

Panic, Potency, and the Crisis of Nervousness in the 1920s

productive concerns, and especially the ability to bear male progeny, were of paramount importance in medical discussions of male impotence. See Nye, "Honor, Impotence, and Male Sexuality," 53, 55.

89. Faingol'd, *Polovoe bessilie: Ego prichiny preduprezhdenie i lechenie*, 29.

90. Iakobzon, "Sotsial'noe znachenie polovykh rasstroistv," *Gigiena i zdorov'e* 3 (February 1930), 5–6.

91. For examples of these images in political posters, see Stephen White, *The Bolshevik Poster* (New Haven, Conn., and London: Yale University Press, 1988). The contrast between the nervous, impotent youth and his self-assured, productive counterpart had its parallel, as described by Eric Naiman, in the threat posed by a healthy (menstruating) female and the reassurance of an anorexic woman who has stopped bleeding. Arguing that the most powerful marker of female sexuality during the NEP was a woman's ability to menstruate (considered a sign of the disruption of capitalism), Naiman contrasts this with the idealized, ideologically pure female body of the hungry Civil War era, a body which had become anorexic, incapable of menstruating, and hence completely desexualized. See his *Sex in Public*, ch. 6.

92. In her analysis of 1920s sex surveys, Sheila Fitzpatrick interprets the high level of anxiety over impotence among men as owing to the "unusual burden of responsibility and obligation felt by the first postrevolutionary generation of university students" and the lack of clear direction regarding their sexual behavior. See Fitzpatrick, "Sex and Revolution," 265–266. According to Anson Rabinbach, the physician's role as expert was crucial in the treatment of neurasthenics in Europe as well. See Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 162.

93. Khaletskii, *Polovaia zhizn' i nevrasteniia*, 27.

94. For similar discussions of the role of the doctor's consultation and the power of medical suggestion as forms of treatment, see Kameneva, *Chto kazhdomu nuzhno znat' o nervnosti*, 28; Z. G. Lur'e, *Nevrasteniia*, 8. Lesley A. Hall reaches similar conclusions in her analysis of British doctors and their treatment of male sexual impotency. See her "Somehow very distasteful," 559.

95. Mendel'son, "Polovoe bessilie," in *Gigiena i zdorov'e* 1(8) (January 1924), 6.

96. B. Gurvich, "Po povodu pisem o polovykh rasstroistvakh," 2.

97. Eric Naiman has described this atmosphere of anxiety and panic as "NEP Gothic." See *Sex in Public*, ch. 4.

98. Aron Sol'ts, in a 1924 speech to students of Sverdlov University, inveighs against suicide-related panic: "We have at present a rather great number of suicides. Comrades, that need not cause us any panic. It is natural and understandable. We are going through an era where the nerves of a very great number of people have been so tested, have endured so much, that they no longer have the strength to do further that which is demanded of them by the party." See Aron Sol'ts, "Communist Ethics," in *Bolshevik Visions: First Phase of the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Russia*, ed. William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1984), 46. On the "problem of youth" in the 1920s, see S. I. Gusev, *Kakova zhe nasha molodezh'? Sbornik statei* (Moscow and Leningrad, 1927). Sexual immorality and suicide are explicitly linked in discussions of the Eseninshchina. On this, see Pinnow, "Crisis, Morality, and Class," 28; and *Upadochnoe nastroyenie sredi molodezhi. Eseninshchina* (Moscow, 1927).

99. N. A. Semashko, *Novyi byt i polovoi vopros* (Moscow, 1926), 25–27. Sheila Fitzpatrick has challenged this perception of extreme sexual promiscuity in "Sex and Revolution," 252–278.

100. N. Shvarts, "Razvrashchena li nasha molodezh'," *Za zdorovyi byt* 5 (1929), 2.

101. Coincidentally, this is the same publication date as the first edition of *Za zdorovyi byt*.

102. N A Semashko, "Kak ne nado pisat' o polovom voprose," *Izvestiia* (January 1, 1925): 5.

103. For a more detailed discussion of Zalkind and Liadov's analyses of sexuality, see Naiman, *Sex in Public*, ch. 6.

104. The endocrine glands figure prominently in popular science writing and medical sex advice during the 1920s. See my "Science, Glands, and the Medical Construction of Gender Difference in Revolutionary Russia," in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, ed. David L. Hoffmann and Yanni Kotsonis (New York: Macmillan, 2000), 138–160; and *The Dictatorship of Sex*, ch. 2.

105. I.e., heterosexual, monogamous sex, excluding sex with prostitutes.

106. Eric Naiman explores the Komsomol's approach to male sexuality in this period, which "endeavored to tease and excite so that they could later condemn and, eventually, control." See *Sex in Public*, especially ch. 7.

107. The specific article Semashko has in mind is "Polovoi vopros s kommunisticheskoi tochki zreniia," first published in *Na putiakh k novoi shkole* 6 (1924), 6.

108. This contrast is made particularly striking in the chapter of Eric Naiman's work cited above (n. 106), which examines party debates on the depravity of the young in relation to a sensationalized gang-rape incident in Leningrad. No medical personnel participate in the discussions.

109. This represents a radical departure from the situation before the revolution, when medical discussions of sexuality were overtly politicized. See Julie V. Brown, *op. cit.*, and Laura Engelstein, *op. cit.*

110. Similarly, Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that student insecurity resulted in part from confusion over the conflicting messages of authority figures about sexual liberty and sexual irresponsibility. See her "Sex and Revolution," 276.

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Delivered from Capitalism

*Nostalgia, Alienation, and the Future of
Reproduction in Tret'iakov's I Want a Child!*

Christina Kiaer

In Sergei Tret'iakov's controversial and ultimately censored eugenic play *I Want a Child!* (*Khochu rebenka!*) of 1926, an unmarried party member named Milda, whose extensive public organizing work to benefit the collective leaves no time for marriage or children, suddenly discovers that she wants to have a child. As an agronomist well versed in eugenics as well as Leninism, Milda decides that the prospective father must be of 100 percent healthy proletarian stock. Rationalist and antiromantic, she searches out an appropriate specimen. Fixing her sights on the brawny young worker Iakov from the local construction site, she propositions him to father her child. She offers him a contract stating that after conception she will make no claims for his support of her or the child, nor will she ask him to play the roles of husband or father in any way. After considerable discussion he agrees to her terms, and they begin to have sex. As soon as she conceives, she severs all ties with him. Their son is raised communally in collective Soviet children's institutions. She allows Iakov no fatherly access, despite his pleas. In the play's conclusion, set four years later in 1930, Iakov catches a glimpse of his son when the child wins first prize in a "Healthy Baby" contest—displayed as an object of collective consumption, rather than of traditional, individual parental pride.¹

As this plot summary suggests, Tret'iakov's play scripts a literal, biological

solution to the problem of forming a new Soviet subject. The complex economic and social processes of production and consumption are simplified here through recourse to the metaphor of biological reproduction. In the “new everyday life” (*novyi byt*) after the revolution, the dense web of human desires surrounding sexuality will be rationalized by eugenic choice as simply as the material clutter of domestic family life will be eliminated from the new collective spaces of everyday life. Developed in the West, eugenics was a science that imposed the industrial disciplines of scientific quality control and rational planning onto the sexed body of the individual citizen. In the context of this play by a left avant-garde writer, eugenics becomes a means to produce a specifically socialist Soviet subject who will be, from his or her very conception, collectively owned and communally oriented.

The bourgeois sexuality inherited from the old world, with its ideology of possession, will be penetrated by the rational eye of science: “In *I Want a Child!*” Tret’iakov said, “love is placed on an operating table.”² The play rejects traditional dramatic formulas for building emotion around its potboiler plot, and instead presents the actions of all the characters as questions for discussion. The inner reaches of private dramas will be laid out for vivisection on the operating table, or better yet, placed under a microscope. This is Tret’iakov’s description of the opening shot of the film script that he wrote in 1928 on the basis of the play:

In the shot a million fibers are moving, and this movement looks like a ripened field, swayed by the wind in one direction. On this swaying there appears a huge, semitransparent sphere, glimmering with radiating filaments from the luminous nucleus at its center. This sphere rolls on the swaying field. The delicate flagella with their fat little heads, wriggling swiftly, move toward the sphere. They surround the sphere with twitching rays on all sides. One of them pierces the membrane of the sphere. This membrane becomes glassy as soon as it is pierced, grows turbid, and through the murk one can see how the head of the flagellum moves toward the nucleus and joins with it. With a sharp movement this entire picture is jerked out of the shot. This is Milda the agronomist-cattle-breeder working with the microscope.³

The round glass eye of the inquisitive microscope, rendering visible this heroic narrative of fertilization, offers a dramatic visual metaphor for the script’s narrative of the penetration of Bolshevik ideology into every aspect of Soviet everyday life (*byt*). The Constructivist artist El Lissitzky designed a stage set for the play in 1929 that similarly literalized this vision of an all-seeing Bolshevik state by making the stage into a transparent glass circle, lit from below and open to the audience on all sides (fig. 7.1). Devoid of traditional props—or, to use the unabridged theatrical term, “properties”—Lissitzky’s bare stage emphasized the rationalizing and antimaterialist aspects of Tret’iakov’s play, clearing a space for social practice unencumbered by possessions. Their use of these metaphors of visibility leave Tret’iakov and Lissitzky open to the charge

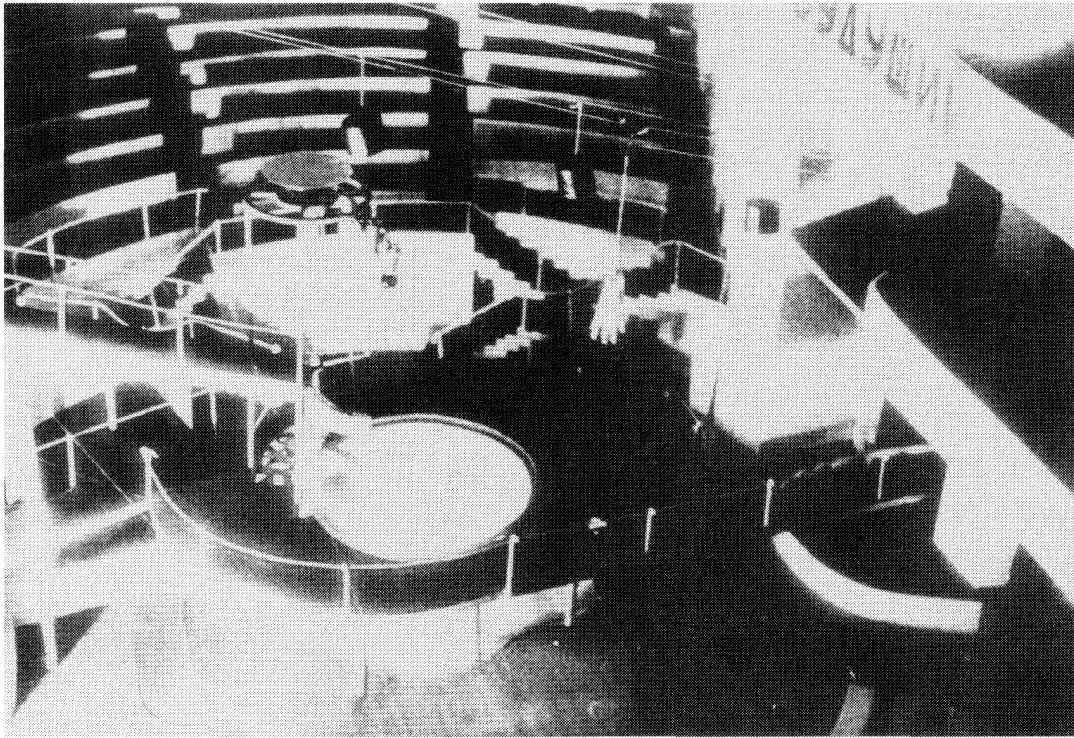


Figure 7.1. El Lissitzky, model of stage design for *I Want a Child!* 1929. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

that their work imagined Soviet subjects as fully rationalized objects of surveillance by the disciplining Soviet state. This would confirm the horror story told by Boris Groys in his influential account of Soviet art: the totalizing impetus in the Russian avant-garde paved the way for the repression and totalitarianism of Soviet society under Stalin.⁴

Tret'iakov wrote for the literary and artistic journal *Lef*, which propagated Constructivism in the arts and a documentary style of literary writing that would become known as “the literature of fact.” The original Constructivist program of 1921 had famously called for visual artists to give up painting and sculpture in favor of entering industry to produce objects for use in the everyday life of the new Soviet collective. *Lef* writers and Constructivist artists wanted to transform the primitive and *meshchanskii* (petty bourgeois) *byt* that existed during the New Economic Policy into a modern, rationalized, and collective *novyi byt*. This goal provides fuel for Groys’s sweeping argument that the avant-garde, like the Bolsheviks themselves, wanted to obliterate all remainders of past culture in order to remake society in its own totalizing image. Tret'iakov’s interest in eugenics in *I Want a Child!* only exacerbates this critique, because eugenics attempts to master the very raw materials of the subject, neutralizing all negative physical and psychological aspects inherited from the capitalist past at the level of the germ plasm. Tret'iakov’s play would then offer additional evidence that the Constructivist dream of fostering a new Soviet subject through the Constructivist object—a kind of gentle metaphor,

in which it is understood that if you change people's material surroundings for the better, you will also eventually change the people themselves in salutary ways—was instead a totalitarian nightmare of a future in which appropriate Soviet subjects would be produced by any means necessary.

