

STILL STEALING STEEL
(Historical–Materialist Study of Zaum)

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☺ KOBANİ ☺
VERANİ

+

MIKI
MIKO

Handwritten graffiti tags

ROBB
Bykobb

Volk
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Dank

By Nika
Tsiskaradi

“I could form no system to explain the phenomenon”

“If a man knows the heart, he will know it was impossible to go back instantly to my chamber; — it was touching a cold key with a flat third to it upon the close of a piece of music, which had call’d forth my affections: — therefore, when I let go the hand of the *fille de chambre*, I remained at the gate of the hotel for some time, looking at every one who pass’d by, — and forming conjectures upon them, till my attention got fix’d upon a single object which confounded all kind of reasoning upon him.

It was a tall figure of a philosophic, serious, adjust look, which passed and repass’d sedately along the street, making a turn of about sixty paces on each side of the gate of the hotel; — the man was about fifty–two — had a small cane under his arm — was dress’d in a dark drab–colour’d coat, waist-coat, and breeches, which seem’d to have seen some years service: — they were still clean, and there was a little air of frugal *propreté* throughout him. By his pulling off his hat, and his attitude of accosting a good many in his way, I saw he was asking charity: so I got a sous or two out of my pocket ready to give him, as he took me in his turn. — He pass’d by me without asking anything — and yet did not go five steps further before he ask’d charity of a little woman. — I was much more likely to have given of the two. — He had scarce done with the woman, when he pull’d off his hat to another who was coming the same way. — An ancient gentleman came slowly — and, after him, a young smart one. — He let them both pass, and ask’d nothing. I stood observing him half an hour, in which time he had made a dozen turns backwards and forwards, and found that he invariably pursued the same plan.

There were two things very singular in this, which set my brain to work, and to no purpose: — the first was, why the man should only tell his story to the sex; — and, secondly, — what kind of story it was, and what species of eloquence it could be, which soften’d the hearts of the women, which he knew ’twas to no purpose to practise upon the men.

There were two other circumstances, which entangled this mystery; — the one was, he told every woman what he had to say in her ear, and in a way which had much more the air of a secret than a petition; — the other was, it was always successful. — He never stopp’d a woman, but she pull’d out her purse, and immediately gave him something.

I could form no system to explain the phenomenon.

I had got a riddle to amuse me for the rest of the evening; so I walk’d upstairs to my chamber.”

(Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*, 1768)

multilingualism and noise, which is continuation of “counter-constructivist model”, could be described as conceptualizing zaum of multicultural, heterolinguistic, or dialogic sphere as non-harmonic, coercive and contradictory expressions.

Because of that we were very excited to come to Tbilisi, to look at the capital of most radical zaum experiments during the zenith of Russian avant-garde. As it is well known, zaum is cornerstone, a spine of Russian Futurism. It means “trans-rational” and as such it is the most extreme manifestation of artistic language as opposite to automatized and ideological everyday language. From 1913, when it is declared as principle of Futurism, it occupied not only a most important position in many avant-garde productions in Russia, but also in Georgia, Tbilisi, where Ilia Zdanevich, who co-authored above mentioned manifesto, also have written very interesting works (dra’s) in zaum style already in 1916.

Because of its total transformation of linguistic laws, zaum was not only important for poets, but also for Formalists, linguists, and later for historical-materialists (read Marxist) orientations in avant-garde, such as LEF. As complete negation of communicability with existing order, zaum is upmost political and radical artistic position. This aspect of zaum could contribute to a politicisation of avant-garde without instrumentalising its most radical elements for any kind of immediate social benefits. I would like to know something of this kind of political art in Tbilisi, which does not repress the unconscious, or contingent aspect of politics.

But there are scholarly works, such as Laureen Ninoshvili’s article, which refers to ambiguity and unintelligibility of zaum language as something constitutive to Georgian national discourse, which she relates to polyphonic folk singing. Even though there are folk and religious elements in zaum (as it was explained primarily by Viktor Shklovsky), it is rather bizzare to relate destructive avant-garde experimentations with national heritage. But similar kind of approach, even in more populist way, could be seen in interpretation of Nana Kipiani, who in two of her essays discusses Tbilisi Zaum and Futurism as best examples of Georgian Europe-oriented cosmopolitan nationalism. For example, in her text titled “The Great Experiment” published in Artforum magazine (April, 2013) she discusses Futurism and other avant-garde manifestations as a canonized artistic heritage of Georgia, which assures national identity. When she discusses the Bolshevik takeover, which apparently put on halt the avant-garde movements in Tbilisi (which is not true), she describes this censure of radical art as difficulty, “to reveal a regional, national identity or carve out their own cultural positions in the European context” (p. 280).

So just imagine, she is complaining about the interruption of historicist and teleological flowering of national identity which avant-garde and left-wing zaum Futurist art should have completed! I think that this is very awkward statement, because in order to interpret legacy of Zaum as affirmative toward European and other liberal-democratic values, one has to neglect the most important elements of this position. Namely, she or he has to silence both the left-wing aspect of

კონტექსტში წარმომდგენია. ამით მინდოდა მეჩვენებინა, რომ არსებობს ლენინის განხილვის უამრავი მაგალითი „ატლასების, პერბაროუმების და რიტუალების” მეშვეობით. ჩემი დისკი ამ მაგალითებისთვის რაღაც სისტემური ფორმის მიცემის მცდელობაა.

მეორე მხატვრული ნაწარმოები არის art-book, ან იგივე ქალაღღის ფილმი „მინაალმდგეობრივ-კონსტრუქცივისტული მოდელი (ლაფონტენის მოთხრობები ემიგრანტებისთვის), ქალაღღის ფილმი ცხრა ნაწილად”, რომელიც მე შეექმენი მინა პენრიკსონთან ერთად. ეს წიგნი საზოგადოებაში გაბატონებულ აქტივობებს ხელოვნებასთან მიმართებაში კონტრარგუმენტებს სთავაზობს და მასში პოლიტიკის და სპონტანურობის დოზას ამცირებს. ამ ქალაღღის ფილმში შევეცადეთ გაგვეკრიტიკებინა ეს ტენდენცია, ამ სვერეოში მულტიკულტურალიზმის, კულტურული რასიზმის, სითეთრის და სეგრეგაციის ძიების მეშვეობით.

ნ.ფ. ეს შეკითხვა კი მინდა ორივეს დაგვისვით. როგორ აღქვამთ თქვენს პრაქტიკას, როგორც თანამედროვე ხელოვანი და, ზოგადად, როგორ გესახებათ თანამედროვე ხელოვნების როლი, მაშინ როდესაც საქართველოში ჯერ კიდევ საკმაოდ ბუნდოვანია მისი გაგება და ეს ტერმინი არც არის განსაზღვრული.

მ.პ. მოკლედ რომ ვთქვათ, ჩემი მხატვრული ნამუშევრების მიზანია, საზოგადოებაში შემოიტანოს ის ხილვადი მექანიზმი, რომელიც ნათელს მოფენს საზოგადოებაში არსებულ უთანასწორობას. არ ვარ დარწმუნებული ამის ზუსტ შედეგში. ყოველთვის მინდა ხაზი გაუვსვა იდეოლოგიურად მძიმე საკითხებს და კონტრადიქციებს. ასე რომ, ვილაცას შეუძლია თქვას, რომ ჩემს ნაშრომებში არის რაღაც დესტრუქციული ელემენტი, რაც სასიამოვნო და კომფორტული არ არის. ეფიქრობ, რომ სწორედ ეს არის თანამედროვე ხელოვნების არსი - იყოს პოლიტიკური და არ ემსახუროს პოლიტიკას.

ნ.ფ. როდესაც თბილისში მოდიოდით, გსურდათ გამოგვეჩვენებინათ შესაძლებლობა და მიმდინარე მულტილინგვალისზმის პროექტს და „ნამაურის” კონცეფციას დაკავშირებოდათ; ასევე, გსურდათ გაგვეთო, თუ როგორ ჩაეტეოდა თბილისი მულტილინგვალისზმის ჩარჩოებში, მზაურის ასპექტიდან გამომდინარე. უფრო რომ დავაზუსტო, გსურთ, რომ თბილისში მეტი გაავით 20-იანი წლების „ზაუმის” მოძრაობის შესახებ და აღმოაჩინოთ მისი სავარაუდო ეფექტი ადგილობრივ ხელოვნებაში. რა არის თქვენი კონკრეტული ინტერესების სვერო და რისი გაგების სურვილი გაქვთ?

მ.პ. სეზგინი, ძირითადად, ზაუმსა და ფუტურისზმზეა ორიენტირებული. მე უფრო მეტად საჯარო სცენებში სახალხო იდეოლოგიური სიმბოლოები მინტერესებს, თუ როგორ მოხდა ერთი ისტორიული ეპოქის ნაშლა, მაშინ როცა სხვები დამახასოვრეს და აღადგინეს კიდევ. ასევე, მინტერესებს ქალაქის ახლანდელი ცვლა და პროგრესში წარმოჩენილი მისი საჯარო სივრცე. თანამედროვე მოქმედებები გულისხმობენ პრივატიცაზიას, არქიტექტურულად და ისტორიულად მნიშვნელოვანი შენობების დანგრევას, ასევე პარკების და საბჭოთა სიმბოლოების განადგურებას. ამიტომაც, მცირე ერთობლივი კვლევის ჩასატარებლად, სხვებც მოვიწვიე,

Theory of Zaum

The first theoretical text on zaum was written by Viktor Shklovsky in 1916 and translated into English in 1985 as “On Poetry and Trans–Sense Language” (*October*, vol. 34, Autumn, 1985, pp. 3–24). As everyone else, we will start the book on zaum with this work.

In this book, zaum is preferred to “trans–sense”, because it presents the issue in a more beautiful resonating sound. It cannot be denied, the word zaum sounds more beautiful than trans–sense. The beauty is not only because the word zaum is echoing deeper and stronger, but also because it is more disturbing, violent and aggressive. The aim is to introduce this force of zaum which is generated through coercion.

Shklovsky starts the text with this statement: “wordlessly but in sounds, that is what the poet is talking about.” The coercive sound of zaum in this sense of trans–sense is a noise. Through this analysis, the noise will be audible. For this noise to take place – for the obvious reason as it will not happen by itself – two historical and methodological clarifications should be introduced.

We need to magnify
the force of zaum
because there is no
automatic/spontaneous/smooth
politicisation of words.

The first is about the relation between art and theory, precisely between futurist art practice and formalist literary theory. According to this, zaum is the most important device of Russian Futurism, one which liberates words from any ideological and automatized constraints.

This brings us to the second issue, which is about the relation between art and ideology. This relation could be described as well through the conceptualisation of the extrinsic materials which constitutes the zaum. Precisely, it refers to the transformation of ordinary–language which happens [with]in the zaum–language.

So, we could reverse the theoretical expose and re–formulate the problematic in backwards: b. what is distinctively artistic about zaum? a. in which way this apparent distinctiveness of art has been interpreted in theory of language and stylistic formations?

We learned how to look at the world backward, we enjoy this reverse motion (which regard to the word, we noticed that it can be read backward, and that then it acquires a more profound meaning),

(Alexei Kruchonykh, *worldbackwards*, 1912)

The shortest way to conceptualise these questions is to grasp them through a common denominator which is a word. Consequently, to put words backwards are to detour the theoretical questions:

- a. What kind of historical and ideological processes transforms ordinary word to a poetic word?
- b. How does this transformed word find itself in theory?
- c. Can theory prefigure these transformations?
- d. Is transformation a political process?
- e. Can we think of politics as a total sum of all these instances?

