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The new Third Rome? Moscow in the Russian culture of the 1990s

Is Meaning Cast in Stone?

In a seminal article on architecture in the age of globalization, Frederic Jameson has suggested that the symbolic meaning of architectural projects is as volatile as the arbitrariness of the sign: "No work of art or culture can set out to be political once and for all, no matter how ostentatiously it labels itself as such, for there can never be any guarantee it will be used the way it demands. A great political art can be taken as a pure and apolitical art; art that seems to want to be merely aesthetic and decorative can be rewritten as political with energetic interpretation."[1] That is, meaning projected onto space is deduced through allegorization, a process depending on contingent contexts as much as unconscious associations. Built space per se, according to Jameson, can never be political: the ideology behind it is never cast in its stone, so to speak. As St. Augustine writes in the treatise on scriptural allegory and interpretation that Jameson cites, a thing can mean itself or its own opposite. Thus, suggests Jameson, "a sugar-candy postmodern decoration can for a moment stand as a heroic repudiation of the dominant, old, repressive modern glass-box international style, only in another blink of an eye to become 'indissolubly'… associated with the high- and low-life ultraconsumerist speculation of a Reagan 1980s destined to join the 1920s in the history books for sheer upper-class indulgence."[2]

Official urban planners and architects of post-Soviet Moscow can hardly be suspected of having consulted the Marxist theoretician of postmodernism—or St. Augustine, for that matter. Perhaps they should have. The grandiose programme of Moscow's reconstruction in the 90s bankrolled by the New Russians was unambiguously ideological in its determination to re-establish the historical role of Russia's capital, the role obliterated by the 70-odd years of Communist rule: Moscow the heart of Orthodox Russia, the glorious Third Rome of the famous

[1] Frederic Jameson. "Is Space Political?", *Rethinking Architecture: a Reader in Cultural Theory*, Neil Leach, ed. (London, 1997), p. 258.
[2] Ibid.

16th century monastic doctrine, Moscow the bustling hub of merchants and traders—the Moscow that we lost and now have again recovered. Moscow city planners under the omnipotent long-term Mayor Yury Luzhkov attempted to revive foundational myths as they shaped the re-invented image of the city and transfigured its physical and symbolic landscape, setting up new urban icons next to ancient churches and architectural landmarks of the Soviet era. Alongside faceless corporate glass boxes and international-style supermarkets that bear witness only to Russia's entry into the global economy but not to Moscow's special place, there emerged monumental public projects designed to celebrate Moscow's glorious pre-Revolutionary history (still alive in vernacular dreams), and moreover, to recreate it. It certainly does not take a Jameson to recognize in these efforts of negating the Soviet legacy the latter's stubborn survival and triumph. Only "in another blink of an eye" the monumental gesture of reclaiming Moscow's shattered past is associated with the monumental gesture of constructing radiant future on the ruins. One only need recall, as the cultural critic Svetlana Boym has done in her study of post-cold-war European cities, that Luzhkov's campaign of monumental reconstruction culminated in Moscow's 850th anniversary celebration just as Stalin's did 50 years before in the celebration of the 800th.[3] In fact, it was Stalin who established the tradition of such celebrations after he authoritatively determined Moscow's birth date from the city's first mention in the Russian chronicles. It is hard to argue with Boym's conclusion that the Luzhkov style is nostalgic not really for Moscow as it once was but rather for "Stalin's grand gestures and the apparent stability of the Brezhnev era."[4] However, as I wish to suggest in this paper, there is more to the allegorical potential of this re-shaped nexus of space, historical memory, and identity in contemporary Moscow. Insofar as the historical meaning and mnemonic value of any given structure is a question of allegorical content, one should be cautioned against a priori deducing the social meaning from either the intended message of structures in the new "Moscow style" or

[3] See Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, 2001).
[4] Ibid, p. 118.

indeed even from the reverse of this message. A recent film about Moscow in the 90s will help me make my point.

