg. I live on my own. Busy with self-education." In 1917, he witnessed the beginning of the February Revolution. Ahola remembered that he went to work early in the morning and saw hungry old women near the Winter Palace; it was the beginning. The year of 1918, he "spent for the Revolution."[900] Ahola steadily drew. He noted that he began to understand the sense and techniques of agitation posters. In 1919, Ahola joined the Red Army because he saw that the achievements of the October Revolution—because of the Civil War—were in danger. But he did not want to kill, and, therefore, he served as a baker for the military and made drawings from time to time. In 1920, his military unit moved constantly, following the frontline of battle. He visited Pskov, Gatchina, Yamburg, Viciebsk, Polack, and Hrodna. He wrote: "I want to know what the World is and why I live here [...] I don't know who the author of the next idea, but I like it: 'A human being is a shortcut Universe.'"[901]

In 1920, Ahola came to Viciebsk for the first time and soon moved to the city. He spent two pivotal years there. In 1922, he did his first oil paintings. In 1923–24, he studied at the Odesa Art Institute in Ukraine. According to his memoirs, he participated in the shooting of *Battleship Potemkin* by Eisenstein (the mass scene at the steps) and made an object—a 13,5-metre model of the battleship—for the film's animated advertisements.[902] In 1924, he wrote a letter to the Foreign Department of the Minsk Committee on 20 July 2024 asking for residency permission in Soviet Belarus.[903] He moved to Minsk and became a member of the Belarusian Union of Cultural Workers (Belrabis), collaborating with a range of institutions that appeared in those years. Ahola worked for different cultural organisations (The Institute of Belarusian Culture, the Belarusian State Publishing House, Belrabis, the Byelorussian State Film Studio and others), designed the books of Belarusian writers, illustrated magazines and newspapers, e.g. *Krasnyj Proletarij* (*The Red Proletarian*), *Vioska* (*The Countryside*), *MLOT*, *Trybuna Mastactva* (*The Rostrum of Art*), *Savieckaja Belarus* (*Soviet Belarus*), *Krasnyj fakel* (*The Red Flame*), *Pijaner* (*The Pioneer*), and many others. Some of the pictures were signed but usually not because they were often portraits of Bolshevik and Soviet leaders, caricatures, and agitation posters. In Minsk, the artist signed himself as Ahola-Valo (*valo* means "light" or "beam" in Finnish). He also drew posters for circuses and shops, participated in the creation of the first Belarusian animated cartoons, and constructed the decorations and effects for theatre

[900] AAVF, the scratch pad of 1926.
[901] Ibid.
[902] Probably, Ahola earned extra money as a mute on the Film Studio. He mentioned other "roles" as well. In Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria,* 196–9.
[903] AAVF, 5_116A-156B, Venkielteksti131B.

production in BDT-1. Additionally, he consulted the Museum of the Revolution in Minsk and created general plans for staging the revolution's ten-year anniversary in the city. According to Nalivaika, Ahola-Valo's lino printing works and the technology he applied made a major contribution to the development of Belarusian graphics.[904]

His active involvement in building a new Soviet state culture is explained not only by his sincere belief in the ideas of the October Revolution. He also had to work hard to support his family. This was the main reason for his improbable productivity. On 25 November 1926, he wrote a letter to an editor of *Belaruskaja Vioska* magazine, complaining that he worked in difficult circumstances because of his many jobs. As a result, the work might not be done on time; moreover, it is difficult to control quality. Therefore, he asked for a full-paid salary, including the cost of materials and a working table.[905]

In 1930, he completed the project *The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind* in Minsk made specially for the First All-Belarusian Agricultural and Industry Exhibition. Before the opening, Ahola-Valo left Belarus. Due to a wave of arrests, staying in the city could have been dangerous, so he moved to Moscow. According to Suvanto, Ahola decided not to draw anymore since he did not want to serve Stalin's propaganda. Although Lenin was a central subject in his art—Ahola-Valo was one of the first artists to draw Lenin in Soviet Belarus—he never made a drawing of Stalin. In Moscow, he worked as an engineer and constructor in different institutions. In 1933, he left the USSR, mentioning a special resolution of the Soviet authority for foreign citizens to leave the country. With support from the Finnish embassy, he took his archive of hundreds of documents including artworks.

In 1939, the Winter War between Finland and the Soviet Union started. As a communist, Ahola-Valo was accused of parricide and imprisoned in the Tammisaari prison camp in Finland for two years. He was released after the war and got a scholarship from the Finnish authorities to create large-scale artwork on the Vikings. He moved to Sweden to collect materials with his second wife and spent forty years there. During this period, Ahola concentrated on developing the theory of self-education and organisation of labour and leisure, which he called "AE-evohomology." The study aimed to be "the science of humanity's rebirth for total liberation from all the harmful and unnecessary accumulation of an age of darkness."[906] In Sweden, Ahola-Valo had a restful life, however, he felt alien. The artist feared that his heritage would be lost after his death. He believed that the only place where his

[904] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.2_26-46B, Venkielteksti30K-L.
[905] AAVF, 8.2_206-219, Venkielteksti206A-B.
[906] AAVF, 1.2_26-46B, Venkielteksti29A. Transl. from Russian.

(art)works could be recognised was the Soviet Union. In 1976, Valo wrote to the General Committee of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR to ask them to consider his cultural and scientific heritage, firstly the study of AE-evohomology, as a part of Soviet culture. He mentions the decree about the internment of foreigners as his reason for leaving the country in 1933, though the USSR was the only homeland for him—"How could I be a foreigner? There was a misunderstanding..."[907] According to his notes, he still ardently believed in Soviet ideas. He asked the Soviet authorities if he and his wife could get Soviet citizenship and settle somewhere in the country ("v kolkhoze"). And, if possible, the artist wanted to take his collection of three thousand books with him because he remembered how the Soviet border guards did not allow him to bring some books about Estonian art in 1930. "Trust me, I do not tend to harm the political aim of Enlightenment of the Soviet Union. I just want to keep some books in Finnish which are a childhood memory for me."[908] The artist did not get a response.

At the end of the 1980s, he moved to Hämeenlinna, where the Ahola-Valo Foundation was established. During the last decades of the Soviet Union, the artist maintained contact with the Belarusian diaspora abroad. The Institute of Belarusian Culture in the USA, founded by anti-Soviet immigrants Vitaŭt and Zoja Kipiel, greatly appreciated the role of Valo's artistic heritage for Belarusian culture in the 1920s.[909] After the collapse of the USSR, Ludmila Nalivaika from the National Art Museum and later the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus Piotr Kraŭčanka visited the artist in Hämeenlinna. In 1995, Ahola-Valo came to Minsk to participate in the Second Congress of Belarusian Studies. He died two years later. In 2010, an exhibition of his works was organised at the National Art Museum in Minsk.

From post-revolutionary Viciebsk to Soviet Minsk

All scholars who refer to Ahola-Valo's heritage highlight his connection to the People's Art School during Chagall and Malevich's time. This likely automatically brings attention to the almost "unknown" figure of the Finnish artist. However, there are no official records about Ahola-Valo in the School's archive except for his personal note that he attended Pen's class.[910] The artist mentioned that he knew Chagall "but had no common points."[911] Ahola remembers

[907] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti1A. Transl. from Russian.
[908] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti1D.
[909] AAVF, the Letter of 1988.
[910] Hanna Zapartyka also questions whether Ahola was officially a student. He did teach at one city's school, attended Pen's and Judovin classes, and that is it. Hanna Zapartyka, "Bielaruskaja planieta finskaha mastaka Alieksantery Achola-Valo," *Aŭtohraf Aĺmanach* 1 (2020): 134–40.
[911] AAVF, 10_271A-274O__. Venkielteksti273A1. Transl. from Russian.

his first visit to Viciebsk in 1920. He came with his military group on the First of May celebration. There was a big demonstration; the city was illuminated impressively.[912] Soon, he learnt about the People's Art School and applied to Pen's class which, according to the number of students, was the most popular in the school.[913] Ahola said,

> Imagination was given free reign, but the school took no fixed line on art. There were Realists, Cubists and Suprematists working at the academy, and artists ranging from Marc Chagall and El Lissitzky to Kazimir Malevich. I joined the Realists. I was interested in Yuri [Yehuda] Pen's history and portrait painting, in Braser's semi-realistic sculpture and in Yudov's prints made using a cross-grain technique, xylography.[914]

Because of his military service, Ahola attended Pen's lessons occasionally which meant he was not officially enrolled. After the beginning of the semester 1920–21, he had to leave the city with the army. He was injured, fell ill with typhoid fever, and spent several months in different hospitals. In 1921, he was transferred to Viciebsk and worked at the hospital's library and club after recovery. He also created stage designs for several theatre productions. In particular, he mentioned his collaboration with TEREVSAT, the Youth theatre, and the Jewish Theatre in Viciebsk. Soon, he was employed as a teacher at a primary school. He probably continued to attend Pen's class as a visiting student, but without getting involved in UNOVIS experiments. Ahola mentioned that "the world knew Chagall's groups of artists." However, from his point of view, the sculptor Zair Azhur (Zair Azgur) and the artist Mikalai Husieŭ (Nikolai Gusev)—followers of socialist realism—were the best students.[915]

In 1921, Ahola participated in the First Exhibition of the City's Young Artists and received a high rating. He was invited to draw for *Vitebskije Izvestija* (*Viciebsk News*). He adopted four-year-old siblings (their mother was not able to care for them), a fifteen-year-old homeless boy, and then a little girl. "At that time, we spoke five languages: Russian, Yiddish, Belarusian, Finnish, and then German, which the children learned at school," Ahola remembered.[916] In Viciebsk, he met his future wife—Elena Nikonovich-Yatskevich, who was one of Chagall's models.[917] This may be a reason for Ahola's negative and even vicious opinion

[912] He mentioned the famous suprematist tram, however, it was too "early" to see suprematism on Viciebsk streets since Malevich did not even come yet.
[913] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 50–1. Transl. from Finnish.
[914] Kimmo Sarje, "With Alexanteri Ahola-Valo in the Early Days of the Soviet Union," *Siksi* 1 (1992): 12.
[915] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 108.
[916] Ibid., 98.
[917] Ahola mentioned that she was also Pen's model. Besides, her father was a tenant of the land where Chagall's family built their house. Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin erraria*, 168, 171.

of Chagall. In his memoirs, the Finnish artist denied any of Chagall's contributions to the foundation of the People's Art School.[918] Elena was against the adopted children, and Ahola had to find a new home for them. Soon, they had two children. However, according to Ahola, it was an extremely unhappy marriage.[919] He attempted to leave his wife several times but did so officially after their move to Finland.

Indeed, the People's Art School played an important role in Ahola's professional making. However, it was only one part of his dynamic life in this period. This fact is supported by his questionnaire for the Institute of Belarusian Culture, which prepared documentation for the dictionary of artists in the Soviet Union. As for his educational experience, Ahola-Valo mentioned only Phanderphild Art School and Art Institute:

> 7. Education: secondary
> 8. Special education: Fan-der-Flit Art School,[920] Art Institute in Odessa
> 9. Speciality: graphic artist, engraver, mechanic, film-mechanic, baker-confectioner, rail construction worker
> 10. Practice: in different Viciebsk schools (1921–23), a cultural worker at libraries in the army, and a buddy for peasants
> 11. Influences: from the masters of all times
> 12. Exhibitions: Viciebsk (1921), Minsk (1925)
> 13. In what museums are the artworks? Nowhere
> 16. Iconography: in magazines and newspapers
> 17. General formal characteristics: techniques—varied, materials—varied, style—varied, topics—politics, education symbology, mode of life and critique.