One can look at the seminal book of Gerald Janacek (*Zaum: The Trans-rational Poetry of Russian Futurism*, 1996) and see that in there, theory of zaum is nothing else than blowing up of Shklovsky’s theses in the wrong direction. When I say that Janacek missed the main points of Shklovsky’s theory I mean this: he couldn’t see the conceptual coercions and contradictions in that text, he couldn’t hear the noises, and following this, he couldn’t understand that zaum has a political form in its strongest sense. What Janacek does, which is followed by many other academicians, is to introduce a theory of zaum which is nothing but a translation of the most populist interpretation of Ouspensky and his fourth dimension into the analysis of poetics: zaum–word as a window to extraterrestrial–world! That is a mystical zaum with elements of Slavic antics, orthodox mysteries and New Age stellar configurations. Indeed zaum have something of these antics; Shklovsky makes them clear by enlisting all possible non–Futurist zaum’s: children rhymes (chukha, lukha/pyati, soti/sivi, ili), Pushkin, folklor, speaking in tongues/glossolalia’s (nasontos lesontos furt lis), Gogol, Knud Hamsun (ylayali, kuboaa), Maxim Gorky (sikambr), dreams, foreign languages, technical terms, errors, etc. He does this list not to demonstrate some sociological background of zaum, but to expose the coercions in the most disturbing way. If chukha, lukha, kuboaa, sikambr, nasontos lesontos are noises, then the discussion of this noises should be dirty and impure. Shklovsky says this as clear as possible: “zaum language rarely appears in pure form”

The theoretical implication of these archaic examples of zaum in the Futurist avant-garde device is more complicated than Janacek and others are noticing. Non-contemporaneity or unevenness of zaum is a theoretical and formal issue: how can archaic expressions be compatible with contemporary anti-traditional avant-garde art? Shklovsky who is aware of this discrepancy questions the issue with these terms: “is these means of expressing emotions peculiar only to this group of people [futurists], or is it a general phenomenon of language which has not yet been clearly understood?” (p. 6). It is possible to formulate differently and ask whether zaum is a new language yet to be understood through singular heuristic tools. The thesis I want to propose is this: the main distinctiveness of zaum is not based on non-rational, indefinite and alogical expressions (as Janacek insists), but rather on how these expressions are used, discussed and theorised. In this sense zaum poetry is not interesting because the strangeness of its form is similar to other unexplainable strangeness of religion and schizophrenia; but because contemporary zaum-poetry of Futurism could be seen in strange relation to this strangeness. Let me put this way: the peculiarity of zaum is due to the uneven organisation of unevenness, not solely to uneven and strange expressions. Formulated in this way, zaum-theory is a complete negation of historicity, teleology, gnoseology, mysticism, religion, nationalism and any other metaphysical belief based on the harmonious coexistence of contradictions. Thus, it is really depressing to read so many academic and scholarly works insisting that the estrangement and zaum experiments are conditions of nationalist regenerations, knowing that for Shklovsky the main principle of any formal transformation is based on theory of zig-zag, or of *knight's move*: the history of art does not follow the rule of linearity of tradition as a son succeeding his father, but the zig-zag road of a nephew succeeding his poor uncle. [This book is written in Tbilisi, during art residency there. It wants to demolish the stupidity of using zaum for securing the anti-communist and nationalist revisionism based on lies. Apart from this historiographic intervention, with this very act, the book want to demolish also the ways how someone is expected to behave during the art residencies. Zaum teaches us no respect for fools and reactionaries!]

The real theory of zaum, as it is used by Futurists, and further elaborated by Shklovsky, cannot be discussed in relation to nationalist ideas and in a relationship with that kind of aspirations.

I cannot put this clearer than this: zaum, neither of Kruchenykh, nor of Zdanevich have anything to do with Georgian independence and national aspiration of liberal-democratic modernisation in the year of 1918! This book is intervention to this kind of simplifications, and readers will have a chance to see them throughout the text, scattered here and there, also they will have a chance to see the aggressive and impure, uneven and dirty zaum-combinations regarding these stupidities.

“Whether this is the case or not, one thing is certain: zaum sound language strives to be language” (Shklovsky, p. 22).

Use-value of zaum is here: it strives to move forward, to position itself in the world. Once we have understood the sound of zaum as noise and installation of this device through impurity, unevenness and struggle, then the social and political implications of zaum should not tie us to black and white narrative of national, or other retarded compositions. One thing has to be understood, apart from being dirty and loud, zaum is also dangerous:

“The commission chairman then asked if he thought that his “aggressive rhetoric” against Russia contributed to Moscow’s unwillingness to normalize ties with Tbilisi; the chairman asked Saakashvili about his “Liliputin” remarks.”

(*Saakashvili Testifies Before War Commission*, Civil.ge: daily news online, 28. November, 2008)

“Words die, the world stays young forever. And artist has seen the world in a new way, and, like Adam, he gives his own names to everything. A lily is beautiful, but the word ‘lily’ is soiled with fingers and raped. For this reason I call a lily ‘euy’, and the original purity is established.”

(Alexei Kruchenykh, *Declaration of the Word as Such*, 1913)

Declaration of the Word ... of Class Struggle

In the writings of Bakhtin and his circle, zaum and Futurist language were not discussed as a primary material of literary scholarship and cultural theory in the sense that I am going to do. But in their theoretical work, especially in the book *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*:

A Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics written by P. N. Medvedev, zaum is analysed as “ideal limit to which every artistic construction aspires” (Medvedev, p. 104). This is absolutely true, and Futurist, together with Formalists were aware of the synthetic and constructivist character of zaum.

“Zaum is created and made by the artist and not just passively adopted as heavy inheritance from ages past; it is the sole constructive language.”

(A. Kruchonykh, *The Phonetics of the Theater*, 1923)

Nevertheless, the real potential of the theory of zaum in Bakhtin’s circle is to be found in the least expected places. This potential is in their insistence on the contradictory character of ideological formations and in the role of the words in these ‘socio–aesthetical’ processes.

Theoretically, it is possible to think of the word as a site of class struggle. This is a theory of V. N. Voloshinov which he puts forward in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* book.

The main issue of Voloshinov, Bakhtin and Medvedev was a discussion of art forms in relation to historical transformation and ideology in general. To put it bluntly, they were looking at ways how to understand the formal characteristics of literature without silencing the noises of the word. According to Voloshinov, there is inherent excess in the word which cannot be silenced: “countless ideological threads running through all areas of social intercourse register effect in the word. It stands to reason, then, that the word is the most sensitive index of social changes, and what is more, of changes still in the process of growth, still without definitive shape and not as yet accommodated into already regularized and fully defined ideological system,” thus, “the word has the capacity to register all the transitory, delicate, momentary phases of social change.” (Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, p. 19).

So far so good! Usually, Bakhtinians and Voloshinovians tend to disclose this radical thesis by fully accepting the so–called dialogical or process–based nature of words and communication without making another step, which is a crucial step; to understand the reasons of this incompleteness, and of this excess inherent in the material of the word. To Voloshinov the most important thing was not the nature of word as

such, but the nature of word in the ideological field: in which way words shape the contradictions of the social extrinsicality (the famous headache of Russian Formalists), and on which terms these contradictions determinate the nature of the word? For Voloshinov, especially for him, the reason and the generator of contradictions of the ideological field which determines the excess of the word are class struggles!

Voloshinov who never refers to Marx, otherwise than in the title of the book, wrote a real treatise of Marxist linguistics: the marxism in his book is not a sociological model discussing the relations, but a historical–materialist position which lays the foundation of contradictions as a site of struggle. “Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle ... by an intersecting of differently oriented social interests within one and the same sign community. i.e. by the class struggle.” (Voloshinov, p. 23)

One cannot help but wonder whether the issue of class struggle as a theoretical registration which is the primacy of Marxist thought, could be applied to all fields of ideological apparatuses, such as linguistics and arts as Voloshinov proposes. The answer is simply yes, but this application will not happen by translation of class struggle to the artistic tendency. It can only happen when the class struggle which is a condition for any historical transformation is grasped in formal terms of permanent conflicts, contradictions and coercions and as the asymmetry which designates these coercions. In fact, in the world of Mikhail Bakhtin, the class struggle is not only a constitutive of a dialogical character of the words; it also contains a bacteria of a certain kind of zaum – the irrationality – through the word, which is shaped by these conflicts and contradictions:

“The utterance is filled with dialogic overtones, and they must be taken into account in order to understand fully the style of utterance. After all, our thought itself – philosophical, scientific, and artistic – is born and shaped in the process of interaction and struggle with others’ thought, and this cannot but be reflected in the forms that verbally express our thought as well.

Others’ utterances and others’ individual words – recognized and singled out as such and inserted into the utterance – introduce an element that is, so to speak, irrational from the standpoint of language as system, particularly from the standpoint of syntax.”

(Bakhtin, *The Problem of Speech Genres*, 1979, p. 92)

This is the fundamental reason why we have to formalise the question both as the language–as–class–struggle and also the language–on–class–struggle.

“Marxism–Leninism tells us something quite different: that it is the *class struggle* (new concept) which is the motor (new concept) of history, it is the class struggle which moves history, which advances it: and brings about revolutions. This Thesis is of very great importance, *because it puts the class struggle in the front rank*. In the preceding Thesis: “it is the masses which make history”, the accent was put (1) on the exploited classes grouped around the class capable of uniting them, and (2) on their power to carry through a revolutionary transformation of history. It was therefore the masses which were put in the front rank.

In the Thesis taken from the *Communist Manifesto*, what is put in the front rank is no longer the exploited classes, etc., but the class struggle. This Thesis must be recognized as decisive for Marxism–Leninism. It draws a radical demarcation line between revolutionaries and reformists. Here I have to simplify things very much, but I do not think that I am betraying the essential point.

For *reformists* (even if they call themselves Marxists) it is not the class struggle which is in the front rank: it is simply the classes. Let us take a simple example, and suppose that we are dealing with just two classes. For reformists these classes exist *before* the class struggle, a bit like two football teams exist, separately, before the match. Each class exists in its own camp, lives according to its particular conditions of existence. One class may be exploiting another, but for reformism that is not the same thing as class struggle. One day the two classes come up against one another and come into conflict. It is only then that the class struggle begins. They begin a hand–to–hand battle, the battle becomes acute, and finally the exploited class defeats its enemy (that is revolution), or loses (that is counter–revolution). However you turn the thing around, you will always find the same idea here: the classes exist *before* the class struggle, *independently* of the class struggle. The class struggle only exists *afterwards*.

