

ART AND CULTURE AS REVOLUTION

Maria Shevtsova

In the glow of the Northern Lights, the terrestrial globe, its South Pole resting on a floor of ice. The entire globe is covered with rope ladders representing the parallels and meridians. Between two walruses supporting the world stands an ESKIMO HUNTER with his finger stuck into the Earth. He is shouting at an ESKIMO FISHERMAN reclining in front of a campfire.

HUNTER

Oh! Oh! Oh!

FISHERMAN

Just listen to that hollering!
He's got nothing better to do
than stick his finger into the world.

HUNTER

A hole!

FISHERMAN

Where?

HUNTER

It's leaking.

FISHERMAN

What's leaking?

HUNTER

The world!

FISHERMAN (*jumps up, runs over to the HUNTER, and looks under his finger*)

O-o-o-oh!
The work of unclean hands!
Damn!
I'll go and notify the Arctic Circle.

(He starts to run off but encounters a GERMAN, who jumps out at him from behind the edge of the world, wringing out his wet coat sleeves. The GERMAN tries to buttonhole the ESKIMO FISHERMAN, but finding no buttons on the latter's parka, clutches the fur).

GERMAN

Herr Eskimo!
Herr Eskimo!
Something most urgent!
Wait just a moment

FISHERMAN

Well, what is it?

GERMAN

Let me explain.
 Today I was sitting in a restaurant
 on the Friedrichstrasse.
 Through the window the sunlight
 was so enticing!
 The day,
 like a bourgeois before the Revolution,
 was serene.
 People were sitting there
 quietly Scheidemannizing.
 When I'd finished my soup,
 I looked at the Eiffel towers of bottles on the shelf,
 and I asked myself:
 What kind of beef shall I have today?
 Or should I have beef at all?
 I looked again,
 and my food stuck in my throat:
 something was wrong out there in the street!
 The statues of the Hohenzollerns,
 which had been standing there among the carnomiles,
 suddenly flew upward, head over heels!
 Then came a roar.
 I rushed up to the roof.
 A waterless flood
 was surging around the building,
 drowning out all other sounds;
 it swept on,
 engulfing whole districts of the city.
 Berlin was an angry sea, raving
 in bass notes of invisible waves.
 To,
 and fro,
 above,
 below,
 went houses like men-of-war.
 And before I even had time to wonder
 whether this was the doing of Foch, or -

FISHERMAN

Cut it short!

GERMAN

I was soaked to the skin.
 I looked around me:
 everything was dry,
 yet it poured, and poured, and poured.
 I summoned up all my Yacht Club know-how;

and here before you,
dearest sir,
is all that remains of Europe now.

FISHERMAN

N-n-not much.

GERMAN

(pointing in a horizontal direction)

Allow me to rest beside your most honorable seals.

(The FISHERMAN, annoyed, jerks his thumb toward the campfire and goes off in the opposite direction, but bumps into a pair of dripping wet AUSTRALIANS, who have come running out from behind the other edge of the world.)

FISHERMAN

(taking a step backward in astonishment)

When you see faces like that, words fail yuh!

AUSTRALIAN AND HIS WIFE *(together)*

We're from Australia.

AUSTRALIAN

I'm an Australian.

We had everything.

For instance:

a palm tree, a cactus, a dingo, a platypus.

AUSTRALIAN'S WIFE *(weeping with an onrush of emotion)*

And now it's all up with us!

We had to let everything go.

