

## Soviet Cosmologies and Ontologies, 1960s-1970s

**Date: Friday 26 October 2018**

**Location: The Boardroom, University of Westminster, 309 Regent Street,  
London W1B 2HW**

*Marie Curie Foundation Symposium, Individual Fellowship, Horizon 2020  
Hosted by the Institute for Modern and Contemporary Culture, University of  
Westminster in conjunction with the Faculty of Arts, University of Wolverhampton*



There is a tendency in revisiting the narratives of historical socialism to focus on the early revolutionary avant-garde and repressive post-revolutionary contexts of Soviet cultural politics, or on the destructive legacy of Stalinism and the dissident cultural non-conformisms it produced. This generates a very familiar teleology of state oppression, in which everything is subject to the instrumental logic of Stalinism. Yet, paradoxically, the political economy of the Soviet Union in the aftermath of this repressive teleology in the 1960s and the 1970s - the years that in the historiography of socialism become the embodiment of both the Khrushchev Thaw and the Brezhnevite stagnation - is underwritten by its explicit counter-capitalist sociality. This is because it was precisely in these years that the residual utopian imaginaries of the communist tradition were able to find a becalmed and reflective (albeit, materially impoverished) place in the would-be socialist relations of Soviet production. As such, these utopian imaginaries became attached to a series of radical humanist interventions into the problems of labour, sexuality, power, gender, language, culture, the unconscious, cognition, reality, the universal, etc., in a context in which the *non-libidinal* character of post-capitalist political economy became a defining feature of this becalmed, reflective context. The result was the production of new ontologies and lexicons of emancipation, despite the fact that 'state socialism' was in its decline. This one-day conference aims to map these ontologies and heterodox socialist critiques in order to inquire as to whether they have any viability in the context of gnoseology, philosophy and critical theory today.

## PROGRAMME

10.00am

Coffee

10.30 am – 12.30 pm

### **Communist Cosmologies**

This session revisits paradigmatic notions such as language, consciousness, the subject, the universal, and the general, in their specific application in the construction of a communist cosmology.

*Chair: Keti Chukhrov (Higher School of Economics, Moscow; Marie Curie Fellow, Univ. of Wolverhampton)*

Hannah Proctor (ICA, Berlin) – Masses as Individuals: Soviet Psychology in Britain and America, 1953-1977

John Timberlake (Middlesex University) – “Then Let’s Put Astronomy Fourth”: Dialectic and Pavel Klushantsev’s *Road to the Stars, Moon and Mars*

Galin Tihanov (Queen Mary University) - Power/Insurrection: Porshnev/Foucault

12.30-1.30

LUNCH

1.30 – 3.30 pm

### **Cultural Anthropology: Between Modernism and Refunctioning of the Classical**

This second session reflects on the alternative paths of modernisation in Soviet society, which in turn led to a re-articulation of classical art and realist aesthetics as a project of worldly emancipation.

*Chair: John Roberts (Wolverhampton University)*

Nikolay Erofeev (Oxford University) – Self-governing Housing in the Brezhnev era: Youth Residential Complex

Anke Hennig (Central Saint Martins) – Catharsis of Modernism: The Aesthetics of George Lukács

David Riff (Arts Festival Steirischer Herbst) – “It goes without saying that my ideal lies elsewhere”: Mikhail Lifshitz’s Elusive Anti-Modernism

4.00 – 6.00 pm

**What is to be done with Dialectics: Evald Ilyenkov between Marx, Hegel and Spinoza.**

Ilyenkov is one of the major figures of late Soviet Marxist thought. His gnoseology consists in providing the material and social foundations of a dialectics of the Idea, that is, in the convergence of mind and matter (or body). The two key thinkers known for their materialization of spirit – Hegel and Spinoza – meet in this epistemology of communist sociality. The session will discuss these connections in the production of a new materialist dialectics.

*Chair: David Cunningham (IMCC, University of Westminster)*

Maria Chehonadskih (Central Saint Martins) – “The October Revolution: An Epistemological Approach”

Alexei Penzin (Wolverhampton University) – “Dialectics and Speculative Thought in late Soviet Marxism: Ilyenkov’s Cosmology”.

Keti Chukhrov (Marie Curie Fellow in UK, Higher School of Economics, Moscow) – “The Ideal is Material and vice versa: Ilyenkov’s Proofs”.