Revolutionaries, on the other hand, consider that it is impossible to separate the classes from class struggle. The class struggle and the existence of classes are one and the same thing. In order for there to be classes in a “society”, the society has to be *divided* into classes: this division does not come *later in the story*; it is the exploitation of one class by another, it is therefore the class struggle, which constitutes the division into classes. For exploitation is already class struggle. You must therefore begin with the class struggle if you want to understand class division, the existence and nature of classes. *The class struggle must be put in the front rank.*”

(Louis Althusser, *Reply to John Lewis*, p. 49–50)



Zaum and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

Anyone who visits The Museum of the Soviet Occupation inside the Georgian National Museum, the pro–aristocrat installation of stalinist anti–stalinism (this is not an oxymoron!), as a published material will get a copy — in English language — of reprint of Special Report of the Select Committee on Communist Aggression called *Communist Takeover and Occupation of Georgia* published by Government Printing House in Washington, United States of America in 1955. There one can read:

“All efforts of the Soviet regime in Georgia today are concentrated on an intensive Russification. By every means in their power, the Communists are trying to make Russians out of Georgians. Russian words are being increasingly introduced into the Georgian language, even when there are already perfectly good Georgian words with the same meaning”

(*Communist Takeover*, p. 59–60)

This is not true, since the Russians, read Bolsheviks and revolutionaries, and the Georgians, read Mensheviks or reformists, were not speaking the same language. The word “dictatorship of the proletariat” didn’t exist in the vocabulary of Mensheviks. Before introducing some basic political differences between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, which is conditional in understanding the theoretical implication of what we are going to discuss about the politics of language and avant–garde art, I will pursue this discussion from opposite perspective: from the very linguistic nature of the word “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

It is very unfortunate situation that one of the most talented theoreticians of LEF, Boris Arvatov is caricatured as a precursor of “internet — a proto–socialist object”, and his complicated theories on productivism is reduced to a “redemption of the utopian myth of social harmony — a Marxist–humanist myth — for the proletarian culture of the future” (Christina Kiaer, “Boris Arvatov’s Socialist Objects”, *October* vol. 81, Summer 1997, pp. 105–118.) Arvatov, was interested, if anything, in contradictions of poetic and practical language. His text *Poetic and*

Practical Language asks this question: is there any communicative and useful aspect of poetic language, particularly of zaum language which is inherently based on contradictions and of shifting the meanings? Arvatov, following work of linguist close to formalists Lev Iakubisnkij (*The Accumulation of Identical Liquids in Practical and Poetical Language*) who observed that differentiation of poetic language from practical language is happening due to the phonetic nature of poetry which has a tendency of accumulation of liquids (precisely liquid consonant clusters). Accordingly, this tendency of accumulating of consonants in a rhythmic fashion is a device of differentiating the poetic language from the ordinary language. Osip Brik, who was the publisher of Mayakovsky and member of Cheka, in his text *Sound Repetitions*, for example, has discussed difference between poetic and practical language in similar terms: he has analyzed hundreds of individual examples from Pushkin’s and Lermontov’s verses to illustrate the argument that in poetry, repetitions of sound and “sound combinations” that did not carry any semantic charge stood on a par with imagery and “served not only as euphonic additions, but were the results of an independent poetic strivings,” anchoring the work structurally.

Arvatov adds to this discussion many examples of practical language which are also using similar devices of poetic language constructions. This is particularly visible in the language of decrees, slogans, or word–orders which Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari following Lenin have described as “the elementary units of language” (*A Thousand Plateaus*).

Arvatov’s example of the liquidity of practical language is slogan from the Communist Manifesto: “Proletarier aller Länder vereinigt Euch!”, where no less than six “r” is repeated. He shows that the repetition of liquid “r” in this slogan is not an arbitrary thing, the device is adding a poetic excess to the slogan. In Russian, there are three “r”: “Proletarii vseh stran, soedinajtes!”, same as in Georgian: “proletarebo qvela k’veqnisia, šeert’dit!”, as in Turkish: “bütün ülkelerin i çileri, birle in!”, and extra one more in Armenian: “proletarner bolor erkrneri, miacék!”, only three in English: “workers of the world, unite!”

The effect of consonants, especially of consonant „r” is known both to formalists (one could say without exaggeration that Roman

Jakobson's overall work in the field of linguistics and phonology is based on the permutations of consonants, which he learnt from his experience during his futurist years) and revolutionaries.

"I would call this system Lloyd-Georgism, after the English Minister Lloyd George, one of the foremost and most dexterous representatives of this system in the classic land of the "bourgeois labour party". A first-class bourgeois manipulator, an astute politician, a popular orator who will deliver any speeches you like, even r-r-revolutionary ones, to a labour audience, and a man who is capable of obtaining sizeable sops for docile workers in the shape of social reforms (insurance, etc.), Lloyd George serves the bourgeoisie splendidly, and serves it precisely among the workers, brings its influence precisely to the proletariat, to where the bourgeoisie needs it most and where it finds it most difficult to subject the masses morally."

(V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism and the Split of Socialism*, Collected Works Vol. 23, p. 117-8)

When this same quotation appeared in the book of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe which is about the critique of theory of Lenin from the position of spontaneous liberalist heterogeneity, this "r-r"s are missing:

"I would call this system Lloyd-Georgism, after the English Minister Lloyd George, one of the foremost and most dexterous representatives of this system in the classic land of the "bourgeois labour party". A first-class bourgeois manipulator, an astute politician, a popular orator who will deliver any speeches you like, even revolutionary ones, to a labour audience, and a man who is capable of obtaining sizeable sops for docile workers in the shape of social reforms (insurance, etc.), Lloyd George serves the bourgeoisie splendidly, and serves it precisely among the workers, brings its influence precisely to the proletariat, to where the bourgeoisie needs it most and where it finds it most difficult to subject the masses morally."

(V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism and the Split of Socialism*, Collected Works Vol. 23, p. 117-8, as quoted in Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategies: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Second Edition, London and New York: Verso, 2001, 89, foot note 7)

The *pictatorship of droletariat*, with three 'r', is as well one such poetic organisation. The intervention of Arvatov is particularly important because it aims Shklovsky's half-baked formalisation which starts and stops in the world of arts. Arvatov corrects this by adding that "form does not live only in the poetry and arts, but in all corners of life" (p. 712). Most crucial part of this thesis is that the creativity, shifting (famous sdivg of Kruchenykh), constructivism, and zaum are not only devices of art; the political language (such as slogans) also are works of creativity, shifting, constructivism, and zaum. Without understanding this, politics, as well as art will be reduced only to an ideological state apparatus where nothing new ever appears. Where art is reduced, as in so-called Stalinist aesthetical theory, to the reflection and representation of social transformations. This is the reason why we have to take Arvatov's proposal seriously: "the task of scientific poetics is to understand the fact that 'contradictoriness of poetic language' as a distinct set of practical organisation" (p. 707). The politicisation of zaum-words or newly generated words after the revolution has a very complex history. Between years 1923 and 1929 in the pages of *Lef* and *Novy Lef*, these issues were a battlefield of concepts and positions. But one prevailing thesis has to be corrected: Sergei Tret'iakov agreed that new words such as *ar-ef-es-ar*, *sov-dep*, *cheka* and *sorabis* are "entirely new, bold and economical language developing alongside art, quite independently of it." Regarding this postulate, Tret'iakov then asks two questions to conservative art theoreticians who resists this contingent novelty: "1. Why should the 'command' of the agitational poem and poster be more compelling than a resolution, an order, a draft, or a diagram? and 2. Isn't the agitational force of a poem diminished if it's composed using the same forms previously intended to *divert* the person from the present, practical moment?" (Tret'iakov, *Art in the Revolution and Revolution in the Art*, 1923). The question is simple: how can we use the reactionary language in order to describe revolutionary moment? Answer that I want to propose is this: revolution requires new words, such as zaum. But there is also one more issue which has to be clarified, namely that all the new words are not automatically zaum-words; for zaum to strive, apart from the notion of conflict, one extra effort should be made, which is an effort of radical negation and refusal.

The limit line of zaum has to be underlined; in the end of the day, zaum is emancipation from the normative and affirmative use of language:

“The ‘zaum’ is anything which adds to the mass of common devices used in everyday speech a newly created device, which do not have a specific communicative function (‘cheka is not a ‘zaum’ word because it has a predetermined objective meaning which is necessary for fulfilling its straightforward utilitarian tasks). Pure ‘zaum’ is thus understood only as an extreme expression, which takes the realisation of the language–creation process to its limits.”

(Boris Arvatov, *Language Creation: On ‘Transrational’ Poetry*, 1923)

Paradoxically these limits of language will not de–politicize the use–value of zaum; contrary they will introduce the new and contingent syntaxes corresponding to a moment!

As we already saw, zaum strives to be a language. Same is with the ‘dictatorship of proletariat’: it exemplifies the effectiveness of the language of slogans.

“Every particular slogan must be deduced from the totality of specific features of a definite political situation”

(V. I. Lenin, *On Slogans*, 1917)

But still, this effectiveness of changing things in shortest time of period is not exempt of contradictions and cleavages. Especially the word–orders such as “dictatorship of proletariat” are not. After all is written and done, still today, maybe even more, the dictatorship of the proletariat is distorted as a Leninist excess which generated a “phenomenon” called Stalin!?! But things are a bit more complicated.

“A captured Red Army nurse was raped. The Polish officers infected her with syphilis. She was sleeping with them.

She infected them, then poisoned herself with morphine.

She left a note: “I became a prostitute to infect the Poles.”

But I am an art theoretician.

I am only a falling stone.

A stone that falls and can, at the same time, light a lantern to observe its own course.”

(Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917–1922*, p. 133, 179)



spinoza falling stone

shklovsky falling stone

shklovsky stalling stone

shklovsky stealing stone

stalling stealing stone

stalling still stealin

still stealing steel

Adam Smith in Tbilisi

In this bicentennial year of “The Wealth of Nations,” revolutionaries throughout the world look for inspiration not to Adam Smith, but to Karl Marx or Leon Trotsky, or Mao Tse-tung. The ideas of Adam Smith are generally considered to be outmoded, and anything but revolutionary.

But from Tbilisi (Tiflis), ancient capital of Soviet Georgia, comes word suggesting that in 1976 the ideas of Adam Smith can indeed be revolutionary doctrine, giving inspiration to the same kinds of violence that in this country are generally the monopoly of left extremists. In Soviet Tbilisi, where major crackdown against private entrepreneurs has been under way for some time, the Soviet adherents of Adam Smith have struck back with fire and explosives. Some 100 cases of suspected arson have taken place in Tbilisi these past three years, and recently a bomb apparently planted by free-enterprise desperadoes shattered windows in the main government building.

It would be inaccurate to believe that Soviet advocates of free enterprise spend most of their starting fires and manufacturing bombs. On the contrary, there is much evidence that they expend most of their energy on the Soviet Union’s extensive “parallel economy,” a highly developed though often illegal network of markets in which needed goods and services can be purchased from profit-oriented entrepreneurs. Soviet consumers turn to these businessmen because the socialist wholesale and retail distribution system often is unable to satisfy existing demands for goods and services. The flexibility and success of Soviet private entrepreneurs may be seen in the Kremlin as even more threatening to the Soviet system as the unusual fires and bombs of Tbilisi.

(The New York Times, Saturday, May 15, 1976)

Decentred Class Struggle

This is a pleonasm that is worth to think about while falling. When French Communist Party in 1976 abolished the dictatorship of the proletariat and instead introduced the “democratic road to socialism” which since then became the official policy of so-called European Left, some important theoretical discussion on the issue of class struggle became urgent and unavoidable. Most notorious and urgent were Louis Althusser’s and particularly Etienne Balibar’s intervention. Of latter, I will mention a bit more, as it will provide an important historical understanding of this particular zaum-slogan. As it is known, the reason why “dictatorship of the proletariat” was abolished from European Leftist discourse is because it has been associated with the Russian style of Eastern communism, indicating the horrors of Stalin. So as the story goes: proper de-Stalinization implies emancipation from “dictatorship of the proletariat.” The intervention of Balibar, which is reverberating still today, was in two directions: a. that abolishment of “dictatorship of the proletariat” as a theory of communism has been realized already in 1936 by Stalin himself; and b. that this abolishment meant also elimination of dialectics of historical contradictions, and class struggle. Stalin’s formula which leads to the abolishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat was simple: Soviet Russia has so far reached the state of class alliance where different sections of classes in society were not anymore in antagonistic conflict but co-existed in a peaceful form which was delegated to the abstractness of the state. This means that Stalin did not abolish the concept of class relations (he accepted the existence of classes) but he has abandoned the idea that these classes are in conflict. He mistook socialism with communism, and understood the revolutionary subjectivity as the matter of the state.