All is lost: the dingo,

the platypus, the cactus, the palm tree -

they've sunk down in the sea;

they're all at the bottom

This is from Mayakovsky's *Mystery-Bouffe* written by him in 1918 and directed by Meyerhold in the same year to celebrate the first anniversary of the October Revolution.¹ Mayakovsky wrote a second version of the play, which he described as "A Heroic, Epic and Satiric Representation of Our Era", in 1921 in order to change its content, though not its form, according to the changes in the era represented. Since the early 1920s, the period of the New Economic Policy (1921-1924), are central to this paper, references below are to the version of 1921. Let us, however, keep in mind Mayakovsky's laconic wish that, in the future, "all persons performing, presenting, reading or publishing *Mystery-Bouffe* should change the content, making it contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute".²

Mystery-Bouffe is in six Acts, framed by a prologue and a concluding chorus whose function and effect are those of an epilogue. The prologue, while summarising the play's subject matter, mocks the textual and performance conventions of realist theatre, as allusions to Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* and Stanislavskian stage techniques make quite plain. At the same time, it introduces, in the buoyant, comic vein of *opera bouffe* (hence, of course, Mayakovsky's title), the critical perspective taken on capitalism,

imperialism and war - as well as on Russia's Provisional Government after the collapse of tsarist autocracy - by *Mystery-Bouffe* as a whole. The chorus/"epilogue" closing Act VI is a version of the *Internationale* invented by Mayakovsky for the play. It is sung by the Unclean, alias workers and peasants, for the Commune, alias world socialism.

Act I, which opens with the dialogue quoted above, relates how the advent of Revolution's universal flood forces seven pairs of the Clean and seven pairs of the Unclean, together with a Compromiser, an Intellectual and The Lady With The Hatboxes, to build an Ark destined to save them. Act II shows how the Clean - representatives of the international ruling élite, including Lloyd George and Clemenceau - appoint a monarch who is supposed to protect the meagre victuals on board from the Unclean. The monarch gobbles up the food set before him, whereupon the Clean discover the virtues of democracy and devour in unison the remaining provisions. The Unclean, for their part, discover that

The republic turned out to be the same thing
as a king -
but one with a hundred jaws".³

In Act III the Clean and the Unclean pass through Hell. The Devils fail to frighten the Unclean, who dismiss the former's pitchforks, fires and stretching irons as mere trifles when compared with machine-gun fire, British tanks, the siege of battle (World War I and the Civil War), the siege of Capital and the stretching of joints by factory driving belts. In Act IV the Unclean, who leave the Clean behind in Hell, pass through Paradise. They find the cloud-food of saints, angels and luminaries like Tolstoy unsatisfactory, but nonetheless take Jehova's thunderbolts for the purpose of electrification for the Commune they are seeking, and move on to Act V. Here is the Land of Chaos ruled by famine, self-seekers and speculators. In Act VI they finally arrive at the Promised Land where food and electricity are in abundance, and where machines and tools serve rather than torture them. The merchant, sole survivor of the Clean on this Dantesque journey, immediately understands the gains to be made from becoming a concessionaire - a reference to the NEP practice of inviting private investment in State-owned production and accommodating what Lenin called in this period "State capitalism" to market demands. Further reference to the Merchant's "know-how" alludes to Lenin's commitment, in the name of NEP, to learning from "bourgeois specialists", which also involved learning how "to do business" from them. We shall return to these points, as well as to the significance of the Intellectual's claim at the end of Act I that he can "sabotage a bit" by doing nothing, while others work, precisely because, as a "specialist", he is "indispensable".⁴

Mayakovsky, it should by now be clear, is a scribe of the Soviet Revolution. However, he is not only its theatrical historiographer. He also helps to create the Revolution through his artistic contribution to the overwhelming cultural fermentation - in habits, manners, actions and minds or *mentalités* - that is inseparable from, and indeed is endemic to, this mass social event: any view of the Revolution that excludes such factors of cultural politics on the grounds that it is essentially a political phenomenon (where politics would be narrowly defined as party politics) or simply a matter of economic restructuring (where economics would be defined, in reductionist terms, as nothing more than "base" or infrastructure) is of limited value for explaining why the Revolution had social impact and meaning, and a mass, rather than only vanguard, dynamic. These observations need to be placed beside my synopsis and glossary of *Mystery-Bouffe*, whose principal role, in this context, is to suggest how and why Mayakovsky understood art, politics and economics to be facets of each other and of culture generally speaking

and, thus, part and parcel of the same process for which he too adopted the name of Revolution.

