

## Mikhail Lifshitz's Philosophy of Art and the Marxist Horizons for the “End of Art History”

Angela Harutyunyan

**Abstract:** This article takes as its starting point a key problematic in art history—namely, the discipline's turn away from class struggle, social contradictions, and totality as central analytical categories and methodological standpoints since the 1970s. Informed by post-structuralism, art history instead embraced the collapse of “art” into any signifying practice and of “history” into textuality. Against the background of these disciplinary shifts, which paralleled millennial “end of history” narratives, the article asks whether another, non-liberal, end of art history is possible. It poses this question as a provocation, but also as an invitation to excavate a repressed tradition within the discipline—one constituted by a missed encounter between a Hegelian-Marxian philosophy of art and art history in the Soviet context.

The article focuses on Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz's reading of Marx's conception of uneven development in the 1930s to argue that his treatment of this concept as both a philosophical foundation for Marxist art history and a key condition of the aesthetic ideal allowed him to uphold the communist project of emancipation, both within and against Stalinism and positivism. Grounded in the historical form of the division of labor, it was the non-synchronous or uneven relation between being and consciousness, art and material conditions, as well as ideality and reality, that supported Lifshitz's Hegelian-Marxian conception of art's ideality as both historical and transhistorical—one entangled with the communist project of emancipation. If revisited critically, Lifshitz's Marxian philosophy of art may point toward a materialist re-politicization of the discipline before its putative “end.”

**Keywords:** *Contradiction; Uneven Development; Aesthetic Ideal; Realism; End of Art; Dialectics; Communism; Soviet Marxism*

# **Mikhail Lifshitz's Philosophy of Art and the Marxist Horizons for the “End of Art History”**

Angela Harutyunyan

## **Contradiction vs. Diversity**

Commenting on the retreat of post-structuralist Althusserian Marxism when faced with the triumph of postmodernist cultural analysis in 1980s Great Britain, art historian Andrew Hemingway writes, “rather than being contradictory, social reality was simply diverse. Lacking an adequate concept of totality, lacking an adequate conception of the dialectic, Althusserian Marxism (with its feminist and semiological addons) collapsed in the face of the challenges of the postmodern. Lyotard trumped Marx!”<sup>1</sup> In other words, in Hemingway’s understanding, the reduction of reality to language and text triumphed over its dialectical conception.

These lines crystalize a turn in the discipline in the Anglo-American context characterized by a rebellion against the German-language art historical tradition on the one hand, and an orthodox Marxist sociology of art, on the other. This rebellion has its roots in the 1970s social movements that in academia manifested as a revolt against disciplinary boundaries. Alternatively, as in the writing of Hans Belting and Arthur Danto, the sublation of art history variously as either cultural anthropology or philosophy, follows the Hegelian path of the end of art as the overcoming of art’s sensuous materiality on the one hand and the end of the supposed linear progression of history on the other.<sup>2</sup>

Methodologically, most of this revolt against discipline relied on poststructuralism and was politically oriented toward a critique of identity. It became crystallized in “new art history” in the mid-1980s<sup>3</sup> and included art historical analyses informed by feminist critique, psychoanalysis, and semiotic and structuralist approaches, wherein a Marxism—devoid of dialectics and totality—emerged. Since the later 1990s and the 2000s, postcolonial cultural criticism and decolonial approaches have been added to the mix.<sup>4</sup>

If the 1960s to 1970s social movements, with their radical social critique, impacted the discipline by making it porous, by the 1990s, this porosity had led to the collapse of the fundamental tensions between art as an autonomous sphere and history as an unfolding totality that had animated the discipline since its emergence in nineteenth-century Germany and beyond.<sup>5</sup> Pioneered by the art historians shaping the *October* journal in the United States and formative for cultural studies in Britain in the 1970s, this expanded field of art history itself became canonical in the 1990s with its own conceptual and linguistic apparatus and was joined by the “new art historians” Keith Moxey, Norman Bryson, Mieke Bal, and others. The central claim made by the new art historians, as varied as they may be in terms of the methods and disciplines foundational for art historical critical practice, was that art history as a modern and autonomous discipline was an ideological construct, a political tool for domination, and hence, needed to be deconstructed and subsumed under linguistic and intertextual interpretation while laying bare the operations of power at play in the constitution of the discipline and its boundaries. This work of deconstruction aimed to overcome the modernist “art” and “history” pairing, understood as a coupling of autonomous art with a concept of history as totality. This collapse of “art” into any signifying practice and “history” into textuality laid no claim to the total and revolutionary transformation of social reality, and to echo Hemingway, it not only lacked an adequate conception of the dialectic, but conceived the dialectic itself as a modern myth.

Implicitly liberal in its political agenda, new art history, especially throughout the 1990s, aligned itself, if unwittingly, with the Fukuyaman “end of history”<sup>6</sup> spirit after the collapse of the USSR. Since a political system that upheld a conception of history as a dialectical totality had been relegated to the dustbin of history, the dominant *Stimmung* of the new decade that animated art history was that contradictions themselves were a thing of the past. The Cold War liberal equation between political totalitarianism and methodological adherence to social totality won the day.

Deconstruction of the politics and ideology of artistic and art historical canons alike has been almost always carried out through a method that can be characterized as ultimately presentist: artworks are conceived as texts open to endlessly fluid semiosis subjected to the needs of the present, while every work of interpretation betrays the partial perspective of the interpreter as a subject marked by race, class, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Any claim to historical reconstruction or historical truth has been viewed as an ideological instrument complicit in a politics of domination. As the 1990s marked a new stage of the rapid expansion of capital and its globalizing “cultural logic” that reinforced the fragmented appearance of totality as reality itself, art historical scholarship, enchanted by poststructuralist theory, was increasingly clinging to

the fragment as the self-sufficient unit of analysis and rendering the historical past as yet another version of the present. History is dead, and in any case, it never really existed. And paraphrasing Hemingway once again, the more reality became contradictory, the more art history, now disavowing its own object and method, erased contradictions and worked with diversity.

Against the background of the above-outlined historical and disciplinary shifts, this article asks whether another, non-liberal, end of art history is possible. It poses the question as a provocation but also as a prompt for an excavation of a repressed tradition of the discipline constituted by a *missed encounter* between a version of a Hegelian-Marxian philosophy of art and art history in the Soviet context. This is a missed encounter because the Hegelian-Marxian philosophy of art developed in the 1930s did not become formative for the discipline of art history within the Soviet Union; however, the failure to lend a methodological ground for the discipline is not due to the marginalization of this tradition, but because it was realized in a distorted manner by Soviet Stalinist scholarship. In other words, its realization was its defeat. If Marxism was successfully applied as a means of critiquing bourgeois culture, it nevertheless did not form methodological foundations for art history.