But when Marx discovered the historical necessity of the dictatorship of the proletariat, he did not refer simply to socialism: he referred to the process which, within the very heart of the existing class struggles, leads towards the *society without classes, towards communism*. Socialism, alone, is a half-way dream house, where everyone can choose his own menu, where the demarcation line between proletarian politics and bourgeois or petty-bourgeois politics cannot be drawn in a clear way.

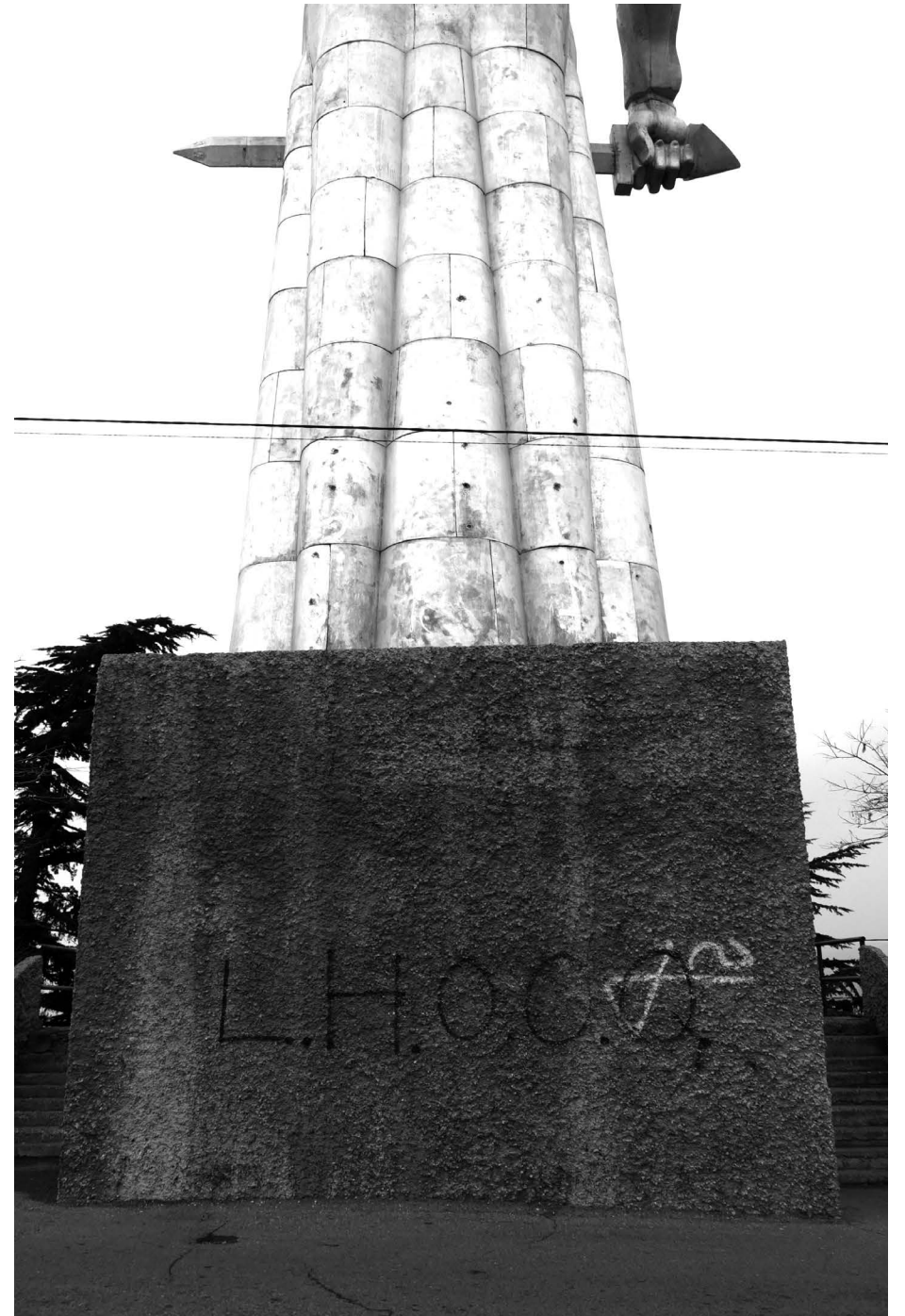
(Etienne Balibar, *On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, 1976, p. 48–49)

Apart from abandonment of class struggle, there are other theoretical deviations introduced by Stalin (such as historicist, teleological evolutionism) that Balibar has targeted: The misunderstanding or underestimation of the class struggle—in-theory, does not prevent it from unleashing itself in practice: for the precise reason, one which deserves to be recalled today for the benefit of all those who seem to doubt it, that the class struggle is not an idea but an unavoidable reality” (p. 54–55). This means that even Stalin, who have abandoned the theory of class struggle, should be in practice theorised through the class struggle. Needless to say, zaum too, which is often substituted to the operations of unconscious forces, should be dissected through this conceptual operation.

“I discovered, closer than I had imagined, a streetcar in the opposite direction, and I made my way home. — I got to Dom Herzena before Bernard Reich. When he subsequently arrived, he greeted me with the words: “You’re out of luck.” He had been to the office of the Soviet Encyclopedia and had dropped off my piece on Goethe there. Karl Radek had happened to drop by, had seen the manuscript lying on the table, and had picked it up. Suspicious, he had inquired who had written it. “The phrase ‘class conflict’ occurs ten times on every page.” Reich pointed out that this was not the case, and said that it was impossible to deal with Goethe’s impact, which had taken place during a period of intense class conflict, without using the term. Radek: “The point is to introduce it at the right moment.”

(Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary*, 1985, p. 81)

elle a chaud au cul



Tbilisi Affair

V. N. Voloshinov, whom we already have mentioned, in 1927 published a book rarely mentioned today, called *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*. In this book, Voloshinov described Freud in the role of ‘bourgeois ideologue’ whose philosophy served to “create a world beyond social and historical” (p. 91). Freud is but one of such bourgeoisie ideologues, others being Steiner and Bergson, respectively operating in the field of *magic* and *instincts*. Freud’s field is sex.

How could Freud’s theory of psychoanalysis, which is a harsh attack on a bourgeoisie concept of family values and sexual Puritanism, be a foundation for bourgeoisie ideology? Voloshinov’s answer is scandalous: it is because Freud has made good use of the Futurist and Formalist device of ‘making strange’. Simply, according to Voloshinov, the family institution in the beginning of XXth century, when Freud was writing, was already a dead thing. By introducing “oedipal complex” to a family affair, Freud then found a magnificent way of making the family unit ‘strange’. Or as Voloshinov further specifies: “precisely this novel and piquant ‘meaningfulness’, imparted to all those aspects of life that have lost their meaning, is what has attracted so broad a public to Freudianism” (p. 91).

“Any successful act of estrangement thus rests on a paradox: the end product is meant as a piece of innovation – arrived at through various artistic devices – that serves, however, to revive and make more palpable the old (and constant) substance of things.”

(Galim Tihanov, *Politics of Estrangement*, 2005, p. 686)

Usual argumentation, still valid today, is that in the essence of estrangement theory and generally the Russian Formalist version of the theory is a conglomerate of phenomenology, Neo-Kantianism and Machism. There are numerous accounts which point at this heterogeneous nature of Formalist theory. Marxists who are not familiar with avant-garde art use this intellectual position for criticizing the structural and transcendental foundation of Formalists opaqueness; for right-wing and conservative intellectuals this is proof that Formalism was actually a missing chair (or precisely interrupted chair: because of Revolution) of philoso-

phy of phenomenology in Russia and Eastern Europe (Tihanov, for example, who is otherwise most interesting historian of Russian Formalism shares this opinion). All these discussions on phenomenological and Neo-Kantian influences to Futurism and Formalism disregards one important issue: that apart from conflictual/coercive constitution of words that are crucial for ‘strangeness’ of zaum, it should be noted that this strangeness is also a result of radical contingency, aleatoriness, and opaqueness that stems from the strong social forces (which was detected by Arvatov too).

This leads zaum from Marxism to Psychoanalysis, but actually, we are still in the same place, because we writing about Tbilisi. In 1979 students of Georg Uznadze organised First International Symposium of Unconsciousness in Tbilisi. In the first book of the conference papers, a text of Althusser could give us a clue for understanding the logic of zaum. In the paper *The Discovery of Dr. Freud in its Relations with Marxist Theory*, Althusser claims that there are at least two philosophical grounds – of a *materialist* and *dialectical* thought – for comparing Freud to Karl Marx. First is their *conflictual* character, which is actually a “conflictual rift of the class struggle” generating a science marked by endlessly renewed scissions. These endless scissions are not a harmonious co-existence of contradictions, but a “conflictual science with no compromise possible.” A dangerous science, for sure! Here is the proof: Freud’s line on approaching America when he visited there is well known: “we’re bringing them the plague.” One thinks of Marx’s line speaking of Capital as “the most gigantic missile launched at the head of the capitalist bourgeoisie” (Althusser, “The Discovery of Dr Freud”, p. 117). Another instance or philosophical ground which brings Marx and Freud together is similarity of their *topographical model* without a center, in which the various instances have no unity of their conflictual functioning, or the apparatus (p. 121). This de-centered and complex unity of agencies that enables the conflictual character of Marx and Freud to encounter is also a model that could set up the conditions for the politicisation of zaum. This is a rather difficult task to realise, but here are elementary conditions for this operation. Zaum fits perfectly to this designation of historical materialist conflictual and de-centered language, but this designation should be used within its own terms. They are not to be translated

adapted to existing language; also it should not be compromised with the existing order. It is against accommodation and easy translation to pragmatic (historicist narrative) reason.

Here are at least two consequences of such zaum–conceptualisation: *first*, zaum should be understood in its own logic. This means that the use value of zaum, if there is any such thing, can take place only within the terrain of zaum–logic. (Remember Freud’s line: “One is obliged to use the currency reigning in the country one is exploring”, reminded also by Althusser). *Second*, more substantial and philosophical consequence of this historical–materialist logic of zaum is that phenomenological theories haunting Russian Futurism and Formalism, are discredited because they consider some sort of unity of consciousness. Simply, the phenomenology is not recognising the real dangerous element of the unconsciousness: as such it is not able to hold a grip with zaum’s real subversion.

This is what Louis Althusser wrote in his paper for Tbilisi Soviets. He wrote even more scandalous things, such that “Marx and Freud would thus be close to each other through materialism and dialectic, with a strange advantage accruing to Freud for having explored figures of dialectic very close to those of Marx but also at times richer than them and as though awaited by Marx’s theory” which were, naturally, censored in the publication edited by A.S. Prangishvili, A. E. Sherozia and F.V. Bassin, and published by “Metsniereba” publishing house in Tbilisi, in 1978.

Abracadabra without Guarantee

The limit of phenomenological appreciation of zaum is best and most clearly discussed by Ben Brewster, translator of Althusser’s work to English, long before Tbilisi text:

“... [unconsciousness] is a concept phenomenology cannot ultimately admit. Shlovsky’s ‘bracketing’ of the referent in Art as a Device is not essentially phenomenological because it is not a transcendental reduction, concentrating as it does on aspects of the sign Husserl would have discarded. Thus for Husserl ‘abracadabra’ is the type of nonsense (Unsinn), whereas glossolalia of all kinds were of crucial importance of the zaum poetry of Khlebnikov, and it is one of the merits of formalist theory that it was invented, so to speak, to justify Khlebnikov’s poetry.”