Simulations of Totalitarianism

First, I would like to consider Luzhkov's ideology of Moscow's reconstruction in the light of its critical reception. Five years ago one of the most vocal opponents of the new Moscow style, art historian Grigory Revzin attempted to describe it in terms of Culture II, borrowing the term from the influential book by the émigré architect and culturologist Vladimir Paperny. In his study of Stalinist architecture published in the US in 1985 and recently reprinted in Moscow, Paperny, in the spirit of the Tartu semioticians Lotman and Uspensky, develops a binary theory of a pendulum evolution of Russian history in which the revolutionary, avant-gardist, and cosmopolitan Culture I invariably gets transformed into an imperial, complacent, stagnant, and nationalistic Culture II.[5] Whereas Culture I seeks to suspend the legacy of oppressive tradition, enact universal emancipation, and create norms, values, and orientations out of itself, Culture II re-inscribes oppressive legacies from which it distils national values that it holds immutable. The most clear-cut manifestation of this binary is the constructivist architecture of Moscow in the 1920s as contrasted with the post-war Stalin Baroque. Consider, for example the famous unrealized project of Tatlin's Monument to the Third International, with its dynamic spiral representing Hegelian dialectics ascending into openness and unfinalizability, Melnikov's masterpiece, the Rusakov Dom Kul'tury in the shape of a gigantic cog-wheel, the 1926 building of the Ministry of Agriculture in the shape of a grain elevator, or Le Corbusier's famous Narkomkhoz building commissioned by the Soviet government in 1929, with its naked supports and huge circle of windows symbolizing all-around transparency. The totalitarian style of high Stalinism with its pompous monumentality and eclectic historical citation negates these Utopian forms, replacing them with stolid Greco-Roman models lavishly embellished with opulent

[5] See Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura Dva* (Ann Arbor, 1983).

Socialist Realist ornaments. The post-war Moscow reconstruction boom turned to the national imperial symbols, famously exploiting Kremlin shapes in the seven Moscow "wedding-cake" skyscrapers built in the late 40s-early 50s to celebrate the capital's 800th anniversary.

Revzin argues in his article that the late perestroika years of the 1980s and the early 90s clearly saw the return of Culture I, with its experimental (this time postmodernist) drive aimed at old authorities, ruthless in its attack on the grand narratives of the past. Yet as early as 1994 the new Moscow style of Mayor Luzhkov brought back distinct elements of Culture II. The difference this time, however, was that the new architectural language of power is clearly postmodern as well. This creates a certain paradox. As Revzin explains, these days "Moscow Kremlin has yet again become the main source of inspiration. Designing a building in Moscow above 3 stories without towers is the same as applying for immigration in the Brezhnev era. That is, it amounts to officially declaring oneself a dissident. Symbols of statehood and power are inserted wherever possible. The state order is clear and is being carried out. But there is something strange in its execution. All these towers aren't drawn seriously. They are all somehow toy-like…"[6] The most vivid manifestation of this toy-like quality is the gargantuan underground shopping mall in Manezh Square next to the Kremlin—the largest shopping mall in Europe designed by the court artist and Luzhkov's close friend Zurab Tsereteli who orchestrated almost all of Moscow's grand public projects of the 90s. The structure is complete with a giant cupola decorated with Moscow's patron St. George killing a dragon on top of the world map with Moscow at its heart, and a sculpture garden adjacent to the Kremlin wall filled with Disney-like versions of Russian folk tale characters (bears, Ivan the Fool, Frog Princess, and the like). The ideological message behind the mall is a response to Stalin's eradication of street trade, still abundant in the years of NEP of the 1920s. The street next to Manezh Square then known as Okhotny Row, Marx Avenue since the 1930s, and now Okhotny Row again, was a bustling retail area, where merchants sold their wares since time immemorial. Luzhkov and Tsereteli bring

[6] Grigorii Revzin. "Postmodernizm kak Kul'tura Dva: ob osobennostiakh sovremennoi moskovskoi arkhtektury," *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 25.01.97. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.