The political implications of this defeated but undead tradition point at the possibility of a non-liberal, and namely communist abolition of art and art history alike, a possibility that is entangled with the fate of the universal emancipation of the proletariat. The communist abolition of art, unlike its liberal counterpart, attaches itself to the emancipation of art from its status as a commodity (even if “an absolute commodity” in the Adornian sense, one that negatively reflects on the relations of exchange) as well as to the overcoming of art’s autonomous sphere as part and parcel of the bourgeois division of labor. This is a form of abolition that is only possible with the revolutionary overcoming of commodity relations themselves. From this perspective, if art’s autonomy is overcome with the realization of art’s ideality as the historical actualization of the communist ideal, then the need for an autonomous discipline dealing with the sphere of the ideal is no longer historically expedient. Art history as such, from a Marxian perspective, can only be relatively autonomous, as it is determined by the social conditions of production, in the last instance.<sup>7</sup>

This article focuses on Soviet philosopher Mikhail Lifshitz’s 1930s reading of Marx’s conception of uneven development to argue that Lifshitz’s systematic treatment of this conception as a philosophical foundation for a Marxist art history allowed him to uphold the communist project of emancipation both within and contra Stalinism and specifically positivism. Grounded in the historical form of the division of labor, the non-synchronous relation, or unevenness, between economy and art supported Lifshitz’s Hegelian-Marxian

conception of art's ideality as historical and transhistorical, and one that was entangled with the communist project of emancipation. The content of the ideal was formulated as at once aesthetic, political, and ethical and its true social realization was seen as possible only with the universal emancipation of the proletariat.

Lifshitz's approach to art and aesthetics as both relatively autonomous and as part of social totality, in addition to the analytical categories developed for aesthetics and art history, may point toward a progressive repoliticization of the discipline, before its putative "end." Although this tradition never self-consciously formed "the end of art history" as a programmatic aim, nevertheless, if we take its methodological assumptions seriously, we can claim that the end of art history was its implicit horizon. Art history may end as a discipline only if the division of labor and its specialization end. Rather than grounding itself in "diversity," this tradition worked through the "contradictions" of reality, including the contradiction between the ideality of the communist horizon and the reality of the Soviet state.

Lifshitz's Marxian-Hegelian philosophy of art is firmly rooted in the Soviet historical world, and yet, it is also an uncomfortable reminder of the unrealized horizons of ideality opened up by the October Revolution. While Lifshitz's work is entangled in a historical world, only vague contours and distorted appropriations of which are present today, its political and philosophical foundations may nevertheless reinvigorate the discipline beyond its borders and boundaries, and reground it in social struggles in a present that seems exceedingly lacking any emancipatory horizon of futurity. A critical reexamination of some of the key premises proposed by Lifshitz would open avenues toward the re-politicization of the discipline, not in terms of pointing at the implicit political and ideological blind spots and exercises of power, while rejoicing over unmasking them, but explicitly connecting the methodological tools of the discipline to the analysis of social totality on the one hand, and to the political horizon of the transformation of this totality on the other. This also means upholding the classical foundations of the discipline, which are rooted in the conception of art's ideality as a conduit to truth and beauty. Yet, Lifshitz's materialist conception of art history grounds the historically formed transhistorical ideality in the material contradictions that are not immanent to the sphere of ideality. In short, this means re-grounding a conception of the discipline as both relatively autonomous and as entangled in the historical present.

## Two Sides of Oblivion

English-language translations of Lifshitz's philosophical writings are sparse. The groundbreaking volume of 1933 that for the first time compiled Marx's and Engels's writings on art and literature, *Marks i Engels ob Iskusstve* (Marx and Engels on Art), appeared in the English translation as early as 1938 under the title *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*.<sup>8</sup> Lifshitz's monumental 1933 article on the reception of Winckelmann entitled "Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the Three Epochs of the Bourgeois Weltanschauung" saw light in a 1946 issue of the International Phenomenological Society's journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*.<sup>9</sup> Several other articles and pamphlets came out in English-language publications in the late 1930s and 1940s.<sup>10</sup> More recently, Lifshitz's 1968 book *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop Art* was translated by David Riff and published in the Historical Materialism series.<sup>11</sup> The harsh polemical tone in the essays of the volume contrasts with his philosophically nuanced writings of the 1930s. His essays of the 1960s are largely responsible for earning Lifshitz a reputation as a staunch conservative in the post-Thaw Soviet cultural sphere, a reputation that still prevails amongst the formerly dissident Moscow intelligentsia and their heirs.<sup>12</sup>

Commentaries on Lifshitz's work are relatively sparse as well, although there is growing interest in them, mostly from Russian scholars who also publish in English-language academic periodicals. This contrasts with his younger philosophical comrade Evald Ilyenkov, for instance, who has enjoyed a revival in international philosophical scholarship. Apart from Stanley Mitchell's pioneering feature on Lifshitz in the 1997 issue of the *Oxford Art Journal*,<sup>13</sup> Andrey Maidansky's and Vesa Oittinen's special issue of *Studies in Eastern European Thought*,<sup>14</sup> and Evgeni Pavlov's review of the Russian publication of Lifshitz's correspondence with Georg Lukács by Grundrisse press,<sup>15</sup> Lifshitz hasn't enjoyed popularity in English-language academia amongst Marxist art historians and theorists of art.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, while Maidansky and Oittinen address Lifshitz's oblivion in the introduction to their special issue, they do not ponder the reasons for its persistence.<sup>17</sup> What, then, are some of the reasons for this persistent oblivion?

A key factor is perhaps Lifshitz's consistent aesthetic conservatism and his wholesale condemnation of modernism and post-war Western art as nihilistic, a quality he saw as aligned with irrational tendencies ultimately serving fascism. Such a crude condemnation is hard to fathom from the standpoint of contemporary materialist aesthetics and critical art history that have attached art's emancipatory horizon and its tragic fate under capitalist reification to modernism, the historical avant-gardes, and, to a varying degree, their post-war heirs. As opposed to this, Lifshitz's defense of Socialist Realism as the embodiment of the

historical-transhistorical ideality of classical antiquity on a higher plane of the materialist dialectic appears outmoded, not only from the standpoint of materialist aesthetics and criticism informed by Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School, but also by new art history aligned with feminist, queer, post-colonial, and de-colonial discourses that have critiqued the historical construction of Greek Antiquity in modern Europe as implicated in reproducing the colonial and patriarchal structures of domination at the expense of heterogenous desires and identities.<sup>18</sup> Lifshitz himself would characterize these trends as symptomatic of a “crisis of truth” and as mere theoretical fashions (*moda*).<sup>19</sup> But he would, as a true dialectician, also detect the truth of such “distortions.”

The second and most important reason is philosophical and methodological and has to do with Lifshitz’s insistence on dialectical logic that exists in nature and extends from nature to the social world, his conception of objective universality, and his onto-gnoseology that ultimately grounds both social and epistemological ontology in Engels’s dialectic of nature.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, Lifshitz adheres to an orthodox version of dialectical materialism. If, according to Mitchell, both Lifshitz and Lukács in the 1930s combined Hegel’s lectures on fine arts with Marx’s early writings, Engels’s letters on realism, and Lenin’s theory of reflection to develop a theory of Socialist Realism alternative to its Stalinist variant,<sup>21</sup> in Lifshitz, Engels’s ontology of nature combined with Platonic idealism more pronouncedly forms the ground on which objectivity and universality of the aesthetic ideal stand.<sup>22</sup> If Western Marxism in its new left variant has largely divorced Marx as a historical materialist from Engels’s teleological ontology of nature, according to which thought acquires its key principles not from itself but from the external world, in conformity with nature and history, Soviet Marxism upheld Lenin’s conception of the unity of thought of Marx and Engels. More specifically, for Lifshitz, the aesthetic ideal that unfolds through a materialist dialectic ultimately acquires its objective and universal character from matter/nature: if there is no ideality in nature, there can be none in the social and historical world.