It might be that he couldn't prove this education at the People's Art School since he was a visiting student. However, as Kimmo Sarje notes, till the end of his life, Ahola-Valo has called Viciebsk one of his homes. At the same time, he was "alone" in the city. Remembering his study in Odesa, he noted:

> Odesa was more international than Vitebsk. [...] The approach to art there was very serious and strictly pedagogical. There were no particular movements, and you could do what you wanted. In Odessa relationships between students were friendly, and there was a feeling of solidarity

[918] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin erraria*, 117–18.
[919] Ibid., 166–71.
[920] He meant the Art School by N.F. Fan-der-Flit in Pskov where he, probably, got lessons from his military service in 1919. Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen," manuscript.

> that was lacking in Vitebsk... We often had berry soup for dessert in the canteen. People had donated ladles, glasses and plates, in which it was served ... I have never seen such a big flounder anywhere in Odesa.[921]

The Viciebsk period was also unique because, according to Ahola, it was the beginning of his AE-evohomology. "I didn't yet have a goal to create anything in the field of education," Ahola explained. "I was just having inflammatory conversations about humanity and how to live and how not to live."[922] He started with his notebook of self-discipline which consisted of a working plan, time management, schedule, and diary as a method to control his way of living. He believed that true communism could be built only by new men, who should not be engineered but educated from the very beginning, from childhood. Therefore, Ahola considered all his activities, especially in architecture and design, as a means or a result of the new order but not a "decorative" element. However, from the very beginning, he faced misunderstandings. He had to design a house for a collective farm worker, and, among other things, Ahola proposed constructing a special bedroom for a mother and child, since they should not sleep in the same room—the mother's breath was a potential carrier of infection that could affect the child. At the same time, they should be in the same space so the mother could look after the child. The artist developed a particular construction of a glass wall which lifted up. "The Revolution cannot change [the people] if they are not re-educated," Ahola said during the presentation to the special committee. "These models and drawings, devices and construction I show you represent the future life which, from my point of view, should be realised." But the head of the committee responded that it would be too complicated for an ordinary person. "Let's bring noble beds made of nickel-plated balls that have been used before. [...] Let's show the world who we are. That our collective farm workers had become affluent."[923]

Already in those years, Ahola was aware of what was happening politically and ideologically, differentiating the utopian realm of communism and the violent reality of Bolshevism. Ruoho points out the conflict between the artist's values and reality, which "left a traumatic legacy that has had an indelible impact on his thinking."[924] He kept his Finnish passport, although he likely had the opportunity to change his citizenship. Several times, Ahola mentioned that the foreign passport was the reason that he could not get a job or state orders in

[921] Sarje, "With Alexanteri Ahola-Valo in the Early Days of the Soviet Union," 12.
[922] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 90.
[923] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 257.
[924] Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen," manuscript.

Soviet Belarus. He preferred not to point out his origin. The artist spoke Russian and Belarusian well, and almost nobody imagined that he was a Finn, except for his colleagues and the GPU (the State Political Directorate)[925]. He learnt to balance "between two fires," as he called nationally oriented groups in Belarus and Bolshevism. But he did not feel completely safe. He remembered that after his project of the house of a collective farm worker was rejected, he made a speech about the true aim of the revolution while some bureaucrats thought only about their benefits. After the committee was over, his wife said he would definitely be arrested that night. "They wouldn't dare do that," Ahola assumed. "If a Soviet man had said it, they might have reacted to this. But they could do nothing when I, a foreigner, said it. Overwise, the Finnish embassy would intervene, and it would become known to the whole world and be against them. It would become easy material for counter-propaganda." The artist was right—the GPU did not come.

In mid-1925, Ahola-Valo probably understood the need to collaborate with the Bolsheviks for security reasons. He remembered that one day, a man dressed in military uniform came to his apartment and asked him to go to the GPU office. His wife was afraid because of her noble origin. Ahola was placid—he was from a working family. That day, the GPU invited him to illustrate *Krasnyj Pogranichnik* (*A Red Border-Guard*) magazine, because they appreciated his works and trusted him, as a faithful follower of the revolution. Valo agreed but asked for a more comfortable apartment with a studio. Soon, he moved to Malaja Tatarskaja Street in the centre of Minsk, where he lived with his family till his departure to Moscow. The installation of Lenin's Mausoleum that the artist created for the First All-Belarusian Art Exhibition in 1925 was also moved to the GPU's club. It was an "object" 9.5-10 metres long and 4 metres high. A special map of Lenin's life was put on one of the facades in the form of a relief. It was the map of the whole Soviet Union, indicating remarkable places where the Bolshevist leader was born, where he studied, his travels, his site of deportation to Siberia. Lenin's portrait was installed at the centre of the mausoleum, creating an iconic effect. The artist considered this project as one step toward *The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind* that he completed several years later.

Following realism, Ahola experimented with different genres (portraits, posters, drawings, caricatures) and techniques, especially in engraving. He combined Belarusian ornaments with the space-age motifs. One of his famous works titled "Kastrycnik" (October) was a print with an image of the Earth spinning around a wheel in the Universe. The photo was

[925] GPU was the secret policy founded in the USSR in 1922.

published on the front page of *Savetskaja Belarus* newspaper on 7 November 1925 (the anniversary of the Red October)—"decades before the Soviet Union sent a satellite into Space."[926] In 1963 in Sweden, Ahola met Yuri Gagarin, the Soviet cosmonaut who was the first person to journey into outer space, and presented him with the original print, which was placed in the Museum of Cosmonautics in the USSR.

In 1928, the All-Belarusian Artists Union was founded and focused mainly on painting, considering other arts as crafts. During the public meeting of artists from the old and young generations, Ahola voiced his position and was called "not an artist [but] woodworker [who] simply painted floors and made furniture." Ahola publicly responded:

> You have nothing in common with this century. Your time belongs to the past [...] An artist who knows how to invent must also ensure that his inventions help art progress. [...] The floor must be painted, not because anyone can do it, but because the colour of the floor affects a person's psychology.[927]

According to Ahola, this debate provoked a split in artistic circles and a group of young artists led by him established the artistic organisation "Pramień" (A Beam), aiming to promote the idea of the scientific nature of art. The members included the artists Jauhien Cichanovič, Oskar Mariks, Paval Hutkoŭski, Alena Puk (Aladava), Uladzimir Bochan, Samuil Holdyn, Alieś Karpienka, Vasil Murašoŭ, Julij Šuster, Janka Kaškiel, and many others (Ahola mentioned one hundred ten participants; many of them were repressed and exiled in the 1930s).

> From the Manifesto written by Valo:
> [Our aims are] to restructure the foundations of everyday life by bringing art closer to the practical demands of life itself and by criticising the negative aspects of everyday life; to promote industrialisation by applying a technique of graphic expression close to facilitating the mass production of art and industry, and by designing improved designs and agitating them at exhibitions and in life; to reflect in their work the achievements of the proletariat (to the history of the BSSR).[928]

The group met in Ahola's studio, which was equipped with mechanised furniture (made

[926] Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen," manuscript.
[927] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 223.
[928] Anton Denisov, "Mify i fakty iz zhizni 'belorusskogo finna,'" *Belaruskaya dumka* 7 (2018): 89. Transl. from Russian.

by the artist) that allowed him to transform the space according to need (lockers could be lowered and turned into benches). Visa Suonpään describes the studio as "a real place of a person from the new age."[929] The principle of rationalisation was also the basis for the artist's time management. "A clock face more than two metres wide was painted on the floor of the studio, and different colour zones meant different purposes: red for relationship (communication), purple for inventions, green for science, yellow for everyday life, light blue for art, dark blue for architecture, and black for sleep."[930] In addition to creative activity, "Pramień" organised an educational course at the university which consisted of different disciplines, from art techniques to art history and philosophy.

In contrast to formalist (avant-gardist) artists in the 1920s who developed industrial design and art, the artists of "Pramień" orientated themselves to realism, which had to assist in the educational process of a new Soviet man. Ruoha points out that Ahola did not accept any reference to formalism and "was troubled when he later learned that the Great Encyclopaedia described 'Pramień' as a formalist organisation."[931] The works by "Pramień" members were presented collectively at the Third All-Belarusian Art Exhibition in 1928. Ahalo's won second place for his portrait of Miasnikov (sculpture) and first place for graphic work for his engraving print "Dazynki."

In 1929, Ahola and the artists of "Pramień" were invited to create a triumphal arch for the anniversary of the foundation of the BSSR. The monument was made from wood that imitated stone and was about 8 metres high and 6 metres wide. A picture of the republic's coat of arms was on the front of the gate. Images of developments in agriculture and industry were put around it. On the back were Lenin's portrait and slogans—"The days of struggle have passed," "The Whites have been defeated," "Suffering has been overcome," and others. The sides of the gate included a section of reliefs with different statistics of success. Ahola remembered that they worked day and night, because "[the group's] further development, economic and otherwise, depended on it."[932] After the celebration, the monument was disassembled. A sketch is included in Ahola's archive that allow us to imagine how incredible this arch might have looked. The fact that it was temporary might be explained by the time limit. More likely, the local authority decided too late to decorate the celebration with a special memorial; therefore, it was impossible to invite sculptors (e.g. Grubbe or Biembiel) to create

[929] Qtd. in Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 225.
[930] Ibid.
[931] Ruoho, "Suomalainen valkovenäläinen," manuscript.
[932] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 280.

something monumental. They needed a conceptual artistic object, which could be realised in the short term. And Ahola was that artist who did it. Unsurprisingly, he was invited to construct the MOPR (International Red Aid) pavilion the following year, less than six months before its opening.

The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind

> It is impossible!...
> We did not get a command for such an opinion...is it spontaneous?..
> You, Sir (but not a comrade) Valo, are mistaken!
> It is a utooopia!![933]

According to Dzianisaŭ, the First All-Belarusian Agricultural and Industry Exhibition was one of the most significant ideological events in the Republic.[934] Supported by the leaders of Soviet Belarus, the project aimed to demonstrate the achievements of the economy of the BSSR in the previous decade. There was a territory of seventy-five hectares on the city's outskirts with more than sixty objects, including pavilions which presented the achievements of different branches of the economy, science, culture, and art. Famous Belarusian artists, sculptors, and architects were invited to design pavilions (Ivan Achremčyk, Valiancin Volkaŭ, Aliaksandr Grubbe, Oskar Mariks, and others). Preparations for the exhibition started in the autumn of 1929. But some organisations—such as Belgoskino (Byelorussian State Film Industry), Belgosizdatelstvo (Byelorussian State Publishing House), Lengiz SSSR (Lenin Publishing House) and MOPR—joined the exhibition later.