The aim of this essay is to demonstrate, precisely on the unpromising ground of an analysis of Tret'iakov's *I Want a Child!*, that the Russian avant-garde offered a more sympathetic model for imagining the passage of the Soviet subject into the *novyi byt* than is usually understood. The desire for a total break between the capitalist past and the socialist future lies close to Tret'iakov's avant-garde heart, but it is a desire that his text continuously undermines. Tret'iakov the avant-gardist is also a Marxist dialectician, denaturalizing ideology by pointing out its contradictions. He invokes the potentially socialist aspects of eugenics, such as the destruction of the bourgeois property relations of marriage and family, but he also deconstructs his own eugenic narrative, interrupting it with almost journalistic scenes depicting topical and heated discussions of sexuality, the family, and the material problems of contemporary *byt*, and refusing traditional dramatic formulas for building emotions or delivering character identifications. Tret'iakov also challenges eugenics theoretically, through a Marxist critique of its potential alienation of the labor of the male (re)producer and, unusually at this time, through a critique of the traditional gender roles that were reinforced by the contemporary Soviet manifestation of eugenics. The opening image in his film script of the passive ovum and victorious active sperm has by now become a clichéd biological metaphor for male dominance, but Tret'iakov keeps the image firmly in the petri dish; the play scrambles assumptions about traditional gender roles, refusing the supposedly natural link between biology and lived gender.

As futuristic as Tret'iakov's play appears to be, with its evocation of a brave new world of eugenic mastery, his text in fact exposes, with uncanny, newsreel-like precision, the lived contradictions of everyday Soviet experience during NEP in the face of new Soviet ideologies of the subject. A small notice announcing the play in the newspaper *Vecherniaia Moskva* in 1926 emphasizes this temporal disjunction, describing its subject as “the problem of sex and marriage in the conditions of the *novyi byt*, and this *novyi byt* is treated by the author as a prognosis for the future.”⁵ Tret'iakov had finished the first version of the play by late September 1926, because on 28 September he assigned the performance rights to the avant-garde theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold. The signing of this contract was announced in all the newspapers and theater journals in November of 1926, and it was expected that the play would be performed in the 1927–1928 season at Meyerhold's theater.⁶ Rehearsals for the production began in February 1927 and were well under way when permission to produce the play was denied by Glavrepertkom (*Glavnyi repertuarnyi komitet*, the censorship arm of Glaviskusstvo). Meyerhold was eventually given permission by Glavrepertkom, in December 1928, to mount it in his theater exclusively as a “discussion piece,” rather than a traditional theatrical

performance, and only if certain of the most problematic parts were rewritten. The planning of Lissitzky's stage sets, which involved a total rebuilding of the theater interior, was begun in early 1929. But the sets were never completed, and the play was never performed.⁷ Tret'iakov's film script was also censored by Glavrepertkom in 1929.⁸

The problem of the play's temporal dissonance dominated the Glavrepertkom discussion of it in 1928. As the remarks of the various censors demonstrate, the play uncomfortably signaled the gap between propaganda visions of the future and present social reality, and laid bare the deep conflicts in Soviet visions of what the utopian future would be like. The Proletkul't theorist Valerii Pletnev claimed the play had not fully developed the eugenic problem sociologically, but then admitted that the real problem was that "perhaps the play has appeared sooner than necessary."⁹ Another member of the committee, a "representative" worker named Petrov, similarly proposed that the play was simply ahead of its time, and not yet relevant to Soviet life: "the problem must be posed, but not now (we have not attained that level yet [literally, we have not grown up enough])" (*problemu nado postavit', no ne seichas [ne dorosli]*).¹⁰ The censors, it seems, took one look at the eugenic theme, the frank discussion of sexuality, the nontraditional gender roles—and panicked. This essay will suggest that the censors did not read the play carefully enough, because the process through which the Soviet Union will "grow up" into a more rationalized future is in fact its subject.

In *I Want a Child!* the lived experience of *byt* continually interrupts grand Bolshevik plans for a *novyi byt*. Tret'iakov investigates the human effects of the transition to the new world of socialism, rather than offering a blithe narration of its achievement. Despite their seemingly uncompromising, futuristic vision, Tret'iakov's play, and Constructivism more broadly, share the insight of Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished *Arcades Project*, that a future socialist culture will succeed only if it can redeem the human desires lodged in the everyday practices and material objects of the past. The *Arcades Project* attempted to imagine not just a Marxist revolution but the transition to socialism that would follow it, to imagine a form of socialist culture that would reactivate the original promise of the creativity of industrialism while delivering it from the commodity phantasmagoria of capitalism that prevented its realization.¹¹ The Constructivist program of designing expedient new objects for mass production in Soviet industry was meant not just to replace the commodity form, but to provide a socialist rejoinder to the commodity's emotional power, because the "socialist objects" of Constructivism would function as active "comrades" in social life.¹² Tret'iakov's play provocatively extends this Constructivist reinvention of the creativity of industrialism onto the territory of the human body itself, using the device of eugenics to imagine a parallel reinvention of procreativity through industrial technology. Like Constructivist socialist objects freed from the pernicious effects of the commodity form, Tret'iakov's socialist form of reproduction would be delivered from the consequences of capitalism:

possessiveness, the alienation of labor, and patriarchal social forms of male dominance and female passivity.

The goal of Benjamin's project was to awaken people from the "dream sleep" of the commodity phantasmagoria into socialist culture through his "materialist history" of the revolutionary potential of mass culture. The moments of potential awakening took the form of a dialectical image: "that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."¹³ The transitional nature of Tret'iakov's play, set within the socially chaotic context of NEP but looking toward the socialist future, was meant to provide the contemporary Soviet audience with such an awakening "constellation." Holding the past, present, and future in a fragile solution, this constellation offers counter-evidence to Groys' indictment of the avant-garde for its attempt to obliterate the past to create a totalized future.

A Socialist Eugenics?

The play treads a fine line between describing the actual problems of Soviet *byt* during NEP in 1926, and imagining a futuristic *novyi byt* which is far more radical sexually—both in its incorporation of the highly topical issue of eugenics and in its emphasis on a woman making her own choices about sex and reproduction—than the official propaganda version of the *novyi byt*. The question of *byt* in relation to Bolshevism first entered seriously into public discussion in 1923 with the publication of Leon Trotsky's essays on the subject in the party newspaper *Pravda*, collected that same year in his book *Voprosy byta*, which inaugurated an explosion of public debate about the prospect of a new everyday life under socialism.¹⁴ The phrase *novyi byt* had cropped up regularly in the utopian atmosphere of the civil war years, loosely signifying a range of ideas from simple strategies for the modernization of backward peasant life to radical collective living arrangements, but these ideas had not occupied official party attention. The party's sudden interest in *byt* in 1923 represented, most broadly, a sense that the New Economic Policy had brought about a breathing spell after the upheaval of the civil war, allowing the new government to turn its attention from seizing power to questions of culture and social life. It also signaled a worry that the return to a semblance of normality under NEP would result in a bourgeois influence on morality, sexuality, and domestic life. The party responded by engaging more directly in formulating ideas of appropriate habits of daily life under communism.¹⁵ In the mid-1920s, mass propaganda for the *novyi byt* stemmed primarily from the health sector and consumer cooperatives, and promoted modern hygiene, health, and the collectivization of child care, cooking, laundry, and shopping.

Throughout the 1920s, however, the *novyi byt* was popularly understood to refer to the incendiary questions of the new sexual and family relations promoted by the Bolsheviks. Tret'iakov's choice to take up the theme of eugenics is an instance of his response to current debates on the topic of sexual

byt. The rationalistic and scientific veneer of eugenics resonated well enough with other Bolshevik organizational goals that it received a certain amount of attention in the mass press. An unfortunate manifestation of the modernist faith in progress, science, and the eventual control of nature, the theory of eugenics was popular in most Western countries in the 1920s, with varying degrees of racism and coerciveness. In Russia, interest in eugenics first arose around the time of the revolution. The Russian Eugenics Society was founded by the biologist Nikolai Konstantinovich Kol'tsov in 1920, under the auspices of the National Commissariat of Health (Narkomzdrav).¹⁶ The young science was deemed worthy of state support because of its status as a kind of "civic religion," as its founder Francis Galton had called it. It undermined Christianity and shared the Marxist, materialist belief that human beings had the power to shape the future and improve the human condition. But the question of the practical implementation of eugenics was always the problem, in Russia as elsewhere. In the "negative" model of eugenics, unfit men would be forcibly sterilized; this was practiced in several states in the U.S., originally in Indiana. In the "positive" model, people with desirable traits would be encouraged to reproduce with each other, but there was as yet no practical application of this model anywhere, other than the practice of requiring certificates of freedom from hereditary disease in order to obtain a marriage license. The third, "Lamarckian" model of eugenics was based on the idea that genetic material was not immutable, but could be influenced by social conditions, and that this changed genetic material could then be passed on to the next generation. This model appealed to Marxist supporters of eugenics, because it implied that human action could directly change the germ plasm. Anatolii Lunacharskii, the Commissar of Enlightenment, wrote a film script celebrating the Lamarckian idea that eugenics could make people into "captains of the future" rather than "slaves of the past."¹⁷ In this example of a totalizing Bolshevik vision, the transition to the socialist future would be accomplished by the destruction of all the unacceptable elements that humanity had inherited from the capitalist past.

Scientists involved in eugenics in Moscow and Leningrad differed among themselves on the best model of practical implementation to follow, and, in the absence of any officially sanctioned view on the matter, the mass press expressed a range of opinions on eugenics.¹⁸ The significant point for understanding Treťiakov's play is that there was a widespread popular interest in eugenics in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. It was most often mentioned in relation to the prevention of syphilis and other venereal diseases. Due to its infectiousness and seriousness, syphilis was one of the most pressing public health problems in both the countryside and the cities. Since it was often passed on to children, it provided a convenient starting point for the promotion of eugenics, as did the prevalent belief that alcoholism was hereditary. This could be described as a relatively benign and partial form of the eugenic argument: women should avoid marrying men with venereal disease or alco-

holism, because their lives would be easier and happier if they had healthy children. An article about the treatment and prevention of syphilis in the *Magazine for Women* (*Zhurnal dlia zhenshchin*) in 1924, for example, encouraged the reader to participate in public work to combat syphilis, including taking part in “the so-called ‘eugenic movement.’”¹⁹ A footnote explained that eugenics is a growing science that aims “to organize . . . all aspects and forms of the battle for rendering humanity healthy, for improving the human race, including the battle against venereal disease.”