For Lifshitz, ideality in each historical stage of the development of the materialist dialectic comes to a painful confrontation with alienated and reified forms of social existence. Nevertheless, it is capable of breaking through calcified representations and evolving toward higher forms of the incarnation of beauty and truth. In this, really existing things are imperfect embodiments of concepts which can only be truly realized with the realization of human freedom. This ultimately Hegelian insight nevertheless diverts from Hegel in refusing to accept the “tragic” fate of the arts and their demise for the needs of the supra-sensuous Spirit. While nature itself has ideality, the ideal can only be realized socially and historically.<sup>23</sup> This form of materialism, which borders Aristotelianism, has been discredited as essentialist and metaphysical and the

foundational role it plays in Lifshitz's philosophical writings make his rehabilitation in contemporary art historical and philosophical-aesthetic discourses a controversial and difficult undertaking. In its understanding of the relationship between reality and representation it relies on Lenin's formulation of reflection theory based on Lenin's critique of Machian Empirio-criticism.<sup>24</sup> While Lenin's goal was to define a relationship between the mind and the world through the path of offering a critique of vulgar idealism and mechanical materialism, in the Soviet 1930s, Lenin's theory of reflection was turned into a theory of aesthetics and adopted as a foundational concept for Socialist Realism. The basic tenet of reflection theory is that thought is a property of matter and is constituted in the process of becoming conscious of matter, which in turn is tested by praxis. Matter exists independently of thought and has reflectibility, and mental images arise from the sensations of material objects, or as Engels calls them, *Gedanken Abbilder*, thought images. Thought doesn't take its principles from itself but rather from the external material world. Reflection here is not understood as a photographic one-to-one mechanical relationship of representation but in terms of thought's ability to grasp external reality in its contradictions, which is ultimately tested by the practical activity of human beings.

Finally, the oblivion is politically motivated: Lifshitz's materialist aesthetics is firmly rooted in the historical world of the USSR that no longer exists and of which only distorted shadows remain. The declining fragments of this world are being seized upon by regressive authoritarian and neo-imperialist forces in contemporary Russia, reinforcing the Cold War era identification of the Soviet Union with Stalinism, an identification that has prevailed both in the East and the West. In this context, any attempt at critically revisiting the Soviet historical experience and especially those thinkers believed to be part of the Soviet orthodoxy is met with accusations of reproducing Soviet colonial domination. Lifshitz's optimistic humanism ultimately upheld a firm belief in the USSR as the only actually existing historical possibility toward communism, despite the political setbacks and tragic distortions this project faced in the Soviet state. Lifshitz was not blind to the forms of alienation that he saw in the USSR, yet his generational and intellectual embeddedness in the project of socialist construction in the 1920s and 1930s was the ground upon which his historical optimism stood.

The agonistic combination of revolutionary progressivism and aesthetic conservatism that Lifshitz embodied can hardly be fathomed from the perspective of contemporary critical theory and art history, informed, as it is, by historical materialism in its new left variant and animated by the post-structuralist critique of grand narratives. If the first requires aesthetic progressivism, the second demands wholesale abandonment of social totality, dialectical logic, and any claim to a social transformation by class struggle. Ultimately, Lifshitz's

scholarship had a *practical* task of delineating a Marxist philosophy of art in a country that saw itself as the embodiment of a higher stage of Marx's dialectical materialism than the world of capitalist commodity relations.

While in the Anglo-American context Lifshitz's reception is hesitant and slow, in post-Soviet Russia there was a Lifshitz revival, especially between 2010 and 2018. Nevertheless, this reception hasn't been without controversy either. The three-volume compilation of his writings in the USSR came out right after his death in 1984 and was followed by only sporadic publication of his works in the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>25</sup> It was only between 2010 and 2015 that the publication of some of Lifshitz's vast archive of previously unpublished writing appeared. Most of these efforts were spearheaded by artist Dmitry Gutov with the *Grundrisse* press and Lifshitz's student, the philosopher of art and aesthetics Viktor Arslanov. These relatively recent publications include fragments from his diaries;<sup>26</sup> his correspondence with Lukács between 1930 and 1971; letters to V. Dostal, V. Arslanov, and M. Mikhailov from 1959 to 1983;<sup>27</sup> his 1940 lectures on aesthetics at the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History;<sup>28</sup> writings on Hegel and Montaigne;<sup>29</sup> and several other volumes published by *Iskusstvo*. Most of these publications have appeared due to the tireless efforts of a handful of people, including Gutov, Arslanov, and Riff.

These efforts culminated in 2018 in an exhibition curated by Gutov and Riff and dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Lifshitz's *Krisis Bezobraziya* (Crisis of Ugliness) in the USSR.<sup>30</sup> Entitled *Only Our Soup Can Could Speak: Mikhail Lifshitz and the Soviet 1960s*, the exhibition was held at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. It brought together Lifshitz's archival documents and books, as well as his 1960s art criticism. The reaction to the exhibition on social media was mixed: while some artists and cultural figures embraced the effort, others, especially the representatives of the former Moscow underground, attacked the curators for reviving Stalinism and justifying artworks replete with "Third Reich aesthetics," alleging they were thereby clinging onto repressive and outmoded discourses that hinder artistic freedom.<sup>31</sup>

Despite Lifshitz's philosophical "rehabilitation" in the 2000s in Russia, his philosophy of art and aesthetic theory did not form a methodological framework for the discipline of art history either in the USSR or in the post-Soviet context. In the USSR, the art historiography institutionalized in art history survey books, such as *A Universal History of Arts*, was dominated by sociological approaches that prevailed beyond Stalinism,<sup>32</sup> and continue in the present. But now this dominant scholarship, which in many former Soviet republics has been combined with nationalism, is complemented by trends and frameworks indebted to French post-structuralism, which is seen as a desirable alternative to the hegemonic art historiography.

## A Missed Encounter

First and foremost, the missed encounter between Lifshitz's Soviet Marxian philosophy of art and the discipline of art history can be tracked in the divorce between the realization of labor and the realization of art, and the discipline's abandonment of the communist horizon. And it was precisely this entanglement that Lifshitz consistently argued for throughout the 1930s by synthesizing classical aesthetics with Marxian historical materialism. The broader program was to chart a path for a materialist aesthetics that would be consistent with the philosophical and political foundations of Marxism-Leninism. To do so, Lifshitz's initial endeavors in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s were directed toward discerning a philosophy of art in Marx and Engels's often scattered references to art, literature, and aesthetics on the one hand, and showing Marx's consistent Hegelianism when it came to aesthetics, on the other. While showing Marx's indebtedness to Hegel in the former's conception of aesthetics as a sphere of the sensuous and supra-sensuous, Lifshitz nevertheless emphasized the Hegelian limitations when it came to the problem of the historical destiny of the arts, one which could only be answered by turning to the Marxian solution of historical development. In *Marks and Engels ob Iskusstve* and his articles and lectures throughout the 1930s, Lifshitz stressed that art is not a thing of the past; rather, its social realization is entangled within the horizon of the proletariat's liberation through its sensuous engagement with the material world. Liberation of labor from alienation and its status as a producer of commodities is the only pathway toward the social realization of aesthetics, and progressive art necessarily reflects the democratic aspirations of the oppressed.