Founded in 1922 by Communist International, MOPR was an international social service organisation that aimed to provide material and moral support to political prisoners worldwide. The BSSR branch was established in 1924, and its activity covered the whole country. The Byelorussian department of MOPR organised donation campaigns, collecting money, clothes, and provisions. The situation in Western Belarus, where there were many political prisoners (due to the Polish anti-communist regime) received special attention. Valo collaborated with the Byelorussion MOPR previously. There were only six months to design and build the pavilion. Ahola remembered getting a call from MOPR with the invitation to

[933] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti11C. Transl. from Russian.
[934] Anton Denisov, "Uchastiye Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo v podgotovke i stroitel'stve Pervoy Vsebelorusskoy sel'skokhozyaystvennoy i promyshlennoy vystavke v Minske v 1930 godu," *Iskusstvo i kul'tura* 31, no. 3 (2018): 16.

head the project, but he had to present a plan in 24 hours. "You are such a genius," they said. "We're counting on you to do something. Just make a little plan [...] We need an architect to build it and an artist to develop the content."[935] The ideas he presented the next day were accepted. The concept of the pavilion aimed to unfold "the history of sufferings of mankind," which turned into the unofficial title of the project.[936]

Dzianisaŭ notes that this pavilion still exists in historiography mainly as a ghost, firstly because of a lack of official documentation. The photos from Ahola's archives and his drawings allow for the reconstruction of the image of the pavilion which is impressive. The author of a review in *Saveckaja Belarus* noted that "it is one of the best pavilions of the Exhibition which creates the strongest effect, [however] you cannot find the title and location of this pavilion in the guidebook of the [Exhibition]."[937]

There was a limited budget, but Ahola-Valo could invite other artists (also from Viciebsk) to create sculptures and paintings. According to Valo's plan, the pavilion consisted of modules with a total area of two hundred square metres. The main hall opened with a six-metre statue called "Armed Tyrant of the World" which represented fascism (Fig. 11).[938] Made from wood and sheathed with ruberoid, the figure had a gun on his arm and trampled on his victims, represented by sixty-five figures from different periods of history including scientists (e.g. Giordano Bruno) and thinkers. Special equipment was installed inside the statue to project information on the wall. The texts described the political victims of capitalism in Poland, Germany, and the USA. The sculpture had an electrified table whose image appeared on the sculpture's large wide back. When a visitor pressed a question button, an image would open on the sculpture's back, telling the story of different forms of violence over centuries. The statue could be seen from the outside through one of the pavilion's glass walls. Its interior was decorated with art compositions and installations made by Ahola-Valo, depicting torture and torment throughout different historical stages, for instance, "Belyj terror na Balkanakh" ("White Terror in the Balkans") and "Smert v hommute" ("Death in a yoke").[939] A significant part of the exposition was devoted to the activities of MOPR and the history of the

[935] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 284.
[936] Denisov, "Uchastiye Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo v podgotovke," 17. Transl. from Russian.
[937] Qtd. in Problemnyy kollektiv, "Nadpis' karandashom: o reprezentatsii nasiliya v pavil'one MOPR Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo." *Tsentr eksperimental'noy muzeologii*. Transl. from Russian. https://redmuseum.church/nadpis-karandashom-o-reprezentatsii-nasiliya-v-pavilone-mopr-aleksanteri-ahola-valo.
[938] AAVF, Taidekronikka (alkuperäinen)/II/62.
[939] The last one presents a form of Chinese torture when a person is put to death without food but by various means of luring them with food and the smell of food. From Valo's description, AAVF, Taidekronikka (alkuperäinen)/II/62).

revolutionary movement in Russia and Belarus. Therefore, it combined elements of documentary and symbolic images, artworks, and propaganda. The pavilion was performed in a constructivist style, which was widespread in the Soviet Republics at that time, but it was unique from the others—as if it was a revolutionary "temple."[940]

Ahola-Valo spent all of his time on the construction, working together with builders (Fig. 12). He equipped a special working room for himself, where he could stay overnight to avoid wasting time. As the Problem Collective mentions, this project allowed him to test his method of time management, developed in previous years. This method was based on the concept of time economy, including rest, organisation of the working process, and self-education. For instance, Ahola worked out a system in which he could collect building trash quickly and not block up the space. It saved time. He proposed using special screw-bolts for mounting the modules, so it was easy to assemble and disassemble the pavilion. There is one notebook in which Ahola carefully fixed the whole process of the pavilion's embodiment: how much money he got from the MOPR, all the duties he had to perform, the costs, and others' tasks. He scrutinised every tiny step, like, for instance, "install a fire extinguisher." These notes show that his imagination was strongly supported by understanding how to realise it. He was an artist who conceptualised, an architect who built, an engineer who realised and managed, and a worker who created. In contrast to many avant-garde projects of that period (e.g. the "Monument to the Third International" by Vladimir Tatlin, whom the Finnish artist admired), Ahola's "Temple" was built and performed its function entirely. The artist created a performative space which not only unfolded the story of injustice but also involved the audience in this "discovery." It was the embodiment of "total liberation," where the figure of the artist turns into "a fighter for justice."[941]

Nevertheless, Ahola-Valo missed the opening. According to Dzianisaŭ, there might be several reasons why the artist left the city. From the beginning, he conflicted with the secretary of MOPR, who did not support Valo's ideas. The project was also criticised by Grubbe, who pointed out mistakes in the construction, Valo's leading position, even charging Ahola with corruption. According to the Finnish artist, there were professional jealousy and private reasons because of an earlier short-term relationship between Valo and Grubbe's sister. Additionally, the campaign against national democrats (the Union for Liberation of Belarus case [ch.6.2.]) started in the spring of 1930. The head of the artistic committee of the Exhibition, Jazep Dyla,

[940] Qtd. in AAVF, Taidekronikka (alkuperäinen)/II/62). Transl. from Russian.
[941] AAVF, Venäjänkieliset tekstit, 1.1_1A-25B, Venkielteksti21B. Transl. from Russian.

was arrested. And Valo, who collaborated with nearly all Belarusian organisations and writers, might have felt threatened. Moreover, the pavilion was immediately criticised in newspapers. The author of one review pointed out the pathos of the project and its representation of the terror of capitalism; the works were "low artistic" and "beneath all criticism."[942] The pavilion got almost no official support, which may signify a possible threat to the artist, who decided to leave Soviet Belarus in haste.

Ahola-Valo called his life "dramatic theatre."[943] Following his memoirs and dozens of versions of his biography, it seems that he did not remember but performed—through a range of repetitions—his past to create an image of what the "real artist" had to be. Although his singular artworks (drawings, paintings, sculptures) could not be considered avant-garde from the perspective of "pure" avant-garde theory, his case signifies two fundamental aspects. Firstly, the interdisciplinary character of avantgardish artworks, which existed in between different genres, should be analysed through a performative-based approach. The matter is not only such impressive and large-scale artworks as the pavilion, where interdisciplinarity and performativity took a central stage. The role of biography as an imaginary construction and the form of self-representation in the process of the creation of avant-garde mythology (and it is a second aspect) should be considered. [944] Paraphrasing Clifford, Ahola's case raises the question of where an artist as a person ends and the avant-gardes begin.[945] Although Ahola-Valo was a follower of realism and criticised Chagall's and Malevich's programs as "morbid,"[946] I argue that his contributions might be considered as "total art" or Gesamtkunstwerk, which extends the existing theoretical models of the avant-gardes beyond common aesthetic criteria (futurism, dadaism, luchism, and others).

In addition to this theoretical intervention, the cases of Litvinaŭ and Ahola-Valo also disclose particular relationship not only between avant-gardes and Bolshevism but also between avant-gardes and nationalism, which avant-gardists who promoted the transcultural agenda might have perceived as the same "fire" as Bolshevism.

[942] Denisov, "Uchastiye Aleksanteri Akhola-Valo v podgotovke," 19.
[943] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 167.
[944] Ulbrich, Medick and Schaser, ed., *Selbstzeugnis und Person: transkulturelle Perspektiven*.
[945] Clifford, "'Hanging Up Looking Glasses at Odd Corners,'" 186.
[946] Saarinen, *Valko-Venäjä ennen Stalinin terroria*, 123.

Conclusion

As introduced at the very beginning, the focus of the dissertation is not avant-gardism in terms of aesthetics or philosophy since, as an aesthetic phenomenon, it transformed, as Ranciere notes, from radical practices into nostalgia[947]. Meanwhile, the field opens new perspectives in connection with recent approaches and disciplines that problematise not only the canon of art history but also understandings of the avant-gardes more generally. These two analytical frames are the primary orientation for my research, as I exercise these different perspectives not merely to locate the history of the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus *somewhere* on the map. The purpose was to demonstrate how the elusiveness and unsteadiness of the avant-gardes could be embodied in hybrid and "in-between" cultures. To define these embodiments, which frequently did not fit into the existing "canon" (either aesthetically or historically), contextualisation remains essential because it allows reading such definitions as radicality, ideology, experimentalism, revolution, liberation, emancipation, etc. "locally."

Therefore, I suggest that as heterogeneous and asynchronous phenomena, the avant-gardes were particularised by historical and cultural peculiarities of "geography" or a cultural context, where they emerged and performed. The avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, like in other Central and Eastern European countries, appeared as a reaction to geopolitical and social changes and performed at the intersection (or in between) of the Bolshevik Revolution, the national policy, and transcultural agendas which determined diverse models of avant-gardism. The avant-gardes in the Belarusian context balanced between the transnational agenda (as a network and a rhizome), horizons of different utopias and the politics of cultural emancipation that emphasise the possible hybrid and incomplete character of the avant-gardes in Belarus.

However, the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus, or, more precisely, their "ghosts," developed sporadically and incoherently for several reasons. Generally, I argue that as a pure phenomenon (in terms of the autonomy of art and its emancipatory purpose), the avant-gardes on so-called Soviet territories were possible only during the first years after the Red October (in the liminal space of the Russian Revolution). While the ideology in the Soviet Union became increasingly centralised and controlled, particular models of the avant-gardes (as a

[947] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 4.

mode of negotiation and compromise with the Bolshevik authority) were developed and conceptualised the phenomenon of the Soviet avant-gardes. The exceptions—as attempts to establish space for not-ideologised and autonomous art—were possible until the mid-1930s and emerged either "by accident" within an ideological program or somewhere on the margins of the "Soviet", highlighting its manifold and varied character.

As for so-called "national" republics, this field of the "Soviet" was even more extended and agile since it included more than Bolshevism, particularly, hybrid modes between Bolshevism and nationalism(s) (to varying degrees, not as a singular program) that influenced the realm of art including the avant-gardes. This was one reason that, from my point of view, the avant-garde as an entire and *radical* phenomenon could not be embodied in Soviet Belarus as the artists had to balance between their artistic agenda and Bolshevism on the one side and nationally oriented policy (which constantly changed) on the other side, which the stories of Litvinaŭ and Ahola-Valo demonstrate. Exceptions were possible, but they were realised at the "in-between" moments (e.g., the People's Art School).

As was mentioned above, the national dimension was also heterogeneous. In some cases, it represented a rigid political program of the domination of one ideology over others with a defined role for art. But sometimes, it turned into a mode of emancipation and struggle against "colonisers", including aspects of class. In this case, the national facet allowed one more model of the avant-gardes (as an emancipatory practice but in the national version) to appear (as a result of the "Belarusian" aftermath of the Russian Revolution, e.g. the Belarusian Literature and Art Commune). It is indicative that the artistic circles in late-Soviet Belarus were also heterogeneous and contradictory even within the non-conformist scene. Although those artists were anti-Soviet, they speculated about the past, present, and future of Belarusian art differently. If Chagall and, to a greater extent, Malevich were symbolic points for departure for the group of artists to whom Rusava, Kaškurevič, Hlobus, or Dureika belonged (in terms of the present "we"), for other more nationally oriented artists and scholars the canon of Belarusian art (as a mode of a "pure" culture) began after the reorganisation of the People's Art School in 1923 (Ščakacichin's model).

Therefore, because of the tension between Bolshevism and nationalism (or, more precisely, between different political programs which determined the social and cultural landscape in the 1920s), the avant-gardes in Soviet Belarus were performed in a mode of incompleteness, mutation, and dispersion. They were possible in the cracks and gaps which appeared sporadically here-and-there but became invisible (as the avant-gardes) to the existing canon. This happened not because of a peripheral or marginal context. As I argue, this

centre/periphery logic does not explain but rather reproduces power asymmetry and exclusion as if it is natural that "margins" cannot produce any "great" art at all. According to Foteini Vlachou, "Proving that art from the periphery is equally worthy of study as the art from the various centres, though, engages in a circular logic that ends up reaffirming the centrality and immutability of the art historical canon."[948] This is why many (feminist) scholars insist on deconstructing and provincializing the canon of (art) history which should cease to serve *the interests of (male) rulers*.