## **Hannah Proctor**

### **Masses as Individuals: Soviet Psychology in Britain and America, 1953-1977**

This paper will discuss the translation, reception and dissemination of work by Soviet psychologists in the US and UK during the Cold War period. It will consider exchanges, communications, miscommunications, influences and antagonisms across the iron curtain, exploring how these interactions and the strange trajectories taken by Soviet ideas about subjectivity in the US and UK complicate received ideas about the Cold War ideological divide. It will consider the significance of time lags in publication, of political (and supposedly apolitical) framings of Soviet work in the Anglophone world, of the diverse disciplinary contexts in which Soviet psychological publications circulated and of practical applications of techniques and methods in very different contexts to those in which they first emerged. What of these theories' and practices' political meaning was retained in this process of translation/transplantation and what was lost?

*Hannah Proctor teaches at ICI Berlin and is a member of the Radical Philosophy editorial collective. She works on histories and theories of radical psychiatry and emotional histories of the Left.*

## **John Timberlake**

### **Then Let's Put Astronomy Fourth': Dialectic and Pavel Klushantsev's *Road to the Stars, Moon and Mars***

Whilst the problematics of Boris Groys's Neo Platonist account of the USSR embodied in *The Communist Post Script* (2006) might be understood in terms of the text's political lacunae, the Soviet Union's own *a priori* narrativization of its ambitious space programme does establish a detailed schema in which manifestations of Philosopher Rulers and Guardians feature heavily in the exploration of space. Since the capitalist restoration, Pavel Klushantsev's pseudo documentaries *The Road to the Stars* (1957) *Moon* (1965) and *Mars* (1968) have been widely read as reflecting the film maker's own personal alienation from Soviet Communism, and there is strong anecdotal evidence to suggest Klushantsev's personal political views were distant from Communism, if not completely opposed to it. Nevertheless, through detailed examination of Klushantsev's extensive use of models and ground breaking special effects, this paper will argue that as extrapolations, these three films nevertheless visualise elements of a 'Republic in space', and in doing so reflect the hegemony under which they were produced.

*John Timberlake is an artist. Recurrent themes in his work are the construction of histories, memory and landscape. Recent exhibitions include: 10-4 at Stephen Lawrence Gallery, Greenwich (2018) Artists Impression: Mangled Metal at the Peltz Gallery Birkbeck (2015); We Are History at Beaconsfield (London, 2014); Turning Points at the Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest (2014-15); and Visions of War Above and Below at the Imperial War Museum, London (2015-16). Timberlake's monograph Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary was published by Intellect in 2018.*

**Galin Tihanov**  
**Power/Insurrection: Porshnev/Foucault**

My starting point in this paper is the mutual appreciation Foucault and Porshnev had for each other's work. But this is only a springboard to help me focus on Porshnev's intellectual growth (from a scholar of insurrection and subversion to a thinker who essays to understand the cultural and psychological mechanisms of evolution), and discuss his peculiar place in the landscape of post-revolutionary Soviet thought. I dwell on his gradual departure from Marxist dogma that was to be compromised - and remain ultimately frustrated - by his later attempt to work within an anthropological framework, which put to the test his expertise as a historian.

*Galin Tihanov is the George Steiner Professor of Comparative Literature at Queen Mary University of London. He has held visiting appointments at Yale University, St. Gallen University, the University of Sao Paulo, Peking University, Seoul National University, and the Higher School of Economics (Moscow). He has published widely on German, Russian, and East-European cultural and intellectual history; his current research is on world literature, cosmopolitanism, and exile. His new book, The Birth and Death of Literary Theory: Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond, will be published by Stanford UP in 2019; he is currently writing Cosmopolitanism: A Very Short Introduction for Oxford UP.*

**Nikolay Erofeev**  
**Self-governing Housing in the Brezhnev era: Youth Residential Complex.**

During the Soviet era an idea of collective housing was implemented in various forms, from the constructivist house-communes (*doma-kommuny*) of the 1920s, up to their 'revised version' the House of the New Way of Life in the 1960s, to the less well-known Youth Residential Complex projects of the 1970s and 1980s. Yet, once they appeared, most house-communes were hastily dismissed as 'utopian imaginings' and came to be seen as failed projects. As part of a larger trend, scholars have regarded these schemes of collective housing as failing to achieve their ambitious goals – due to overly reductive forms of planning that were incapable of making room for the complexities of everyday life. This paper argues with this view of such projects' 'failure', focusing on the late-Soviet articulations of communal housing: the Youth Residential Complexes built between 1974 and 1985. Based on self-management, this project aimed to make housing and services self-sufficient and to diminish the need for state subsidies and state-role in housing. This paper analyses how official narratives of communal housing and visions of emancipation were re-interpreted and re-articulated by the residents. In an example of a constructed and actually-functioning housing complex, the paper seeks to produce a picture not only of how socialism projected housing utopias but also of what it actually achieved.