In *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature*, Lifshitz delineates this path through aesthetics:

Art cannot exist without a sensuous basis; the idea of the artist demands an objective embodied form. This is the law of the sphere of aesthetics that has an irreplaceable meaning for human society. In its foundation lies the ideal of life that has developed from the entire history of mankind, one that is purified from crude materiality but is nevertheless real. The inevitable domination of the abstract culture of the spirit cut off from the physical labor of the majority of people in a class society is hostile to it. Historically the world of art and poetry is firmly connected to the popular roots of social life, and its presence in this life is a symbol of true democracy, more or less clearly understood.<sup>33</sup>

Lifshitz upheld that the identification of the social realization of aesthetics with the realization of communism could be found in Marx's early writings. As it is furthest removed from the world of crude need, aesthetics is the true sphere of ideality, of the realization of human freedom, and as such, it is fundamentally

inimical to the bourgeois relations of production. This sphere of ideality is constituted in a long historical process and is ultimately fermented in material social relations. Yet, as will be argued below in reference to Lifshitz's engagement with Marx's conception of uneven development, aesthetics is also relatively autonomous from these relations. There is neither a fast track to the end of art, nor to the end of history. From this perspective, re-politicization of the discipline would entail the coupling of the sublation of art and art history alike with a revolutionary program of social transformation, as difficult as this task might be.

The second important *missed encounter* between the discipline and Lifshitz's Marxian philosophy of art is the formulation of an aesthetic-political program of realism. His conception of realism combines classical aesthetics with Engels's letters on realism (these were not yet available when Lifshitz published the 1933 volume on Marx and Engels on art and literature) and Lenin's theory of reflection and upholds a fundamental identification of realism with truth. The mode of artistic presentation of truth is beauty, wherein the artist shapes an "artistic image" (*khudzhestvenniy obraz*) through their engagement with the manifold sensuousness of the world. This formulation safeguards realism from its formulaic appropriations as a style confined to a particular epoch: in its concrete historical embodiment in various epochs, from classical antiquity to ancient Russia, the Renaissance, and Socialist Realism, realism reveals the democratic and emancipatory wishes of the people and their dreams for liberation. It is concrete and yet indeterminate enough not to become a formula.

It was this philosophical-political program of formulating realism as truth that animated Lifshitz's construction of Soviet antiquity in the 1930s,<sup>34</sup> by reclaiming classical antiquity's democratic spirit in opposition to its appropriations by National Socialism, a commitment that remained in his writings in the later decades as well. This was part of his broader effort at formulating a Marxian philosophy of culture that insisted on the democratic character of popular arts,<sup>35</sup> on the identification of realism with truth, and on the acquisition of knowledge through interaction with reality. For instance, in his lecture *Realizm drevnerusskogo iskusstva* (Realism of Ancient-Russian Art), he attributed realism to Russian orthodox icons while formulating a conception of realism as truth derived from classical Hegelian aesthetics, instead of conceiving realism in terms of verisimilitude. For Lifshitz, realism shouldn't be confined to a particular historical epoch. Instead, it is manifest, in varying degrees, in all artistic products that uphold the aesthetic ideal. Here, aesthetic ideality is entangled with the program of realism as truth. As he put it: "Realism is truth in art, and truth is the foundation of all creativity [...]. It is truth that lies at the very heart of art, but the path to it is not always straightforward. Sometimes it passes through abstraction from immediate pictorial representation."<sup>36</sup>

It is in the wider sense of realism's identification with truth that the reactivation of Lifshitz's Marxian philosophy of art may point toward a re-politicization of the discipline. The assumption of the existence of an objective reality not reducible to thought, language, or discourse is what distinguishes this tradition of Marxism—which Lifshitz shares with Lukács as well as with Frederick Antal, Max Raphael, and others—from post-Marxian trends in art history. For an art history to pose the question of realism once again, does not mean that it should identify realism as a method of representation with realism as a style. Neither does it need to adhere to the quasi-Aristotelian elements of the reflection theory. What this entails is the need to foreground the question of the representation and figuration of our vast and complex world in forms, methods, and means that are adequate to it. It also means to show the contradictions inherent in the clash of art's ideality with reality, a clash that art historical scholarship, attuned to the complexity of artistic figurations of the world, would need to historicize.

The third programmatic contribution Lifshitz made in the Soviet 1930s was by working through Marx's conception of uneven or non-synchronous development between art and economy in the unfinished fragment of his manuscript "Einleitung zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie" (1857). While Lifshitz was most certainly also familiar with Marx's formulation of primitive (originary) accumulation in the *Grundrisse*, nevertheless Lifshitz's starting point for the question of uneven development are the fragmented paragraphs on Greek antiquity from Marx's 1857 Introduction, where the latter explicitly addresses the sphere of art. The basic problematic is the following: how can one apply a materialist analysis to art—traditionally the sphere of ideality—without risking sociological and economic reductionism. In short, how can art, which from a Marxist standpoint has both infrastructural and super-structural elements, not be reduced to its social conditions of production, general social technique, and economic logic or conceived as merely expressive of ideology? And finally, can certain artistic products surpass the conditions of their production, and consequently, the social conditions and relations of their production? It is this third missed encounter that the article stages as a crucial impetus for animating the discipline with consistent materialism. This is because, from a Marxian perspective, uneven development is the fundamental law that shapes historical development in capitalism, whether unevenness is ascribed to the conditions of production, social, and cultural forms or to the various spheres of social activity.

## Uneven Development and the Soviet 1930s

The focus on uneven development allowed Lifshitz to conceive of a theoretical and philosophical pathway toward forming a methodologically consistent and orthodox Marxist materialist aesthetics while taking the foundations of aesthetics in idealist philosophy seriously. Developed in his battle contra positivism and vulgar sociology, Lifshitz's reworking of Marxian uneven development through Hegel's conception of classical antiquity as the adequate form of the sensuous presentation of the supra-sensuous idea, positions him both within and in opposition to the official aesthetics of Socialist Realism. Nevertheless, Lifshitz's efforts should not be simply confined to the historical conditions of the 1930s and seen merely as a response to them. The analytical paths that uneven development opens up as a foundational consideration for materialist aesthetics and Marxist art history alike have the potential to redirect scholarly attention to the formative contradictions between art and economy in late capitalist modernity, rooted in the contemporary forms of the division of labor. Reinvigorating this formative contradiction as an analytical ground for tackling contemporary art's alignment with and misalignment from the prevailing and radicalizing forms of capitalism, can show the uneven conditions of artistic production in capitalism's structural peripheries, and may facilitate a critical engagement with contemporary art.<sup>37</sup>

The uneven development between the sphere of ideality and material conditions formed one of the key methodological and analytical foundations for Lifshitz's engagement with art and literature in his fertile authorial biography. Although most of his writing took the form of articles and essays, rather than monographs, the consistency with which he upheld the foundational principles of materialist aesthetics he himself developed throughout the 1930s is perhaps unmatched amongst Marxist philosophers of art. These principles were developed in his revolutionary volume of 1933, *Marks i Engels ob iskusstve*,<sup>38</sup> his lectures at the Tretyakov Gallery and at the Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History in 1938 to 1940, and in his essays published in *Literaturniy Kritik*, a journal that was founded in the aftermath of the famous 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers and closed down in 1940 as a result of repressions.<sup>39</sup>