There are further reasons for my using Mayakovsky in an emblematic way. The purpose of *Mystery-Bouffe*, here, is not to provide a commentary on myths, myth-making or representations of the Soviet Revolution, despite the fact that imaginary, theatrical, instead of scriptural, representation is also at issue. Rather it is to bring into focus, through Mayakovsky, the debate held by the main protagonists of 1917-1924 on the subject of what Lenin identified, in 1923, as "cultural revolution".⁵ These protagonists are Lenin, Lunacharsky (and Narkompros) and Bogdanov (and Proletkult). Narkompros (The People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, that is Education) was formed on 26 October 1917, one day after the storming of the Winter Palace. Lunacharsky was appointed its Commissar. It was radically altered in 1921, partly because of Lenin's and Lunacharsky's pressure on the institution, as well as because of mounting difficulties (for example, size, bureaucracy, dispersion of forces) within the institution itself. The Proletkult, which was more a movement than a systemic body (even though it was financed by Narkompros) was virtually dismantled in 1920. Bogdanov retired to the Moscow Academy, although Proletkultists continued their work on a smaller scale throughout the 1920s.⁶

How, then, does *Mystery-Bouffe* emblemize, participate in and shed light on the debate concerning "cultural revolution"? How does it help to foreground the differences that separated Narkompros and the Proletkult from their very inception, even though their common objective was proletarian culture?

The points apparent in *Mystery-Bouffe*, which specifically emerge from the debate, may be summarized as follows:-

1. The Revolution was understood by all protagonists to be a phenomenon of world importance. Thus the success of the Revolution, albeit of primary significance for the Soviet Union, was to be measured beyond its frontiers, that is, in terms of global history.
2. Art, as one component of culture, was understood to be instrumental in the formation of the proletariat State, whose new culture was inseparable from that State.
3. The existence of social classes, their interpenetration and the struggle between them did not cease overnight, when the Bolsheviks established government. The problem, then, was to know how to deal politically and culturally, to the advantage of the working and peasant classes, with a bourgeoisie and a no less hostile petty bourgeoisie, both of whom chose to boycott Soviet construction.
4. The question of the role of the intelligentsia - and hence of artists - in the Revolutionary process was of paramount importance and could not be addressed independently of (2) and (3) above.
5. Art as an aesthetic enterprise was fused with the idea of art as instruction. As such, art was viewed as having educational and political functions irrespective of, and even because of, its imputed aesthetic qualities. Aesthetics, in other words, were considered to be interconnected with wider social forces.

6. Propaganda, understood as the propagation of socialist objectives, concepts, values, attitudes and aspirations could - and for Proletkult should - occupy pride of place in art.

7. Art had a privileged position in culture in that it could develop sociopolitical consciousness for sociopolitical action. Priority was thus given to art because art was assumed to be the site where political struggle was most transparent. In this respect, bourgeois art was not considered to be an exception. Indeed, the argument over whether bourgeois art should be jettisoned (Bogdanov, Proletkult) or preserved (Lenin, Lunacharsky, Narkompros) was underpinned, to a large extent, by the idea that art is the site where political struggle continues, even when the proletariat State is a political (and administrative) *fait accompli*. Bogdanov and Proletkult overall saw Lenin's but especially Lunacharsky's support of the classical tradition, as well as their concessions to artists still working within that tradition, as nothing short of condonation of an undesirable, reactionary bourgeoisie. (Head of Narkompros, Lunacharsky was the favourite target of everybody's criticism, including that of Communist Party officials, who thought he was too conciliatory with both the old guard right and Proletkult left).⁷

8. Culture was given the special definition of education. Narkompros was responsible for all levels of schooling, from primary to tertiary (not excluding such institutions as the Academy of Sciences) in Moscow and Leningrad, as well as in the provinces.⁸

9. Since education, in the Russian language itself, implied courteous decent, "civilized" behaviour, such conduct implied culture.

10. Since education, under the jurisdiction of Narkompros, was also conceived in terms of technical skills, disciplined work habits and application, and what today would be called labour management - elements fundamental to Lenin's concept of "specialists" - these practical, job-and-achievement factors also entered into the definition of culture.