simulated history back with a vengeance. But herein lies the paradox which Revzin discusses with reference to another powerful landmark of Moscow' cityscape, the gigantic statue of Peter the Great designed by the very same Mr Tsereteli. The statue, argues Revzin, despite its enormous size looks like a transformer toy (in fact, if one considers that Peter's statue is a recycled version of a rejected Columbus statue in Puerto Rico, the metaphor appears even more accurate). Thus "… the role of Culture II in today's Moscow is played by a postmodernism mutated almost beyond recognition." That is, such trademark elements of postmodern architecture as the citation of stable symbols, historicism, secondary images can be accommodated only in compliance with the new style that celebrates central power. Naturally, there is a clash here with the very essence of postmodernism. "The essence of postmodernism is such that it cannot be Culture II. It cannot assert ideas of a collective rallying around national symbols." What we have, according to Revzin, is an impossible event of power re-assertion by means of its own deconstruction. He writes that Tsereteli's Peter, although a toy, is still as frightening, as would be a cockroach the size of a guinea-pig."[7] So has postmodernism been mutating in post-Soviet Moscow towards a new Culture II, as Revzin and also another Russian culturologist Mark Lipovetsky have argued?[8] To answer this question in the negative would be to deny the obvious; however, to give a positive answer would mean to oversimplify things immensely—any use of binary patterns in cultural analysis, however complex it may be, is, needless to say, schematic. I would suggest that what we witness in the Moscow of the 90s is the die-hard Culture II itself undergoing a postmodern mutation and thus opening itself up to most radical re-interpretations.

That capitalism in whatever form has re-established itself in Russia is beyond any doubt (this year's recognition by the EU and the US of the Russian economy as "market-based" is a mere confirmation of what took place at least seven years ago). Therefore Luzhkov's Moscow exhibits the global, and thoroughly postmodern desire (in the Jamesonian sense) to re-design

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[7] Ibid.
[8] See Mark Lipovetskii. "Moskva—'Kul'tura Dva': opyt parallel'nogo chteniia." *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 2, 1998.

itself as a postmodern theme park, a Disneyland of history, a theatrical space of positive sensory identification with the past. Everywhere in the world of late capitalism Disneyfication has become synonymous with inauthenticity, with commodified simulations of fairy-tale histories from which real historical traumas are absent. In this respect Moscow is not unique. What *is* unique to the new Moscow style is precisely the fact that the commodification of vernacular nostalgias is simultaneously yet another in the long line of attempts to exercise the language of state power. Any such exercise in the past indeed proceeded in a pendulum-like mode, from extreme to extreme, always trying to obliterate all traces of a previous obliteration. Consequently, the hyperreality of today's historicist designs, rather than entertaining the viewer with a seductive aesthetics of historical memory impregnated with a habitually authoritarian message, does just the opposite: in the language of the architectural theorist Neil Leach, it becomes anaesthetic, sense-numbing.[9] Due to the fact that cultural obliterations took place ever so often, the "new" ideological message really fails to get across to the intended recipients who are by now blasé and oblivious to it.

Sign of the Void

Consider the case of the Luzhkov's most grandiose historical remake: the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, resurrected from the ashes of history to the tune of some 300 million US dollars in time for the festivities of 1997. The history of the cathedral speaks volumes about patterns of obliteration. It was commissioned by Emperor Alexander I at the end of 1812 in commemoration of Russia's victory over Napoleon. The order took decades to execute. After the first project of an ecumenical church in the neo-classical style was rejected, another architect was appointed by Alexander's brother Nicholas I who in 1839 chose the architect Konstantin Ton to design the cathedral. Ton went back to the Byzantine model after which most old churches in Moscow were fashioned, including the State Cathedral of Assumption in the Kremlin. The site

[9] See Neil Leach, *The Anaesthetics of Architecture*, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

chosen for the new church was already occupied by a 17th century St. Alexis Convent which the Tsar ordered cleared for the new project. Nicholas I did not see the new cathedral in his lifetime. It was completed only in 1883, during the reign of his grandson, another arch-conservative and nationalistic emperor, Alexander III under whom Moscow experienced what is usually referred to as pseudo-Russian revival—the age of overly decorous buildings, such as History Museum in Red Square which Le Corbusier proposed be blown up in the early 1930s. Reflecting on the newly built cathedral, a contemporary art critic Prince Evgeny Trubetskoi observed, "Architects lacking inspiration and the understanding of the meaning of church building are always substituting spiritual elements with decorative ones. A typical example of such costly absurdity is the Cathedral of Christ the Savior that looks like a huge samovar around which all of patriarchal Moscow has gathered cheerfully."[10]