> The canon is therefore the main obstacle befalling the study of art in the periphery and geographical approaches have not done much in changing this aspect because the definition of centres and peripheries as (primarily) geographic regions obscures rather than reveals how they have been constructed in and through art historical discourse[949].

The argument that nationalism played a specific (restrictive) role in Belarusian territory refers only to the Belarusian case because Soviet nationalism(s) had diverse backgrounds and applications in different cultures[950]. There might be many reasons to explain these differences (historically, geopolitically, culturally). But, from my point of view, fundamentally, specific modes of nationalism in Belarus were caused by the peculiarities of the culture, which Abdziralovič identified in terms of "fluid and changeable forms" that determined not only the character of culture (as unsettled and shapeless). This fluid model of culture might also influence the aesthetic modes, which, through embodiments of this fluidity, uncertainty, and marginality, resisted the existing rigid forms of cultures (as models of colonisation). The claim of these forms that are "unrecognisable" to the canon as avant-gardes might be considered in terms of *decolonial aesthesis* (Tlostanova) since it requires not merely extending the imagination around the theory but also intervening in the memory (the past), which is one of the fundamental points for decolonial theory.

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[948] Foteini Vlachou, "Notes from the Periphery: History and Methods", *Visual Resources*, 32:1-2 (2016), 196.
[949] Vlachou, "Notes from the Periphery: History and Methods", 196.
[950] See, Kosiński et al., *Lexicon of the Theatre Avant-Garde of Central and Eastern Europe.*

Describing her experience of entering so-called Malevich's territory in Viciebsk, Taciana Katovič notes, "[Russian scholars] have a greater scale, more possibilities, more money, and more of them. We had another opportunity—bodily. We exist in the space of this city. [...] It is almost a physiological experience."[951] In 1998, Katovič welcomed an international group of scholars to Malevich's Third Plein Air in 1998. In attendance was Dmitrij Sarabjanov, one of the most remarkable Russian scholars of modernism and the avant-gardes. Instead of going to a hotel after the train, he asked Katovič to go immediately to the People's Art School building, which was still used for commercial purposes and was closed. "He touched these walls, and I understood it was a metaphor for our Viciebsk entrance into Malevich's space."[952] Once, Katovič watched a film created by Russian scholars on a Russian TV channel about the Viciebsk People's Art School. The film finished with a fragment of a passing suprematist tram. "Suddenly, and I live at the centre, I hear how the real suprematist tram is going under my window [in 2016, the city authorities reconstructed the route of a specially created suprematist tram as a tourist attraction]. It was a sign!" Those who live in Viciebsk, Katovič continues, only have these physical traces. "Where are we, a 'province?' And where are they, 'great scholars'?'" she asks ironically. "But we live here."[953] It is the local "provincial" privilege.

If you come to Viciebsk today, you might get the same feeling of bodily touching as the only form of privilege to read the history of the avant-gardes there. There are still no big posters or banners, nor notable mass tourist routes and "commodities" that would "sell" the history (except for, probably, some small hand-made plates, cups or buttons with artificial references to Chagall's Viciebsk made by local craftsmen). There are museums in the most important places, but almost always, they are half empty, except for rare private tours for foreigners with a focus on the history of the avant-gardes. Assistants at these museums will give you an informal guided tour through collections (even if you do not ask them to), explaining the objects' meanings and telling you the dramatic story of Viciebsk, the city that both the Nazis and Bolsheviks destroyed. There are no original works of those artists; many photos are copies from Russian museums and archives. Chagall's House Museum is located on an almost empty uninhabited street. The exposition includes several tiny rooms and a small backyard. There is no cafe or other place to sit and feel the atmosphere (although, in the 1990s, there was a plan to turn the whole street into a public attraction). Exploring the city, you can

[951] *A Talk with Taciana Katovič.* Conducted 31 July 2021. Transl. from Russian.
[952] Ibid.
[953] Ibid.

find some memorial desks about where Pen lived or Chagall studied, and that is it, except for rare special events organised by local artists and scholars. The city lives its own life; the shadows of the avant-gardes appear somewhere in its backyards, belonging to the same "minority" as it was a hundred years ago.

At this point, Viciebsk is not a unique place. In other Belarusian cities, you can also find only traces of avant-gardes and modernism. For instance, the Museum of Chaim Soutine in Smilavičy is located in the former building of the Children's Cultural Centre (a former kindergarten). It consists of two small rooms. One tells a story of the local Jewish community (including Soutine's parents); the second reconstructs the atmosphere of Paris cafes with an exhibition of reproductions of Soutine's prints on the wall. The stories of the fascinating artistic past of these places can be performed only in one's imagination.

Nevertheless, Viciebsk still remains an important place, regarding attempts to claim the avant-gardes for Belarusian cultural discourse as if no other art history could "happen" beyond this recognisable case. Indeed, these distinguished names of Viciebsk artists played a significant role in Belarusian art history. But does Belarusian art need only Chagall and Malevich to be accepted as art? The decolonisation of art history (as an imaginative performance of *deterritorialization*) means not merely taking and adding this page to Belarusian art and culture. The point is to extend the narration beyond the "recognisable" and to explore its margins—those pages which might be considered *local*. But this "local" as something "less meaningful" and, therefore, "excluded" alludes not to "provincial" culture. To think locally means to deconstruct the centre- and male-oriented perspective on the avant-gardes, allowing us to imagine the landscape of art's histories in radically divergent ways.

> To put it differently, if narration has so far constituted the centre, where movement, evolution, drama and climaxes occur, the periphery has been defined as description: where the absence of narration, pause and stasis dominate. It is time we started narrating the periphery[954].

[954] Vlachou, "Notes from the Periphery: History and Methods", 197.

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Illustrations

Fig.1. Ludmila Rusava and Ihar Kaškurevič, *Ažyŭliennie Kazimira* (*Kazimir's Revival*). Viciebsk, 1988. Source: from the archives of I. Kaškurevič / pARTisan(ka) archive.

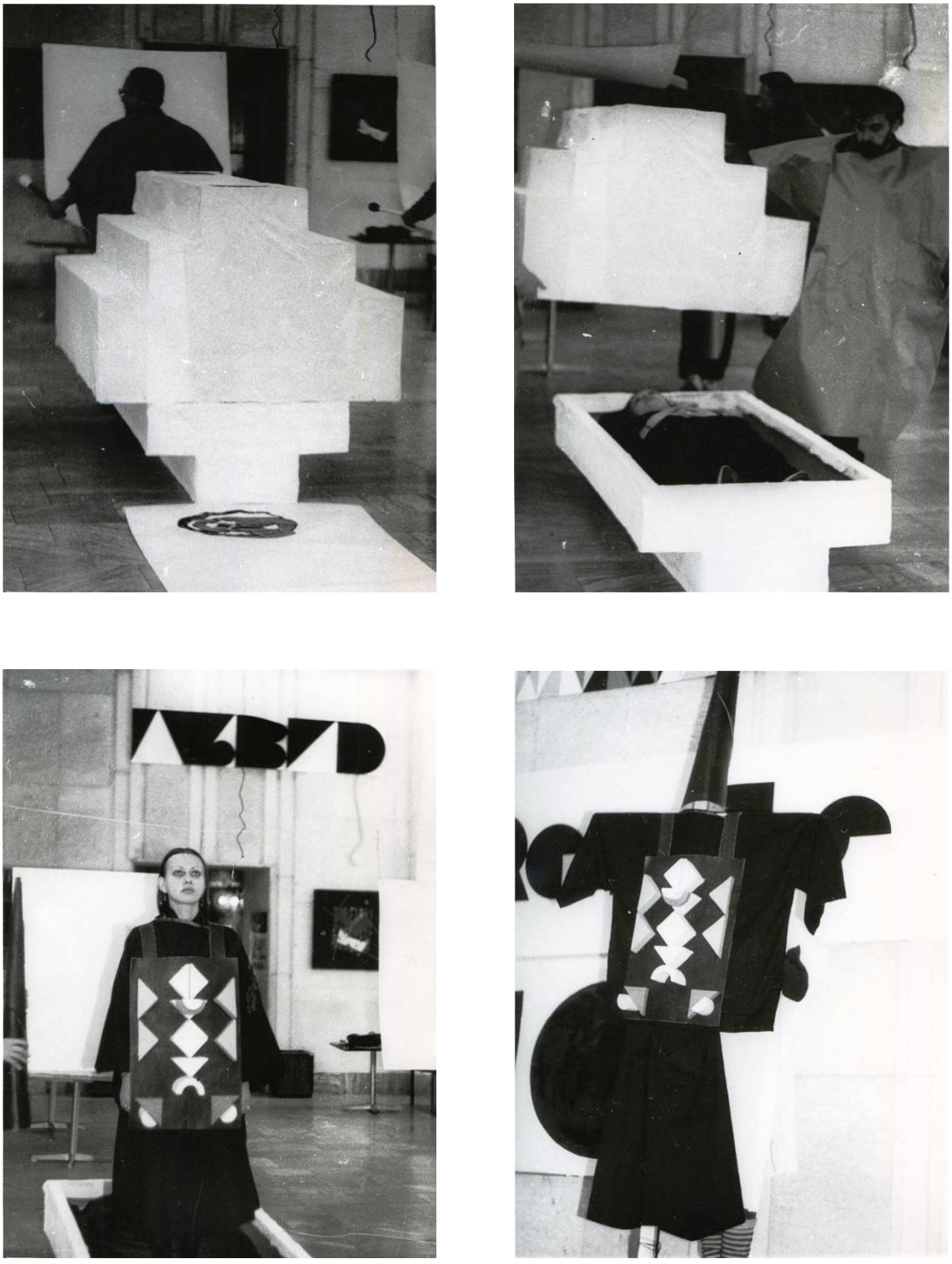

Fig. 2. Ihar Kaškurevič. *Spaliennie Kazimira* (*Kazimir's Burning*). Nearby Viciebsk, 1988. Source: from the archives of I. Kaškurevič // pARTisan(ka) archive.

Fig. 3. Robert Falk with his Viciebsk students, Viciebsk, 1922. Seated, first row from left: L. Zevin, I. Beskin; second row from left: R. Falk, R. Idelson, D. Morachev; third row from left: A. Volkhonsky, S. Rivinson, M. Kunin, F. Rabkina. Source: GAVO.

Fig. 4. Leŭ Litvinaŭ with the scale model for *Fuenta Avehuna* by A. Tyshler. Source: the archive of I. Gerasimova.

Fig. 5. *Fuenta avehuna,* dir. L. Litvinaŭ. BDT-1, 1928. Source: BDAMLM, f.313, v.1, sp.299, l.5.