We can now recapitulate briefly by stating that the term culture, in the framework of the preceding points, incorporates the notions of daily life (*byt*), mental structures or consciousness, formal and *ad hoc* schooling, vocational training, high art, popular art, avant-garde art and propaganda art and, most important of all, proletarian art which, like a prism, refracted parts of each art just cited. Moreover, the term incorporated what is best described as political culture (that is, familiarity with, or comprehension of, politics) and following this model, economic culture, technological culture and so on. In short, it is not an exaggeration to say that "culture" was synonymous with "society" The equation is apposite given that the goal of the Revolution was nothing less than the complete transformation of society itself. *Mystery-Bouffe* is an avant-garde rendition of this very goal.

Mayakovsky's extraordinary artistic output, of which *Mystery-Bouffe* is a typical but not exhaustive sample, does not fall neatly on either side of the debate.⁹ Founder and publicist of Russian futurism, his absolute allegiance to the Revolution did not, however, entail acceptance of the old masters, "bourgeois classics" in the line of Chekhov and Tolstoy, whom Lenin and Lunacharsky upheld as artistic models and sources of learning for the new proletarian State. Yet, insofar as Mayakovsky used his innovative, anti-traditional art forms for the causes articulated by Lenin and Lunacharsky, and which were put into practice through the many cultural and educational channels available in Narkompros, he took his position with the latter, not so much against Proletkult as

against the educationists and artists - opera singers, musicians, orchestra directors, ballet dancers and actors - who refused to cooperate with the Bolsheviks. A considerable number of Proletkultists were, in any case, more willing to rally round the Commissariat, when it was first founded, for political reasons comparable to the ones defended by Mayakovsky and again by other futurists who, in opposing conservative dominion, voluntarily became the Commissariat's allies.

On the other hand, insofar as Mayakovsky shared with Proletkult its idea of art as unmediated propaganda and its idea of knowledge as a utilitarian end, his artistic genres, with their direct political message, establish his affinity with Proletkult. An essential point nonetheless needs to be stressed: Mayakovsky did not share with Bogdanov and his closest collaborators their non-Bolshevik, non-Communist, ideologies and strategies, to which what Bogdanov described as the "autonomous" mass movement of the Proletkult was dedicated. This aspect of the debate will be elaborated below. The immediate observation necessary here is that, although the debate was fought out between two main camps, which can be characterized as "left" and "leftist" or as Bolshevik and non-Party, even anarchist, "leftist", there was ample room for a whole range of positions moving to the right of the political spectrum and turning back to the idiosyncratic left, of which the futurists, and Mayakovsky, in particular, are excellent examples.

Mystery-Bouffe certainly raises the question of who created art and knowledge and therefore culture; similarly, the question of how these were to be made and distributed. The task, as has already been noted, was assigned to Narkompros from the beginning. It was reassessed in 1921, when Narkompros was not so much placed under the tutelage of the Central Committee (in fact, it continued to maintain its own programmes) as adjusted to anticipate NEP policies. NEP required greater coordination between Narkompros input (especially with respect to its preparation of competent professionals) and the NEP drive for economic efficiency and productivity. For instance, one of the principal aims of Narkompros was to form new cadres from the workers and peasants. NEP was obliged to draw on them, at which time Narkompros's original commitment to an alliance with bourgeois intellectuals became imperative. Mayakovsky's Intellectual's desire to "sabotage a bit" refers explicitly to the widespread, frequently passive, resistance on the part of *ancien régime* intellectuals to any Bolshevik organ -not just Narkompros - seeking their abilities while appealing to their self-interest, when not to their goodwill. (The Land of Chaos can be seen as an allegory on these issues). By the same token, the Intellectual's remark on indispensable specialists is announced ironically at the expense of Lenin's conviction that benefit must be had from their expertise for a sound economic system without which proletarian culture simply could not exist. It is relevant to note that Mayakovsky's workers attempt, unsuccessfully, to build the Ark with the Intellectual and otherwise to forge paths with him towards the Commune before they lose him forever to the joys of cultivated talk in Paradise with Tolstoy and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Mayakovsky's inscription in his playtext of Proletkult's sceptical attitude towards bourgeois specialists - technical and intellectual - historically contextualizes all the more clearly Proletkult's disagreement with Lenin.