A year later in the same journal, on the other hand, one of the editors pokes fun at the eugenic movement. “There are many conversations about this fashionable science—eugenics,” the piece begins. “How should men marry, how should women marry, in order to fulfill through this act their duty to humanity, to provide the country with a healthy growth, a healthy, strong, and talented generation.”²⁰ The author offers no substantive critique of eugenics, but simply notes ironically that people will always take chances in choosing their partners, and no amount of eugenic propaganda will change that. As a result, the author concludes tauntingly, the poor little science of eugenics will be left all alone like a lonely woman, spilling many tears over all the lost possibilities of giving birth to talented people and unable to stop the births of all the little ordinary individuals, about whom “no stories will be told, no songs will be sung.” Negative as these few paragraphs are, they indicate the popularity of eugenics, as well as the content of popular perceptions of it. In most people’s minds, eugenics seemed to be associated with the idea of choosing healthy partners, rather than the possibility of state coercion; it involved choices made within marriage and traditional family structures; and it could just as easily be derided within the popular-Bolshevik discourse of materialism—eugenics is idealistic fantasizing about creating “talented” people, not truly materialist in everyday, practical terms—as it could be celebrated as precisely a materialist, down-to-earth science—making humanity healthier by combating the consequences of venereal disease.

Advocacy of the more coercive model of eugenics in the mass press was rare. An article from 1926 in *Smena*, the illustrated magazine for communist youth, gives a fairly garbled account of genetic science, concluding with blithe assurances of the quick and painless nature of the operation for male sterilization, as well as of the great possibilities for artificially promoting good hereditary traits in human beings, along the lines learned from agricultural experiments and animal husbandry.²¹ The author seems to have gotten his or her information from the Russian Eugenics Society, which accounts for the article’s extreme, partisan viewpoint. The secretary of the society, a young scientist named M. V. Volotskoi, who was a student of its founder, Kol’tsov, was a strong advocate of negative eugenics in the form of enforced sterilization and had published a book advocating it in 1923, which he revised and published again in a second edition in 1926.²² The *Smena* article was illustrated with the saccharine logo of the society, an etching of three generations of shapely, nude



Figure 7.2. Logo of the Russian Eugenics Society, reproduced in *Smena*, no. 5 (1926).

Aryan types posed under a classical bower of trees (fig. 7.2), as well as with photographs—of twins, an “idiot” and a peasant with six fingers and toes—from the collection of the Museum of Social Hygiene, which had strong ties to the Russian Eugenics Society. In 1929, another protégé of Kol’tsov, Aleksandr Serebrovskii, claimed that eugenics could contribute to the five-year plan by improving the production of human beings through “the widespread induction of conception by means of artificial insemination using recommended sperm, and not at all necessarily from a beloved spouse . . . with the current state of artificial insemination technology (now widely used in horse and cattle breeding), one talented and valuable producer could have up to 1,000 children.”²³ Serebrovskii would soon have to recant his wild plan and apologize for implying that the five-year plan had been deficient without it. Although ideas for such radical and antifamilial models of eugenics could be published freely in the 1920s, they appeared primarily in purely eugenicist publications, rather than in the popular press; in this regard the *Smena* article is an exception. Eugenics fit into the officially sanctioned versions of the *novyi byt* only as a component of organized sexuality and reproduction on the traditional familial model.

As long as eugenics was advocated merely as education and propaganda, it was insistently individual and family oriented: what can the individual man or woman do to ensure that his or her spouse will be an appropriate parent? While the idea of choosing a mate eugenically was ridiculed in the *Magazine for Women* editorial, it was earnestly advocated by one Dr. Bernatskii in an article in the mass-oriented magazine *Hygiene and Health of the Worker and Peasant Family* in 1928, entitled “What You Need to Know in Choosing a Husband or a Wife.”²⁴ According to Bernatskii, four conditions must be met for a marriage to be successful, the foremost of which is the good health of both partners. Although he does not use the term, Bernatskii is clearly a believer in eugenics. He urges young prospective marriage partners to take responsibility for the health of the future generation of the nation, cautioning them with scary statistics about the hereditary nature of “horrible and fatal” diseases such as syphilis, tuberculosis, nervous disorders, and alcoholism. He even cites with approval the advice of a German researcher named Bunge, who recommends that young people should avoid marrying not only anyone with a history of disease, but anyone who has bad teeth. This urgency around the question of hereditary health can only be entertained, however, in the context of the most traditional forms of marriage and family relations. The second condition that must be met in a marriage partner is “the necessity of definite and sharply expressed sexual characteristics, physical as well as spiritual (the male principle and the female principle).”²⁵ A woman is “more caressing than a man, her movements are light, her voice is softer, she is tidier and neater, she is more observant of details, she loves coziness and cleanliness. In a word, she is ‘feminine.’”²⁶ This union of healthy, appropriately gendered partners will only be strengthened by the third and fourth conditions for successful marriage: mutual interests and, finally, love.

Dr. Bernatskii’s emphasis on traditional marriage and gender roles is symptomatic of the conservatism of the intense campaign of the later 1920s for improving the health of sexual *byt* (*ozdorovlenie polovogo byta*). Earnest debates about *byt* within the Komsomol in 1925 and 1926 had centered on the caddish sexual behavior of young male communists, who took advantage of Marx and Engels’ critique of bourgeois marriage to get women to have sex outside the bonds of marriage. In a brief scene of a gang rape in *I Want a Child!* entitled “Hooligans,” Tret’iakov refers to a contemporary manifestation of worries about the new Bolshevik sexuality: the gang rape by a group of twenty-six young men, some of them Komsomol members, of a young peasant woman in Chubarov Alley in Leningrad in August 1926. Beginning on 12 September 1926, this disturbing rape received extensive press attention as an outrageous example of hooliganism among Soviet youth, against which the press had already been campaigning for several months.²⁷ Although it may seem unlikely that Tret’iakov would have added a whole new scene to his play within two weeks of its completion just to respond to this media event—the rape was first reported on 12 September, and he signed a contract with Meyer-

hold to produce the play on 28 September—this is precisely the kind of documentary attention to current events to which Tret'iakov was committed as a writer. The scene of the gang rape does not involve any of the main characters, nor is it organically connected to other scenes, so it could easily have been inserted at the last minute to respond to the press on the Chubarov rape.

According to some of the many condemnations of the Chubarov rapists that appeared in the press, their villainy in relation to Soviet society lay not only in their brutal criminality toward the rape victim herself, but also in the hazard they posed to public health: some of the young men who were first in line in the rape infected not only the woman with venereal disease, but also, necessarily, some of their comrades who followed, in effect homosexually infecting each other with disease through the body of the woman. Tret'iakov chose to emphasize this aspect of the Chubarov case, by having one young man in the gang of hooligans direct another that he must go last, because he is “sick” (Kh.R. 218). Tret'iakov's inclusion of this violent scene intensified the urgency of the questions of sexuality that his “discussion play” raised. Although the scene effectively evokes the horror experienced by the woman, and therefore obviously condemns the rape, it comes across less as a moral condemnation of the individual young men involved than as a highly critical analysis of the irrational and disorganized male proletarian sexuality of the time.

A Feminist Eugenics?

The model of eugenics that Tret'iakov deploys in *I Want a Child!* challenges Dr. Bernatskii's insistence on clearly defined gender roles, as well the traditional sexual morality espoused in the party debates on the sexual question and bourgeois models of domesticity and the family. The central character of Milda is defined by her conscious refusal of traditional femininity. She embodies the figure of the androgynous and asexual Bolshevik woman who emerged in the popular imagination in the civil war years.²⁸ In her first appearance in the play, she is dressed in a man's suit, standing with her back to the audience in the worker's club attached to the construction site (*stroika*) that is the play's setting. She has dedicated herself to public organizing work at the site, giving lectures at public meetings and fighting to establish a children's day care center at the workers' club. When the workers Iakov and Grin'ko enter the club, Grin'ko mistakes Milda for his male pal “Frolka,” whom he grabs from behind and turns around. Upon seeing his mistake, he pushes Milda away, exclaiming, “That's not a person, that's a woman” (*ta tse zh ne chelovek, ta tse zh baba*) (Kh.R. 210)—a slang reworking of the traditional Russian proverb “A chicken is not a bird, a woman is not a person” (*Kuritsa ne ptitsa, zhenshchina ne chelovek*). Grin'ko's scornful misogyny is applied with special venom to the androgynous and authoritative Bolshevik woman.

The rest of the play makes a point of contesting the traditional construction of femininity that supposedly justified this misogyny. A key scene in

this contestation unfolds when Milda has invited Grin'ko's comrade Iakov to her room for an "interview" and propositions him to sire a child with her. She seduces him into sleeping with her through the traditionally feminine ruse of physical transformation, aided by the commodity objects associated with bourgeois femininity. Iakov responds negatively to her proposition at first, but Milda disappears behind a screen, emerging a few minutes later transformed: hair waved, face made up and powdered, dressed in a tight, low-cut dress. The "soldier-woman" (*soldat baba*), as Grin'ko calls her (Kh.R. 224), achieves her goal of conceiving a child without a husband or a traditional family—a goal directly contradicting conventions of femininity—by taking on the masquerade of store-bought femininity. When Iakov asks her wonderingly how she managed to transform herself, she answers with customary frankness, "The way all such things are done. From the parfumerie. From the hair dresser" (Kh.R. 227). Yet after this initial scene of seduction, Milda returns to her normal, unfeminine self; there are no more mentions of makeup or dresses. Tret'iakov invokes the familiar dramatic ploy of the Cinderella figure—the transformation of the ugly duckling into the swan—only to defuse its power by refusing to maintain the transformation. The feminine beauty revealed by the transformation is no more natural than the masculine plainness that preceded it; both are constructed, with the help of everyday objects like powder, perfume, curling irons, and dresses—or soldier's trousers and sturdy boots.

In addition to her lack of an appropriately feminine appearance, Milda's clinical and unembarrassed relation to sexuality is the antithesis of traditional cultural expectations of femininity. As Frances Bernstein has demonstrated, among 1920s sexologists, women were assumed to be more prone than men to shyness or "false shame" (*lozhnyi styd*) when it came to sexual matters.²⁹ In contrast to this ignorant form of feminine shame, Milda demonstrates a rational and informed approach to sex when she is propositioned by a man from her building who pleads his "physical need for a woman" because his wife is out of town. She refuses, suggesting that he can resolve his problem alone in his room: "Onanism at your age and in your position can, in my opinion, only be useful" (Kh.R. 220). Graphic, clinical words such as "onanism" were rarely heard on the Soviet stage; Tret'iakov's language is deliberately factual and informative, to underscore that the play is meant to foster discussion about sex, rather than to eroticize it or moralize against it. Milda's suggestion that masturbation would not be harmful in this man's case in fact conveys to the audience the latest results of Soviet sexological research, which revealed that masturbation was harmful for adults only when it interfered with "normal" sexual life with a partner. The man responds to her frank suggestion by accusing her of a *meshchanskii* prudishness. He, not Milda, is the overt object of parody in this scene, providing a caricature of the kind of opportunistic male attitude toward sex that emerged with the Marxist critique of bourgeois morality, and that was so vehemently criticized at the time in the Komsomol press. Milda's unemotional rationalism is also meant to be parodic; Tret'iakov stated that "[i]t is not

true that I want to foist Milda upon the public. I myself included a number of moments that discredit her.”³⁰ Yet while the audience is not meant to heroize or fully identify with Milda, it is asked to take her knowledge and actions seriously.

