



CHAPTER 1

Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise

**When I get tired of myself
I'll fling myself into the golden sun.**
Velimir Khlebnikov

In November of 1993 two exhibitions of socialist realist art were organized in Europe and America. The first one, “Stalin’s Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism, 1932–1956,” opened in New York at the Institute for Contemporary Art, P.S. 1 Museum; the second one, “Agitation zum Gluck: Sowjetische Kunst der Stalinzeit,” took place in Kassel, Germany, at Documenta-Halle (fig. 1.1). From Kassel the exhibition went back to the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg where it was open until mid summer of 1994. Without getting into details, one may conclude that while trying to promote their treatise of Soviet society as a spectacle viewed through a historicist lens, the organizers of the two exhibitions were incapable of reconstructing the most crucial element of the socialist realist enterprise—the communal perception. The thought that socialist realism is not transportable without it apparently did not cross their minds. Regardless of being banal both semantically and aesthetically, socialist realism was nonetheless an integral part of the structure in which it was expected to perform its duties. Therefore an adequate staging of the socialist realist “spectacle” on alien territory is impossible without the transformation of this territory beforehand. This would require an instant optical revolution that switched from an individualized vision to a communal one. But since restructuring “the gaze of the beholder” by shifting its “optics” from individual to collective takes years (as was the case in the USSR), any attempt to become instantly accustomed to the “heritage” of a totalitarian past or “to perform a total and immediate reactivation”¹ of its referents is likely to end up being a failure. On the other hand, one can hardly succeed in replaying collective language games (Soviet-style), unless the attention is evenly spread between both sides of the “medal”—Stalinist “psychedelic commodity”² (i.e., socialist realism) and its ultimate consumer, the Communal.³ The unwillingness on the part



1.1

Installation view, "Agitation zum
Glück: Sowjetische Kunst der
Stalinzeit," Documenta-Halle,
Kassel, Germany, 1994.

of the curators to realize this, is, perhaps, the greatest weakness of both exhibitions. To compensate for this flaw is the main purpose of this essay.

In psychoanalysis, *imagoes* are unconscious representations that give form to our bodily and emotional reactions toward the outside world. In his early works, Jacques Lacan emphasized “family” complexes as those which are responsible for the imaginary replication of the environment in the psyche of an individual. Given the living conditions in urban Russia after the October Revolution, it seems apt to stretch the notion of the family even further and to treat “family complexes” as communal. The aforementioned unconscious representations are frequently at odds with the official version of reality (falsified representations). To compensate, the officialdom assumes the role of “analyst,” thereby imposing a therapy upon an individual (“analysand”) in order to adjust his or her relations with “reality.” This adjustment usually results in identification with characters populating image-making media (from television to pornography), i.e., those “others,” whom the viewer misrecognizes as him- or herself (e.g., a personage, a role model, etc.). However, the identificatory efforts fail to prevent the subject’s alienation from his *jouissance*, which—according to Lacan—belongs to an *other*.⁴ Only the hero of visual representation is “blessed” with the opportunity to be exempt from alienation, to hold on to his or her *jouissance* on a permanent basis. Despite the fact that two of the models portraying the “Marlboro Man” died of lung cancer, we can still see him—on the corporate billboards or in our memory—experiencing the moment of ecstasy (the ecstasy of smoking). But outside the realm of representation, the rules are different. The Real (*le réel*) is manifested in the viewer’s impossibility to appropriate *jouissance* through imitation of a hero’s experiences without losing tempo. This hysterogenic factor was subjected to a different treatment in the Soviet Union, where the emphasis was placed on “ideological *jouissance*” as opposed to sexual satisfaction, or the enjoyment of high living standards, or commodity-oriented pleasures.