*Nikolay Erofeev is a DPhil (PhD) candidate at University of Oxford working on the history of Soviet architecture. Erofeev was born in Moscow in 1985 and graduated from the History of Arts department at the Moscow State University in 2014. He is an author, lecturer and a participant in various projects on Soviet architecture and urban planning and has contributed to projects at the Garage Museum of Contemporary art, Shchusev Museum of Architecture in Moscow and National Center for Contemporary Art and Travelling academy project.*

**Anke Hennig**

### **Catharsis of Modernism: The Aesthetics of George Lukács**

In his *Aesthetics*, written in the early 1950s, George Lukács reassessed the concept of catharsis: He seriously expanded its sphere of influence—from the psychology of art to social anthropological pedagogy, political practice, an aesthetics of realism and, finally, a retrograde theory of history. I would like to show how Lukács' concept of catharsis relates to the psychological theories of affect that constitute the actual core of the ancient discourse on catharsis. Lukács, however, very quickly departs from this understanding of affect (as I will demonstrate by way of a comparison with Lev Vygotsky's *Psychology of Art*, published in 1925) in order to change the historical-philosophical questions into anthropological. I will follow this by discussing the political aspects of Lukács' anthropology of catharsis as viewed in the context of the Stalinist purges in which he was involved. Next, we will examine the dialectics of mimesis and catharsis in Lukács' aesthetics of realism: In the context of his critical realism, a catharsis become historical assumes a reproductive form. We will then look at this historical "reversal", in which all history presents itself to Lukács as a tragedy in need of a catharsis. Finally, the cathartic notion of Lukács' concept of progress will be explained using the Stalinist slogan of a "history of the future".

*Anke Hennig is a theorist of 21<sup>st</sup> century literature and visual culture. Recently she was Visiting Professor at University of the Arts, Berlin and taught at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts, London. She chairs the international research group Retro-Formalism and is co-founder of the trans-national research platform Speculative Poetics. She is the author of Soviet Cinematic Dramaturgy (2010) and, with Armen Avanesian, co-author of Present Tense: A Poetics (Bloomsbury 2015) and of Metanoia: Speculative Ontology of Language (Bloomsbury 2017).*

**David Riff.**

### **“It goes without saying that my ideal lies elsewhere”: Mikhail Lifshitz’s Elusive Anti-Modernism**

The Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz (1905-1983) is notorious as an unrelenting critic of modernism. Beneath the surface, however, there are plenty of hints that his scathing polemic was more than it initially seemed. Opposed to government-issue anti-modernism as much as to the Soviet consumer's unreflected enthusiasm for Picasso or Warhol, Lifshitz developed an original immanent critique of modernist epistemes and practices several decades ahead of its time. This critique was founded in a Marxist aesthetics Lifshitz had helped to pioneer some 30 years before, and which he continued to develop until the end of his life. His was a highly original, “onto-gnoseological” reading of Lenin's theory of reflection, leading to a dialectical materialist recuperation of notions central to idealism such as Beauty, Truth, and the Ideal, after their “sad but necessary” destruction through modernism in 20th century philosophy and art. Such concepts could still be anticipations of a truly humanist communism, he insisted, even as the Soviet Union and its intellectual life began collapsing all around him. The talk looks at the ideals and realities of Lifshitz's philosophy of art and its historical context through the lense of curatorial-artistic practice. Exploring some of the propositions and experiences behind the recent large-scale exhibition “If our soup can could speak...” at Garage Museum of Contemporary

Art, Moscow, it asks what Lifshitz might mean today in Moscow and elsewhere, as new generations raised under post-communist conditions of authoritarian neoliberalism encounter the repressed and falsified artistic and political legacies of the 20th century and the remnants of the Soviet past.

*David Riff currently works as curator of discourse at the interdisciplinary arts festival Steirischer Herbst. Riff has written widely on contemporary art in Russia as an art critic, and is translator of The Crisis of Ugliness [1968] by Soviet aesthetic philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz, published in the Historical Materialism book series by Brill. Riff was a member of the workgroup Chto delat and recent curatorial projects include "If our soup can could speak. Mikhail Lifshitz and the Soviet Sixties" (with Dmitry Gutov) at Garage in Moscow, 2018; the PLURIVERSALE festival (with Ekaterina Degot) at the Academy of the Arts of the World in Cologne (2014-2017); "Monday Begins on Saturday", Bergen Assembly 2013 (with Ekaterina Degot); and "Shockworkers of the Mobile Image," the first Ural Industrial Biennial in Ekaterinburg in 2010 (with Cosmin Costinas and Ekaterina Degot).*

### **Maria Chehonadskih**

#### **The October Revolution: An Epistemological Approach**

Commencing from a critique of the putative understanding of the October revolution and the narrative of the Cold War in Western Marxism, the paper seeks to redefine the epistemological principles involved in the constitution of the post-revolutionary knowledge (1917-1934). The paper will address the problem of the revolutionary rupture with past modes of knowledge production and engage with post-war French theories of epistemology and Marxist philosophy of history in order to rethink the questions of historical discontinuities, epistemological breaks, and the structures of knowledge production in relation to history, revolution and social imagination.