The lectures at the Institute, entitled "Introduction to the Marxist-Leninist Theory of Art," were unprecedented and charted an entirely new theoretical and methodological terrain for art history based on Hegel's aesthetics, Marx's historical materialism, and Lenin's theory of reflection. Preceding attempts at Marxian aesthetics had been fragmentary and inconsistent. It is remarkable, then, that as early as the late 1930s, Lifshitz felt that the newly emergent early 1930s tradition of constructing a systematic theoretical treatment of art based

on Marx and Hegel had been interrupted or aborted.<sup>40</sup> What came to dominate in its stead was positivism with attention solely to facts rather than to methodological questions and theoretical foundations. Ironically, this is precisely the fate of Lifshitz's philosophy of art and aesthetics as well—it did not have a significant impact on art historiography in the USSR.<sup>41</sup>

*Marks i Engels ob Iskusstve* of 1933 is a pioneering effort to constitute a systematic Marxist philosophy of art by meticulously selecting fragments on art, literature, and aesthetics found in Marx's and Engels's vast writings—from their programmatic works to the then newly published and unpublished manuscripts and correspondence. The Marx and Engels Institute directed by Ryazanov, where Lifshitz was based, had already published some of this vast archive.<sup>42</sup> However, Lifshitz's volume is not simply a compilation of Marx's and Engels's writings on art and literature. Rather, it involves Lifshitz's close engagement with these fragments, which he elegantly weaves into a coherent narrative. He historicizes them within the nineteenth-century European political and intellectual developments in which Marx and Engels themselves were steeped while also pointing at their continued historical relevance and their political actualization in the victory of the Bolshevik Revolution. Lifshitz's reading is immanent and yet it betrays a specific philosophical and political approach, which is indebted to Lenin's reading of Hegel in his *Philosophical Notebooks* of 1916, his 1908 work on *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and is also embedded in the historical experience of constructing a socialist state.

The volume came out at a crucial juncture: toward the end of the first Five-Year Plan. Marking Stalin's Great Break in 1928, this new model of centralized teleological economic planning put an end to Lenin's New Economic Policy (1921–1928), which had allowed the existence of private enterprise and land ownership under the control of the socialist state. The Five-Year Plan put the Soviet Union on the path of extensive modernization, wherein large-scale industrialization through building “the commanding heights” of the Soviet economy was aimed at creating an infrastructure for socialism and catching up with capitalist modernization in Western Europe and the United States.

It was this grand project of economic modernization that provided Soviet culture with a renewed impetus for the already fervent demands for class-oriented art and literature and for the construction of a properly proletarian cultural sphere. Impatient with the slower pace of cultural transformations and the cultural assimilation of the experience of the 1917 Revolution throughout the 1920s, the avant-gardists and realists around the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) and the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), saw an opportunity to launch what they conceived as a belated cultural revolution.<sup>43</sup> The proletarian consciousness had to be constructed with



1. Film Still from Dziga Vertov, *The 11<sup>th</sup> Year*, 1929.

the same speed as economic infrastructure. In short, what Lifshitz conceived as a vulgar and deterministic connection between class and cultural production was becoming the dominant ethos, replacing the slower temporality of NEP transformations and the plurality of propositions regarding what was to be done with culture after the socialist revolution.

When Lifshitz's volume came out in 1933, the cultural accelerationism of the avant-garde and RAPP writers' impatience for futurity were giving way to the institutionalization of cultural conservatism, with Socialist Realism famously declared the official cultural doctrine in the First Congress of the Soviet Writers in 1934. This was to herald increasing control by the central Party apparatus of the intellectual and cultural sphere that culminated in the official Stalinist "monoculture" of the late 1930s. If, during what was then known as Stalin's Great Break of 1928, proletarian writers and artists were given free rein to launch a wholesale ideological assault on the so-called traditionalists of the 1920s, now, during the so-called second break with the institution of Socialist Realism and the centralization of culture, it was time to purge the official cultural sphere from the avant-garde and the proletkult in the name of restituting tradition.<sup>44</sup> With the 1938 publication of the notorious *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course*, which included Stalin's article on dialectical materialism, the last nail in the coffin of de-centralized artistic and literary collectives was hammered.

At first glance, it would seem that Lifshitz would have been content with the double defeat of the avant-garde experimentation that he shunned and the deterministic view of the proletkul't writers with their central conception that there is a straight line running directly from class to culture, and from economy to consciousness. Lifshitz, a former student and lecturer of VKhUTEMAS and subsequently an ardent critic of his alma-mater, had turned to classical aesthetics to counter the productivist accelerationism of the avant-garde while developing a Leninist theory of culture.<sup>45</sup> Like Lukács, he was on the side of realism as opposed to avant-garde's aleatory and fragmented syntax. But if for Lukács, it was nineteenth-century literature's critical realism that provided a model for the new socialist aesthetics, for Lifshitz, it was classical antiquity, as the historically adequate embodiment of the transhistorical ideal, which was to be summoned on a new and higher plane of post-revolutionary socialist construction, acquiring new content.<sup>46</sup>

This program was political and aesthetic at the same time: politically, its purpose was to salvage antiquity from its fascist and Nazi appropriations in the 1930s; aesthetically, it was to bridge the fissure in the new socialist culture between the ideality of art and material conditions but to do so in ways that did not impose a fast-track synchronicity between social relations and consciousness,



2. Film Still from Dziga Vertov, *The 11<sup>th</sup> Year*, 1929.

declared as already achieved in the official Stalinist discourse.<sup>47</sup> For Lifshitz, who believed in the progressive unfolding of the historical dialectic, despite death, decay, and decomposition as a price paid for progress, the material content of Greek society could not be repeated, and nor should the classical form be reproduced superficially and formally. Instead, it is the deeply democratic content of classical antiquity as inextricable from the aesthetic ideals of truth and beauty that should be brought back on a higher stage of the unfolding dialectic, in the proletarian state.<sup>48</sup> If his defense of the classical ideal, if only superficially, departed from the traditions to be summoned as mandated by the doctrine of Socialist Realism, his philosophical outlook and his debt to Hegel in formulating the classical ideal as key to the analysis of uneven development frontally opposed the official culture.

With the avant-garde defeated, Lifshitz saw that the main threat to the new Soviet culture came from the official line that mandated vulgar sociologism and positivism. His consideration of Hegelian aesthetics as a crucial path toward formulating a Marxian aesthetics came at a time when Hegelianism was an accusation thrown at “class enemies.” Nevertheless, as was typical of the contradictions of Stalinism, several volumes of Hegel’s *Complete Works* were published in 1938; that is, precisely at the height of official anti-Hegelianism.<sup>49</sup> Lifshitz’s Hegelian reading of Marx’s famous remarks on Greek art in the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy treats consciousness as non-synchronizable with social being.