The treatment administered to the communal subject in the form of socialist realism’s mesmerizing narratives—regardless of the technical signifier—aimed at identification without alienation. Communal sight was equipped with the cathartic optics necessary to decrease the distance between the viewer and the hero, whose ideological *jouissance*⁵ was supposed to be instantly, without delay, shared by the audience. To those familiar with the communal environment, the preference for ideological over sexual *jouissance* is not accidental. According to the artist Ilya Kabakov, who is the chronicler of the communal world order, “illicit sex in *kommunalka* [i.e., a communal dwelling space] is considered tantamount to theft and therefore invites the severity of collective sanction.”⁶

And this is despite the fact that “everything which is discussed in a communal apartment is camouflage for what is really going on, that is to say, the copulation of words, a logogyration.”⁷ It suffices to remember Andrei Zhdanov and Karl Radek’s 1934 campaign against sexuality, which made erotically explicit representations unacceptable for Soviet artists. In this respect, we can apply to the Soviet case Michel Foucault’s assessment that sexuality in Victorian times was “so rigorously repressed, because it was incompatible with a general and intensive work imperative.”⁸ There was also another motive behind Zhdanov and Radek’s discomfort with sexual imagery. The viewer’s alienation from the protagonist’s libidinal pleasure seemed not to be affected by the cathartic optic as effectively as in cases of ideological orgasm.⁹ Lately, the never-ending attempts to master identification without alienation have taken a new turn—virtual reality, a three-dimensional techno-ersatz of communal optics. To those familiar with Emmanuel Levinas’s writings, virtual reality is synonymous with an ironic downplaying of the philosopher’s belief that “one sees and hears like one touches. . . . It is like caressing: the caress is the unity of approach and proximity.”¹⁰

In all likelihood, the true cause of the jealousy of communal speech toward conventional sexual practices is the fact that speech is itself a form of sex,¹¹ an orgy of chatter, “texturbation.” The latter, regardless of its denial by the very participants of the communal exchange, attests to the bodily nature of speech rituals. This, in combination with “the presence of some lofty [extracommunal] imperative,”¹² contributes to what Georges Bataille—in his analysis of Sade—noted as a hypocritical appeal to the language of power and authority. Speech, consequently, is both the torturer and the ecstatically quivering victim. But who, then, is *homo communalis*? And what about his or her drama, fears, pain, and suffering? Could it be that communal apartment-dwellers are nothing more than audio props, a podium for the protagonist whose name is speech?

In chapter 4 I argue that the portraits of Soviet leaders functioned as mirrors (screens or reflectors) responsible for redirecting the identificatory waves of the communal subject from some images to others; that is, they functioned *de facto* as instruments of synchronicity. The idea of the screen or the reflector also extends to other identificatory schemes related, for example, to the postrevolutionary New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921–1928) in Russia. During the NEP years, posters for Western movies as well as billboards that advertised cookies, cigarettes, or household goods used images of attractive women. Next to these commercial advertisements, one could also see propaganda posters and photographic displays that represented images of “model” citizens and their deeds that

were worthy of imitation. In such instances, when the consumer's gaze moved from the erotic image to the political one, it still retained (by dint of inertia) its libidinal intensity. As a result, what occurred was a transfer of libidinal interest from one iconographic context to another. Thus the erotic context turned out to be a screen or a reflector in relation to the political one. In this manner, a consumer optic facilitated eroticization of political imagery. Later, the libidinal economy of socialist realism and of Soviet mass media came to be dominated by two aspects: ideological perception of the body and bodily perception of ideology.¹³

Parallel to the NEP's aim to reintroduce capitalist commodities to a country swept by communalism,¹⁴ there was yet another process that had been developing on a much larger scale. I am referring to the production of socialist commodities—things that can be characterized as both psychedelic and didactic. These things had nothing to do with the items of everyday use—kitchenware, furniture, clothing, etc. Such items were habitually dismal; they lacked any sense of pleasure, any hope for prestige or comfort. The ways in which the communal psyche connected itself to communal objecthood were completely defetishized. The communal Eros was redirected to the sphere of public (read socialist) objecthood which—for the most part—consisted of indexical sign-objects from the inventory of photographic, sculptural, or architectural agitprop.¹⁵ These also included “cine-forms” through which one could “perceive a tempestuous and incessant flow of people as an interrupted moving form of never stopping content.”¹⁶ Even if they looked tangible, they were still images and traces of something else. Thus, the socialist commodity had a repeatedly postponed presence—an object in its pure potentiality. However elusive, especially as seen through the lens of individual (i.e., noncommunal) optics, the socialist commodity (*obshchestvennaia veshch* in Aleksei Gan's terminology) has never failed to be perceived as an object. By this I mean that the indexical and anticipatory nature of the socialist commodity has tended to be objectified by turning the representation of its presence into the presence of representation. As was mentioned earlier, many socialist objects functioned as instruments of synchronicity (they were “in charge” of channeling the waves of communal desire in the “proper” direction). The fact that the socialist commodity had a postponed presence was in harmony with the deferral of individual subjectivity.¹⁷ With this double deferral, the capitalist subject/object dichotomy was subjected to the same fate.