The cathedral was destined to be at the centre of patriarchal Moscow only for 48 years. In 1931Stalin's retainers declared the by now closed and dilapidating church a toadstool of the old regime, an "ideological fortress of the propaganda of patriotism, militarism and chauvinism." The destruction was swift and public. In the same year most of the artwork was removed, and a public implosion ceremony conducted. Part of the reason why Stalin wanted the church removed was that the site was chosen for another cathedral, this time one of atheism and victorious Bolshevism, the most ambitious architectural project ever conceived in post-revolutionary Russia: the 416-meter-high Palace of Soviets with a 6,000-ton statue of Lenin with an outstretched arm on top. The old cathedral would have been dwarfed by comparison. The project was so enormous that even at the time of Stakhanovite labour only 16 stories of its metal structure were erected before World War II. It was also rumoured that the project could not have been built anyway because of a structural problem with Lenin's arm. According to Mayor Luzhkov, a whole secret Research Institute of the Arm was established to design the gigantic limb. What came down to us is the foundation and architectural sketches. Those of the interior of

[10] Evgenii Trubetskoi. "Dva mira v drevnersskoi ikonopisi," *Filosofiia russkogo religioznogo iskusstva XVII-XX vv.,*(Moscow, 1993), p. 242.

the Palace clearly betray the designers' undisguised fascination with cathedral spaces. After all hopes of building the Palace were abandoned, in the 1960s the foundation was turned into a huge open-air swimming pool, operating year round.

During the perestroika years, projects for restoring the blown-up cathedral began to emerge, many of them conceptualist, such as rebuilding the church as a wire frame, an empty metal outline, to serve as a symbol of sorrow and repentance. But instead, a secret decision was made by the Mayor and the Patriarch in 1994 to resurrect the destroyed cathedral exactly as it was built by Ton, if only a little better, using reinforced concrete and all modern construction technologies. It took a mere 3 years to carry out the reconstruction on the very same foundation of the phantasmatic Palace of the Soviets that previously housed the swimming pool. It was the world's largest religious construction project at the end of the 20th century. Work went on round the clock, as did the interior decoration, supposedly following the surviving photographs of the original as closely as possible. Ubiquitous Zurab Tsereteli designed the cross for the main dome. The Cathedral was inaugurated with great pomp, with President Yeltsin and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin in attendance. It is now Russia's principal Orthodox cathedral, again at the centre of patriarchal Moscow, this time in its simulated, hyperreal, postmodern incarnation. So I again come to my principal point here, that this latest mutation of Culture II precisely by virtue of its postmodern character has lost its oppressive power, becoming for millions of Moscovites nothing more and nothing less than just a city landmark, visible from far away, quite spectacular, particularly when illuminated at night, the signifier of an urban allegory whose signified is too uncanny to give it much thought.

Moscow without Quotation Marks

The end of 2000 was marked in Moscow by the premier of a long-awaited film about the nouveau-riches in Russia's capital city. The film simply titled *Moscow* by the director Aleksandr Zeldovich, based on the screenplay by the cult author Vladimir Sorokin, had been five years in

the making. The screenplay was published back in 1995, before the shooting even began. It produced a literary sensation, with the script nominated for the Russian Booker Prize. And while five years later the film itself won strong critical acclaim, both at home and in Europe where it toured the festival circuit, most reviewers were quick to point out that the film depicts the Moscow of the 1990s, not the city of 2000 and should thus be read as a requiem to an era. The director himself, when asked about the period portrayed in his film, was somewhat more ambiguous, referring to the English Present Perfect Tense, alien to the Russian grammar, as an accurate answer to the question.[11] Be it as it may, the Moscow of 2002 is quite a different place indeed; what the film captures is the Zeitgeist of a historical chapter hopefully more or less closed by the economic crisis of 1998. Luzhkov's and Tsereteli's heydays are over, gone with the ruptured balloon of the go-go 90s. However, as many of the film reviewers have noticed, whereas Sorokin's screenplay written in the early stages of this transformation suggests a new style that is built on the combination of estrangement, pastiche, parody of dead cultural languages, cruel naturalism and a new monumentality, the film itself, while following the script to the letter, does something completely different: it shows the void that opens up behind the signifying surface of this new style. The film is not about Moscow as a living, bustling metropolis of some 12 million real people where enormous energies have been released in the last ten years. The Moscow Zeldovich and Sorokin portray is an artificially constructed space suspended in the vacuum of a cultural tradition not simply broken but virtually annihilated by the Soviet collapse. It is definitely a film about Moscow as a site of new ideological projections. Yet, it is also a film about the impossibility of any such projections in the postmodern and post-totalitarian age. *Moscow* is an allegorical articulation not of the real city but of the artifice of the 90s and thus an incisive critique of the grandiose "Moscow style" of the New Russians, their city planners and architects.