The basic problematic in Marx’s remarks on the Greeks was the following: on the one hand, Marx believes that the Greek epic cannot be reproduced in the age of bourgeois production: what is Hermes and Vulcan compared to Roberts and Co. and Crédit Mobilier.<sup>50</sup> The mediating link between Greek material conditions and Greek art is Greek mythology, which itself is a manifestation of the conceptions of nature rooted in Greek material life. Greek art cannot be repeated but, nevertheless, it continues to exude inexplicable charm. If the first statement seems to be consistent with the historical materialist understanding that social being determines social consciousness (and this has been precisely emphasized as a Marxian analysis of art and culture by its pioneers, Plekhanov and Fritzsche), the second assumption could be seen as contradicting historical materialism and opening a door for idealism. Lifshitz says that if one only focuses on the deterministic relationship between being and consciousness, one will end up being a vulgar sociologist. The two statements need to be read together, and if done so through a consistent materialist approach, one will find out that there is no discrepancy between them.<sup>51</sup>

The contradiction between the rudimentary form of Greek economy and the high level of its art on the one hand, and the transhistorical character of Greek

antiquity on the other, has a materialist explanation if one considers the fundamental node of Marxian analyses: the historical character of the division of labor, as well as the valorization of quantity over quality, as in capitalism.

The relative harmony of simple commodity economy, the birthplace of capitalism, is “measure”; while capitalism, with its disproportions and contradictions between the ancient methods of appropriation and the higher forms of production, is the violation of “measure.” Capitalist society is dominated by “the measureless as measure,” as Hegel expressed it.<sup>52</sup>

In antiquity, the division of labor between intellectual and artisanal production, town and countryside, displayed a relative balance between qualitative and quantitative labor. Here, human “talent” was not entirely subsumed under abstract labor and capital accumulation. And this balance became the precondition for a higher artistic development amongst the Greeks, despite the backward nature of their mode of production. The social relations were simpler in Greek antiquity, with correspondingly simpler antagonisms than those generated by the inversion of the social relations as relations between commodities. In antiquity, in short, fetishism and art hadn’t acquired a structurally similar character. The opposition between quality and quantity is also an opposition between measure as a key signifier of classical ideality and the sublime quantitative measurelessness of commodities and the social relations they generate. Lifshitz traces Marx’s interest in measure vs. measurelessness to his dissertation on Epicurus and extends it to *Capital*, where measurelessness and the quantitative nature of the commodities conceived as their sublime characteristic acquires a fetishistic characteristic that becomes formative for social relations.

Lifshitz stresses that despite Greek art’s higher ideality, from the historically materialist point of view, it is neither possible nor desirable to restore the material conditions of Greek society. Moreover, the more complex forms of the division of labor in capitalism and the straining of the social antagonisms (not only between labor and capital but also between social conditions and ideality) are the precondition for the abolition of classes, “even if the change had to be wrought by means of ‘progress over skulls.’ The decline of ancient society, together with its art, was a necessary and progressive phenomenon.”<sup>53</sup>

Then, unevenness between the material and spiritual spheres is grounded in the “paradox of progress,” where “the world is ‘assimilated’ by means of the ‘alienation’ of human forces” and where “together with the increase of freedom grows the strength of natural necessity.”<sup>54</sup> The division of labor and the paradox of progress is the only answer to “the riddle of uneven development.” Following the path charted by Marx, Lifshitz exposes the “aesthetic” structure of the commodity as sensuous-suprasensuous, which gesturing toward the historical destiny of the arts, whose social realization is only possible through de-alienation of labor

as a value-producing activity and the overcoming of the fetishistic commodity relations that cloud consciousness. The historical destiny of the arts is precisely entangled with the revolutionary overcoming of commodity relations.

Lifshitz's methodical combination of Hegelian objective idealism, which posits the aesthetic ideal as transhistorical-historical,<sup>55</sup> and Marxian historical materialism, which seeks the realization of the aesthetic ideal in the historical destiny of the proletariat, provides a double foundation for the development of his Soviet Marxian aesthetics in the 1930s, one that forms an orthodox Marxist-Leninist opposition to the Stalinist orthodoxy of the Party that acted in the name of Marxism-Leninism. Marx's conception of uneven development, recast by Lifshitz as a historically conditioned and hitherto unsurpassed opposition between social being and social consciousness, could not be accommodated in Stalin's and Zhdanov's characterization of writers and artists as "engineers of the human soul"<sup>56</sup> and the assumption that the soul of the socialist human had been already engineered with the achieved synchronicity between the forces of production, relations of production, and consciousness, heralded by the victory of socialism in one country.<sup>57</sup>

What can we take from Lifshitz's consistent efforts at developing a Marxian aesthetics and how can his endeavor reinvigorate the discipline of art history, in an age when aesthetic ideality rooted in classical antiquity had been subjected to the harshest critique? Similar to Lifshitz's insistence that we cannot repeat antiquity as a style or a form, we cannot repeat Lifshitz's philosophy of art as a general schema. However, the key tenets of his philosophy of art, which grounds the sphere of art in social contradictions, his insistence on realism as truth, and his emphasis on uneven development rooted in the social division of labor may become a fertile ground for re-embedding the discipline in the contemporary world of late-capitalist contradictions, expressed in neoliberalist repartitioning of the world, in genocidal violence, and in resurgent right-wing extremism forming the new political status quo. Uneven development does not only refer to the various spheres within the capitalist mode of production, but it primarily designates a specifically capitalist logic of primitive (originary) accumulation and the subsumption of elements of outmoded production under the law of value. But rather than looking at outmoded forms of production in the interstices of capitalism as a romantic gateway to an "outside," we need to see how these non-synchronous economic formations and the cultural forms they generate are subsumed within the very processes of capital's valorization. Re-politicization of the discipline would have to take uneven development seriously, and if it does so, we may avoid the fetishization of so-called decolonial visualities and epistemes as romantic gateways from late-capitalist modernity.