Fig. 6. Alexander Tyshler, *Jim Kuperkop*, sketch of the curtain. Dir. L. Litvinaŭ, BelGOSET, 1929. Source: the archive of I. Gerasimova

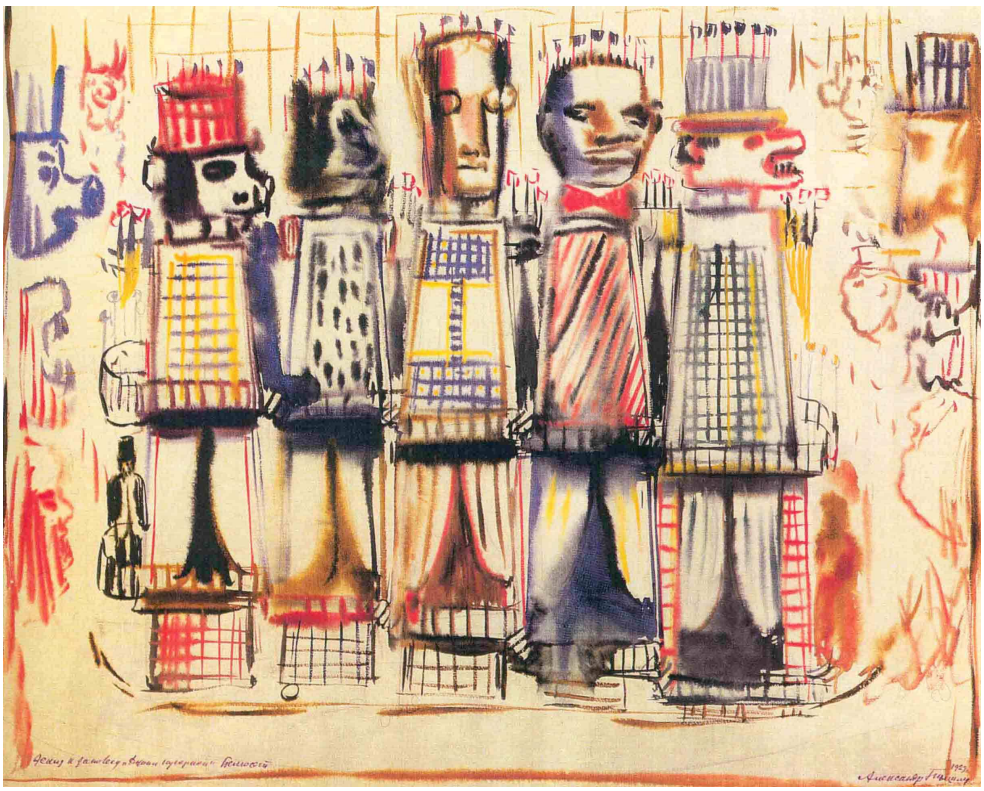

Fig. 7. *Žakieryja,* dir. L. Litvinaŭ. BDT-1, 1934. Source: BDAMLM, f.335, v.1, sp.3, l.1.

Fig. 8. L. Litvinaŭ during the tour with Kazan Drama Theatre in Moscow, the mid-1950s. Litvinaŭ is the third person from right. Source: Litvinovs family archive.

Fig. 9. A. Ahola-Valo, Viciebsk, 1922. Source: AAVF

Fig. 10. Aleksanderi Ahola-Valo Foundation, Hämeenlinna, March, 2022. Source: the author's archive.

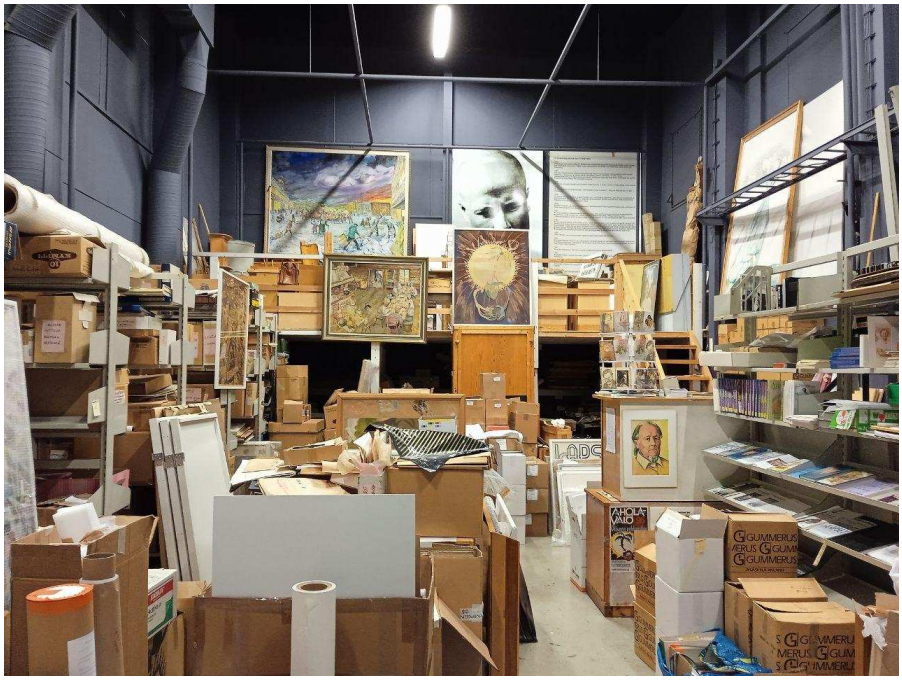

Fig. 11. A. Ahola-Valo, “The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind”, sketch, 1930. Source: AAVF.

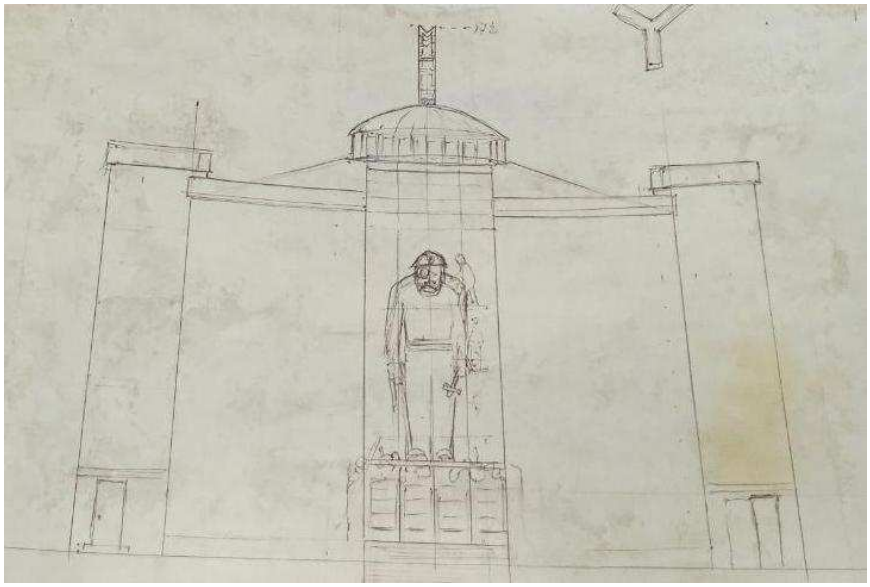

Fig. 12. A. Ahola-Valo during the building of the pavilion “The Temple of Sufferings of Mankind”, Minsk, 1930. Source: AAVF.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Dissertation untersucht und erörtert die Spuren der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus während der Zwischenkriegszeit (1918-1939). Aufgrund ihres spezifischen historischen Rahmens sind diese Spuren eng mit den politischen Prozessen (Glasnost und Perestroika) der 1980er Jahre verbunden. Daher beginnt diese Studie (als eine Reise in die Vergangenheit) mit der Untersuchung der belarussischen nonkonformistischen Kunstszene jener Zeit, die sich in vielfacher Art und Weise auf die historischen Avantgarden zurückbesinnen. Trotz der etablierten Tradition der Avantgarde-Theorie sieht die gegenwärtige Wissenschaft eine Notwendigkeit darin, dieses sozialen und kulturellen Phänome aus einer nicht-eurozentrischen Perspektive neu zu überdenken. Dabei geht es um alternative theoretische Modelle, die für die Bestimmung des Phänomens jenseits der westeuropäischen Grenzen unerlässlich sind, insbesondere in Ländern wie Belarus, wo die Avantgarden in einem Moment entstanden, in dem sich sowohl der belarussische Staat als auch die belarussische Kultur neu abzeichneten. Basierend auf dekolonialen Theorien, performance-basierten und biographischen Ansätzen entfaltet die Dissertation einige Beispiele der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus als *(un-)performed histories*, die das Verhältnis zwischen der transkulturellen Agenda der Avantgarden und vergangenen und aktuellen Prozessen der Dekolonisierung der belarussischen Kultur problematisieren.

Die Zeit der Avantgarden in den 1910er und 1920er Jahren war offensichtlich eine besondere Zeit für die mittel- und osteuropäischen Länder und die Republiken der Sowjetunion (UdSSR), da die alten Hierarchien und Normen zusammenbrachen und neue Staaten, Grenzen, soziale und kulturelle Strukturen entstanden. Der Erste Weltkrieg, die Februar- und die Oktoberrevolution von 1917 bewirkten einen historischen Moment, in dem diese Länder ihre kulturelle Autonomie proklamierten. Bevor 1918 der erste Versuch unternommen wurde, eine souveräne Republik zu gründen, hatte Belarus nie als Staat existiert. Vom 13. bis 18. Jahrhundert war es Teil des Großfürstentums Litauen, dann des polnisch-litauischen Staatenbundes; 1795 wurde das Gebiet des heutigen Belarus dem Russischen Kaiserreich einverleibt. Zu Beginn des 20. Jahrhunderts ermöglichten die politischen Veränderungen in den europäischen Ländern und im Russischen Kaiserreich die Konsolidierung einiger belarussischer nationaler Gruppen und das Entstehen einer Bewegung namens Belarussische Nationale Wiedergeburt. Historiker beschreiben die Zeit von 1917 bis 1919 als eine Zeit der ideologischen Kämpfe zwischen verschiedenen politischen Gruppierungen. Im Jahr 1920

wurde die Belarussische Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik (BSSR) ausgerufen, die bis zum Zusammenbruch der UdSSR im Jahr 1991 bestand[955].

Den meisten Studien über die russischen und sowjetischen Avantgarden zufolge nahm die *revolutionäre* oder *linke Kunst*, wie sie in der Sowjetunion genannt wurde, in den ersten Jahren nach der Oktoberrevolution in den Sowjetrepubliken eine bedeutende ideologische Stellung ein[956]. Für die Avantgardekünstler eröffnete die Oktoberrevolution, die mit einer Emanzipation in Bezug auf Klasse, ethnische Minderheiten und künstlerische Mittel verbunden war, einen Horizont für die Verwirklichung ihrer künstlerischen Revolutionen. Dies war jedoch nur einer der Gründe dafür, dass sie oft direkt in den Prozess der Gründung neuer Institutionen oder sogar staatlicher Gebäude engagiert waren. Aktuelle Forschungen zeigen, dass die Einbindung von Künstlern in den politischen und sozialen Bereich vielmehr ein langfristiger Prozess war und aus verschiedenen Gründen geschah (Kap. 3). Dennoch waren die Künstler, die sich in den bolschewistischen Institutionen niederließen und dort arbeiteten, die Vorhut der kulturellen und sozialen Transformationen.

Wie in vielen anderen Ländern war auch im sowjetischen Belarus die kommunistische Agenda ein Hybrid aus Kommunismus und Nationalismus. Vor der Oktoberrevolution waren die Belarussen in Bezug auf die Klassenhierarchie hauptsächlich Bauern. Daher wurzelte der belarussische Nationalismus, der von verschiedenen politischen Formationen artikuliert wurde, „in der Kluft zwischen nationaler und sozialer Identität und war in erheblichem Maße von äußeren Kräften geprägt“[957]. Dies war einer der Gründe dafür, dass viele Künstler und Schriftsteller den belarussischen Bolschewismus in den 1920er Jahren unterstützten und sich für die Entwicklung des belarussischen Kulturprojekts in der BSSR einsetzten. Andere Künstler ließen sich von der transnationalen Agenda des Bolschewismus inspirieren, die in den ersten Jahren nach der Revolution verkündet wurde und den Menschen nicht-russischer Herkunft, einschließlich der Juden, einen gleichen Status versprach. Für Leŭ Litvinaŭ, der als einer der experimentellsten Theaterregisseure seiner Zeit bekannt war, eröffnete ein solches Versprechen nicht nur die Möglichkeit einer professionellen Theaterkarriere im Jüdischen

[955] Infolge des Vertrags von Riga 1921 fiel der westliche Teil von Belarus an Polen, wo er bis 1939 verblieb. Fast die Hälfte des heutigen belarussischen Territoriums (die Grenze verlief in der Nähe von Minsk) stand nicht unter sowjetischer Herrschaft. Der Verweis auf das sowjetische Belarus in der Studie soll daher auch verdeutlichen, dass sich die Forschung lediglich auf den Teil der belarussischen Kultur konzentriert und nicht den kulturellen Bereich (einschließlich der Avantgarden) im westlichen Weißrussland abdeckt.
[956] Vgl. zu Katerina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the early Soviet Era, 1918–1928* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).
[957] Simon Lewis, *Belarus—Alternative Visions. Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 5.