[11] See Aleksandr Zel'dovich. "Zhizn' avangardnee kul'tury," *Iskusstvo kino*, no. 11, 2000.

The most essential aspect of the film is its reliance on ostentatious exteriority: as Sorokin himself explains in a post-production interview, “we wanted to look at Moscow with a non-human gaze. The gaze of angels, birds, or insects—don’t know which…”[12] As a result, the film refuses to focus on the signified and instead presents a melancholy display of signifiers that, paradoxically, assumes the gesture of saving Moscow the multilayered and overdetermined text by declaring it a pure surface. The plot of the film is as banal as much of what was taking place behind Russia’s transition to a market economy: the action revolves around a suitcase with cash which one of the characters steals from his best friend who consequently cannot pay his own gangster associates and is murdered by them. None of the characters are flesh-and-blood human beings; they are mere constructs endowed with certain archetypal characteristics that determine their fate. The murdered entrepreneur and ballet buff Mike is the symbol of the country’s new myth-making elite, too blinded by his idealistic ambitions to survive in the cruel reality of the 90s. His friend, psychiatrist Mark is, by contrast, a backwards-looking figure. A typical member of the 70s introspective intelligentsia, he is prisoner to the past and hence equally incapable of communicating with the 90s world; he kills himself by jumping off a ski dive on Lenin Hills overlooking the bleak panorama of the city. The only winner in this story is the faceless and remarkably golem-like character Lev who seems to have no past and no future altogether. His Moscow is a city devoid of history or memory. In one of the most telling scenes he takes the character Olga, Mark’s autistic patient and the sister of Mike’s fiancée, on a boat tour of the city. His commentary is as terse as it is crucial for understanding the film’s conceptual design: “This is the Kremlin. The President lives here. This is the chocolate factory Red October. They make chocolate here. This is the Church of Christ the Saviour. Here people will pray to God.” Describing the old Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet landmarks simply in terms of their function, Lev brings into focus what *is* there for “the inhuman gaze”: the naked signifier of the grand narrative we call “Moscow.” And in an equally revealing scene near the end, he collects the

[12] See http://sorokin.rema.ru:8101/interview/moskva.shtml

stolen money from the letter "O" of the colossal highway sign "Moskva" at the city boundary. This is allegory becoming literal, signifying, in the words of Walter Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* book, "the not-being of that which it presents"[13]: Culture I and Culture II are both dissolved by the order of the signifier, Moscow itself—this time without the quotation marks. The abyss that opens up between the surface of the sign and any meaning it may articulate is the price one has to pay for the saving of textual authority. In the film's closing sequence we are left pondering the angel's eye view of strangely unfamiliar Moscow roofs to the sounds of angelic soprano.

Sorokin and Zeldovich's film is an icy spectacle, a spectacle as intoxicating as it is sobering. And it is also symptomatic of a pressing need that more and more Russians begin to acknowledge, even in the face of Mayor Luzhkov's continued insistence on his "Moscow Style": the need to discard any claims at theorizing "Moscow" as a phantasmatic totality of whatever kind, the need to de-territorialize its textual space. It seems that the task of recasting the meaning of city stones is best accomplished by relying on the poetic function. As Félix Guattari writes in his "Text for the Russians" (a talk written for Russian poets and writers in 1988), "[the] efficacy [of this poetico-existential catalyst] rests essentially in its capacity to promote active, procedural ruptures at the core of significatory tissues and semiotic denotatives, from which it will set new worlds of reference to work."[14]

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[13] Walter Benjamin. *Gesammelte Schriften*, Frankfurt a.M, 1980, I:406.
[14] Félix Guattari, "A Text for the Russians," *Poetics Journal,* no. 8 (1989), p. 3.