## NOTES

---

- 1 Andrew Hemingway, "New Left Art History's International," in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the Left* (Pluto Press, 2006), 184.
- 2 Hans Belting, "The End of Art History?," trans. Christopher S. Wood (University of Chicago Press), 1987; Arthur C. Danto, "The End of Art: A Philosophical Defense," *History and Theory* 37, no. 4, Theme Issue 37: *Danto and His Critics: Art History, Historiography and After the End of Art* (December 1998): 127–43.
- 3 Jonathan Harris, *New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (Routledge, 2001), 6.
- 4 Harris, *New Art History*, 7.
- 5 Hal Foster, "Six: Antinomies in Art History," *Design and Crime and Other Diatribes* (Verso, 2003), 84–103.
- 6 Francis Fukuyama equated the end of the Cold War period in history with the end of history as such, since the new epoch in which Western liberalism triumphed was no longer seen as defined by ideological antagonisms. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992).
- 7 Marxian aesthetics views art history not as an autonomous discipline governed solely by its own laws and constituted through the history of the discipline, but also as one which is multiply mediated by those spheres of social activity that are determined by the relations of production, whether that's law, politics, or religion. Max Raphael and Walter Benjamin, for instance, refer to Engels's 1893 letter to Franz Mehring to ground the bourgeois autonomy of the disciplines within the historically formed division of labor. See Max Raphael, *Proudhon, Marx, Picasso: Three Studies in the Sociology of Art* (Humanities Press, 1980); Walter Benjamin, "Eduard Fuchs, der Sammler und der Historiker," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1937): 346–80.
- 8 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Marx i Engels ob Isskustve* (Sovetskaja Literatura, 1933). The English translation was republished in 1972 by Pluto Press, with an introduction by Terry Eagleton. The volume was reviewed by Lee Baxandall in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37, no. 4 (Summer, 1979): 493–95. It had earlier served as an inspiration for Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, *Marx and Engels on Art and Literature: A Selection of Writings* (Telos Press, 1973).
- 9 Mikhail Lifshitz, "Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the Three Epochs of the Bourgeois Weltanschauung," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7, no. 1 (September 1946): 42–82.
- 10 For a comprehensive list of these publications, please refer to a bibliography compiled by Gyorgi Okseinot and published on Dmitry Gutov's website dedicated to Lifshitz: <http://www.gutov.ru/lifshitz/biblio.html>.
- 11 Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop Art*, trans. David Riff (Brill, 2018).
- 12 The Soviet publication came out in 1968, the year the Prague Spring marked the failure of de-Stalinization from above and further alienated the European Marxist intellectuals from the USSR, a process that had been unfolding since the 1950 to 1953 Korean War and had been intensified since the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956.
- 13 Stanley Mitchell, "Mikhail Alexandrovich Lifshits (1905–1983)," *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 2 (1997): 23–41 and Stanley Mitchell, "Mikhail Lifshitz: A Marxist Conservative," in Hemingway, *Marxism and Art History*, 28–45.
- 14 The volume came out in 2016 and included contributions by Maidansky, Oittinen, Dmitry Gutov, Sergei Mareev, Annett Jubara, Svetlana Klimova, and Alexander Dmitriev. It focused on Lifshitz's philosophy of art and aesthetics and especially on his concept of the ideal; see *Studies in East European Thought* 68, no. 4 (December 2016). Another addition to the Lifshitz reception in English-language publications is Keti Chukhrov's "Classical Art and Human Resignation in Soviet Marxism," in *Sweet Sixties: Specters and Spirits of a Parallel Avant-garde*, ed. Georg Schöllhammer and Ruben Arevshatyan (Sternberg Press, 2013).
- 15 Evgeni V. Pavlov, "Perepiska" [Letters], *Historical Materialism* 20, no. 4 (2012): 187–98.
- 16 A more recent publication is Sasha Freyberg, "Confronting Modernism in the Stalin Era: Mikhail Lifshitz as Critic and Philosopher of Culture," in *Stalin Era Intellectuals*, ed. Vesa Oittinen and Elina Viljanen (Routledge, 2023).
- 17 Andrey Maydansky and Vesa Oittinen, "Mikhail Lifshitz: An Enigmatic Marxist," *Studies in Eastern European Thought* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 241–46.
- 18 Most notably, see the Routledge series *Classics and the Postcolonial*. See also Sarah F. Debrew, *Untangling Blackness in Greek Antiquity* (Harvard University Press, 2022), W. D. Penrose Junior, *Postcolonial Amazons: Female Masculinity and Courage in Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2016), and Whitney Davies, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (Columbia University Press, 2020), amongst others.
- 19 Freyberg, "Confronting Modernism," 114.
- 20 Lifshitz's engagement with Evald Ilyenkov's "Concept of the Ideal" is telling in this regard. While Ilyenkov discusses ideality as a form arising from the intercourse of commodities and situates its universality in the social world, Lifshitz grounds the universality and objectivity of the ideal in nature. Mikhail Lifshitz, *Dialog s Evaldom Ilyenkovym: Problema ideal'nogo* [Dialogue with Evald Ilyenkov: The problem of ideality] (Progress Traditsia, 2003).
- 21 Mitchell, "Mikhail Alexandrovich Lifshits," 25.
- 22 Viktor Arslanov characterizes his philosophy as "transcendental materialism." Viktor Arslanov, "Preface," in *Mikhail Alexandrovich Lifshitz* (Moskva, 2010), 1.
- 23 This is precisely the kernel of Lifshitz's argument contra Ilyenkov's concept of the ideal as mentioned in footnote 20.

## NOTES

---

24 V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism* (1908); *Lenin Collected Works*, vol. 14 (Progress Publishers, 1972), 17–362.

25 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Sobranie sochenenii is tryekh tomakh* [Collected works in three volumes] (Moskva, 1984–1988). For instance, see Mikhail Lifshitz, *Ocherki russkoi kul'tury* [Essays on Russian culture] (Moskva, 1995), and Mikhail Lifshitz, *Dialog s Eval'dom Ilyenkovym* [Dialogue with Evald Ilyenkov] (Progress-Traditsiya, 2003).

26 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Varia* (Grundrisse, 2010).

27 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Pis'ma, 1959–1983* (Grundrisse, 2011).

28 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Lektsii po Teorii Iskusstva, ILFI*, ed. V. M German, A. M. Pikichyan, and B. G. Arslanov (Grundrisse, 2015).

29 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Montagne, Vypiski i komentarii. 1930-ye gg.* [Extracts and comments, 1930s] (Moskva, 2022); Mikhail Lifshitz, *O Gegele* [On Hegel] (Grundrisse, 2012); Mikhail Lifshitz, *Nadaeo: V zaschitu obyknovennogo Marksizma* [I am fed up: In defense of an ordinary Marxism] (Iskusstvo XXI vek, 2012); Mikhail Lifshitz, *Liberalizm i Demokratiya: Filosofskie Pamflety* [Liberalism and democracy: Philosophical pamphlets] (Iskusstvo XXI vek, 2007).

30 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Krizis Bezobraziya* [Crisis of ugliness] (Iskusstvo, 1968).

31 These attacks were taking place mostly as commentaries to Dmitry Gutov's social media posts. One critical article that actually engaged with the exhibition was published in *Khudozhestvennaya kul'tura* [Artistic culture]. Andreeva Ekaterina Yurievna, "Vystovka v chest' Mikhaila Lifshitsa: sovetskoe mejdú parafiksiei i rekonstruktsiei" [The exhibition in honor of Mikhail Lifshitz: The Soviet between para-fiction and reconstruction], *Khudozhestvennaya kul'tura* 4 (2020): 128–45. The author criticizes Gutov and Riff for trying to restore and "para-fictionalize" the Soviet by recycling it. I am grateful to Gutov for pointing to this review.

32 For an excellent discussion on the Soviet *A Universal History of Arts* in the context of Cold War art historiography, see Vardan Azatyan, "Cold-War Twins: Mikhail Alpatov's *A Universal History of Arts* and Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art*," *Human Affairs* 19 (2009): 289–96.

33 Mikhail Lifshitz, *Philosophia iskusstva Karla Marks'a*, in *Sobranie sochenenii v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1 (Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1984), 138–39. In Russian, translated by the author.

34 His 1933 article on Joachim Winckelmann is especially exemplary for Lifshitz's aesthetic and ultimately political project of reclaiming the Soviet state as the most loyal heir of antiquity. See "Joachim Winckelmann i tri epokhi burjoiznogo mirovozreniya," in *Istoriya Iskusstva drevnosti. Maleye sochineniya* [Art history of antiquity: Minor works] (Gost'litizdat, 1936) and in Mikhail Lifshitz, *Vobrosy Iskusstva i Filosofii* (Gost'litizdat, 1935); it has also been translated and published as Mikhail Lifshitz, "Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the Three Epochs of the Bourgeois Weltanschauung," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 7, no. 1 (September 1946): 42–82.

