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### Book Review: The Futurist Files: Avant-Garde, Politics, and Ideology in Russia, 1905–1930

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Iva Glisic, *The Futurist Files: Avant-Garde, Politics, and Ideology in Russia, 1905-1930*. Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois Press, 2018. x, 218 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paper.

Iva Glisic gets right down to business in *The Futurist Files: Avant-Garde, Politics, and Ideology in Russia, 1905-1930*, challenging the dominant view that Russian and early Soviet avant-garde art was strictly utopian at its core. The so-called Russian Futurists were not “blinded idealists” (5), Glisic argues, but rather pragmatic artists and theorists who rejected bourgeois culture, embraced the Revolution, and participated in the Bolshevik project in hands-on ways. Applying the broad label of Futurism to Russian and early Soviet avant-garde art that spanned the pre-Revolutionary period through the 1920s, Glisic makes an important distinction between absolute utopia and a more relative utopia that entailed working toward a future ideal, which became, she proposes, the *modus operandi* for the Russian Futurists in the 1920s. *Futurist Files* tracks the evolution of this work, concluding with brief commentary on 1930s aesthetics that underscores Glisic’s broad contention that Futurism anticipated Socialist Realism.

From the very start, Glisic emphasizes, the Futurists committed themselves to overthrowing the status-quo. Chapter One of *Futurist Files* explores the revolutionary activity of the Futurists-to-be in Imperial Russia, from Vladimir Tatlin’s activism while studying at the Penza College of Art to Vladimir Mayakovsky’s involvement in a Moscow prison break and Vasily Kamenskii’s own stint in jail. Such revolutionary pursuits gave rise to pre-Revolutionary cubo-futurist art, which Glisic emphasizes while rebuffing the notion that the Futurists’ initial work was apolitical.

The story proceeds apace in Chapter Two, where Glisic probes the Futurists’ rejection of their rabble-rousing past and participation in the “proletarianization” of early Soviet culture. They aimed to transform early Soviet reality by reconfiguring everyday life—*byt*—and by fashioning the consciousness of the New Soviet Man. The Futurists’ aversion to yesterday’s aesthetics informed much of their work, as constructivists, productivists, and others railed against outdated culture, whether artistic or social. Glisic focuses in particular on Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International*, which she perceives less as a utopian project and more as a radical creative means for engaging the Soviet people in the Bolshevik cause. When viewed alongside early Soviet agit-trains and Mayakovsky’s ROSTA posters, Tatlin’s Tower emerges as part of a comprehensive attempt to bring Futurist art “into conversation with the principles of Marxism” (86).

In Chapter Three, Glisic dives into the Futurists’ antagonism toward Soviet Russia’s NEP-era policies, as she raises the controversial specter of Futurism harboring the seeds of Socialist Realism. In formulating “a creative philosophy that resonated strongly within Socialist Realism” (92), the Futurists shifted aggressively away from easel painting toward production art. Citing Nikolai Chuzhak’s 1923 “Under the Banner of Life-Building (An Attempt to Understand the Art of ‘Today’)” and his earlier *Toward an Aesthetic of Marxism* (1912), Glisic hones in on the dialectical process underlying the Futurists’ urge to provide an antithesis to the status quo—e.g., NEP culture—to synthesize their work for tomorrow. Glisic also highlights the Futurists’ celebrations of the October Revolution’s 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary that reflected their desire “to champion core changes instead of superficial razzmatazz” (124), as articulated, for instance, by Sergei Tretiakov, who theorized on Futurist art’s ability to enhance everyday life.

In her fourth and final chapter, Glisic grapples with the writings of two prominent Soviet cultural overseers, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky, whose policies the Futurists had to contend with in the 1920s. Whereas Lunacharsky advocated for proletarian art that reassessed

the past and presented Communist life-building through comprehensive, Futurist-inspired means, Trotsky believed that Futurism would be a necessary step on the way toward bridging the divide between the creative intelligentsia and the Soviet people. In applying ideology to everyday life through production and by championing the New Soviet Man, the Futurists found room to function within the increasingly doctrinaire 1920s.

What happened next is well known. Glisic, following the lead of scholars such as Boris Groys, portrays Futurism and its aim of making the future real as presaging Stalinist art. Some might disagree with Glisic's rendering of Futurism as a precursor to Socialist Realism, yet there is no denying that *Futurist Files* proves a valuable and cogently argued study. In making her argument, Glisic focuses more on the theoretical essays written at the time than on the era's art and in doing so gives short shrift to the formalism so unique to early Soviet Futurist art. Nevertheless, Glisic has produced an intelligent, compelling exploration of the Futurists' impatient desire to realize tomorrow's world in the immediate here and now of their today.

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