In solving the narrative problem of how to get this unfeminine rationalist interested in having a child at all, Tret’iakov does not resort to traditional gendered assumptions about women’s natural longing for motherhood, but rather invokes the powerful rhetoric of production. In an elaborately staged scene, reproduction is linked to production when Milda encounters a procession of twenty fathers holding infants marching along the street. She starts a conversation with the fathers which quickly degenerates into a eugenics lesson for the audience, as different fathers explain the reasons for the sickliness of their children. One man married a tubercular woman, another married his cousin—explanations indicating that Tret’iakov’s brand of eugenics is more aligned with the model of individual, informed choice than with coercive, interventionist models. The crucial moment for sparking Milda’s desire, however, comes when “Father no. 1” asks her if she has a child herself. When she says no, he responds: “But a good product would come from you. Your pelvis is one hundred twenty centimeters and you would produce a lot of milk” (*A produkt by u vas khoroshii vyshel. Taz santimetrov sto dvadtsat i moloka by mnogo dali*) (Kh.R. 214). The proposal that reproduction could be understood within the structures of organized production—her body a well-equipped factory, her breasts providing adequate raw materials, her good health ensuring flawless products—provides the impetus for her sudden desire to have a child. The Constructivists took rational industrial production as their model for artmaking after the revolution; in *I Want a Child!* it also becomes the model for human decisions about sex and reproduction.

Yet more traditional models of sexual desire also crop up in the play, both by design—in order to signal to the audience the tenacity of the old *byt*—and in certain cases seemingly unconsciously, suggesting the limits of Tret’iakov’s own ability to think beyond the contemporary ideology of sex and gender. Tret’iakov seems to recognize, for example, that the rational, production-based explanation for Milda’s sudden desire to have a child will not in itself seem fully convincing as the basis for such a traditionally personal decision. He therefore inserts a few clues for her decision that deliberately summon more conventional assumptions about gender roles. In the film script she is described as caring for the animals in her charge with maternal tenderness (Kh.R.-S 35). In the scene with the “Fathers,” Milda hears the cries of the babies and announces to her friend that the sounds of the cries seem to her “like a man was kissing me on the lips” (Kh.R. 213). This is her only expression of sexual desire in the entire play, and it is effectively sublimated into maternal desire. Tret’iakov never offers an explanation for her lack of sexual desire, except for the rational Bolshevik sublimation of her sexual desires into the tasks of production. Yet here, where her sexual desire for once finds expression,

Tret'iakov gives it the form prescribed by Freud himself as properly feminine: the sublimation of feminine phallic desire into the desire to have a child.

In a scene that seems to involve a less conscious deployment of gender stereotypes, Milda's selection of Iakov as the father of her child is explained not only by his proletarian pedigree, but by his possession of the masculine gender characteristics deemed desirable by Soviet proponents of eugenics. Once Milda realizes that she wants a child, her friend, a doctor, offers to introduce her to a eugenically appropriate candidate for fatherhood: a handsome doctor who stems from an old family of the intelligentsia. She meets her friend at his office at the *stroika* to arrange the introduction to this doctor, but from his window she catches sight of the rugged figure of Iakov, at work on the actual construction project itself. Tret'iakov accentuates the contrast between *intelligent* and proletarian by once again invoking the recent Chubarov gang rape, which he had already incorporated into the play in the form of the inserted scene of a gang rape. The reason that Milda notices Iakov outside the window of her friend's office is that they are interrupted in their conversation by a commotion outside: the police have come to the construction site to arrest the leader of the hooligans who committed the gang rape. Iakov, also at work there, vocally defends the rapists: women themselves provoke rape, he says, by wearing perfumes and powder and wiggling their buttocks (Kh.R. 223). Hearing this speech, Milda exclaims "Hooligans!" but her doctor friend replies that Iakov and his comrades are not hooligans at all, but merely strong, healthy young men: "No consumption, no neurasthenia, no venereal disease—exhibition pieces" (Kh.R. 223). Seemingly in response to this affirmation of Iakov's health, Milda starts a conversation with him. Yet the scene suggests that not only his health attracted Milda, but also his display of rough masculine sentiment in his defense of the vicious rape. Tret'iakov uses the instance of Chubarov, the best-known public breakdown of Soviet sexuality, as an additional plot premise to facilitate the meeting of Milda and Iakov, endowing the rape's violence and misogyny with the status of an irrepressible origin of the new model of organized, eugenic sexuality of the future.

Milda's choice of the manly Iakov over the proposed *intelligent*, who is described as delicate and polite, is made more immediate and visual in the film script version. Milda is in her friend the doctor's office when the second doctor enters briefly. In this man, her friend assures her, flows the blue blood of the intelligentsia; he will produce excellent offspring. Tret'iakov then describes a montage of changing, successive portraits of pedigreed people over the course of three hundred years, ending with the portrait of the handsome doctor (Kh.R.-S 40). This montage provides a literal image of eugenics: the positive traits of past generations are passed down through time, creating a link between the past and the future. Yet the almost *mise-en-abîme* effect of the infinite progression of similar portraits through time is stopped at the present moment. There is no montage of the doctor's future offspring coming forward, as it were. The reason for this becomes apparent later, when Milda sees this

same blueblooded doctor bandaging the hand of an injured worker: “During the bandaging the contrast was striking between the pale, refined face of the doctor and his narrow, aristocratic hands and the bronze, cast-iron, snub-nosed workers” (Kh.R.-S 40). Through eugenics, class politics will be imposed onto the very germ plasm, protecting the future from the unwanted class characteristics of the presocialist past. Hard-muscled, bronzed masculinity wins out over the pampered, feminized upperclass male body. The favorite Bolshevik symbol of the rough, handsome worker is here presented alongside the teachings of contemporary medical discourse, such as those of Dr. Bernatskii, that the combination of masculine men and feminine women created the healthiest families and offspring.

This scene on the *stroika* celebrating stereotypical proletarian masculinity is in line with the relatively benign understanding of popular eugenics that existed then in the Soviet Union, but it is at odds with the critique of gender stereotypes that dominates the rest of the play. This discordance is another instance of Tret'iakov's “discussion piece” style, in which visions of the rational, gender-egalitarian reproduction of the future are continuously intertwined with the eruption of desires from the past that complicate their realization. Or it may signal that his radical vision of a future socialist sexuality—in which a woman could be as swayed by the ideology of production as by traditionally gendered desire—could not be imagined unconditionally from the perspective of the present.

Industrial Production: An Imperfect Model for the Future of Sex

Tret'iakov stages his most powerful criticism of eugenics by framing it as a problem of productive labor: by projecting industrial models of rational production onto the body, the play proposes, eugenics also risks carrying the exploitative labor practices of the capitalist past into the future. Milda's search for a proletarian specimen to father her child is portrayed as double edged. In her first interview with Iakov, Milda presses him for information about his parents and grandparents. He complies, assuming that she is yet another of the many writers gathering information on the everyday life of workers (*rabochii byt*) at that time. His friend Grin'ko interrupts, boasting that Iakov's father and grandfather were both metal workers from the Putilov metalworking factory, making him nothing less than a “count” of the working class. The Bolsheviks consistently singled out metal workers as the most authentic proletarians; they were provided with better housing and workers' clubs than other worker groups, and generally consulted and quoted and photographed more in the popular press. In the context of this farcical scene, in which Milda has made up her mind that she wants a proletarian father for her baby, the *Putilovskii* metal worker pedigree offers a distinctly comic touch. Yet Iakov is clearly being manipulated, unaware that he is being looked over like a potential stud on a stud farm.

This is made explicit in the pivotal scene, set later that night, in which Milda propositions him. Tre'iakov emphasizes the outlandish nature of her proposition by staging the scene so that the real-life conditions of present, overcrowded Soviet *byt* intrude on her utopian attempt to form a new one. When Iakov visits Milda's room under the mistaken impression that there will be another interview, he encounters the typical, squalid *byt* of a communal building: hooligans congregating outside and neighbors singing loudly or yelling to each other from windows and in the hallways. While Milda begins to formulate her proposition to Iakov, a "Voice" from outside the room calls to her that she has a visitor. She asks to say that she is not at home, and then begins her awkward speech to Iakov: "You, of course, understand that what we have going here is an all-purpose construction project. A cooperative, hospitals, schools. In a word, in order to make things better for people" (Kh.R. 226). She is interrupted by the Voice again, this time crying "They don't believe you"—referring both to the caller that was sent away, and, dramatically, to her speech. Milda locks her door, and continues pedantically, "You know that there is production. This is when products are made in factories or from the earth, and there is reproduction—this is when human stock itself is renewed, or more simply—people are born." Iakov answers patiently that he understands. She continues on in a eugenic vein, explaining that bad conditions of production lead to a low-quality product, just as incorrect conditions of reproduction—disease, alcoholism, idiotism—lead to bad people. Just as she is getting to the point, another Voice interrupts, this time to ask her if she by chance received a letter addressed to another room. When Milda finally manages to tell Iakov that she wants to conceive a child with a healthy worker, and that she has chosen him, he immediately objects that he already has a fiancé. Milda offers him the crucial explanation: "I don't want a husband. I want a child. You yourself aren't necessary to me. I need your spermatozoa." She then presents him with a contract stating that after conception, he will be relieved of any responsibility for supporting her or the child.

This dry business proposition aims for farce, playing the mismatch between the humorless Milda and the "regular guy" Iakov for laughs. Milda's firm belief that the complexities of human emotion can be solved by planning in advance and drawing up contracts parodies the figure of the earnest Bolshevik activist and organizer. It also challenges conventional wisdom about the passivity of feminine sexuality, for Milda knows what she wants, explains it frankly, and is not embarrassed to ask for sex. But the scene also presents eugenics in a critical light, because it enacts the central problem of Marxism itself: the alienated relation of the producer to the product of his labor. Milda has selected Iakov because of his *Putilovskii* proletarian pedigree, and yet she demands of him what has always been demanded of the proletarian: that he produce a product and then give it up, to be alienated from it forever. The body's natural production of sperm and the production of metal machine parts through physical labor in a factory are not comparable forms of production, yet

the metaphor of alienated labor is made fully intentional: Iakov responds angrily to Milda's proposition by asking "What am I, a stallion?" (*Zherebets ia zavodskoi, chto li?*) (Kh.R. 227). Tret'iakov puns here on the standard term for "stallion," *zavodskoi zherebets*, which literally means "factory stallion."

In the Constructivist vision of a socialist future, the alienation of the worker from the object of his labor will be eliminated not only through the communist transformation of the means of production, but through the very form of the objects produced: socialist objects will be comrades of the worker, rather than alienating commodities to be possessed by someone richer than himself. This Constructivist dream of a *novyi byt* without possessions provides the context for the powerful justification that Milda offers Iakov for her exploitative demand on his reproductive labor: the product in question, the healthy part-proletarian child, will belong to the collective rather than to Milda herself. Later she will state explicitly that the child will be raised primarily in the children's house (*detdom*) and the kindergarten (*detskii sad*) (Kh.R. 233), and in the film script, she even teaches her child to call her "nana" rather than "mama," so that it will not miss her when she dies. She wants Iakov to give up his sperm to her, not just to fulfill her personal wishes for a child, but to benefit the Soviet collective. This is a private, bodily counterpart to the public, economic demand made by the Bolshevik Party of the Soviet proletariat: accept a continuing alienated relation to your labor, just as under capitalism, because the product of that labor is now expropriated by the state, which "represents" you.

Already in 1923, writing in *Lef*, Tret'iakov had imagined that in the socialist future, the human subject—personified in a character he called the "Futurist inventor"—would no longer latch onto fetishized objects, but would willingly part with the products of his creative labor, offering them to the collective. This subject would be able to flower as a true creator because he floated free of material things: "the Futurist must be least of all the owner of his own production."³¹ Three years later, in *I Want a Child!* Tret'iakov has Milda's friend Distsipliner speak lines that carry this battle against possession from production into reproduction:

To hell with husbands . . . What do you say to a syringe? The government will give the best spermatozoa to the best women producers. The government will encourage such a choice. It will take these children at its own expense and develop a breed of new people . . . In this way there will be scientific control over the person not only during upbringing, not only during birth, but even at the moment of conception. (Kh.R. 221)

The tone of the scene suggests that this outburst is to be viewed as eccentric and dystopian—much as the same real-life suggestion published by the eugenicist Serebrovskii in 1929 would be viewed—but other aspects of the play suggest that these ideas do not lie so far from Tret'iakov's own.