Theater. Zu Beginn der 1930er Jahre wurde er sogar zum Leiter des Belarussischen Nationaltheaters (Kap. 6.2.). Gleichzeitig gab es individuelle und kollektive Avantgardeprojekte, die sich nicht in die nationalen Debatten einmischten. Die Künstler der Viciebsker Volkskunstschule, die durch die Namen von Marc Chagall und Kazimir Malevich berühmt wurde, experimentierten radikal mit den Wahrnehmungsmodi und präsentierten eine alternative gemeinschaftliche Form der künstlerischen Zusammenarbeit, die neben und unabhängig von den Debatten über Nationalität und Identität als ideologisches Projekt existierte (Kap. 3.3-4.).

Mitte der 1920er Jahre leitete der neue Führer der Kommunistischen Partei, Stalin, den Prozess der Zentralisierung der Macht ein und erklärte die wichtigsten ideologischen Programme. Seine Aussage ‚Proletarisch im Inhalt, national in der Form' rief politische Kampagnen gegen die national orientierten Kulturprogramme und ihre Anführer in allen nicht-russischen Sowjetrepubliken hervor. Anfang der 1930er Jahre begannen die politischen Repressionen zunächst gegen zu national orientierte und dann gegen zu avantgardistische (formalistische) Künstler, Theatermacher, Schriftsteller und Dichter. Die postrevolutionäre bolschewistische Agenda des Transnationalismus verwandelte sich in einen sowjetischen Imperialismus, der sich auf die Dominanz der russischen Kultur stützte. Nach dem Tod Stalins 1953 und dem Beginn der Tauwetter-Periode (‚chruschtschewskaja ottepel') in der UdSSR lebte die Erinnerung an die Avantgarden langsam wieder auf. In Sowjetrussland wurden viele unterdrückte Künstler und Wissenschaftler rehabilitiert. In der BSSR, wie auch in anderen Sowjetrepubliken, hatten diese Prozesse aufgrund der neuen Kampagnen gegen nationalistische Bewegungen, die von sowjetischen Führern eingeleitet wurden, jedoch einen anderen Charakter. Es war nach wie vor verboten, sich auf ein nationales Geschichtsmodell zu berufen. Eine öffentliche Auseinandersetzung mit der lokalen Geschichte, einschließlich der Kunstgeschichte, wurde in diesen Ländern erst während der Perestroika möglich.

Vor den 1980er Jahren existierten die Erinnerungen an die experimentelle Kunst der 1920-30er Jahre im sowjetischen Belarus nur in Form von mündlichen Erzählungen. Aber selbst diese wurden hauptsächlich als dem Phänomen der russischen Avantgarde zugehörig dargestellt, als ob das belarussische Territorium zufällig in ihrem Schatten stünde. Im sowjetischen Belarus waren es die Künstler der informellen (nonkonformistischen) Kunstszene, die sich durch ihre künstlerischen Praktiken den Diskurs der Avantgarden zurückeroberten (Kap. 1).

Die Dissertation basiert auf zahlreichen Primärquellen: Dokumente aus den Archiven in Minsk, Viciebsk und Hämeenlinna, einschließlich privater Archive (Beschlüsse, Berichte,

Listen, Briefe, Notizen und Fotos); veröffentlichte Memoiren, Zeitungen, Zeitschriften, historische Bücher und literarische Werke aus den 1920-30er Jahren; und Gespräche, die ich mit Künstlern und lokalen Wissenschaftlern geführt habe, die in den 1980-2010er Jahren zur Rückgewinnung der Avantgardegeschichte im belarussischen Kulturdiskurs beigetragen haben. Ich beziehe mich auch auf Materialien (Dokumente und Interviews), die ich für meine frühen Forschungen über die informelle Kunstszene im sowjetischen Belarus gesammelt habe[958]. Neben bekannten Quellen aus dem Staatlichen Archiv Viciebsk (Forschungsreise im Juli-August 2021) und dem Belarussischen Staatsarchiv für Literatur und Kunst (Forschungsarbeit 2018-2021) enthält die Studie mehrere einzigartige Dokumente. In erster Linie handelt es sich dabei um das Familienarchiv von Leŭ Litvinaŭ, das mir (mit Erlaubnis des Enkels Rustem Litvinov) von der belarussischen Wissenschaftlerin Inna Gerasimova überlassen wurde. Der zweite Korpus besteht aus Materialien, die während der Forschungsreise zum Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo Museum in Hämeenlinna im März 2022 gesammelt wurden. Da Archive im belarussischen Kulturkontext eine besondere Rolle spielen und der Zugang zu ihnen manchmal zu einem Abenteuer wird, gibt es ein Unterkapitel, in dem ich den Prozess des Entdeckens erläutere und die Quellen ausführlicher beschreibe (Kap.6.1.).

Abgesehen vom allgemeinen Forschungsstand in Bezug auf die Lücken in der gegenwärtigen Avantgarde-Theorie und der Erläuterung der wichtigsten methodischen Ansätze (dekolonialischer und biographischer) und Konzepte wie Performativität, Identität, Hybridität, Liminalität und der dritte Raum (*third space*) werden in der Einleitung mehrere Aspekte vorgestellt, die für die Studie eine wesentliche Rolle spielen. Erstens offenbart sie die fast vollständige Abwesenheit des belarussischen kulturellen Kontextes in den aktuellen Debatten über die Dezentralisierung und das *Remapping* der mittel- und osteuropäischen Kunstgeschichte[959]. Einer der Hauptgründe dafür liegt in der Definition des Begriffs ‚Osteuropa', der vor allem mit dem ‚Ostblock' als einem Gebiet „zwischen dem Eisernen Vorhang und der Sowjetunion" in Verbindung gebracht wird[960]. Ein solcher Ansatz

[958] Die Interviews wurden für die Ausstellung ‚Minsk. Nonkonformismus der 1980er Jahre' (Y Contemporary Art Gallery, Minsk 2014) geführt, die ich co-kuratiert habe. Die Materialien wurden veröffentlicht in: Tania Arcimovič und Artur Klinaŭ, eds. Minsk. Non-kanfarmizm 1980-ch (Minsk: Lohvinau, 2014).
[959] Vgl. Laura Hoptman and Tomas Pospiszyl, eds., *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002); IRWIN, ed., *East Art Map. Contemporary Art and Eastern Europe* (London: Afterall Books, 2006); Jérôme Bazin, Pascal Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotr Piotrowski, eds. *Art beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)* (Budapest; New York: Central European University Press, 2015); Amy Bryzgel, ed., *Performance art in Eastern Europe since 1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).
[960] Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe 1945-1989* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2009), 7.

reproduziert das Stereotyp des homogenen Charakters sowohl der sowjetischen als auch der postsowjetischen Kultur. In den meisten Fällen, auch bei den Avantgarden, wurde das ‚Sowjetische' in ‚Russisches' verwandelt. Doch was bedeutet ‚sowjetisch' im Kontext der belarussischen, ukrainischen oder georgischen Kultur? Eine neue Optik und Sprache sind unerlässlich, um das Sowjetische im Sinne einer transkulturellen Geografie neu zu imaginieren.

Infolgedessen, und das ist ein zweiter Aspekt, werden die Avantgarden anderer, nicht-russischer Sowjetrepubliken an den Rand gedrängt und in das russische Phänomen eingegliedert, obwohl der Prozess ihrer Rekonzeptualisierung derzeit energisch fortgesetzt wird[961]. Was den belarussischen Kontext betrifft, so wurde das Phänomen der Avantgarde im sowjetischen Belarus noch nicht einmal von den einheimischen Wissenschaftlern anerkannt, die sich an dem dominanten Modell der russischen Avantgarde als radikaler Kunstbewegung orientieren[962]. Dies offenbart in erster Linie die Hierarchie im Prozess der Wissensproduktion (Moskau als Zentrum, in dem die „universelle Form des Wissens"[963] in der UdSSR produziert wurde)[964]. Andererseits ist der Fokus lokaler Wissenschaftler, einschließlich derjenigen, die die UdSSR nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg aufgrund ihrer antisowjetischen Einstellung verließen, oft durch die nationale Geschichte und folglich durch ein national orientiertes Kulturmodell begrenzt. Sie klammern die Avantgarde als der belarussischen Kultur „fremdes Element" aus[965]. Beispielsweise argumentiert Uladzimir Malcaŭ, dass die Entstehung der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus mit der Ausweitung der russischen Programme zusammenhing und dass avantgardistische Gastkünstler „die Bühnen der nationalen Ränder [...] zur Verbreitung ihrer Ideen in der Breite nutzten, und diese Ideen waren relevant"[966].

Die Tatsache, dass viele Avantgarde-Künstler, die in den 1920er Jahren im sowjetischen Belarus arbeiteten, ethnische ‚Nichtbelarussen' waren, unterstützt diese Spekulationen. Der Künstler Marc Chagall und der Theaterregisseur Leŭ Litvinaŭ waren

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[961] Myroslava M. Mudrak and Tetiana Rudenko, eds., *Staging the Ukrainian Avant-Garde of the 1910s and 1920s* (New York: Rodovid Press, 2015); Myroslav Shkandrij, *Avant-Garde Art in Ukraine, 1910–1930: Contested Memory* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019); Vera Faber, *Die ukrainische Avantgarde zwischen Ost und West: Intertextualität, Intermedialität und Polemik im ukrainischen Futurismus und Konstruktivismus der späten 1920er-Jahre* (Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2019).

[962] Vgl. zu Tatiana Kotovich, *Encyclopedia russkogo avangarda* (Minsk: Ekonompress, 2003); Vladimir Maltsev, "Russkij avangard i formirovanije natsionalnyh traditsij (Scenografija belorusskih teatrov 1920-h godov)," in *Avangard i teatr 1910-1920-h godov* (Moscow: RGBI 2008), 221-279.

[963] W. D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 81, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/unigiessen/detail.action?docID=999946.

[964] Almira Ousmanova, "Debaty o postsotsializme i politiki znaniya v prostranstve mnozhestvennykh post-," *Sotsiologicheskoye obozreniye* (2020): 52.

[965] Vladimir Seduro, *The Byelorussian Theater and Drama* (New York: Research Program on The U.S.S.R., 1955).

[966] Maltsev, "Russkij avangard i formirovanije natsionalnyh traditsij", 222.

belarussische Juden (oder *litvaks*). Einige Künstler, wie El Lissitzky und Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo, kamen zu Beginn der 1920er nach Belarus. Aber welche Rolle spielten die geografischen und kulturellen Grenzen in den Programmen der Avantgarde? Was könnten uns die verschlungenen Wege der Künstler verraten? Geht es um die Frage der ‚Heimatlosigkeit' der Künstler?[967] Oder versuchten die Avantgarden, die Geografie als *hybrid, transcultural phenomenon*[968] jenseits aller ideologischen Beschränkungen zu überwinden?