In the real-life drama on Proletkult it was Lenin who was its most aggressive opponent. Lunacharsky, apart from his personal contact with Bogdanov, tended to be sympathetic to Proletkult on a selective basis. He believed Proletkult had its strict uses in encouraging workers' creativity through such avenues as workers' clubs, arts studios and art laboratory experimentation, to which workers had easy access. He believed too that Proletkult was useful for disseminating information. To the extent that Proletkult vulgarized science, albeit its own particular brand of the sciences and technology - Bogdanov was a passionate exponent of proletarian scientific knowledge *sui generis* - it

at least had the merit of opening the doors, to the popular masses, of an area that had hitherto been closed to them. So, faced with Lenin's invective against Proletkult, Lunacharsky was often embarrassed by his tolerance towards it.

Lenin's antipathy had two sides, each a double of the other. He found preposterous Proletkult's claims to have discovered unique knowledge, whether it was established through the sciences or through the arts. He thought Communist slogans did not constitute Communist science any more than rudimentary, quasi-positivistic "laws" constituted the truth of the physical and natural sciences - an assumption evident in Bogdanov's writings.¹⁰ He argued it was a mistake to believe that it was "not necessary to acquire the sum of knowledge of which Communism itself is a consequence. Marxism is an example of how Communism arose out of the "sum total of human knowledge".¹¹ (Elsewhere Lenin speaks of the inadequacy of the "science of the agitator and propagandist").¹² Proletarian culture, scientific, technological or artistic, could only be achieved through reworking "the culture created by the whole development of mankind":

Proletarian culture is not something that has sprung from nowhere, it is not an invention of those who call themselves experts in proletarian culture. That is all nonsense. Proletarian culture must be the result of the natural development of the stores of knowledge which mankind has accumulated under the yoke of capitalist society, landlord society and bureaucratic society.¹³

Lenin's words are a variation on the theme of Lunacharsky's "human treasury" of art to which, for Lunacharsky, the best art of all classes throughout history belong and on which the proletariat must draw in order to produce its own.¹⁴ This was the platform on which Lunacharsky consistently withdrew his sympathy from Proletkult. As can be seen, his critique of Proletkult's outright dismissal of bourgeois arts has, for foundation, the principle of the appropriation of the "stores of knowledge" accumulated by mankind set out by Lenin. In the context of this argument, Bogdanov's blueprint for the Proletarian University, which was to rival "bourgeois" Moscow University, is a most eloquent document. Bogdanov's curriculum is in three stages, preparatory, fundamental and specialist.¹⁵ All stages emphasize the natural sciences, which are distilled, reduced to methodology or the history of "social technique", as well as the history of economic and social conceptions and of philosophical "systems". (The preceding term is itself revealing). No attention is given to the humanities as such. A unit of the general history of literature and art appears only at the fundamental stage and only as a sub-category. The specialist stage is predominantly concerned with "encyclopaedia" courses, including what Bogdanov calls "organizational science". The explanatory paragraphs on the curriculum have a here-and-now, short-term, decidedly pragmatic outlook on the subjects designated. Training in analytical thinking and synthesis does not rate a mention. These, it would be reasonable to assume from Bogdanov's various discourses, pertain to the cultural heritage which the proletariat "does not possess, but which possesses him".¹⁶