Tret'iakov makes Distsipliner's state institutions with their sperm banks

and syringes seem rational and even benign by dramatically emphasizing the pathos of the seduction scene, in which Milda's ideal of collective reproduction is bogged down by the trappings of traditional, bourgeois sexuality. Amidst the farce and didacticism, the scene also invokes sympathy for Milda, who must compromise her own, unfeminine identity with a curling iron and lipstick in order to spark Iakov's desire, just as the audience would be expected to cringe at Iakov, the frank and healthy proletarian, being tricked by bourgeois feminine wiles into betraying his girlfriend and alienating himself from the product of his sperm. Distsipliner's proposal makes some sense: if Milda wants to have a child for the collective, outside the traditional gender constructs of the family, why should she not be able to access proletarian sperm without sinking to a form of feminine deception? If Iakov wants to contribute his healthy proletarian sperm to the collective, why should there not be collective structures that allow him to do so of his own free will, allowing him to release his product into the collective as a non-alienating political choice?

The simple fact that Distsipliner is identified as an inventor suggests that he is a figure for Tret'iakov's heroic "Futurist inventor," who speaks Tret'iakov's own disciplining desire for a socialist future in which both the products of creative invention—socialist objects—and the products of Soviet reproductive bodies under "scientific control"—eugenic children—will belong to the collective. No human characters in Tret'iakov's story experience artificial insemination with a syringe or a "scientifically controlled" conception. But by making Milda's character an agricultural expert involved in animal breeding, Tret'iakov alludes to this more futuristic, and potentially coercive, model of eugenics. The opening shot of the film script shows the fertilization of an egg through a microscope, and the following shot shows Milda turning from the microscope to assist a young peasant man who has brought in a suckling pig. Later she has a daydream that explicitly collapses the distinction between agricultural and human engineering. It takes the form of a montage sequence in which the lines in a book she is reading "transform themselves into a suckling pig, a donkey, a little cucumber, a hothouse seedling, a baby tiger in a zoo, a baby camel and, finally, a child" (Kh.R.-S 7). In the context of these allusions, Distsipliner's outburst about a future of syringes seems less remote from the present-day action of the play, even if the play's narrative does stay within the model of "positive" eugenics, emphasizing individual choice.

The possibility that the character of Distsipliner expresses aspects of Tret'iakov's own extreme views, camouflaged by the "discussion play" format, is suggested by the similarities between Distsipliner's scripted outbursts and a brief, two-page introduction to the film script of *I Want a Child!* that Tret'iakov wrote in late 1928 or early 1929. In this text, he expresses his exasperation with people who irresponsibly pass on their venereal diseases, tuberculosis, malaria, and neuroses to their children, rivaling his crotchety tone in *Lef* in 1923, where he denounced the material clutter and inefficiency of contemporary Russian *byt*, and even the backward Russian people themselves, citing their

“inability to walk intelligently down the street, to get on to a streetcar, to exit a lecture hall without shoving each other.”³² He calls for sexual practices to become organized in the same way that other everyday practices have become organized under the *novyi byt*. People have learned to spit in spittoons, wash their hands before eating, and warn others to stay away if they are sick with a cold, he notes, but no one has learned to say “Don’t touch me, I have gonorrhoea” (Kh.R.-S 33). If the directives of science can penetrate most aspects of *byt*, Tret’iakov complains that where human sexuality is concerned, the penetrating gaze of science is blocked by the “swampy fumes of shame and convention” (Kh.R.-S 33). He blames this disorganized state of sexuality on the institution of bourgeois marriage, whose basis in economics and the ideology of possession leads to dissipation and sexual fever.

Unlike the more conventional advocates of a new socialist sexuality, Tret’iakov imagines a future social order in which reproduction is no longer organized according to patriarchal marriage structures, and children become collective social objects rather than private fetishes. The whole enterprise of reproduction must shed its structures of possession and become more collective:

Only where the former form of marriage is smashed and great responsibility is assumed by the individual, the former “small proprietor,” the present “co-worker,” before his or her comrades in life and before future generations, will it be possible to return to conception the purity, all the clarity and social responsibility, that it lost choking in orgasms and gonococci. (Kh.R.-S 33–34)

In his emphasis on the sexual partner as a “comrade in life” and his critique of the former status of the lover as a “proprietor” of another, Tret’iakov echoes the Bolshevik feminist Aleksandra Kollontai, who argued in her famous 1923 essay “Make Way for Winged Eros! A Letter to Working Youth” that a woman could only become an equal in a romantic relationship if it were freed of the physical and psychological effects of the property relation, which made women the possessions as well as dependents of men.³³ Rather than taking her ideas seriously, the party had disparaged Kollontai for her feminist “subjectivism” and “deviationism,” just as representatives of party organs in Glavrepertkom would censor Tret’iakov’s play five years later for its “sexual anarchy,” its “vulgarity” and “unhealthy interest.”³⁴ In some respects Tret’iakov strays even further from tradition than Kollontai, because whereas her writings focus on the problem of love in the new collective, and betray a belief in natural gender difference and the emotional significance of maternity, the hard-nosed Tret’iakov imagines a future in which women can choose to have children independently of love for any one man, and in which men and women would not have to be organized within the strict gender categories of masculinity and femininity.³⁵

Despite his fantastic rhetoric, fueled by paranoia about the dangers of modern Western sexuality, Tret’iakov offers an insightful critique of the sexist

and commodified structures of bourgeois sexuality and marriage. This was a critique that he believed should be applied to the Soviet policies of the *novyi byt*. Only in the Soviet Union, his introduction continues, the “land of unbelievable experiment,” can there exist a “solicitous hand” that will lead “a humanity choking in its own filth onto new paths” (Kh.R.-S 34). The role of this solicitous hand is partly filled, he states, by Okhmatmlad (*Okhrana Materinstva i Mladenchestva*, the State Department for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy). Not surprisingly, however, this Soviet institution advanced a fairly traditional rhetoric of morality and gender roles that was very much at odds with Treťiakov’s. Ironically, the Glavrepertkom member who voted to censor the play for its “sexual anarchy” was a representative of Okhmatmlad, Dr. Abraham Gens, signalling the gap between the nonpossessive and gender-egalitarian *novyi byt* of the future imagined by Treťiakov and the more traditional vision of the Soviet state.³⁶

In other aspects, however, Treťiakov’s *novyi byt* could itself be described as traditional in comparison to that of the Soviet state. His concern with promoting rational production leads him to endorse a form of putatively socialist morality as limiting as the morality of the pope: he cites the “barren fox-trotters” of the West as examples of people who have “severed the moment of pleasure from the moment of production of their own” (Kh.R.-S 33). His quest for an act of conception characterized by “purity” and “clarity,” and his demand that vision and transparency replace the swampy murk of the desiring body, “choking in orgasms and gonococci,” leave no room for a differently desiring body. He cannot imagine an alternative sexual desire. In the end, he offers a critique of bourgeois forms of sexual desire, on the one hand, and the promise of collective state institutions that will ensure, not a different model of pleasure, but only a different model of reproduction without private property, alienation of labor, or gender oppression, on the other. His vision of the future is limited by his conviction that the industrial creativity of production will be adequate to providing a model for all forms of creativity and procreativity.

The Socialist Object as a Model for the New Soviet Subject

The Constructivists and *Lef* writers may not have advanced a new model of socialist sexual desire, but they did imagine new forms of object desire under socialism, through their theorization of the socialist object as a counterpart to the commodity fetish. In Treťiakov’s play it is not surprising, then, that the problem of how to reconcile old attachments to material objects with a *novyi byt* that will be without possessions continually stands in for the larger dilemma of reconciling old forms of sexual desire with new ones.

As if to demonstrate the tenacious power of material *byt*, Treťiakov elaborately stages an entire domestic and private object world to reveal the desires of his characters and to delineate their identities. In one scene, a group of women in the communal kitchen of Milda’s building sit enveloped in steam

that comes damping out from an enormous array of bubbling pots on the *primusy*, or primus stoves (single propane burners) surrounding them. Within the setting of this literal material density—the exclusive province of women in the new as in the old *byt*—they gossip about how Milda has been bringing a young worker to her room at night, and worry that she will steal their husbands and spread syphilis to their families. This communal but otherwise old-fashioned kitchen—inefficient, low-tech, and overcrowded, the antithesis of the gleaming collective dining rooms of propaganda posters—is the object-equivalent of the women’s old-fashioned, if legitimate, female response to new-fangled, Bolshevik notions of “free love” in the context of their low-income lives. These neighbors’ voices are also heard through the thin walls from the next room during the seduction scene; an older female voice laments that “the Bolsheviks are copulating” (Kh.R. 228), an unflattering if not inaccurate verb to describe the Bolshevik seduction devised by Tret’iakov. A material object has given Milda away: her squeaky bed. By making his depiction of *byt* so crowded and lively, Tret’iakov deliberately rejects the stark visual rhetoric of the propaganda posters for the *novyi byt*, such as an image from around 1924 with the slogan “Woman worker! Don’t forget that public dining rooms emancipate you!” (fig. 7.3).³⁷ A woman worker is shown literally sweeping away all her domestic material objects—a primus stove, frying pans, a tea pot—the jumbled forms of which contrast with the clean lines of the modern, collective building at the top of the picture, labeled “Worker’s Cafeteria.” This cafeteria is part of the future world that Milda dreams of building, but Tret’iakov’s agenda is to force her future visions into constant mediation with the imperfect present. The poster itself inadvertently pictures the intrusion of the oppressive present into the supposedly emancipated future, because the woman worker is still doing the sweeping.

A key scene revolving around material objects demonstrates that firmly rooted beliefs about possessions and their significance will always interrupt the futuristic visions of characters like Milda. The day following Milda’s successful seduction of Iakov, he expresses his newfound feelings for her through an object: he comes uninvited to her room to hang a pair of curtains that he has just found at a good price at the Smolenskii market. Her room was “like a garage,” he says, and addressing her with an affectionate diminutive, he asks “It’s nice that I brought you some comfort, isn’t it, comrade Milka?” (Kh.R. 228). He went to the market, the heart of the free NEP marketplace, to bring home a decorative domestic object that demonstrates his pleasure in the fact that they are building a family together. He has gravely misunderstood the situation, and his gesture is misbegotten, yet it illustrates the difficulty of any scheme that will attempt to do away with the objects of private *byt* and the proprietary emotions they embody.

A verbal battle of domestic objects and their personal associations breaks out later in the scene, when a crowd of snoopily neighbors spill into Milda’s empty room, groping and fumbling at the objects they find there:



Figure 7.3. Propaganda poster, “Woman worker! Don’t forget that public dining rooms emancipate you!” circa 1924. Courtesy of the Russian State Library.

- A briefcase! Is she a Party member?
- Lenin’s works.
- Eugen . . . eugenics.
- Salami. Now what do you say! Smoked.
- For entertaining a fancy gentleman.
- A revolver. Careful, a revolver.
- Probably without a permit.
- It squeaks. (*about the bed.*)
- The blanket is full of holes. The pillows are made from feathers.
- The sheets probably haven’t been washed for a week.
- Maybe they were dirtied from what happened yesterday.
- And in the bag?
- Dirty underwear. Stop! A bra.