(Brewster, *From Shklovsky to Brecht*, 1974, p. 85)

Brewster’s text is of particular importance because it proposes very daring thesis that for radical political art (read communist art) the abracadabra’s and zaum’s are not arbitrary entropies of formation, but the logical outcome of the historical–materialistic thesis. The thesis is based on two principles:

a. *that art needs a fantasy/abracadabra which is a result of a labour*

“A photograph of the Krupps factory or of the AEG yields practically nothing about those institutions. The genuine reality has slipped into the funtional. The reification of human relations, the factory say, no longer gives out those relations. Hence it in fact ‘something to construct’, something ‘artificial’, ‘posited’. Hence in fact art is necessary.”

(Bertolt Brecht)

This is why Rosalind Krauss is not right when she claims that the inherent contradiction of indexicality of photography, and of the sign, but also of the word, is a guarantee of politicisation of the art. It is not that the device of shifting (Futurist sdvig, for example) “which partakes of the symbol even while it shares the feature of something else” (Krauss, Notes on an Index, part.1) can break the “order” by itself; for that to happen something else is needed, an extra effort, or an artificial work, so to say. This “abracadabra” in Leninist language is a dictatorship of the proletariat or subjectivity which will not happen by itself but would need an extra admission, commitment, which is in no line with the logic of spontaneity. This commitment to politics is a labour of intervention the automatized spontaneity.

“The political core of nonspontaneous consciousness is antagonism to to the entire existing social and political order. As for the mechanism of the realization of the conditions that will permit the emergence of a political consciousness, it is the party.”

(Sylvain Lazarus, *Lenin and the Party, 1902 – November 1917*, p. 259)

The extra work or labour of organisation which Lazarus is pointing was also a core of politicisation of de–automatized and non–spontaneous conceptualization of estrangement and excentricism, which Shklovsky formulated in his book on *Mayakovsky and His Circle*.

“It so happened that we had a free evening in London, and a small group of us went to a music hall, a small democratic theater. Vladimir Ilyich laughed easily and in–

fectiously on watching the clowns and vaudeville acts, but he was only mildly interested in the rest. He watched with special interest as workers from British Columbia felled trees. The small stage represented a lumber yard, and in front, two hefty fellows within a minute chopped down a tree of about one meter circumference.

Well, of course, this is only for the audience. They can't really work that fast, 'said Ilyich. 'But, it's obvious that they do work with axes there, too, making worthless chips out of the bulk of the tree. Here you have your cultured English-men!' "He started talking about the anarchy of production under capitalism and ended by expressing regret that nobody had yet thought of writing a book on the subject. I didn't quite follow this line of reasoning, but I had no time to question Vladimir Ilyich because he switched to an interesting discussion on 'eccentricism' as a special form of theater art.

There is a certain satirical and skeptical attitude to the conventional, an urge to turn it inside out, to distort it slightly in order to show the illogic of the usual. Intricate but interesting.'

- a. Lenin is interested in eccentrics;
- b. Lenin is watching demonstration of *real work*;
- c. He evaluates first class work as senseless and wasteful;
- d. Lenin talks about eccentricism in art, a sceptical attitude toward the conventional, and the illogic of the usual."

(Viktor Shklovsky, *Mayakovsky and his Circle*, 1972, 116–17)

This is why in the politicisation of estrangement, or of *zaum*, a good will (of the tendency) is not an adequate position. Similar to Malevich, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh would have also insisted that "art requires truth, not sincerity." The truth of *zaum* is possible to tell only in the currency of *zaum*, otherwise the main point of the labour of *zaum* would disappear. This is why Igor M. Chubarov's thesis in his article "Emancipated Thing Versus Reified Consciousness: Interaction of the Concepts 'Defamiliarization' and 'Alienation' in the Russian Communist Futurist and Avant-Garde Movement" published in *Russian Studies in Philosophy* (Vol. 48, No. 2, Fall 2009, pp. 47–62) needs correction. Even if Chubarov detects the Husserlian-phenomenologist link of Russian Formalism via Gustav Shpet as misleading, and underlines the "social purpose of a thing in the thinking of Shpet" (p. 51); he does not make one more step and to discuss the issue of "labour as creativity" which ensures the encounter between Marxism and avant-garde art through

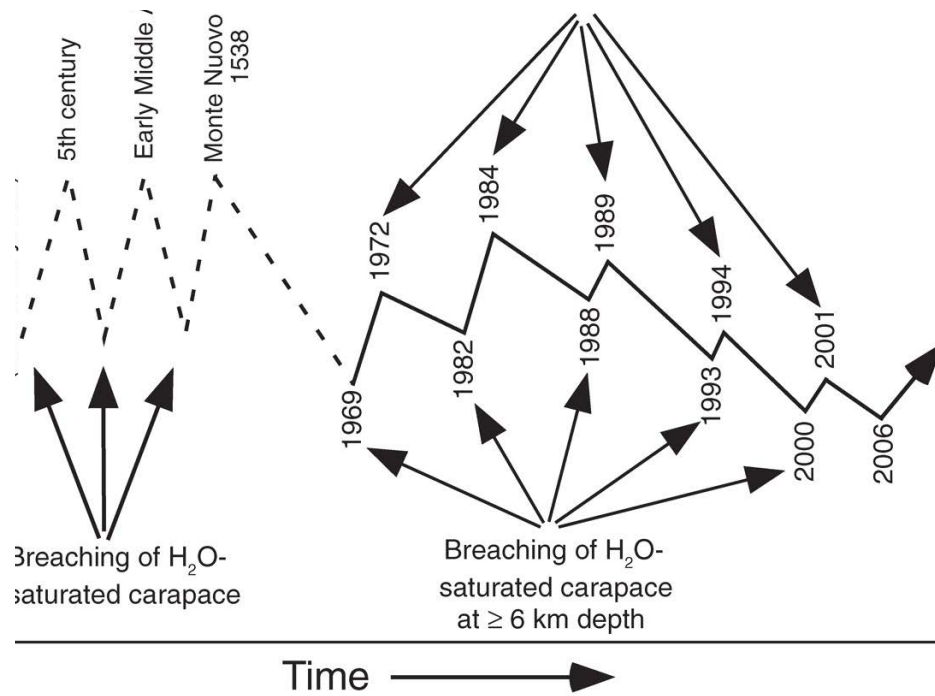
the work of negating the spontaneity (as "understanding of the thing (das Ding) not as an abstract counterpart to the equally abstract subject of consciousness, but as a product of human activity whose concrete forms are determined in the context of the historical development of human relations" (p. 48)); but delegates the contingency of the avant-garde/*zaum* labour to the body substratum. If we follow this, it might be true, though not necessarily (because one thinks of Stanley Cavell, for example), that "the idea of the human body (or, the stream of bodily becoming) ... is directed against the abstract character of the purely phenomenological approach." Nevertheless, this substratum cannot guarantee the "absurdity of the realm of alienation" and politicisation of estrangement; the crucial thing in Marxism and avant-garde is not the concept of un-mediated and de-alienated labour; but the conceptual and theoretical labour on uneven and de-centred nature of class struggles.

"Benedikt Livshitz recalls that during the discussion after the reading, Marinetti was incensed to hear the Russians object that 'destruction of syntax' and 'words at liberty' were old hat compared to the *zaum* poetry of Khlebnikov, a poetry of which Marinetti had never heard. Livshitz himself also objected to Marinetti's poetic doctrine on this grounds that the so-called destruction of syntax was violated by Marinetti's performance itself. He asked Marinetti: What is the point of piling up amorphous words, a conglomeration which you call 'words at liberty'? To eliminate the intermediary role of reason by producing disorder, right? However, there's large gulf between the typographical composition of yours *Zang-Tum-Tumb* and your recitation ... is it worth destroying the traditional sentence, even the way you do, in order to reinstate it, to restore its logical predicate by suggestive gestures, mime, intonation and onomatopoeia?" (Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 1986, p. 64)

b. *secrets of abracadabra*:

"And in 1965, Franco Fortini refers to poetry as one of the 'bradyseisms', vibrations of class struggle that are so slow they cannot be located precisely in it. These uses seem quite independent of one another, but they all refer to one thing, or rather one conviction: that there is a correspondence between the socialist revolution and technical developments in arts, but this correspondence is a secret one."

(Brewster, *From Shklovsky to Brecht*, 1974, p. 98)



Scatological Synecdoche

Alexei Kruchenyk in 1918 heard a presentation of Georg von Charasoff on “Psychoanalytical Interpretation of Zaum” in Fantastic Tavern in Tbilisi. Subsequently, he compiled a book that discussed the history of Russian literature from Pushkin, Gogol, and Symbolists to Ilija Zdanevich, Majakovsky, Khlebnikov and himself through the use of the word ‘kaka’. The aim of Kruchenyk was to find the scatological synecdoche, to reduce words to their smallest parts, in order to find subliminal sexual and (in this instance) scatological message concealed within them as a formal constituent of zaum and whole poetry which is subtracted from the anal–y–tical realm. He did that very successfully, which means he managed to find this synecdoche even in the places where trained eyes would fail. As one contemporary interpreter of his work noticed: “anyone who studies MvK (Maloxolija v Kapote) can never again read Blok’s poem “neznakomka” without seeing nadristat’ in the first line. (p. 630). Because “po veceram nad restaranami” [sic] by Blok, and “i milyx baryshen’ svoix/vojnu i bal, dvorec i xatu” by Pushkin, are accentuated by the handwriting to reveal “nadrest,” vaguely resembling the verb nadristat’ (“to have the shits”), and “ibal,” a phonetic equivalent of the past tense of the verb ebat’ (“fuck”), respectively. (Walter Comins–Richmond, “Kru enyx’s Maloxolija v Kapote: The Anagrammatization of Literature.” *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Winter, 1994), pp. 618–635).

The salacious base of the dialectics of history is not a new thing, as Dominique Laporte in his book *History of Shit* writes: “out of shit, a treasure arose: the treasure of language, of King and State.” But as Laporte ads, the history of shit is unusual history, it demonstrates that “where its anal constituent is concerned, civilisation does not follow a rhythm of linear progress”, because “if that which is expelled inevitably returns, we must trace its circuitous path. Shit comes back and takes the place of that which is engendered by its return, but in a transfigured, incorruptible form. Once eliminated, waste is reinscribed in the cycle of production as gold.”

Two interesting things are related to the anal field in culture and politics, one being eroticism, and another, salaciousness, or shitness. Also, these two tendencies of anal specification (don't forget: we are not formalists, we are "specificators" said Boris Eikhenbaum) can have two oppositional applications, which in our case is zaum and Stalin. In which way shit relates to zaum and to Stalin? How this specific relation, obviously of antagonistic nature, can be formalised? Since this is the question I want to address; the answer should be as shortest as possible. Usual configuration goes like this: zaum as an excess of language and the unbearable and dangerous thing is a 'shit' of morphemes and semantics. Stalin, as opposite to this, is thought as a negation of shit. This is how Milan Kundera explained the kitsch: as a negation of shit. Further, he explained even the death of Stalin's son Jakov in the concentration camp due to the shit. Same goes with the anal and other sexual desires.