Aus diesem Grund spielt die Erklärung des ‚Belarussischen' eine zentrale Rolle für die Studie, denn historisch gesehen existierte das ‚Belarussische' lange Zeit unter verschiedenen Bezeichnungen (Kresy Wschodnie, Severo-Zapadnyj kraj, Belarussische Volksrepublik, Litauisch-Belorussische Sozialistische Sowjetrepublik, Kriwien, Weißruthenien, Weißrussland und andere[969]). Das Ziel der Dissertation besteht jedoch darin, den Bezug auf nationale, ethnische oder geopolitische Kartografien zu vermeiden, die, wie Almira Ousmanova hervorhebt, *ideologisch besetzt sind*[970]. Daher werde ich mich auf die Metapher der *routes/roots* von James Clifford beziehen, die es ermöglicht, über die Vorstellung von Kultur als „verpackt in einem Territorium" hinauszugehen[971]. Diese Metapher hilft dabei, die Landkarte der Avantgarden jenseits der Grenzen neu zu entwerfen und zu fragen, wie die *routes* der Avantgarden mit ihren *roots* zusammenhängen.

Daher folgt die Dissertation den biografischen Wegen der Avantgarde-Künstler, und analysiert die kulturelle Situation des sowjetischen Belarus mit Hilfe der Konzepte der Hybridität, der Liminalität und des dritten Raums (*third space*)[972]. Meine Erklärung des ‚Belarussischen' bezieht sich auf eine hybride Identifikation und den *borderland*-Topos, die den Charakter der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus bestimmten. Anstelle des Begriffs der Identität als politische Kategorie – im Sinne von Ethnizität und Nationalität – werde ich mich auf das Konzept der Zugehörigkeit (*Belongingness*) beziehen, das es erlaubt, zusätzliche

[967] Lotte S. Lederballe Pedersen,"Conditions of Homelessness. Kurt Schwitters' Investigation of Un/Homely Territories," *Nordlit*, no. 21 (2007): 219-27.
[968] James M. Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
[969] Vgl. Eugen von Engelhardt, *Weissruthenien: Volk und Land* (Berlin: Volk und Reich Verl., 1943); Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: the Making of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1956); Vitaut Kipel, "Belorussians," in *Guide to the Study of the Soviet Nationalities: Non-Russian peoples of the USSR*, ed. Stephan M. Horak (Littleton: Libraries Unlimited, 1982).
[970] Ousmanova, "Debaty o postsotsializme i politiki znaniya", 44-69.
[971] Jonathan Friedman, "From Roots to Routes: Tropes for Trippers." *Anthropological Theory* 2, no. 1, (1 March 2002): 22. See also, James Clifford, *Routes: travel and translation in the late twentieth century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).
[972] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. Adam Blauhut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016).

ideologische Einschränkungen zu vermeiden[973]. Bezeichnenderweise ist ein solcher Ansatz notwendig, um individuelle kulturell transgressive Programme der Avantgarden zu untersuchen. Außerdem erlaubt er es mir, nicht in ‚Belarussisch' als Kategorie der ‚Nation' gefangen zu sein, um mich so auf den Rahmen der transnationalen Geschichte zu stützen zu können.

Das erste Kapitel bezieht sich auf die Zeit der 1980-90er Jahre, als die Künstler der informellen Kunstszene im sowjetischen Belarus den Prozess der Rückgewinnung der Erinnerung an die Avantgarden der 1920er Jahre einleiteten. Auf der Grundlage von Erinnerungen und Gesprächen mit lokalen Wissenschaftlern und Künstlern, die an diesen künstlerischen Interventionen beteiligt waren, fragt dieser Abschnitt, warum diese Rückkehr so notwendig war und mit wem und wofür die Künstler kämpften. Nach der chronologischen Logik könnte dieses Kapitel ganz am Ende der Dissertation stehen. Ich beginne jedoch damit, den verworrenen und diffusen Charakter des Avantgarde-Narrativs im belarussischen Kulturkontext aufzuzeigen. Ein solcher Einstieg ist nicht nur aus ‚dramaturgischen' Gründen notwendig (obwohl dies im Übrigen der Ausgangspunkt meiner Studien war). Aufgrund eines nichtlinearen, zersplitterten und zerstreuten Modells der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus können die Geschichten der 1920-30er Jahre als Teil der Ereignisse im Spätsozialismus und nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion betrachtet werden, die ich am Ende des Kapitels ausführe.

Das zweite Kapitel gibt einen Überblick über die primären und aktuellen Quellen der Avantgardeforschung, die oft auf der Kritik der klassischen Theorien von Peter Bürger und Renato Poggioli basieren und in der Folge Ansätze der Pluralität entwickeln. Obwohl einige Theoretiker die Effizienz der etymologischen Genealogie der Avantgarde in Frage stellen, insbesondere James M. Harding, der vermutet, dass dieser Ansatz zu einer Verallgemeinerung des Konzepts führen könnte, gehe ich davon aus, dass dasselbe mit so verlockenden Konzepten wie Multiplizität oder Pluriversalität geschehen kann, die ebenfalls dazu neigen, zu einer Abstraktion ohne Kriterien zu werden. Die Reise entlang der Ränder, und das ist mein generelles Ziel, ist aber nur möglich, wenn die Spannung zwischen den dominanten und peripheren Erzählungen über die Avantgarden gehalten wird. Ich tue dies nicht nur, um zu zeigen, wie die vorherrschende Kritik auf der Grundlage des Begriffs der Modernität konstruiert wurde oder wo die Wurzeln der aktuellen Debatten über die Avantgarden liegen.

[973] Mary Jacobus, *On Belonging and Not Belonging: Translation, Migration, Displacement.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

Vielmehr gehe ich davon aus, dass diese Revision es mir erlaubt, in das Feld zu intervenieren, um meine Studie an einem bestimmten Punkt zu platzieren. Um die Avantgarden in Belarus zu spezifizieren, beziehe ich mich auf das Konzept des dritten Raums (*third space*) von Homi M. Bhabha[974], das meines Erachtens nicht nur hilft, die Besonderheiten des Phänomens auf belarussischem Territorium zu analysieren, sondern darüber hinaus den Charakter der lokalen Avantgarde als Ergebnis des besonderen ‚Standortes' der Kultur offenlegt.

Das dritte Kapitel beschreibt den historischen Hintergrund der Oktoberrevolution als liminalen Raum und gleichzeitig als symbolischen Ausgangspunkt für die Avantgarden in Belarus. Trotz des aus unterschiedlichen Perspektiven unbestreitbaren Einflusses des Oktoberaufstands auf die Ausformung der Avantgarden in der UdSSR stellt das Kapitel die Frage nach seiner Rolle und seinen Auswirkungen auf die politischen und kulturellen Randgebiete des ehemaligen Russischen Kaiserreichs. Es enthält auch Anmerkungen zur kulturellen Identifikation von Belarus als *transnational* und *hybrid*, die sich auf das Konzept der ‚fließende Form' beziehen, das der belarussische Philosoph Ihnat Abdziralovič (Kančeŭski) 1921 formulierte[975]. Nach der Erkundung der Russischen Revolution als zeitlich ausgedehntes Ereignis stellt der Abschnitt Viciebsk vor, wo, wie ich behaupte, die Geschichte der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus begann. Insbesondere gehe ich auf die Geschichte der nachrevolutionären Viciebsker Kunstschule und der UNOVIS-Gruppe ein. Ich identifiziere das Phänomen der Schule in den Jahren 1918-1922 als unmittelbare Verkörperung der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus und argumentiere, dass dies aufgrund der Liminalität des Augenblicks möglich war. Nach einigen allgemeinen Fakten über die Gründung der Schule konzentriert sich das Kapitel auf die Beziehungen zwischen Künstlern und verschiedenen ideologischen Diskursen in der Stadt. Ich behaupte, dass ein situatives Moment der Überschneidung dieser Ideologien an einem bestimmten Ort (der Stadt Viciebsk mit ihrer eigenen Geschichte und ihren Besonderheiten) einen Raum der Möglichkeiten und der Kreativität (im Sinne von Abdziralovič) hervorbrachte, der chronologisch den Rahmen des ‚dritten Raums' der Avantgarden in Belarus eröffnet.

Zentrales Ziel des vierten Kapitels ist es, einige der ‚verschwundenen' weiblichen Namen aus der Geschichte der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus, einschließlich der Viciebsker Kunstschule, aufzuspüren. Mein Interesse gilt dabei sowohl den Gemeinsamkeiten

[974] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.
[975] Abdziralovič, Ihnat [Abdsiralowitsch, Ihnat], „Der urewige Weg. Untersuchungen über eine weißruthenische Weltanschauung", übers. Norbert Randow, Gundula und Uladsimir Tschapeha, In *Annus Albaruthenicus* (2009): 39-58.

in den Biografien der Frauen als auch den Unterschieden in ihren Wegen, die dazu führten, dass sie entweder in die Geschichte eingingen oder aber ‚vergessen' wurden. Das Kapitel zeigt auf, wie viele noch ‚unentdeckte' Seiten jedes Kunstphänomen hat, und stellt die Fähigkeit des bestehenden Kanons in der Kunst in Frage, tatsächlich *eine Geschichte zu erzählen*. Indem ich verschiedene Hindernisse erörtere, mit denen Wissenschaftlerinnen bei der Rekonstruktion von Frauenbiografien konfrontiert werden, zeige ich auf, dass der feministische Ansatz des Geschichtenerzählens nicht nur darauf abzielt, ‚Geschichte' zu erweitern[976]. Es handelt sich um eine Strategie, die den bestehenden männerorientierten ‚Kanon' in Frage stellt und dazu beiträgt, multidiverse und plurale ‚epistemische Räume' zu schaffen, die die Grundlage eines transnationalen Feminismus bilden.

Aufgrund der Machtzentralisierung und des ideologischen Drucks in den 1920er Jahren wurden die Strategien der Avantgarde von der sowjetischen Ideologie vereinnahmt und nach ihrem Potenzial zur Darstellung und Förderung des Bolschewismus bewertet. Anknüpfend an die Aktivitäten des TEREVSAT (Theater der revolutionären Satire in Viciebsk, 1920-1922), das die Bewegung des ‚Theaters der Agitation' (agitteatr) in den Sowjetrepubliken initiierte, untersucht das fünfte Kapitel die Beziehungen zwischen den Avantgarden und der Propagandakunst. Mit Blick auf die Geschichte des TEREVSAT werden die Definitionen von *revolutionärer Kunst* (revolutsionnoje iskusstvo), *linker Kunst* (levoje iskusstvo) und *proletarischer Kultur* (proletarskaya kultura) als zentrale Punkte der Debatten in den Jahren 1917-1922 untersucht. Im Kontext der Entfaltung des Begriffs ‚revolutionär' wird die besondere Stellung des Körpers (als primäre analytische Kategorie) im sowjetischen Theater nach 1917 mit den sozialen und politischen Programmen dieser Zeit in Beziehung gesetzt. Mit Blick auf die Politik des Körpers in den darstellenden Künsten der 1920er Jahre in Sowjetrussland (Meyerholds Biomechanik) und im sowjetischen Belarus (Theaterproduktionen in Minsk und Viciebsk) behaupte ich, dass die Projekte der Avantgarde nicht unabhängig der Besonderheiten der kulturellen Situation direkt von einem Kontext in einen anderen übertragen werden konnten. Vielmehr wurden diese Ideen je nach dem Kontext ihrer Verkörperung während des Prozesses der Übertragung (*travelling*) verschoben, gebrochen oder, genauer gesagt, übersetzt (*translated*)[977].

[976] Marsha Meskimmon, *Transnational Feminisms and Art's Transhemispheric Histories: Ecologies and Genealogies* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2023), 1.
[977] Doris Bachmann-Medick, ed., *The Trans/National Study of Culture: A Translational Perspective* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014).