- Lookie here. Powder. A box of powder. With a powder-puff.
- And “Fialka” [violet] perfume. Heh-heh-heh.
- Say “Fialka” please. And lipstick.
- Soldiers’ trousers. (Kh.R. 229)

The detail with which the neighbors ransack Milda’s things testifies to their confidence that the individual objects in her room will add up to a coherent identity for Milda that will explain the strange goings-on there. But the objects do not add up to a coherent image—either of femininity (the bra, the “Fialka” perfume),³⁸ or of a Bolshevik, soldier-like anti-femininity (the revolver, the trousers); either of *meshchanstvo* (the nice salami, the feather pillows) or of Bolshevik asceticism (the blanket full of holes, Lenin’s collected works). In contrast to this random list of objects, the Constructivists aimed to produce new everyday objects that would support socialist identities rather than the outmoded ones associated with capitalism. Yet while these Constructivist objects would be rational and expedient, they would still carry emotional significance. Tret’iakov’s *Lef* colleague Boris Arvatov, a strong supporter of Constructivism and the concept of the socialist object, expressed this succinctly: “There exists the opinion . . . that the course toward expediency murders the so-called humanity of things, deprives things of ‘emotionality’ . . . such an opinion can only be maintained by those for whom the thing in and of itself, in its rational functioning, cannot be the embodiment of human thought.”³⁹ The Constructivist difference would be that the “humanity” of things would now be one that had shed the negative qualities of human beings under capitalism but maintained the positive human qualities of reason and emotion in socialist form.

The ultimate socialist object in Tret’iakov’s play, characterized by both rationality and “emotionality,” is the eugenic baby. Genetically purged of the capitalist traits of the past, a literal embodiment of the creativity of production, the eugenic child will be an object of properly socialist desire and emotional affect, existing in public nurseries and kindergartens rather than in the materially and emotionally cluttered lap of the family. The final scene of the play, which takes place at a Healthy Baby contest set four years later in 1930, displays the eugenic baby as a perfected product of socialist reproduction. In this imagined future, the *stroika* has been completed. Banners proclaim “Healthy parents mean a healthy new generation”; “A public children’s day care center means the liberation of the woman worker”; “Healthy conception—healthy pregnancy”; and the blunt “Give birth to children” (Kh.R. 235). Milda announces a public lecture in the club later that day for any young men who wish to become fathers and any young women who wish to become mothers, implying that perhaps more collective structures for organizing conception and parenting are already in place. The first prize for one-year-old babies in the contest is awarded jointly to a boy—the second son of Iakov and Milda—and a girl—the daughter of Iakov and his wife. This is the moment



Figure 7.4. Cover of *Hygiene and Health of the Worker and Peasant Family*, no. 4 (1927), announcing the prize winners in the first Soviet Healthy Baby Contest.

when Iakov gets his alienated product returned to him, for he is announced as the father of Milda's son, and therefore gets to beam with double pride at having sired not one but two first-prize children. Public display for the approval of the collective replaces the private, exclusive relation of possession fostered by traditional family structures. Milda's desire to have a perfected child for the Soviet collective replaces the traditional bourgeois desire for privatized parenthood and, by extension, the individual commodity desire of capitalism.

In his journalistic style, Tret'iakov seems to have gotten the idea for the ending of his play from the contemporary announcement of the first Soviet Healthy Baby contest (*Konkurs zdorovykh detei*), sponsored by the magazine *Hygiene and Health of the Worker and Peasant Family* and announced in September of 1926, as Tret'iakov was finishing his play.⁴⁰ The judging



Figure 7.5. Cover of *Hygiene and Health of the Worker and Peasant Family*, no. 5 (1927), announcing the results of the first Soviet Healthy Baby Contest.

of the contest would supposedly be based entirely on scientifically objective and measurable characteristics, such as weight and “skin tone.” The magazine devoted two successive cover images in early 1927 to the young winners of the contest, producing a pair of somewhat inept photomontages of babies; most of them are plump, as desired, while the quality of their skin tone must be left to the imagination, as it is not revealed by the grainy newsprint of the cheap paper (figs. 7.4 and 7.5). The public and festive nature of the contest was meant to strengthen the magazine’s propaganda for the hygiene and health components of the *novyi byt*, not to mention the effort to promote responsible sexual practices and committed parenthood. The ideology of the Soviet contest differed little from that of the same contests in England and the United States, where they originated. These contests placed full moral responsi-

bility on the mother and celebrated the natural “psychological force” uniting mother and child.⁴¹ The population had to be replenished in Europe after World War I just as it did in Russia after world war and civil war. In Europe and the U.S., these contests were always sponsored by department stores and mass magazines, and tapped into their culture of exhibition and display. In 1930s Russia, in Tret’iakov’s vision, the contest became the opposite of commodity display, and instead became a collective, educational site of socialist festival.

Yet even in this triumphal ending for his eugenic theme, Tret’iakov inserts “discussion questions”: is eugenics really necessary, when the regular love union of two healthy working people, Iakov and his wife, can result in as healthy a baby as the more rationally organized union of Iakov and Milda? Are the emotional losses entailed by the rationalization of reproduction justifiable? This question is posed by an exchange between Milda and Iakov before the result of the contest is announced. Milda tells him that she breast-fed the baby until it was time to send it away to the *detdom*. He asks if she did not find it difficult to tear herself away from the baby, and she responds, “It’s always hard to tear yourself away. Do you think it was easy for me back then to let you go?” (Kh.R. 236). Even the rationalist Milda expresses regret at giving up her lover and her child, signaling the difficulty of relinquishing all the possessive desires of the past.⁴² Tret’iakov may have hoped at one level for the implementation of Milda’s rationalist, collective utopia—perhaps even replete with syringes and sperm banks—but his play leaves the impression that if the new Soviet subject is predicated on the destruction of the past, rather than on a redemption of its desires, it will not be a subjectivity that anyone will want to live.

A Theater without Properties: Lissitzky’s Transparent Stage Design

This essay has proposed that the text of *I Want a Child!* offers a complex depiction of the lived contradictions of the *novyi byt*. But its planned staging in the Meyerhold Theater seemed to downplay its material contradictions and to present, instead, a proto-totalitarian microcosm of Soviet citizens being relentlessly surveyed by an all-seeing and all-powerful state. Lissitzky’s model set departs radically from the settings described in Tret’iakov’s stage directions (see fig. 7.1). Instead of sets depicting the *stroika*, the workers’ club, or the crowded communal building, Lissitzky’s plan completely reconfigured the traditional theatrical space of audience and stage to emphasize total visual access and surveillance; only the red banners promoting healthy childbirth, taken from the stage directions for the final scene of the Healthy Baby contest, follow Tret’iakov’s intent. Lissitzky’s own words provide the most cogent description of his work:

The stage is fully merged with the auditorium by the construction of an amphitheatre. For the play itself a new area in the theatre is created, a “ring”

that rises from the orchestra pit. The actors emerge from below, from the depth of the orchestra pit, from above, out of the balconies, and from the sides across bridges: they no longer have anything to do with the stage. Props roll down ropes from above and disappear into depth after every scene. Light sources move together with the actors, who perform on a transparent floor.⁴³

The central ring of the stage was accessible by two ramps that extended to the sides of the theater, as well as by a bridge that connected one of the balconies with a spiral staircase leading down to, and piercing, the ring platform, which was raised above the ground on pillars. Far above the stage, Lissitzky constructed a set of pulleys and ropes with which to transport furniture and props from the upper balconies to the stage. In his model of the stage set, collapsible chairs are suspended above the stage, ready to be deposited on it by the pulley system. The production of the play would be as fully rationalized as industrial production, with the pulley system providing an assembly-line structure to minimize the labor of actors and stage hands.

Lissitzky's design provides a model for the most extreme vision of the materially denuded *novyi byt* imagined by propaganda posters. His literally transparent and open space responds ironically to the cluttered and claustrophobic spaces of the communal building in Tret'iakov's script. Rather than materially enacting these crowded spaces, the spare transparency of the set figures the total visibility and surveillance made possible by the material closeness and nosy neighbors of Soviet *byt*, as well as by the mechanisms of party control over peoples' personal lives, such as informants and the NKVD. The tissue of domestic objects that serves to complicate the rationalizing rhetoric of Tret'iakov's play is removed from the scene, to be replaced, conceptually at least, by the spectators on all sides who will participate in the discussion of the piece. There is good reason to believe that Lissitzky's design was produced in close accord with the wishes of Meyerhold, who had hired Lissitzky to design the set specifically for the limited, experimental "discussion" format of the play that the censors had authorized to be produced by his theater alone.

The stage design of a luminous glass circle, lit from below, makes the actors available for visual investigation as if they were placed under a microscope. It may have been suggested to Lissitzky by Tret'iakov's film script, which opens with the image of the sperm and ovum observed through the round, illuminated lens of Milda's microscope. Lissitzky's design responds to this microscope image not only structurally, at the level of the glass eye of the microscope as an instrument of penetrating vision, but at the level of content. The wriggling sperm penetrating the glassy sphere of the ovum under the microscope take the visually appropriate form, in Lissitzky's model stage set, of the spiral staircase that penetrates the transparent glass circle of the stage in order to open it up and make it more efficient as a productive unit within the assembly line of the set. This reading, which emphasizes the totalitarian potential of Lissitzky's set, Tret'iakov's play and Meyerhold's proposed staging of it,

supports Eric Naiman's conclusion that "if Boris Groys is correct and there is a direct line connecting the Russian avant-garde with Stalin's governance, that line surely runs through Meyerhold and *I Want a Child!*"⁴⁴ Naiman demonstrates that Meyerhold's plan for mounting the play as a "discussion piece" involved an Orwellian notion of "discussion": it would be carefully controlled and scripted in order to ensure that "all questions will be treated correctly."⁴⁵

But the Russian avant-garde was not monolithic, and Lissitzky and Tret'iakov are not identical with Meyerhold. Lissitzky's open glass stage and spiral staircase might be read very differently, as responses to this description of the play given by Tret'iakov in a 1927 interview: "Not a play that closes in an aesthetic circle, but one that begins on the aesthetic trampoline of the stage and unfolds in a spiral, winding its way through the audience's arguments and through their extratheatrical experience."⁴⁶ Lissitzky's spiral staircase literally winds its way up from the stage, connecting with a bridge to the balcony with audience seating above. The spiral is a uniquely temporal graphic form, figuring always the movement from a point in the past toward an infinitely expanding future—in the case of many Russian Constructivist works, specifically the movement from the capitalist past toward the socialist future. Lissitzky's spiral staircase rising dramatically out of the flat stage stands as a graphic figure for a more voluntary and contested dissemination of Bolshevik visions of the future than the model of the penetrating eye of the microscope.

There is no evidence that Tret'iakov himself wanted to stage the play as a scripted discussion; his intention was for the audience member to experience a genuine challenge to his or her own subject position through the aesthetic form of a theater that rejected cathartic narrative and identification with heroes in the bourgeois tradition.⁴⁷ Lissitzky's bare stage could be read, then, as his interpretation of Tret'iakov's call for a stage as an "aesthetic trampoline"—a space cleared of the trappings of bourgeois culture, the better to facilitate the posing of new questions. It is a visual interpretation that partially contradicts Tret'iakov's textual emphasis on the emotional significance of the material objects remaining from the old *byt*, but it does not therefore necessarily dovetail with Meyerhold's desire to control audience participation.