Where zaum is thought and enjoyed as sensual and hedonistic; Stalin is the personification of asexuality. But the comparison is not an even and symmetric, especially with Stalin. One reading book *Conversations with Stalin* by Milovan Djilas, who is known for his militant anti-Stalinism, will come across the catalogue of unpleasant and dirty words used by the chief-commander of Red Army. Also, there is a book, by Daniel Rancour-Lafferiere, *The Mind of Stalin*, claiming that Stalin was homosexual, he was sexually attracted to Hitler and the Nazi-Soviet-pact was a public manifestation of his adoration of the potential aggressor. This asymmetrical relation between zaum and Stalin in the field of sex and shit is worth to think of. My thesis is this: without understanding zaum as the historical-materialist formation of artistic language based on unevenness, conflict and noises, there is no possibility to think about zaum as anti-Stalinist expressions. Also, to think of Stalin as negation of shit is missing the dialectics of history of communism; or more precisely, it is same as to claim that Menshevik's were in favour of zaum! For this reason, better is to start with the unbalance between the shit of zaum and shit of Stalin by underlining the repressed moments of these narratives.

Georg von Charasoff, who converted Kruchenyk to shit and sex, was, as Boris Pasternak wrote "... a gifted scoundrel, mystical anarchist and proven genius, mathematician, poet, anything you like", a typical non-conventional Marxist who developed a mathematical analysis of

capitalist crisis based on Karl Marx's analysis of fluctuations of value. He was born in Tbilisi in 1877 and died in 1931 in Kizhase, in Ukraine. Apart from introducing Freud to Tbilisi Futurists, he also introduced Marx to German Expressionists. Text by economist Christian Gehrke "Traces of the Life of Georgian Intellectual", presented in conferences "The Pioneers of Linear Models of Production" at the University of Paris, 17-18 January 2013 and 16th Annual Conference of the European Society for the History of Economic Thought in Saint Petersburg, Russia, 17-19 May 2012, would be valuable for anyone interested in this missing link between Marxism and zaum, via Freud.

The use value of zaum in the realm of shit and sex: if there is such a thing, it should be found within the language: in the language of places where struggle, conflict and unevenness are everyday life reality. Most interesting definition of zaum and subversion of language I have found in Mziuri park in Tbilisi, where apart from various instances of obscenities and zaum-names is also a definition of its own device in a most formalist way.

Fuck you fucking fuck

— **Fuck**

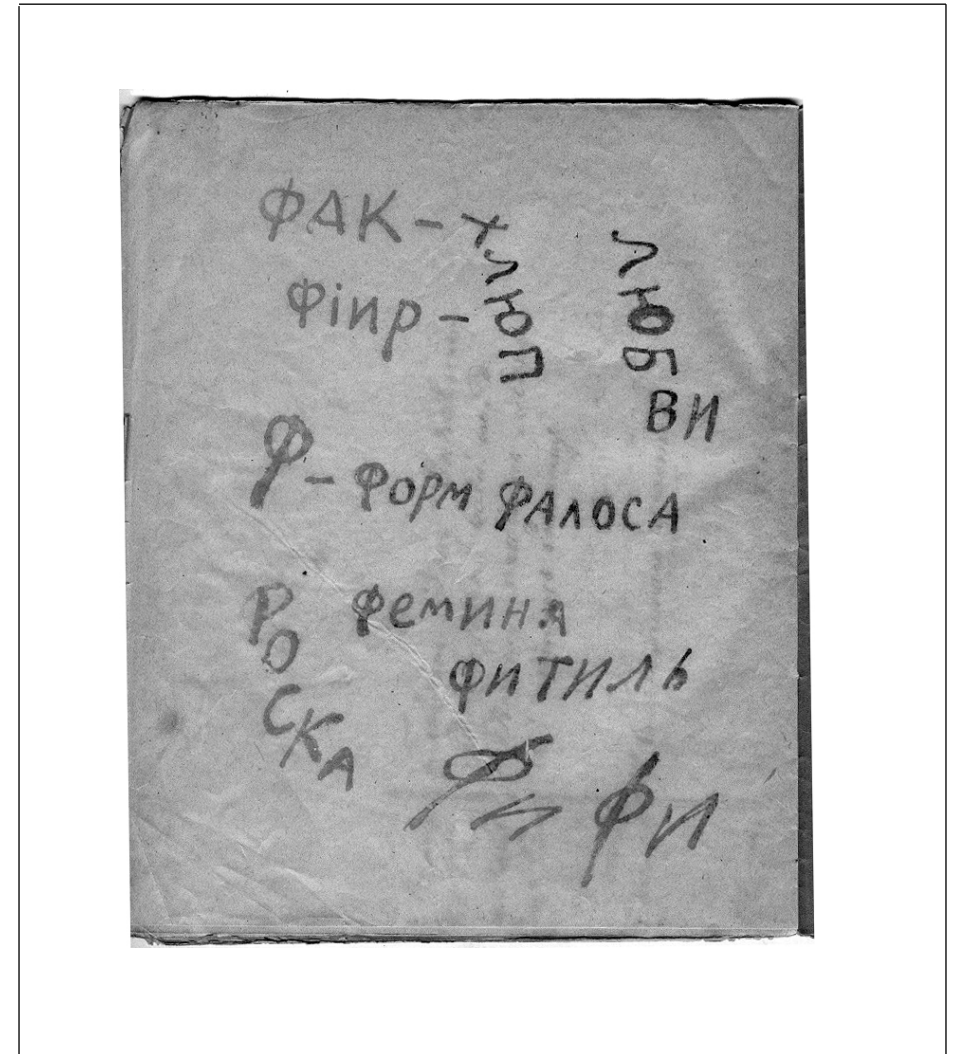
— **VERB [FAAK]**

**Fuck can be used in many ways
and it probably is the only Fuck-
ing word that can be put every
fuckingwhere and still make fuck-
ing sense — fuckers**

Intonation is another way in which we can be aware of the voice, for the particular tone of the voice, its particular melody and modulation, its cadence and inflection, can decide the meaning. Intonation can turn the meaning of a sentence upside down; it can transform it into its opposite. A slight note of irony, and a serious meaning comes tumbling down; a note of distress, and the joke will backfire. Linguistic competence crucially includes not only phonology, but also the ability to cope with intonation and its multiple uses. Still, intonation is not as elusive as it may seem; it can be linguistically described and empirically verified. Jakobson tells the following story:

A former actor of Stanislavskij's Moscow Theatre told me how at his audition he was asked by the famous director to make forty different messages from the phrase *Segodnja večerom*, "This evening," by diversifying its expressive tint. He made a list of some forty emotional situations, then emitted the given phrase in accordance with each of these situations, which his audience had to recognize only from the changes in the sound shape of the same two words. For our research work in the description and analysis of contemporary Standard Russian (under the auspices of the Rockefeller Foundation) this actor was asked to repeat Stanislavskij's test. He wrote down some fifty situations framing the same elliptic sentence and made of it fifty corresponding messages for a tape recorder. Most of the messages were correctly and circumstantially decoded by Moscovite listeners. May I add that all such emotive cues easily undergo linguistic analysis. (Jakobson 1960, pp. 354-355)

So all the shades of intonation which critically contribute to meaning, far from being an ineffable abyss, present no great problem to linguistic analysis; intonation can be submitted to the same treatment as all other linguistic phenomena. It requires some additional notation, but this is just the mark of a more complex and ramified code, an extension of phonological analysis. It can be empirically tested—with the help of Rockefeller (I love this detail)—that is to say, objectively and impartially.⁹ It is no coincidence that the "subject" of this experiment was an actor, since theater is the ultimate practical laboratory of endowing the same text with the shades of intonation and thereby bringing it to life, empirically testing this every evening with the audience.



Nor has de-Sovietization met with universal success. On returning from Yerevan to the bus station in Tbilisi, I asked the elderly taxi driver, in my best pidgin Russian, to be taken to Ploshchad Svobody, Freedom Square. The driver stared at me, and after a couple of further attempts turned to a colleague at the taxi stand: 'What is this American saying?' I repeated my request to his friend, who immediately translated: 'He wants to go to Ploshchad Lenina.' The driver's face lit up: 'Lenin Square, sure.'³¹



³¹ I am much indebted to kind and very helpful informants. Since at least some of them may not want to be publicly associated with an external critic, they are hereby thanked anonymously: I. the outside expert, A. and L. in Baku, L. and W. in Tbilisi, and A. in Yerevan.

Few words on Communism and Swearing. After October Revolution, most of the émigré intellectuals who were criticising “the proletarian dictatorship” gave attention to one particular situation in a new language. For them, revolutionary language apart from being blasphemous was also a language full of the curse and swears. As one of them, A. Bunin, wrote from Paris in 1922 about the revolutionary press, noted: “The papers are full of swearing. The word bastard has become a technical term.”

When thinking of communism, usually people tend to imagine it as the sterile and boring doctrine of rational calculations. Since communists are interested in theory they have to be as precise as possible; but this does not mean that communist language is not interested in ugly, disturbing, dirty and noisy parts of life. In fact, they are in many aspects even more advanced in this field than some avant-garde artists are. It is enough to read Friedrich Engels’ book “The Condition of Working Class in England”, or any Marx or Lenin’s work, to make things clear. Wasn’t it a communist, Antonio Gramsci, who wrote: “workers understood the Futurists far better than the bourgeoisie!,” and wasn’t it Lenin, who was fighting “with his opponents, whether they are his enemies or his party comrades, usually with an argument ‘about words’ – the assertion that the words have changed.”

(Viktor Shkolovsky, *Lenin, kak dekanonizator*, 1924)

Because communist practice and theory are based on conflict and decentering, it is naturally that their concept of language is more akin to zaum than the language familiar with bourgeoisie values, and democratic-liberal sentiments. The language of the bourgeoisie is devoid of any mystery and contingency. It is a language of bureaucracy, baldness, repetition and boredom.

QUESTION: Is it true that language is a superstructure on the base?

ANSWER: No, it is not true.

QUESTION: Is it true that language always was and is class language, and there is no such thing as language which is the single and common language of a society, a non-class language common to the whole people?

ANSWER: No, it is not true.

(J. V. Stalin, *Marxism and Problems of Linguistics*)

One Sunday night, already getting on to the small hours, I chanced to find myself walking alongside a band of six tipsy artisans for a dozen paces or so, and there and then I became convinced that all thoughts, all feelings, and even whole trains of reasoning could be expressed merely by using a certain noun, a noun, moreover, of utmost simplicity in itself [Dostoevskij has in mind here a certain widely used obscenity.—V. V.]. Here is what happened. First, one of these fellows voices this noun shrilly and emphatically by way of expressing his utterly disdainful denial of some point that had been in general contention just prior. A second fellow repeats this very same noun in response to the first fellow, but now in an altogether different tone and sense—to wit, in the sense that he fully doubted the veracity of the first fellow's denial. A third fellow waxes indignant at the first one, sharply and heatedly sallying into the conversation and shouting at him that very same noun, but now in a pejorative, abusive sense. The second fellow, indignant at the third for being offensive, himself sallies back in and cuts the latter short to the effect: "What the hell do you think you're doing, butting in like that?! Me and Fil'ka were having a nice quiet talk and just like that you come along and start cussing him out!" And in fact, this whole train of thought he conveyed by emitting just that very same time-honored word, that same extremely laconic designation of a certain item, and nothing more, save only that he also raised his hand and grabbed the second fellow by the shoulder. Thereupon, all of a sudden a fourth fellow, the youngest in the crowd, who had remained silent all this while, apparently having just struck upon the solution to the problem that had originally occasioned the dispute, in a tone of rapture, with one arm half-raised, shouts—What do you think: "Eureka!?" "I found it, I found it!?" No, nothing at all like "Eureka," nothing like "I found it." He merely repeats that very same unprintable noun, just that one single word, just that one word alone, but with rapture, with a squeal of ecstasy, and apparently somewhat excessively so, because the sixth fellow, a surly character and the oldest in the bunch, didn't think it seemly and in a trice stops the young fellow's rapture cold by turning on him and repeating in a gruff and expostulatory bass—yes, that very same noun whose usage is forbidden in the company of ladies, which, however, in this case clearly and precisely denoted: "What the hell are you shouting for, you'll burst a blood vessel!" And so, without having uttered one other word, they repeated just this one, but obviously beloved, little word of theirs six times in a row, one after the other, and they understood one another perfectly.⁴

Totalitarianism–Unlimited: Empty Signifier

Karl Marx in 1875 criticised the compromise in theory and practice introduced by social–democrat Lassallians to the communist movement with these lines: “It is well known that nothing of the ‘iron law of wages’ is Lassalle’s except the word ‘iron’ borrowed from Goethe’s ‘great, eternal iron laws’. The word ‘iron’ is a label by which the true believers recognise one another” (*Critique of Gotha Programme*).