35 *Narodnost' iskusstva i bor'ba classov* [The popularity of art and class struggle] was a series of lectures delivered at the Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and Art in 1938. It was published in *Sobranie Sochenenii v tryekh tomakh* [Collected works in three volumes], vol. II (Isobrazitel'noe iskusstvo, 1986), 245–92.

36 Mikhail Lifshitz, "*Realizm Drevnerusskogo Iskusstva*" [Realism of ancient Russian art], in *Khudozhnik* 6 (1988), available at <http://www.gutov.ru/lifshitz/texts/real.htm>. In Russian (translation by the author). The lecture was delivered to the employees of the Tretyakov Gallery, where Lifshitz then led the scientific department.

37 The specific contours of such an engagement remain outside the scope of this article.

38 Mikhail Lifshitz and F. P. Schiller, *Marks i Engel's ob iskusstve*, ed. Anatoly Lunacharski (Institute Literatury i Iskusstva, 1933). A second Russian edition in two volumes, again compiled and edited by Lifshitz, each with more than 600 pages, was published in 1957 by the Soviet Academy of Sciences and supplemented further in 1964. Lifshitz's introduction to this second edition retrospectively situates the undertaking of systematizing a Marxist study of art and literature itself in a context that was believed to be on a higher plane of the historical unfolding toward the construction of communism in a practical sense in the early 1930s and from within a state that claimed to spearhead this very project, with its concrete material infrastructure, such as organs of government and industry as well as populations, and the army. According to Lifshitz, the question that animated this undertaking was whether there was a culture corresponding to this new historical stage of the development of social relations of production and whether one could look for its seeds in the achievements of the past or in the presentist and futurist trends. Mikhail Lifshitz, *K. Marks i F. Engel's ob iskusstve (Gosudarstvennoe izdat'stvo Iskusstvo)* (Moskva, 1957), v.

39 The journal brought together what Lifshitz called *techenie*, "the current," and included writers who were battling vulgar sociology. Amongst the affiliates of "the current," Lifshitz counts himself, Lukács, E. Usievich, V. Alexandrov, V. Grib, and Tsap. Andrei Platonov was also active in the journal's circle of writers. In a folder from Lifshitz's archive, entitled "Prima Philosophia" from 1975, there are diaries and fragments of daily writings, some of which Lifshitz calls "memories about thoughts" (*vospominaniem o myslyakh*), where he recommends that contemporary readers interested in the 1930s debates against vulgar sociology should read his articles from 1940 in *Literaturniy Kritik*: "Nadaeo" and "V chyem syschnost' spora." He claims that the publication of these articles served as a prelude to the closure of the journal and if not for the war, things would have ended worse for him: see <http://www.gutov.ru/lifshitz/texts/prodomo.htm>.

40 Lifshitz, *Lektsii po Teorii Iskusstva*, 15.

## NOTES

---

41 It is outside the scope of this article to provide a survey of essential trends within the history of art as a discipline in the USSR. For an insightful article that discusses Soviet art historiography in the context of the Cold War oppositions and affinities between institutionalized Western and Soviet art history survey textbooks, see Azatyan, "Cold-War Twins."

42 Between 1924 and 1930, the Institute had published four volumes from the Marx and Engels Archive in Russian and German, under Ryazanov's editorship. This included *The German Ideology* and *The Political and Economic Manuscripts* of 1844.

43 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Indiana University Press, 1978), 8–41.

44 Vardan Azatyan, "Disintegrating Progress: Bolshevism, National Modernism and the Emergence of Contemporary Art Practices in Armenia," *ARTMargins* 1, no. 1 (2012): 62–87.

45 David Riff, "Introduction," in Lifshitz, *Crisis of Ugliness*, 4.

46 There is no place here to expand on the affinities and differences between Lukács and Lifshitz, which especially manifested in the later part of their philosophical paths. Some of the divergences are explicitly addressed by Lifshitz in his letters and correspondence with Lukács, compiled and published in a volume by Grundlese. Mikhail Lifshitz, *Pis'ma, 1959–1983* (Grundlese: 2011). Maidansky and Oittinen briefly address their key divergences in their opening essay of the special issue: Andrey Maidansky and Vesa Oittenen, "Mikhail Lifshits: An Enigmatic Marxist," *Studies in East European Thought* 68, no. 4 (December 2016): 244.

47 Reflecting upon the "stream" of the 1930s, Lifshitz writes: "We did not write about dialectic and about materialism, but wrote about literature, art, aesthetics, and even about history of philosophy to which the 'stream' paid great attention (inconceivable for the crooks of those days). It turned to such non-traditional and not-too-commanding themes as the aesthetics of Karl Marx, young Hegel, the philosophy of history of Vico, and other things of this kind. See Lifshitz, *Dialog s Eval'dom Il'yenkovym*, 18 (translation by the author).

48 Lifshitz ends his lengthy article on Winckelmann with the statement that Winckelmann's three-staged reception by the bourgeois *Weltanschauung*, culminating in his appropriation by National Socialists, is a reflection of deepening contradictions in capitalism, which can be only solved with the annihilation of class antagonisms. Lifshitz, "Johann Joachim Winckelmann," 82.

49 Interestingly, the first two volumes of Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Arts* were published in 1938 and 1940 respectively, in the worst years of anti-Hegelianism in the USSR. Hegel, *T.XII Lektsii po estetike. Kniga pervaya (Gosudarstvennoe sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe isdatel'stvo)* (Moskva, 1940) and Hegel, *T.XIII Lektsii po estetike. Kniga vtoraya (Gosudarstvennoe sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoe isdatel'stvo)* (Moskva, 1940).

50 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/appx1.htm#214>.

51 Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* (Pluto Press, 1973), 85–87.

52 Lifshitz, *Philosophy of Art*, 97.

53 Lifshitz, *Philosophy of Art*, 91.

54 Lifshitz, *Philosophy of Art*, 86.

55 For Lifshitz, every consistent materialism must also be consistently idealist when it comes to the aesthetic ideal.

56 Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature: The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," address delivered at the Soviet Writers' Congress, 1934, available at [https://www.marxists.org/subject/art\\_lit\\_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm](https://www.marxists.org/subject/art_lit_crit/sovietwritercongress/zhdanov.htm).

57 As Lifshitz reminisces in his autobiographical reflections: "It was in opposition to this mindset that the discussion against vulgar sociology unfolded in 1936 as one of the first big literary discussions of the decade [...]. For us the discussion ran down to proving that artworks are always expressions of socially progressive principles, and that the egotistical interests of the exploiting classes never added anything to art except for flaws and limitations. If there was such a thing as great literature in the past, it only existed in spite of those limits." Mikhail Lifshitz, "Autobiography of Ideas," excerpts trans. David Riff, [http://www.gutov.ru/lifshitz/texts/excerpts.htm#\\_edn1](http://www.gutov.ru/lifshitz/texts/excerpts.htm#_edn1). *Iz abtobiographii idey. Besedy M.A. Lifshitsa. Literaturno-teoreticheskie issledovaniye* (Nauka, 1988), 264–318.