These are the two sides of the *Lef* avant-garde coin: the dream of the transparent relay between human subject and socialist object that eliminates alienation but redeems the desires lodged in the past for the socialist future; and the nightmare transparency of the rationalized public sphere of total control and visibility. In conclusion, two images from *I Want a Child!* can stand for these two possibilities. The first is a photomontage by Lissitzky depicting his costume design for the character of Milda, made in 1929 (fig. 7.6). It maintains all the tensions and contradictions of Tret'iakov's text, at the level of form as well as content. It combines a delicate watercolor drawing of Milda's clothing, juxtaposed jarringly with a black and white photographic image to represent her face. This face is too small for the body, and it is decidedly masculine, as well as surprisingly Asian in its features when the play clearly

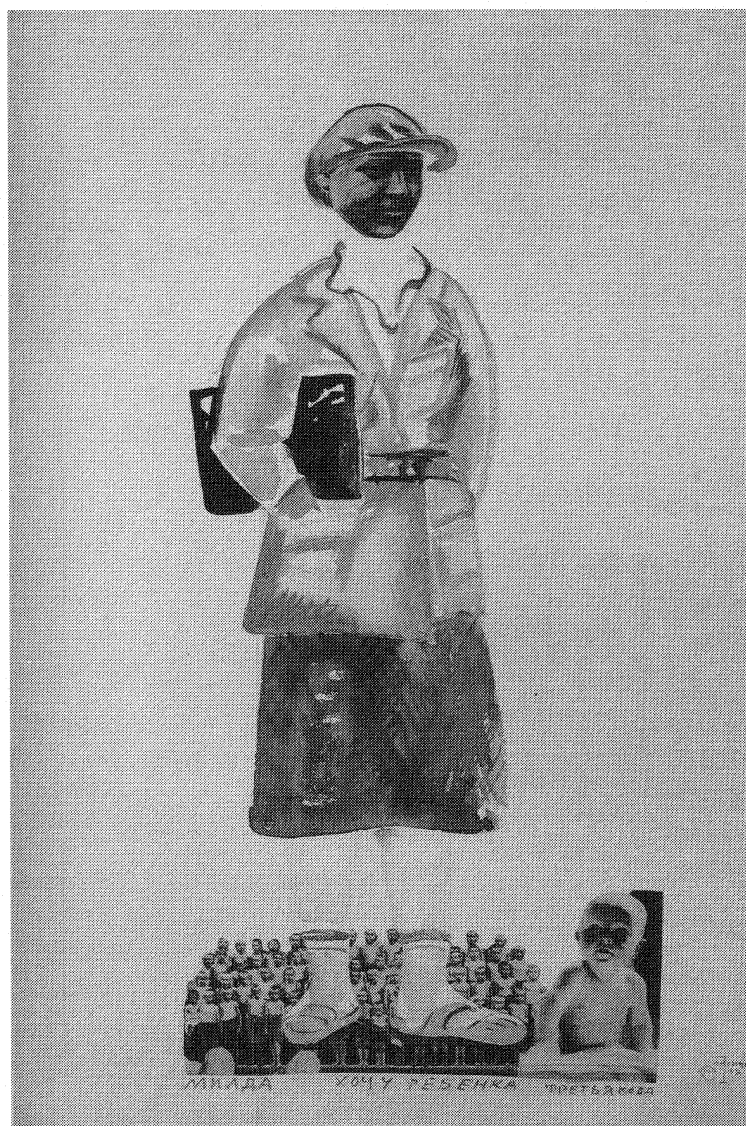


Figure 7.6. El Lissitzky, costume design for the character of Milda in *I Want a Child!* Watercolor, pencil, and collage on pasteboard, 1929. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

specifies Milda's ethnicity as Latvian. Milda's watercolor feet float incongruously above photographs of skinny schoolchildren and a single naked baby, who resembles any one of the plump contestants from the first Soviet Healthy Baby contest. Lissitzky's visual image parallels the montage-like form of Tret'iakov's text, while its content similarly suggests that the futuristic, imagined character of Milda will have to be brought together in a "dialectical image" with the conditions of present Soviet *byt*—signalled here through the documentary photographs of Soviet children—in order for the "flash of recognition" for contemporary viewers to take place. The second image, also from 1929, is a photograph of Lissitzky leaning into the model of his stage set to adjust the fragile railing around the glass circle (fig. 7.7). This photograph



Figure 7.7. El Lissitzky at work on the model of his stage design for *I Want a Child!* 1929. © 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

might be read as the literalization of the nightmare, in which the Constructivist has become pure Stalinist puppeteer, rearranging social space as if it were composed of cardboard human figures and toy objects. This image supports the notion of a direct line between the avant-garde and Stalin; but, as this essay has proposed, the Russian avant-garde contained many lines, the most promising of which could have led toward a very different kind of socialist culture and socialist subject.

NOTES

1. The play was not published in its entirety during Tret'iakov's lifetime. He published two scenes as "Khochu rebenka!" in *Novyi Lef* 3 (1927): 3–11, but the entire play (the first variant) was not published until 1988. See Tret'iakov, "Khochu rebenka," *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia* 2 (1988): 209–237. Future references to the play will be cited parenthetically in the text as "Kh.R.," with page numbers from this publication given. All translations from the Russian in this essay are my own, unless otherwise noted. An English translation of the play has appeared as Sergei Mikhailovich Tret'yakov, *I Want a Baby*, trans. Stephen Holland, ed. Robert Leach, *Studies in Drama and Dance* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1995).

2. S. M. Tret'iakov, "Chto pishut dramaturgi," *Rabis* 11 (1929): 11, cited in A. Fevral'skii, "S.M. Tret'iakov v teatre Meierkhol'da," in S. Tret'iakov, *Slyshish', Moskva?! —Protivogazy—Rychi, Kitai! (P'esy, stat'i, vospominaniia)* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1966), 204.

3. The script remains available only in a blurry carbon copy in the archives of Glaviskusstvo in the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art (RGALI). See RGALI,

f. 645, op. 1, ed. kh. 536, 28–55, which includes a two-page introduction to the script, written by Treťiakov, and the handwritten comments of the Glavrepertkom censor. The narrative of the script is essentially identical to that of the play, though the play’s extensive dialogue is replaced, in the silent film, by terse intertitles augmented by vivid images and montage sequences. Future references to the script will be cited parenthetically in the body of the text as “Kh.R.-S.” The citation here is from p. 35.

4. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

5. *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 2 November 1926. A file of newspaper clippings concerning the play are held in the “Documents” section of the Bakhrushin Museum of Theater Arts in Moscow.

6. Announcements of the agreement between Treťiakov and Meyerhold about the expected performance of the play were published in *Pravda*, *Novyi zritel’*, *Vecherniaia Moskva*, *Zhizn’ i iskusstvo*, *Vechnee radio*, and *Raboचाia pravda*, among others.

7. The circumstances of the play’s fate are recounted in the commentary by Treťiakov’s daughter, T. S. Gomolitskaia-Treťiakova, following the publication of the play in *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia* 2 (1988): 237, and in the accompanying reprinting of, and editorial comment on, the stenographic notes from the Glavrepertkom meetings, pp. 238–243. See also Eric Naiman’s detailed account of these events in *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 109–114.

8. For the censor’s comments on the film script, see RGALI, f. 645, op. 1, ed. kh. 536. Treťiakov had planned the film to be directed by Abram Room, who had directed the highly successful film *Treťia Meshchanskaia* (known in English as *Bed and Sofa*) in 1927.

9. *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 238.

10. *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 238.

11. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999). Susan Buck-Morss writes that the project “put forth the notion that socialist culture would need to be constructed out of the embryonic, still-inadequate forms that preexisted in capitalism.” See her synthesis and interpretation of the project in *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989); citation from p. 123.

12. On the socialist object, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005).

13. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Section N “On the Theory of Knowledge,” 462 [N2a,3].

14. L. Trotskii, *Voprosy byta* (Moscow: Krasnaia nov’, 1923); translated as Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

15. These reasons for the upsurge in party interest in *byt* in 1923 are offered by Elizabeth A. Wood, in *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 194–197. Wood proposes that the shift from the violence of the civil war to the attempt to introduce new ways of living can be understood as an instance of Michel Foucault’s description, in *Discipline and Punish*, of a shift in strategies of power from a regime of punishment to one of discipline (p. 279, n. 16). On the extensive publications on the *novyi byt*, see also Eric Naiman,

Sex in Public, and Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999). Buchli argues that the actual implementation of ambitious *novyi byt* programs for public child care and so on—as opposed to discussions and propaganda—did not begin until around 1930.

16. The general history of Russian eugenics presented in this paragraph is drawn from Mark B. Adams, “Eugenics as Social Medicine in Revolutionary Russia,” in *Health and Society in Revolutionary Russia*, ed. Susan Gross Solomon and John F. Hutchinson (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 200–223.

17. Adams, 213. Lunacharskii’s script, entitled *Salamandr*, paid homage to the Viennese Lamarckian biologist Paul Kammerer, in whose voice these words were spoken.

18. An article in the magazine *Hygiene and Health of the Worker and Peasant Family* in 1927, for example, offered a balanced account that gave weight to all three models of practical eugenics, coming down against “negative” practices and in favor of education to promote the “positive” model, rather than coercive measures, and putting faith in the possibility of developing the Lamarckian model in the future. See Dr. L. Vasilevskii, “Chto takoe evgenika,” *Gigiena i zdorov’e rabochei i krest’ianskoi sem’i* 4 (1927): 4–5.

19. Dr. Poltasenii, “Ne pozor, a neschast’e,” *Zhurnal dlia zhenshchin* 7 (1924): 26.

20. “Krena” (pseud.), “Nash malen’kii fel’eton,” *Zhurnal dlia zhenshchin* 7 (1925): 4.

21. Smur, V., “Mozhno li uluchshit’ chelovecheskuiu porodu?” *Smena* 5 (1926): 20–21.

22. M. V. Volotskoi, *Podniatie zhiznennykh sil rasy (Odn iz prakticheskikh putei)*, 2nd revised ed., Biologicheskaiia Biblioteka (Moscow: Kooperativnoe izdatel’stvo “Zhizn’ i znanie,” 1926).

23. A. Serebrovskii, “Antropogenetika i evgenika v sotsialisticheskom obshchestve,” in *Trudy kabineta nasledstvennosti i konstitutsii cheloveka pri mediko-biologicheskoi institute*, vol. I, ed. S. G. Levit and A. S. Serebrovskii (Moscow, 1929), 3–19, translated and cited in Adams, 216.

24. Bernatskii, Dr., “Chto nuzhno znat’, vybiraia muzha i zhenu,” *Gigiena i zdorov’e rabochei i krest’ianskoi sem’i* 15 (1928): 2–3, and the conclusion in 16 (1928): 6.

25. Bernatskii, *Gigiena i zdorov’e rabochei i krest’ianskoi sem’i* 15 (1928): 2.

26. Bernatskii, *Gigiena i zdorov’e rabochei i krest’ianskoi sem’i* 16 (1928): 6. This conventional understanding of femininity was common in Russia in the 1920s; another example of it appears in a short book published by the Okhrana Materinstva i Mladenchestva: Dr. El’be, *Krasota zhenshchiny i byt* (The Beauty of Woman and Everyday Life). *Sem’ia i byt* (Moscow: Okhrana Materinstva i Mladenchestva, 1927).

27. Eric Naiman has analyzed the extensive press accorded the Chubarov rape as an aspect of party efforts to exercise greater control over the private lives of youth; see *Sex in Public*, ch. 7.

28. This androgynous female figure quickly faded from view in the return to more “normalized” gender roles during NEP, only to reappear again briefly in the wave of industrial enthusiasm of the First Five-Year Plan. The paradigmatic example of the Bolshevik ideal of the unfeminine communist woman from the civil war years is the eponymous heroine of Aleksandra Kollontai’s novella “Vasilisa Malygina” (1923), reprinted as *Svobodnaia Liubov’* (Riga: Stock, 1925). See Eric Naiman’s reading of the novella in these terms in *Sex in Public*, ch. 6.

29. See Frances L. Bernstein, “Panic, Potency, and the Crisis of Nervousness in the 1920s,” in this volume.

30. Tret'iakov's intervention in the Glavreperтком meeting of 15 December 1928, cited in *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 242.

31. Sergei Tret'iakov, “Otkuda i kuda?,” *Lef* 1 (1923): 201.

32. “Otkuda i kuda?,” p. 202.

33. Aleksandra Kollontai, “Dorogu Krylatomu Erosu! (Pis'mo k trudiashcheisia molodezhi),” *Molodaia gvardiia* 3 (1923): 111–124. She imagines that under communism, erotic love will be “winged” as opposed to “wingless,” characterized by 1) emotional equality between men and women, 2) the end of the feeling of property between lovers, and 3) comradely sensitivity on the part of both men and women (p. 123).

34. See the minutes of the Glavreperтком meeting in *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 238–240.

35. Kollontai called the maternal instinct, and women's instinct to care for children, “natural-biological.” See Aleksandra Kollontai, “Dorogu Krylatomu Erosu!” 119, n.1. Elizabeth Wood argues that Kollontai and others in the party's Women's Section (*Zhenotdel*) “perpetuated stereotypes of women” and concludes that “basic gender divisions remained unquestioned.” See Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 199–200 and 207, respectively.