It is possible to say that in some places the word “totalitarianism” plays this role: democracy–fighters recognise each other with this empty word. This is what I want to say: the word “totalitarianism” both theoretically and practically does not have any meaning. The void and emptiness of “totalitarianism” is not something related to de–politicized unconsciousness of Laclau & Mouffe; but it is hallucination, or bad–trip, which plays perfect role of filling the bag of the prevailing ideological position. It is based on excess which is excluded of impure contradictions. The excess of “totalitarianism” is an excess of paranoia, repetition, and all kind of reiterations. This fantasy of the totalitarianism is best described by its highest ideologue and architect of the “containment policy” Georg F. Kennan as “When I try to picture totalitarianism to myself as a general phenomenon, what comes into my mind most prominently is neither Soviet picture nor the Nazi picture as I have known them in the flesh, but rather the fictional and symbolic images created by such people as Orwell or Kafka or Koestler or the early Soviet satirists. The purest expression of the phenomenon, in other words, seems to me to have been rendered not in its physical reality but in its power as a dream, or nightmare. Not that it lacks the physical reality, or that this reality is lacking in power; but it is precisely in the way it appears to people, in the impact it has on the subconscious, in the state of mind it creates in its victims, that totalitarianism reveals most deeply its meaning and nature. Here, then, we seem to have the phenomenon of which it can be said that it is both a reality and a bad dream, but that its deepest reality lies strangely enough in its manifestation as a dream...” (G. Keenan, *Totalitarianism in the Modern World*).

Even if it is based on such grandiose hallucinations, competing with the craziest fictions; this unlimited–totalitarianism has certain limits.

Intellectual evolution of Boris Groys depicts this very well: in attempt to show and picture such totalitarianism he ended up in language where there is no escape from totalitarianism, except in some instances of spiritual anarchism (I recommend two books of Groys’ to understand this evolution: *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant–Grade, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* written in 1988 and *The Communist Postscript* written in 2010).

What are the limits of unlimited–totalitarianism? This is inverting of the question related to the unevenness of shit–stalin axis: description of such limits is a condition for exposing the ideological balance–sheet of the totalitarian thesis. It is possible to claim that the spiritual–paranoia background of the “concept” of totalitarianism is what generates two confusions regarding the contradictions of artistic–political life in Tbilisi; the first one is a puzzle over Stalin and the another one is a blockage of the historical materialist understanding of zaum produced in 1917–1927. These two, in Tbilisi, is merged in the work of Lasha Bakradze.

In the edited book *Stalin Puzzle: Deciphering Post–Soviet Public Opinion*, supported and published by Carnegie Endowment in 2013, which sets for scientific understanding of the “worrying high level of admiration” of Stalin in Russia and Georgia (at least on uniting agenda!), Lasha Bakradze wrote this: “Despite Krushev’s secret speech, a full–scale process of de–Stalinization did not take place in the Soviet Union, including in Georgia. Unlike other totalitarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany, where de–Nazification and a reevaluation of history began as soon as the regime was defeated in 1945, the Soviet system did not cease to exist but merely became less repressive. Men who shared the responsibility for Stalin’s crimes (including Krushev himself) remained leaders of the Soviet state and no one questioned the Communist ideology that had helped install the totalitarian regime in the first place. The men who had built and perpetuated this regime never had to answer for their actions.” (L. Bakradze, *Georgia and Stalin: Still Living with the Great Son of Nation*, p. 49–50).

Anyone reading these lines will end up in concluding that it is millions of workers, anti–fascists, and Karl Marx himself who are responsible for Stalin. Because in the totalitarian fantasy of Bakradze, the “communist ideology” is an installment of conspiracy based on calcula–

ted policy, cooked behind the closed doors, where the masterminds are, not–yet–sentenced, communists. Communism in this fantasy is not the theoretical, practical and organisational result of contingent and aleatory class struggles; it is an obstacle to free market which is a condition for free minds. The “word” which sutures this crazy fantasy is totalitarianism: it neither explains the Stalin, nor the de–Stalinization.

“The term “Stalinism”, which the Soviet leaders have avoided using, but which was widely used by bourgeois ideologists and the Trotskyists, before penetrating into Communist circles, offers in general the same “disadvantages” as the term “personality cult”. It designates a reality which innumerable Communists, above all, have experienced, either in direct and tragic form, or less directly and with more or less serious consequences. Now this terminology also has theoretical pretensions: among bourgeois ideologists and many Trotskyists. It explains nothing. To set out on the road of a Marxist explanation, to be able to pose the problem of the explanation of these facts, the least that is required is to put forward Marxist concepts, and to see whether they are suitable. That is why I am proposing the concept of “deviation “, which is a concept that can certainly be “found” in Marxist–Leninist theory. Thus one might, first of all, talk of a “Stalinian” deviation : first of all, because to talk of a deviation necessarily requires that it should next be qualified, that one should explain in what it consisted, and always in Marxist terms. One thing, at the present stage, must be made clear: to speak of a “Stalinian” deviation is not to explain it by an individual, who would be its “cause”. The adjective certainly refers to a man in history, but above all to a certain period in the history of the International Labour Movement.”

(Louis Althusser, “Note on ‘The Critique of Personality Cult’”, 1974)

Even if the objective of Stalin Puzzle study is, locally, to understand why the de–Stalinisation didn’t take place, or precisely, to understand the shortcomings of President Mikheil Saakashvili’s “superficial” anti–Stalinism one gets stupefied with this similarity.

“As expected, those Georgians that have achieved higher levels of education have less positive attitudes toward Stalin than those with only secondary education and especially those with secondary technical education.”

(Barkatze, p. 52)

“The following layers of the society were targeted [during the Soviet Occupation]:

- I) The medium–prosperity and rich peasants (fight against the so–called Kulaks);
- II) The Georgian aristocracy and intelligentsia in order to prevent the most intellectual part of the society from regaining power.”

(The blurb in the Soviet Occupation Museum)

It is possible to fill the empty bag of “totalitarianism” with all sort of things: Cold–War style anti–communism, liberal–democratic values, elitism, nationalism (“Despite or perhaps even because of the strong anti–Soviet ideology of the country in the past few years, Georgian society is still in the grip of Soviet–style thinking, and even Georgian nationalism still has a quite Soviet character.” (p. 53)), zaum, avant–garde, and many other things that lumps everything to the ideology of culture. Apart from the inherent conceptual limits of totalitarianism, which exists in spite of the unlimited character of the term, there is one peculiar law accompanying totalitarianism thesis. Even if there is a genuine will to emancipate from the Stalinist agenda due to the concepts it uses, it is still in the repetitive, anti–contingent, functionalist, and utilitarian realm of Stalinism. The best example of this is the Art–Program of Sov–Lab which aims at studying the Soviet Totalitarian past, where the role of art appears as a form of reflection, submission, utilitarianism, functionalism and historicist reconstruction; fields where Stalinism is strongest.

Art – Program:

1. Critical perception of the past and establishing democratic values in the society by means of art and cultural projects, as art assists in the projection and exchange of views among different social groups;
2. Aiming at cultural variety to deliver social and political themes to the art area to reflect the social and historic transformation in modern creative conceptions and projects.

(<http://sovlab.ge>)

Dur bul shchyl Variations

“Bul” for instance, is the root (imperative case) of the Tartar verb, “bul”, meaning “to become”. “Dyr” is a variant of the usual copula 3. Pers. Sing. And “bu” a demonstrative pronoun in several Turkic languages, including Tartar. On the other hand, certain sounds and sound combinations do not correspond to the phonemic structure of Turkic languages (the same is true of Russian)

(N. A. Nilsson, Kruchenykh’s Poem “Dur Bul Schyl”, *Scando-Slavica*, 1978)

Dyr bul shchyl
ubeshchur
skum
vy so bu
r l ez

(Kruchenykh, *Pomada*, 1913)

In this analysis, the poem appears as a highly structured composition, more so than the majority of poems, which have to contend with semantics and syntax, and therefore almost inevitably with compromises in the sonic sphere.

(Gerald Janacek, *Zaum*, 1996)

Aseev with contrived perplexity asked Kruchonykh:

“Why did you think all this up?”

“Dyr, bur, shchil [sic]?”

“But I always thought it was: ‘dyr, bur, shir’, said Nikolay Nikolaevich [Aseev].

“No, it needs to be ‘shchil’.”

“Why did you write this?”

“To provide new phonemes ...”

(D. M. Moldavsky, *Vospominaniya so stikhami: A. Kruchonykh*, 1986, from G. Janacek, *Zaum*)

e
DYR(a)–BUL(ava)–SHCHYL(‘)

(Kruchenykh, *Myatezh*, 1920)

DYR–BUL–SHCHYL

/BULYZH DYRU/

UBIL

SCHELI

SHISH

PRYG

SHISHKOV

(Kruchenykh, *Malokholoja v Kapote*, 1919)

Dur bul shchyl

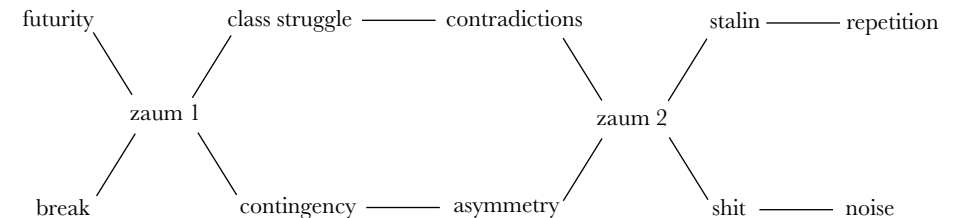
Ubeshchur

Etc.

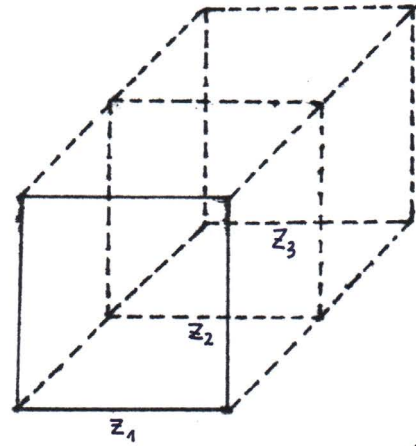
Are perceived as a series of stems, prefixes, etc. with a specific sphere of semantic characteristics (*bulyzhnik* [cobble–stone], *bulava* [mace], *bulka* [roll], *bultykh* [plop], *dyra* [hole], etc.).

In other words, transrational forms possess the properties of that language system with which they are associated. They are integral linguistic facts, which do not differ formally from the already existing linguistic material. In order to stress the point, I put the words ‘transreason’, ‘transrational’ etc. in quotation marks: a meaningless, absolutely transrational speech is impossible.