■

Philosophers and historians are familiar with the concept of the “solar” myth,¹⁸ both its connection with the cults and religions of antiquity and its use, in various modifications, in secular cultural tradition. “Were the

eye not sunlike, how could we behold light?” asked Goethe in his *Zur Farbenlehre*.¹⁹ Clearly, the pathos of sun imitation—creative (or civic) fire lighting the road to the truth—is inseparable from the image of both the artist and the statesman, the “father of nations” who can not only warm his subjects in the glow of paternal generosity, but also reduce them to ashes in the pitiless rays of his “just” wrath. The Soviet *Ozhegov* dictionary (1953) indicates that, in the figurative sense, the sun is “that which is a source and a concentration of something valuable, lofty, and vitally important.” An example: “the sun of the Stalin constitution.” Phenomena of a reverse character include (I quote): “sunstroke—the affliction of brain centers by the heat of the sun.”

The projection of a paradise on earth, made in the image of the solar referent, was reflected in Tommaso Campanella’s utopian work of 1623, *Civitas Solis* (City of the sun), which Lenin recommended to Anatolii Lunacharskii as early as 1918 as a source of ideas for the improvement of monumental propaganda. For many Russian thinkers, artists, and poets—from the Slavophiles to cosmists and futurists—heliotrop(ism) was a sense-of-life metaphor, a means for understanding the artistic image of history within the framework of some unifying principle, however illusory. Here one can also recall Hegel, for whom (as, incidentally, for the theorists of socialist realism, Georg Lukács and Mikhail Lifshits) unity and totality were identical to truth, while fragmentation, which undermines faith in the “indubitability” of this identification, contained the virus of heliomachy, rife with the emancipation of the individual (the ray) from the whole (the light).

Ancient sun cults are known to have practiced human sacrifice. In this context, it is appropriate to interpret the recurrence of mass slaughter in Stalin’s Russia and in Nazi Germany as a revival of solar traditions.²⁰ As previously noted, the solar myth is characterized by the hegemony of metaphor, “the rights and obligations” of which are essentially reduced to the synchronization of fragments under the aegis of a single meaning, which in turn, legitimizes the means of sacrificing the Other in the name of the triumphant Same. However, we should not forget that the widespread notion of socialist realism as a collective artistic practice is correct only under the condition that the Collective tends not to be “identical to itself.” This practice was the implementation of the extremely individualistic *Gedankenformen* (thought forms) of party leaders and theoreticians who personified the Cartesian model of subjectivity, while the communal subject was bound to confessional-cathartic relationships with organs of power and mass repression. To turn these relationships into an imperative, the population was subjected to a shock therapy of Great Purges and

exemplary trials or doomed to socialist realists' anti-alienation treatment. Traumatic neuroses, unavoidable under such circumstances, were relieved through neuroleptic events—holiday demonstrations, mass celebrations, military and sport parades.

In socialist realist paintings, Stalin was often portrayed in the presence of Lenin's statue: the monument to the dead leader was needed to legitimize the viewers' inscription into the image of the one alive. However, the masses were not thus inscribed to imitate him—this would be a sacrilege—but rather to enable them to experience the sense of wholeness in the astral body of the "Father." Among such paintings are Aleksandr Gerasimov's *Stalin's Speech at the XVI Party Congress* (1935), Grigorii Shegal's *Leader, Teacher and Friend* (1937), and Mikhail Khmel'ko's *To the Great Soviet People* (1949). The role of these artists, however, was not solely artistic, which is in fact true of all the official artists—members of the Moscow Union of Soviet Artists (MOSKh).