The reverse side of Lenin's denunciation, which is the nexus of his argument against Proletkult, centres on the problems posed by Proletkult's drive for autonomy vis-à-vis the Communist Party. Bogdanov was too committed to notions of scientific management to hold views of the "spontaneous" character of mass movements. But, unlike Lenin, he was not interested in consolidating or broadening the Bolshevik base. On the contrary, his strategies for political power for the proletariat bypassed the Bolsheviks altogether. It was this that Lenin could not, under any circumstances, accept or forgive. Since Lenin thought the whole sphere of culture was crucial for the consolidation of the Revolution (in all senses of the term "culture" outlined earlier and in several more to be discussed

shortly), any organization claiming independence of the Party and independence from the control of the relevant State organ for a given cultural sector (for example, Narkompros for tertiary institutions) threatened the present and future of the Revolution. Proletkult, in other words, was politically dangerous, in Lenin's view, not for the survival of the State *per se*, but specifically for the proletarian State.

Yet Lenin's idea of culture, embedded as it is in politics, is not complete until it is situated within his argument on literacy, on one hand, and Western civilization, on the other. Here the relation of culture to economics and, consequently, to NEP is all important. Time and again, in his speeches, draft resolutions and pamphlets of 1920-23, Lenin remonstrates on the illiteracy of the nation, on the impossibility of eradicating famine when the vast majority of the population cannot make use of printed and written knowledge. The inability of the popular masses to read Tolstoy, although a symptom of cultural impoverishment, concerns Lenin far less than the fact that workers and peasants are deprived of the fundamentals with which to control their lives in the sphere proper to them, namely, the sphere of labour. The worker needs literacy to operate his machines, the peasant to improve his farm and increase his harvest. Lenin by no means equates literacy with the acquisition of the alphabet pure and simple. NEP was designed to activate the economy. The more Lenin urged the country to accelerate industrial and agricultural production and reward productivity (and, conversely, combat inefficiency, sloth - Lenin's "Oblomovism" - bribery and red tape), the more he advocated the cause of literacy in terms of assimilation and application of knowledge, in the absence of which hopes for a sound, modern economy were empty dreams. The following passage of 1920 is worth recording for its succinct statement of preoccupations that are repeated, in one form or another, throughout Lenin's texts:

We know that Communist society cannot be built up unless we rebuild industry and agriculture, and these cannot be rebuilt in the old way [that is, through "the old system of tuition" of memorising and drilling methods which are contrasted with taking from, and reworking, "the sum total of human knowledge"]. They must be rebuilt on a modern basis, according to the last word of science. You know that this basis is electricity, that only when the whole country, all branches of industry and agriculture have been electrified, only when you have mastered this task, will you be able to build up for yourselves the Communist society which the old generation cannot build. We are confronted with the task of economically regenerating the whole country, of reorganising, restoring both agriculture and industry on a modern technical basis, which rests on modern science, on technique, on electricity. You understand perfectly well that illiterate people are unsuitable for electrification, and even the mere ability to read and write is inadequate. It is not enough to understand what electricity is; it is necessary to know how to apply it to industry and to agriculture, and to the various branches of industry and agriculture.¹⁷

These premises, in sum, underlie Lenin's project for a "cultural revolution" that had necessarily to follow the "political and social revolution" preceding it. Thus, when arguing, in 1923, against the view that Socialism could not be implanted in "an insufficiently cultured country", Lenin concludes:

This cultural revolution would be sufficient to transform us into a completely Socialist country; but this cultural revolution confronts us

with immense difficulties of a purely educational (for we are illiterate) and material character (for in order to be cultured we must have reached a certain level of development of the material means of production, we must have a certain material base).¹⁸