Das letzte Kapitel erzählt die fast vergessenen und verlorenen Geschichten des Theaterregisseurs Leŭ Litvinaŭ und des Künstlers Aleksanteri Ahola-Valo, der als „belarussischer Finne“ oder „finnischer Belarusse“ identifiziert wird[978]. Trotz des Mangels an Dokumenten über Litvinaŭs frühe künstlerische Jahre (1910-20er, der Zeitraum, für den ich mich an meisten interessiere), war es gerade sein Fall, als einer unter (noch nicht entdeckten) anderen, der es mir ermöglichte, die Idee der *unperformed* Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus zu entwickeln. Diese (*Un-)Performances* verweisen nicht nur auf die Geister des Geschehenen. Jacques Derrida beschreibt den Begriff der Spuren und weist auf besondere Beziehungen zwischen ihnen und den Kategorien Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft hin, auf die sich die Spuren beziehen[979]. Dem Weg Litvinaŭs folgend, der begann, als sich der Raum für die Avantgarden langsam aber sicher verdichtete, versuche ich die Fragen zu beantworten, warum diese Avantgarde nicht zustande kam und ob es zumindest Chancen gab, dass sie stattfinden hätte können. Im Gegensatz dazu hatte der Künstler Ahola-Valo, der zehn Jahre im sowjetischen Belarus verbrachte und das Projekt ‘Der Tempel des menschlichen Leidens’ (Minsk, 1930) realisierte, seine avantgardistische Performance fast vollständig vollendet. Obwohl sein Wirken noch immer nicht kohärent beschrieben ist, repräsentieren die verschlungenen Wege seiner Biografie die Komplexität der politischen und kulturellen Situation nach der Oktoberrevolution im sowjetischen Belarus. Die Durchsicht mehrerer Materialkorpora offenbart die Rolle der Lebensbeschreibung als imaginäre Konstruktion und als Form der Selbstdarstellung[980] im Prozess der Schaffung einer Avantgarde-Mythologie. Außerdem erweitert Ahola-Valos Fall die bestehenden theoretischen Modelle der Avantgarden über die üblichen ästhetischen Kriterien hinaus (wie Futurismus, Dadaismus, Rayonismus und andere), einschließlich des Modells der sowjetischen Avantgarde.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich sagen, dass der Schwerpunkt dieser Arbeit nicht auf dem Avantgardismus im Sinne der Ästhetik oder der Philosophie liegt, da die Avantgarde sich als ästhetisches Phänomen, wie Jacques Rancière anmerkt, von den radikalen Praktiken zur Nostalgie umgewandelt hat[981]. Gleichzeitig eröffnet dieses veränderte Verständnis des Avantgardismus in Verbindung mit neueren Ansätzen und Disziplinen neue Perspektiven ein

[978] Olga Ruoho, “Suomalainen valkovenäläinen (Uutta tietoa A. Ahola-Valosta vieraskielisistä aineistoista)”, manuscript. Published in K*ulttuurivihkot*, no. 6 (2020): 38-43.
[979] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986).
[980] Vgl. Claudia Ulbrich, Hans Medick and Angelika Schaser, eds. *Selbstzeugnis und Person: transkulturelle Perspektiven* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2012).
[981] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, ed. and transl. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

Feld, in dem es möglich wird, nicht nur den Kanon der Kunstgeschichte, sondern das Verständnis der Avantgarden generell in Frage zu stellen. Diese beiden Rahmen bilden die grundlegende Orientierung für meine Forschung, da ich diese unterschiedlichen Perspektiven nicht nur nutzte, um die Geschichte der Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus ‚irgendwo' auf der Landkarte zu verorten. Vielmehr ging es mir darum zu zeigen, wie sich die Flüchtigkeit und Unbeständigkeit der Avantgarden in hybriden und Zwischenkulturen verkörpern kann. Die Kontextualisierung bleibt das wichtigste Mittel, um diese Verkörperungen zu definieren, die oft ästhetisch wie historisch nicht in den bestehenden Kanon passen. Sie fordert dazu auf, Begriffe wie Radikalität, Ideologie, Experimentalismus, Revolution, Befreiung, Emanzipation (und andere) sehr ‚lokal' zu lesen und verweist auf die Methodik des ‚*border thinking*' von Walter M. Mignolo (als Schnittstelle von ‚lokalen Geschichten'/‚local stories' und ‚globalem Design'/‚global design'), die eine grundlegende Voraussetzung für die Dekolonisierung des Wissens ist[982].

Daher lege ich nahe, dass die Avantgarden als heterogene und asynchrone Phänomene durch die historischen und kulturellen Besonderheiten einer ‚Geografie' oder eines kulturellen Kontexts, in dem sie entstanden und auftraten, bestimmt wurden. Die Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus, wie auch in anderen mittel- und osteuropäischen Ländern, erschienen als Reaktion auf die geopolitischen und sozialen Veränderungen und entstanden an der Schnittstelle (oder im Zwischenraum) zwischen der bolschewistischen Revolution, der nationalen Politik und der transkulturellen Agenda, die verschiedene Avantgardismusmodelle bestimmten. Die Avantgarden im belarussischen Kontext balancierten zwischen der transnationalen Agenda (als Netzwerk und Rhizom), den Horizonten verschiedener Utopisten und der Politik der kulturellen Emanzipation, was den möglichen hybriden und lückenhaften Charakter der Avantgarden in Belarus unterstreicht.

Die Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus, oder genauer gesagt, ihre ‚Spuren', entwickelten sich aus mehreren Gründen jedoch nur sporadisch und inkohärent. Generell behaupte ich, dass die Avantgarden als reines Phänomen (im Sinne der Autonomie der Kunst und ihrer emanzipatorischen Zielsetzung) in den sowjetischen Gebieten nur in den ersten Jahren nach der Oktoberrevolution (im Schwellenraum der russischen Revolution) möglich waren. Während die Ideologie in der Sowjetunion immer stärker zentralisiert und kontrolliert wurde, wurden bestimmte Modelle der Avantgarden (als ein Modus der Verhandlung und des Kompromisses mit der bolschewistischen Autorität) entwickelt und das Phänomen der

[982] Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 38.

sowjetischen Avantgarden konzeptualisiert. Die Ausnahmen – als Versuche, Raum für nicht-ideologisierte und autonome Kunst zu schaffen – waren jedoch offenbar bis Mitte der 1930er Jahre möglich und entstanden entweder ‚zufällig' (jenseits der Intention des Autors, was Rancieres ästhetisches Regime erklärt) oder irgendwo an den Rändern des ‚Sowjetischen', was dessen vielfältigen und unterschiedlichen Charakter hervorhebt.

In den so genannten nationalen sowjetischen Republiken war dieser Bereich des Sowjetischen sogar noch weitreichender und beweglicher, da er nicht nur den Bolschewismus umfasste. Er umfasste auch Mischformen zwischen Bolschewismus und Nationalismus (in verschiedenen Abstufungen, nicht als festes Programm), die den Bereich der Kunst einschließlich der Avantgarden beeinflussten. Das war ein Grund dafür, dass im sowjetischen Belarus meines Erachtens keine Avantgarden im Sinne des Kanons verkörpert werden konnten, da die Künstler zwischen ihrer künstlerischen Agenda und dem Bolschewismus auf der einen Seite und der national orientierten Politik (die sich ständig änderte) auf der anderen Seite balancieren mussten, wie die Geschichten von Litvinaŭ und Ahola-Valo zeigen. Ausnahmen bildeten Projekte, die im Moment des ‚Dazwischen' realisiert wurden – sei es politischer Situationen oder Kulturen (als unübersetzbare Phänomene, wie beispielsweise die Viciebsker Volkskunstschule).

Wie bereits erwähnt, war auch die nationale Dimension inhomogen. In einigen Fällen stellte sie ein starres politisches Programm der Dominanz einer Ideologie über andere dar, mit einer definierten Rolle der Kunst. Manchmal wurde sie aber auch zu einem Modus der Emanzipation und des Kampfes gegen die ‚Kolonisatoren', einschließlich des Klassenaspekts. In diesem Fall ermöglichte der nationale Aspekt das Erscheinen eines weiteren Modells der Avantgarden (als emanzipatorische Praxis, aber in der nationalen Version; als Ergebnis der ‚belarussischen' Nachwirkungen der russischen Revolution). Aufgrund der Spannungen zwischen Bolschewismus und Nationalismus, oder genauer gesagt zwischen verschiedenen politischen Programmen, die die soziale und kulturelle Landschaft in den 1920er Jahren bestimmten, traten die Avantgarden im sowjetischen Belarus im Modus der Unvollständigkeit, Mutation und Zerstreuung auf. Sie waren in Spalten und Lücken möglich, die sporadisch ‚hier' und ‚dort' auftauchten, aber (als Avantgarden) für den bestehenden Kanon unsichtbar waren. Diese Unsichtbarkeit ist jedoch nicht auf das Phänomen eines peripheren oder marginalen Kontextes zurückzuführen, in denen die Avantgarden entstanden. Denn der Rahmen eines Denkens in den Kategorien von Zentrum und Peripherie reproduziert lediglich die Machtasymmetrie und den Ausschluss gerade so, als ob es natürlich wäre, dass ‚Ränder' überhaupt keine ‚große' Kunst hervorbringen können. Das ist ein Grund dafür, warum

feministische Wissenschaftlerinnen darauf bestehen, den Kanon der (Kunst-)Geschichte zu dekonstruieren und zu provinzialisieren, der nicht länger den Interessen der (männlichen) Herrscher dienen soll.

Diese Argumentation über die besondere Rolle des Nationalismus auf dem belarussischen Territorium bezieht sich nur auf den belarussischen Fall, da die Politik des Nationalismus in verschiedenen Kulturen unterschiedliche Hintergründe hatte und unterschiedlich umgesetzt wurde. Es mag viele Gründe geben, diese Unterschiede zu erklären (historisch, geopolitisch, kulturell). Meines Erachtens sind sie jedoch im Wesentlichen auf die Besonderheiten der belarussischen Kultur zurückzuführen, die Abdziralovič als „fließende und veränderliche Formen" bezeichnete, die nicht nur den Charakter der Kultur (als unbeständig und formlos) bestimmten. Sie beeinflussten auch die ästhetischen Modi, die durch die Verkörperung dieser Fließfähigkeit und Unbeständigkeit jeglichen starren Formen von Kulturen widerstanden. Diese Annahme kann erklären, warum zum Beispiel die Verkörperungen der ‚nationalen (belarussischen) Avantgarde' keinen starken Einfluss auf die lokale Kultur hatten (im Gegensatz zu den ukrainischen oder polnischen Avantgarden). An diesem Punkt kann der Anspruch dieser für den Kanon unerkennbaren Formen, Avantgarden zu sein, im Sinne einer *decolonial aesthesis* von Madina Tlostanova betrachtet werden. Die Wissenschaftlerin schlägt diesen konzeptionellen Rahmen als eine kompliziertere Art vor, über (De-)Kolonisierung nachzudenken, die „von der Erfahrung derjenigen ausgeht, von denen man annahm, dass sie keine Vorstellungskraft haben und nur als passive Objekte für die imaginativen Übungen der [Subjekte der Kolonisatoren] dienen"[983]. Als alternativer multipler Modus der Zeitlichkeit erweitert dieser Ansatz nicht nur die Vorstellungskraft um die Theorie, sondern greift in ‚die Erinnerung/Vergangenheit' ein, der auch aus der Perspektive einer ‚Vormutter' statt ‚Nachfahrin' dargestellt werden kann[984].

[983] Terry Fly and Madina Tlostanova, *A New Political Imagination. Making the Case* (Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis, 2020), 164.
[984] Nandia-Foteini Vlachou, "Why Spatial? Time and the Periphery," in *The Disappointed Writer*, ed. Pinto dos Santos Mariana (Lisbon: Edições do Saguão, 2019), 333-352.