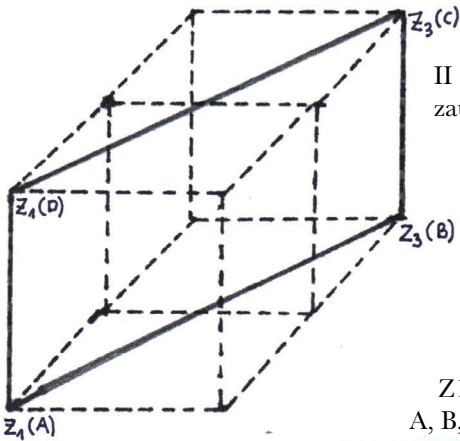
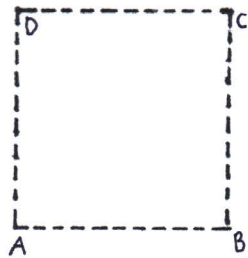
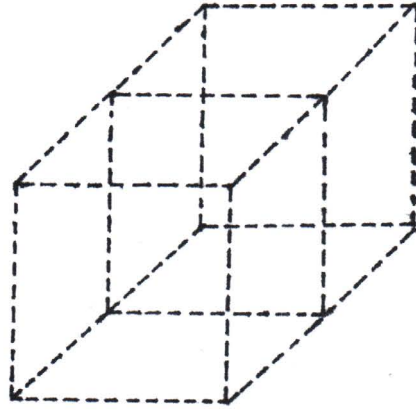
(B. Arvatov, *Language Creation*, 1923)



Historical–materialist model of zaum

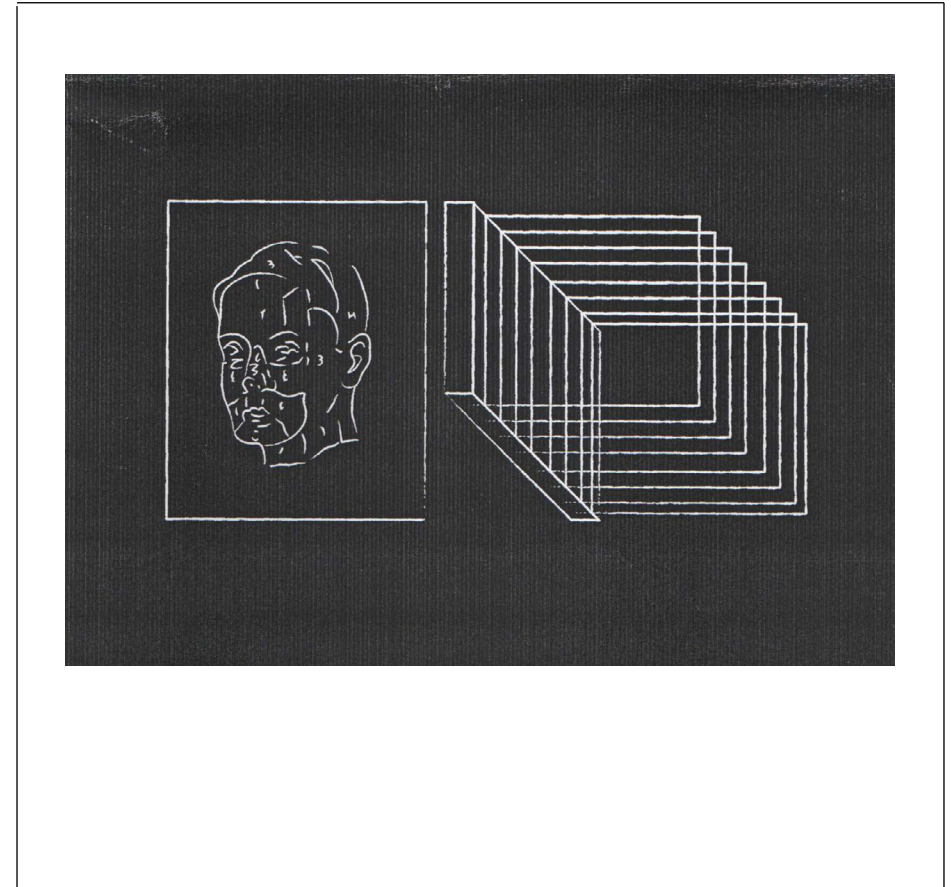


I = historicist model of zaum transformations



II = non-historicist, zig-zag model of zaum transformations

Z1, Z2, Z3 = historical variations of zaums
A, B, C, D = contradictory elements in zaums



When I was writing the zaum words of the dying Akhenaton in “Ka” [1915] — “Manch, Manch” — they almost hurt to look at; I couldn’t read them, I kept seeing lightning bolts between them and myself. But now [1919] they don’t move me at all. And I don’t know why that is.

(Velimir Khlebnikov)

Zaum in Tbilisi, 1917–1927

Vladimir Markov wrote that “The Transcaucasia, and especially Tiflis (now Tbilisi), the capital of Georgia, had become a literary and artistic oasis of Russia by the time Kruchenykh arrived there.” (Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*, 1968, p. 336). This is a historical narrative, based on determinism, which still excites scholars and historians of Georgian avant-garde. But Janacek has noted another thing, that Kruchenykh reached the (minimalist) limit of zaum in Tbilisi, and “that he couldn’t go further” (Janacek, *Zaum*, p. 250–251). He arrived at “silent forms”, which Janacek describes as subphonetic zaum.

I claim that this episode is much more important than the “oasis” of Markov and his fantasies of Menshevik democracy. The “silent forms” of subphonetic zaum could be a link to the politicisation of the avant-garde language: not as a translation of extrinsic (practical) political language to intrinsic (poetic) zaum forms; but as an admission that intensification and exaggeration of forms inevitably lead to a political truth. Kruchenykh arrived at politics in Tbilisi; not through Mensheviko–aristocratic combination, but through the limits of (zaum) language in this social–political combination. One has to know, Kruchenykh didn’t leave Tbilisi after Bolshevik invasion of Georgia; but in 1919, he went to Baku. And after the invasion of Azerbaijan, he worked for a while for Rosta. Last text about zaum in Georgia was not written in 1922, but in 1927; it was L. Esakia’s text *Left Movement and Georgian Art*, published in the tenth issue of *Novy Lef*, describing the “laboratory work with the zaum word.”

Also one has to remember that the starting point of Tbilisi Futurism was manifesto of 41 degree written in 1919 which started with these words: “Company 41 degree unifies left-wing Futurism, and affirms zaum as the mandatory form for the embodiment of art,” signed by I. Zdanevich, A. Kruchenykh, I. Terentev and N. Chernyavsky.

But unfortunately, most of the attention is focused on famous “oasis” of Markov. The reason for my intervention about zaum experiments produced in Tbilisi aims at this particular, determinist and simplified reductionism which renders the zaum as instrumental in building the authentic, European and democratic national values in the Republic

“The multi-lingualism of the book *To Sophia Melynkova* is motivated by a Georgian/Tiflis multiculturalism that is in contrast to Zurich Dada: which was established by artists in exile, whose countries were besieged by the war and who regarded the internationalisation of language as the demonstration of an anti-nationalism. ... The Brothers Zdanevich and other artists and poets of the Georgian and Tiflisi avant-garde were not in exile, rather they worked in the first Democratic Republic of Georgia established in May 1918. Two poets who fled from revolutionary Russia, Alexei Kruchenykh and Igor Terentiev, as well as other artists who were on a brief visit to Georgia contributed to the multilingual context of the book. The internationalisation of the language was also a result of the multilingual nature of Tiflis. Multilingualism, in this case, is not the process directed against national identity as it is in the context of European Dada, but on the contrary the book aligns its identity with the spirit of multiculturalism.”

(Nana Kipiani, *Books as Palimpsest*, in *Kamikaze Loggia*, 2013)

In another text we get to understand the socio-political background of this national-multilingualism from the perspective of the East:

“Georgian/Tiflis avant-garde is the polyphonic merge of Georgian modernism with its aristocratic conservatism, its artistry, with the extreme épater of multi-national and multi-lingual Tiflis avant-garde. Its nature was much determined by the city with its traditional aristocratic representation and at the same time with the extremely performative nature of the merchants and craftsmen, mostly of Asian origin, who were an enchanting influence for artistic Bohemians. Besides, the avant-garde character of the intellectual and artistic life of Tiflis oriented on innovations, amalgamated with deep roots of traditional Eastern Christian culture. This multi-layering of the innovative with the traditional, the overlaying of the local with Eastern and Western unity, determined the “fantastic” nature of Tiflis avant-garde.”

(Nana Kipiani, *Intro*, <http://modernism.ge/>)

And here is perspective of the West:

“The displacement of the Georgian avant-garde of 1910s and ‘20s into the broader field of Russian art also made it difficult for later Georgian artists to reveal a regional, national identity or carve out their own cultural positions in the European context. Nevertheless — in spite of Russification and the accompanying process of so-called acculturation — Georgian unofficial art became the de facto successor to the original Tbilisi avant-garde and eventually gave shape to what has today become Georgian contemporary art.”

(Nana Kipiani, *The Great Experiment*, Artforum, April 2013)

The index of this kind of national aspirations in discussing the avant-garde art of Tiflis could be multiplied, and I guess it is easy to compose some kind of funny and entertaining catalogue of these simplifications. There are other, more scholarly packaged examples too:

“Is it appropriate, therefore, to ascribe some sort of causal relationship between “Georgianness and non-referentiality? ... In light of the linguistic Georgian case, the performance and circulation of non-referential “nonsense” [zaum] in practices as diverse as song and science may seem somewhat less surprising a self-conscious national tradition. ...”

(Laureen Ninoshvili, “The Historical Certainty of the Interpretively Uncertain: Non-Referentiality and Georgian Modernity”, *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*, Vol. 21, Issue 1, pp. 79–89, p. 92)

“I arrived in Tiflis.

A nice town, a poor man’s Moscow.

There was shooting in the streets;

wildly enthusiastic Georgian troops were shooting into the air;

they couldn’t not shoot.

The national character.

I spent one night with the Georgian Futurists.

Nice kids,

more homesick for Moscow than “Chekhov’s sisters.”

(Viktor Shklovsky, *A Sentimental Journey: Memoirs 1917–1922*, p. 74)

Conclusion: Errors as Condition for Advancement of Philosophical, Scientific, Artistic and Political Forms

“One time Brik invited mathematicians for Khlebnikov’s lecture on the mathematical foundations of history, and they were interested, though puzzled.”

(Markov, *Russian Futurism*, p. 293)

In the autopoietic systems, errors are impossible. Even if art is such an autopoietic system, still the system of art should not be grasped as a system of second thermodynamic laws, where the noise and chaos of entropy inevitably find it’s way out. The zaum, as an error, is in the end, a methodological operation, or the conceptual model. It can never compete with life. But as a model and methodology which is consciously facing the contradictions, errors and noises, it is far more advanced than the usual linear and representational approaches. This is one of the main reasons why zaum should be actualized today. As a possibility to make an error, to say a new thing, and to swear against the stupidities, zaum is the indispensable language of art which encounters the politics with its own currency.

I believe in +++++. As Shakespeare says: “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.” I am with Shakespeare.

(Laporte, *History of Shit*, 1978)

It is certain, once the potential of zaum is properly understood, both in theory and in practice, the history of avant-garde in Tbilisi would not have to have colours of nationalist and monarchist aspirations. All unevenness and contradictions would enter the story; together with shit, historical-materialism, conflict, class struggle, unconsciousness, aleatoriness, futurity, contingency, sex, Lenin and *Yanko, the King of Albania*.

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