It is clear, from the two quotations given, that Lenin's outlook is hard-nosed, pragmatic. But it should also be kept in mind that, unlike Bogdanov, he recognizes the achievements of capitalist countries where the "elementary problem" of illiteracy is "liquidated in schools, where people are taught".¹⁹ There is little doubt that Lenin overstretched his point: the literacy level of capitalist countries was not absolute. However, compared with the estimated 2% literacy in Russia, at the time of the Revolution, the level elsewhere was impressively high. This, probably before all else, was for Lenin the cause, effect and proof of that "Western civilization" against which Russia's "barbarism" stood out monstrously - a blight on the landscape of history, which Socialism had to remedy or cease to be legitimate. The programmatic, platform character of Lenin's discourses on literacy and civilization cannot be ignored: they were, after all, delivered on specific occasions in response to, or preparation for, specific problems and in order to both justify NEP (especially its overture to private capital) and make it work. Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that Lenin defended an assembly line conception of literacy and education, that he pursued quick, tangible results from - not education, but what would now be described aptly as information and technocratisation - solely for the sake of the economy. While his gaze on Western civilization also focused on its economic progress - in other words, "civilization" perforce included material accomplishments - it wholeheartedly embraced, let us call it, the enlightenment contours of the terrain. Where this enlightenment once served the interests and well-being of the few, its proposed aim now was to throw a life-line to the damned and despised many on whose oppression enlightenment had been built. Hunger and poverty and illiteracy and ignorance went hand in glove. However, to Lenin's mind, the first pair militates against the removal of the second. For this reason, a "certain material base" preempts the existence of culture as literacy, knowledge and art. The latter is principally understood in terms of high art (bourgeois art) precisely because the art of the people (folk or popular art) had been, in the past, predominantly pre-literate, that is oral, musical, pictorial and craft. But the folk or people of the past were the proletariat and peasants of the present who, unlike their ancestors, were no longer excluded from the State.

It would be appropriate to conclude this paper by referring to Mayakovsky's wish that the content of *Mystery-Bouffe* be changed always in order for the play to be "contemporary, immediate, up-to-the-minute". The play, as has been indicated, is up-to-the-minute with respect to the debate that we can call, by short-hand notation, the Proletkult/Narkompros debate. The first question we may now raise is whether the debate is an event belonging strictly to the past, a document in the archives of history to which a scholar may turn in an attempt to understand the past. Or can it be rewritten - following Mayakovsky's language - and made contemporary according to our time and place and in a social setting that has nothing in common with Revolutionary Russia? The first question, besides repeating the famous "What is History?", opens on to numerous problems concerning the role and function of historiography. These are too vast to be addressed here. The second question, although integrated in the problems posed by the first, asks specifically whether anything can be taken from the past to foreground the issues involved in given problems in the present. If answered in the affirmative, this question can at least guide us in assessing how we can make use of issues proper to a past situation, all allowances being made in the meanwhile for the differences between that situation and the one being lived in the present. In this respect, the Proletkult/Narkompros debate provides us with a stencil over which we can draw new

content for the purposes of highlighting its particular features. The problem of education as the vehicle par excellence of cultural benefits can hardly be said to be anachronistic for our own society. Nor, in fact, can it be said that our time is free of utilitarian preoccupations in which education, too, is narrowly viewed as a utilitarian means to utilitarian ends. The debate may well serve us as a point of reference for considering the limits of utilitarianism and, by contrast, for evaluating intelligently the much greater promise of a utility in education which embraces, rather than expels, the idea, as well as practice, of learning as the complete development of human and, therefore, social resources.

¹ *The Complete Plays of Vladimir Mayakovsky*, trans. Guy Daniels, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1968, pp.48-51.

² *Op.cit.*, p.39.

³ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁵ "On Co-operation" in *Selected Works*, vol. IX, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp.404-409. It is pertinent to state that, although Lenin frequently uses the term "culture" in his texts, he rarely speaks of "cultural revolution". The above article offers, in my view, the most explicit, succinct definition of the concept in its relevance to Lenin's arguments on culture generally. See also Carmen Claudin-Urondo, *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution*, trans. Brian Pearce, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1977, p.13. My reader will note that there are substantial differences between Claudin-Urondo's categorization of the idea of culture in Lenin and the one presented in this paper, even though we concur on our general interpretation of the idea and coterminous concepts in Lenin's thought.

⁶ For an outstanding account of the history of Narkompros see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, 1970. Clearly this short paper cannot treat the history of Narkompros *per se* nor even the history - complex, to say the least - of the period specified. Its emphasis is on the *grandes lignes* of the debate identified and the salient points of the position held by each protagonist in the debate. The paper, although necessarily historical, does not intend to be a contribution to the discipline of history, but belongs rather to cultural studies or the sociology of culture.