36. *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, 238.

37. This poster is located in the Department of Graphics in the Russian State Library, Moscow, catalogued as number P2.XI.2; P2 signifies a poster (*plakat*) from period 2 (designating 1921–1925).

38. “Fialka” was a brand of perfume produced by the state trust Tezhe, literally the State Fats Trust. It produced all kinds of soaps and perfumes beginning in the 1920s and became the main source of such products in the more limited consumer marketplace of the first five-year plans. “Say Fialka please” seems to have been an advertising slogan, although I have not been able to find examples of it.

39. Boris Arvatov, “Segodniashnie zadachi iskusstva v promyshlennosti,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* 1 (1926): 86.

40. In early September, an editorial article appeared about the popularity of such contests abroad, especially in England and America: “Konkursy grudnykh detei,” *Gigiena i zdorov'e rabochei i krest'ianskoi sem'i* 17 (1926): 9. Two weeks later, the magazine's own contest was announced, and an entry blank was included in the magazine; see the first-page editorial “K konkursu zdorovykh detei,” *Gigiena i zdorov'e rabochei i krest'ianskoi sem'i* 18 (1926): 1.

41. “Konkursy grudnykh detei,” 9.

42. Another scene in the play strikes a similar note of loss and regret. Milda's friend Vopitkis asks her if she likes flowers, and she replies that she does not—they are merely the sex organs of plants. He calls her a terrible rationalist, and asks her how she gets along without “the gentle and the intimate in the human spirit.” She replies, “Well, we don't live in easy times” (Kh.R. 213).

43. El Lissitzky, “Der Innen-Aufbau des Theaters Meyerhold-Moskau für Tret-jakows ‘Ich will ein Kind,’” *Das Neue Frankfurt* IV:10 (1930), 226, translated and cited in Peter Nisbet, ed. *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941: Catalogue for an Exhibition of Selected Works from North American Collections, the Sprengel Museum Hanover and the Staatliche Galerie Moritzburg Halle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), 40. Lissitzky signed a contract with Meyerhold's theater on 28 March 1929, to

complete the stage set for *Khochu rebenka!* by 10 April. The set formed part of a design for the total renovation of the theater into a more experimental theatrical space. On Lissitzky's contracts with the Meyerhold theater for the *Khochu rebenka!* set, see the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), f. 2361, ed. kh. 60, and Nisbet, 52, n. 102.

44. Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 114.

45. Naiman writes that "Meierkhol'd understood the theatrical, scripted character of the contemporary debate on sex, but he was disturbed by its (at least, apparent) lack of control from above"—hence his desire to mount the play as a controlled script that retained the appearance of an open discussion. See Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 112–114.

46. Quoted in Fevral'skii, "S.M. Tret'iakov v teatre Meierkhol'da," 204, translated in Naiman, *Sex in Public*, 110–111.

47. Walter Benjamin would associate Tret'iakov with this Brechtian notion of collaborative theater in his essay "The Author as Producer" of 1934. This involves a significantly different notion of the spectator as collaborator from Meyerhold's ruthless, cynical vision in the debates on *I Want a Child!*

eight

"The Withering of Private Life"

Walter Benjamin in Moscow

Evgenii Bershtein

Walter Benjamin stayed in Moscow in late 1926 and early 1927, recording his Soviet experience in his by now famous *Moscow Diary*. This German Jewish writer-philosopher's travel to Moscow can be (and has been) examined from many perspectives. From the point of view of his political biography, the Moscow sojourn was important as an unsuccessful attempt to enter into the reality of revolution-in-construction.¹ In terms of his creative biography, as Susan Buck-Morss proposes, Moscow was one of the sites in which Benjamin's unfinished but still formidable and influential "Arcades Project" had its origin.² Generically, as Jacques Derrida argues in his Moscow lectures, *Moscow Diary* can be read as constitutive of the genre of "a Western intellectual's travel to the Soviets."³ A literary and cultural-historical reading such as Gerhard Richter's recent analysis discovers that, behind "all of its immediacy and narrative gestures of everydayness and clarity," *Moscow Diary* advances a particular philosophy that construes the body as subject of history.⁴ An intellectual historian such as Howard Caygill interprets the work as illustrating the hope and eventual disillusionment with which Europe's left-wing intellectuals regarded Communist Russia.⁵ In emphasizing certain specific aspects of Benjamin's experience in Moscow, each of these approaches is at once illuminating and limiting. My own reading of the Moscow episode in Benjamin's life will treat

several seemingly divergent aspects of the trip as being closely interwoven. Specifically, I will provide new factual information about the circumstances and characters of Benjamin's journey and address the question of how these influenced Benjamin's conceptualization of early Soviet "private life." By so doing, I will argue that *Moscow Diary* documents the translation of Soviet cultural experience into the language of Western theoretical thought; the task of this essay is to illuminate the mechanism and the controlling factors of this translation.

Walter Benjamin spent almost two months—December 1926 and January 1927—in Moscow, brought there by a serious personal crisis. Since 1924 he had been deeply in love with the Latvian communist Asja Lacis, but the status of their relationship had remained unresolved. Benjamin had met Lacis in Capri in 1924, and though they later saw each other in Berlin and Riga, their romantic friendship somehow failed to develop into a steady relationship. In Moscow, Benjamin remained Asja's admirer rather than her lover. Her permanent companions during these years were the Latvian poet Linards Laicens and the Austrian-German theater critic and director Bernhard Reich.

Those who knew Asja Lacis noted that she never strove for strict monogamy in her liaisons.⁶ She made no secret of her view that the traditional family was a relic of the bourgeois epoch. At the beginning of the Civil War, Lacis was married to her first husband, the Latvian journalist Julis Lacis, who was then working as a supply agent for the Red Army in Orel. Asja used her prerevolutionary training under Fedor Komissarzhevskii to run a theater studio for homeless children. After the birth of their daughter Dagmara (Daga) in 1919, relations between Asja and Julis began to deteriorate. According to Elvira Bromberg, an actress from Riga who had lived in Orel at the time, the reason for the change was Asja's unwillingness to spend her time looking after the child at the expense of her work. Bromberg recalled quarrels between Asja and Julis, during which Asja accused her husband of "limiting her freedom." Reportedly, Asja did not hide her extramarital affairs from her husband. The marriage soon fell apart, and she returned to Latvia.

In Riga, Lacis moved in the circles of leftist intellectuals. She directed a workers' theatrical studio that had a radical communist orientation. In 1922 she traveled to Berlin to study German proletarian theater, at which point she met Reich, who was working at the time with Max Reinhardt. In 1926 she followed Reich to Moscow, where Benjamin visited her.

According to Asja Lacis's daughter Dagmara Kimele, even decades later Asja often repeated her claim that when she met Benjamin in Capri it took her only a few weeks to convert him to Marxism. Behind this obvious exaggeration hides a grain of truth: Benjamin's letters to his friend Gershom Sholem testify to the fact that as Benjamin's infatuation with Lacis was turning into a passion, he not only began to study Marxist philosophy but also felt a growing sympathy for the "political practice of communism."⁷

During the years preceding his trip to Moscow, Benjamin became profoundly estranged from the institutions of cultural life in Weimar Germany. In 1925 his plan to secure a position at Frankfurt University fell through, and with it his hope of ending his total and humiliating dependence on his bourgeois family. The death of his father and a new strain in relations with his wife contributed to Benjamin’s personal crisis of 1926. He sensed the need for a drastic change in his life and viewed the trip to the Soviet Union as a reconnaissance mission; he looked for the opportunity to establish radically new conditions of existence.

Alongside this general biographic outline of Benjamin’s trip to the Soviet Union, it is useful to mention the trip’s discursive background. One crucial element of this background is the genre of the “leftist intellectual’s trip to Soviet Russia,” so popular in the twenties and thirties. In Jacques Derrida’s and Mikhail Ryklin’s notes about this genre, Benjamin is assigned a deservedly central role, along with René Etiemble and André Gide.⁸ I would argue that in Benjamin’s trip the mix of the erotic and the political was not an accidental coincidence of biographical circumstances, but a reflection of a certain discursive tendency. As Michel Foucault has remarked, “the history of sexuality [. . .] must be written from the point of view of the history of discourses.”⁹ This suggestion also provides a productive approach to political history. Studying Western European memoirs, correspondences, and journals from the twenties and thirties, we see how widespread among European intellectuals was the conviction that a radical change in society’s political structure would be immediately followed by a no less radical and liberating change in the structure of the sexual relations within society. Soviet Russia was looked upon as the center of this type of experimentation—and not only in the twenties, when there were serious foundations for such opinion, but also much later, when the forms of the bourgeois family (with the addition of total government control) were largely reestablished.

Among the first ranks of advocates for sexual reform were libertarians such as André Gide, who in 1931 remarked in his *Journals* that, to his mind, the most important aspect of “the Russian experiment” was the possibility of “a state without religion, a society without the family.” “Religion and the family,” continued Gide, “are the two worst enemies of progress.”¹⁰ Gide believed that the Soviet Union would become the center of sexual liberation. Subjectively important for Gide was his belief that homosexuals would enjoy full civil rights in communist society. A similar hope emerged among a group of English writers—among them W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, and Stephen Spender—who settled in Berlin in the late 1920s and who kept a keen watch on events in the Soviet Union. To a significant extent the work of these writers determined the character of English literature as it developed in the 1930s, and their left-wing politics exerted a noticeable influence on their contemporaries. The high proportion of homosexuals among the European activists involved in the Comintern (dubbed “Homintern” by an English writer) serves

as anecdotal evidence of the same widespread eroticizing of the Soviet Union.¹¹

A complex of political and erotic motives drove Benjamin's resolve to visit Communist Russia. He not only sought a personal "change of air," an escape from increasingly intolerable domestic tensions; he also had an acute interest in seeing at first hand the workings of Russian communism. In the diary he kept in Moscow, which will be my main source, his observations about private life are inseparable from those about political processes. A single thought runs like a *leitmotif* through his journal, the essay "Moscow," which he wrote upon his return to Berlin, and the letters he sent from Russia: "Bolshevism has abolished private life."¹² In Benjamin's opinion, Soviet society was extremely politicized, and as a result "the tensions of public life—which for the most part are actually of a theological sort—are so great that they block off private life to an unimaginable degree."¹³ He drew his conclusions from the behavior of Lacis, Reich, and a few other Moscow acquaintances who spoke German (Benjamin did not know Russian).

During this time Lacis and Reich were making a great effort to gain a place in the newly forming cultural establishment of communist Moscow. On the political map of cultural life, they placed themselves left of center: while members of the VAPP (All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and the Proletkul't were predominant among their professional and personal acquaintances, aesthetically they were drawn to the more avant-garde trends of Soviet culture, such as Meyerhold's theater and the LEF literary group. By 1927, however, the "left front" of Soviet art had already fallen out of favor with party leadership. An intuitive sense for the subtle nuances of the party general line was becoming increasingly crucial among those who sought if not a guarantee of survival, then at the very least some measure of success on the cultural front. Those of Benjamin's friends who had resolutely opted to build their lives in communist Russia understood this reality well.

Reich was devoting all of his time and energies to his theater and political work; Lacis was convalescing from a recent nervous breakdown in a sanatorium. Her illness had been triggered by an accident that had occurred in the orphanage where she worked: one of the children in her care had almost killed another. When he left his hotel, Benjamin was struck by a lack of private space and people's physical proximity in Moscow streets. Limited in his capacity to interact verbally with the world around him, Benjamin focused on studying the universe of objects, which he saw as iterating the end of private life. In physical space, he registered the bare walls and sparse furnishings of the communal apartments (Reich shared rooms in a dormitory, while Lacis resided in a sanatorium); in the space of sociality, he noted his friends' total absorption in political work. He observed the collapse of the institution of traditional marriage—neither Lacis nor her companion Reich associated their relationship with owning property, nor did they claim rights to each other. In Soviet art,