*Maria Chehonadskih lectures at Central Saint Martins, UAL. She received her PhD in philosophy from the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy, Kingston University in 2017. Her research concentrates on Soviet epistemologies across Marxist philosophy, literature and art, as well as on post-Soviet politics. She has given talks in various universities and art institutions on these topics and published in journals and magazines such as Radical Philosophy, South Atlantic Quarterly, Crisis and Critique, e-flux, Mute, and Moscow Art Magazine.*

### **Alexei Penzin**

#### **Dialectics and Speculative Thought in late Soviet Marxism: Ilyenkov's Cosmology**

The paper will discuss the radical and speculative character of the late Soviet thought, against the stereotypical perspective that presents it as submerged in dogmatism, apart from a few exceptions of "creative" Marxism. Rather than speaking in terms of the vague notion of the "creative", the paper discusses an undercurrent of "speculative" Marxism in late Soviet philosophy, in which Soviet thought - formed in the state established by militant and revolutionary materialism - asked questions about the ontological status of the ideal and distant future of communism. This speculative dimension of late Soviet Marxism will be elucidated through a paradigmatic work: Evald Ilyenkov's *Cosmology of the Spirit*, written in the 1950s but published only

posthumously in the 1980s. Using the hypothesis of the “entropic death of the universe”, extensive references to Engels’ *Dialectics of Nature*, and an elaborated philosophical argument based on Spinoza’s notion of the attribute, Ilyenkov claims that thought (and the seemingly contingent emergence of “thinking life”) is a necessary attribute of matter, which is able to reverse the “thermal dying” of cosmic matter by producing, instead, a "conscious cosmic catastrophe". The paper will also show the reverberations of early anomalous work by Ilyenkov in his later mature works such as *On Idols and Ideals* (1968), *Dialectical Logic* (1974), and *Leninist Dialectics and Metaphysics of Positivism* (1979). In conclusion, the paper will draw on Ilyenkov’s cosmology in order to address the contemporary currents of speculative philosophy, which discuss similar themes of “absolute extinction”, entropy, and the role of thought in the universe, but outside of the communist horizon of late Soviet thought.

*Alexei Penzin is a Reader in Philosophy and Art Theory at the University of Wolverhampton and a member of the collective Chto Delat? (What is to be done?) and of the editorial boards of Stasis (Saint Petersburg) and Moscow Art Magazine. He has published his research in numerous articles in journals such as Rethinking Marxism, Mediations, South Atlantic Quarterly, Crisis and Critique, e-flux. His essay Rex Exsomnia (Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2012) was part of the dOCUMENTA13 “100 Days – 100 Thoughts” series. Penzin also co-edited the English translation of the book Art and Production by Boris Arvatov (Pluto Press, 2017). Currently, he is preparing his book Against the Continuum: Sleep and Subjectivity in Capitalist Modernity, for publication by Bloomsbury Academic.*

### **Keti Chukhrov**

#### **The Ideal is Material and vice versa: Ilyenkov’s Proofs.**

The paper explores the logic and speculative technique of conflating matter and idea in Evald Ilyenkov’s thought. The philosophic figures he relies on to legitimate such conflation are Hegel, Spinoza, Marx, Leontiev. The most courageous of these encounters is the philosophic meeting point between Hegel and Spinoza, the two thinkers who generated two very divergent ‘stereotypes’ of thought - idealism (Hegel) and immanentism (Spinoza). However, Ilyenkov managed to reveal that Hegel’s idealism was grounded in objective materialism conditioned by the Other-determined self, and merely needed Marx’s thought to complete socialization of Subject; whereas Spinoza never truly managed to theorize the unity of mind and matter. This could only be done by Soviet socialist thought and psychology. The paper will detect why these allegations of Ilyenkov were dependent on the eviction of private property.

*Keti Chukhrov is ScD in philosophy, and an associate professor at the Department of Cultural Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics. In 2012-2017 she was the head of Theory and Research department at the National Center of Contemporary Art. Her full-length books include To Be—To Perform. ‘Theatre’ in Philosophic Critique of Art (2011), and Pound & £ (1999) and a volume of dramatic writing: Merely Humans (2010). Currently she is a Marie Skłodowska Curie fellow at Wolverhampton University. Her present research interests and publications deal with the impact of soviet economy on the epistemes of historical socialism; performance studies; Art-systems; and Neo-humanism in the conditions of post-human theories.*