⁷ Fitzpatrick documents this very well, *op. cit.*, pp.110-61. Lunacharsky - "our soft-hearted Anatoly" - was frequently thought to be open to manipulation by those with exploitative minds and harder hearts.

⁸ Nadezhda Krupskaya, member of Narkompros, who was responsible for schools and who worked closely with Lunacharsky on most matters of education, was a firm advocate of local initiative and educational soviets. In 1918 she wrote: "We are not afraid to organize a revolution. Let us not be afraid of the people, let us not be afraid they will elect the wrong sort of representative, bring in the priests. We want the people to direct the country and be their own masters..... We are always thinking in old terms, that if we do not spare ourselves and work day and night in the people's cause, that is enough. But it is nothing. Our job is to help the in fact to take their fate into their own hands!" (Quoted in Fitzpatrick, p.28). However, the problem of how local initiative was thwarted (Lunacharsky, too believed in "maximum autonomy" on the part of the provinces) arose not from the centralization of educational policy in Narkompros, but from the interference in local decisions on education by larger regional administrative bodies (*gubernii*). When Krupskaya travelled through the Volga region in 1918, she found that the absence of direction from Narkompros caused bewilderment in schools and local education departments and made them subject to the dictation of the *gubernii*. Thus, in Krupskaya's words, "all initiative is destroyed"; Krupskaya continues: "All my impressions lead to the conclusion that we are unforgivably alienated from provincial work". (Fitzpatrick pp.44-45).

⁹ Mayakovsky designed and made the scenery and costumes, and drew the posters for the Meyershold productions of four of his plays. Poet and author of literary essays, he also wrote the scenario of three films and starred in all three. His gift for visual representation, and especially for combining visual images and language, extended to his many illustrations of his own books, his caricatures and cartoons, his advertisements for State products and shops - usually accompanied by rhymed captions - and to the "slogan art", as Mayakovsky called it, of the ROSTA windows. ROSTA, or the Russian Telegraph

Agency, was started in August 1919, in lieu of daily newspaper distribution, and principally to inform the public about the Civil War. They were used to decorate empty shop windows and thus brighten the streets of Moscow. Mayakovsky perfected the idiom by turning single posters into a comic-strip series, with a single theme and a linking rhymed commentary on events and issues of current importance ranging from the military campaigns of the Red Army during the Civil War to the necessity of health and hygiene, electrification and tractors, and literacy. One of them, posted in pharmacies, advertised a cure for an ailing proletariat in Europe. It advised taking a potion called "general strike" and another called "united front", both "ordered by Doctor V.I. Lenin". Its instructions for use: "in sufficient quantity". From 1919 to 1922 Mayakovsky produced more than fifteen hundred of these "Windows of Satire". Apart from their didactic value with respect to their content, the Windows provided lessons in reading to a largely illiterate public, a question which is discussed further on in this paper.

¹⁰ *La Science, l'art et la classe ouvrière*, trans. Blanche Grinbaum, François Maspéro, Paris, 1977.

¹¹ "The Tasks of the Youth Leagues" (1920) in *Selected Works*, vol. IX, p.470.

¹² "The achievements and Difficulties of the Soviet Government" (1919) in *On Culture and Cultural Revolution*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1978, p.70.

¹³ "The Tasks", *op.cit.*, p.471.

¹⁴ "Proletariat i Iskusstvo" ("The Proletariat and Art", 1918), in *Izbrannie Stati po Esteike (Collected Articles on Aesthetics)*, Moscow, 1975, pp.63-64.

¹⁵ *La Science*, pp.157-168.

¹⁶ *Op.cit.*, p.244.

¹⁷ "The Tasks", p.473.

¹⁸ "On Co-operation", p.409.

¹⁹ "The New Economic Policy and the Tasks of the Political Education Departments" (1921) in *Selected Works*, vol. IX, p.270.