In the beginning of the 1930s, it became clear that Lenin's behest "to be as radical as reality itself" was not going to be fulfilled: reality was annulled. Soviet art criticism described socialist realism in the spirit of its own mythological traditions.²¹ This was not just myth about myth, but also a form of cathartic adhesion of mythographer and mythology, a situation that radically contradicted the definition of the critical function as defined by Bertolt Brecht and the Frankfurt School. Brecht's "alienation effect" was experienced by Soviet critics only in relation to bourgeois art; in conformity with the domestic situation, it was replaced by an undistanced (and, consequently, uncritical) relation to what took place. For this we may, rephrasing Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse,²² bring the phrase "the affirmative culture of socialist realism" into practice.

Right after the revolution, Lenin issued the requisition of the city apartments (especially in the central areas) in order to divide them among the poor: the "norm" was set up to be one room per person. By 1924 this norm was reduced to 8 square meters per person.²³ In the beginning, the authorities were busing workers to the outskirts of the city, where major plants and factories were located. That is how the program of proletarianization of the center was conducted. Following the death of Lenin in 1924 and the concurrent curtailing of the NEP in Soviet Russia, there began a period of collectivization identifiable with the initial steps of the so-called Stalinist revolution. The peasantry, which in prerevolutionary Russia had constituted the overwhelming majority of the population, was, for the most part, forcibly recruited into collective farms or, in smaller numbers, wiped out or banished to distant regions of the country to perform forced labor. A significant number of others were compelled to migrate to urban

areas. This phenomenon engendered a housing problem of enormous proportions—one that even today awaits a solution.

Stalin's course was to exploit the situation so as to further his project of "de-individualizing" the consciousness and daily life of the Soviet people. City apartments, as provided by law, became as populous as anthills and beehives.²⁴ Such *uplotnenie*²⁵ reached its climax when two or three different tenants had to live in one room.²⁶ Families of every variety, belonging to various social, national, and cultural-ethnic groups, were forced to cleave together in a single communal body. Toilets, baths, and kitchens became the site of this "great experiment" in mass communalization. Thin walls and partitions afforded no guarantee of what Westerners call "privacy." Losing attachment to themselves-as-individuals, the inhabitants of the communal *thermae* were becoming prisoners of each other (an example of alienation from oneself in favor of the collective).

The frustration inherent in such an Orwellian living arrangement was exacerbated by a hysterogenic contrast between the communal interior and the ideological facade, between the overcrowded apartment and the myths of the extracomunal space. According to Kabakov's (sarcastic) assessment,

The world beyond the communal walls is beautiful and whole. Only *we* live divvied up, we're shit. That's the way it was under Stalin. Radio was very important—the announcer Iurii Levitan, whose voice personified the state for thirty years, and all those other hearty voices. The song "Morning paints the ancient Kremlin / oh so softly with its brush, / and the mighty Soviet nation / is awake with dawn's first blush . . ." would fill the apartment. It is really on the subconscious level that this takes effect. Out there is paradise, out there healthy young creatures are off to display their athletic prowess in the May Day parade through the Red Square. While in here, you, sucker, live like a dog.²⁷

Going to work in the morning, the toiling Soviet citizens would leave the squalid communal ghetto to descend—like Orpheus—into the "underground kingdom" of the Moscow subway system, with whose pharaonic architectural grandeur and imperial splendor their pitiful communal existence, naturally, could not withstand comparison.²⁸ Stalin's kitschy skyscrapers and architectural ensembles, such as the pavilions of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV, later called VDNKh) in Moscow,²⁹ played the same role. Derrida's term "being-in-construction"³⁰ comes to mind once we realize that all megalomaniac projects (propagandized under the aegis of the "pillars for the people" campaign) were, in effect, aimed at creating an unprecedented psycho-ideological pressure resulting from the

state's imposition on its subjects, the signs and codes of status and authority.³¹ The paradox, however, lies in the fact that, despite these internal hysterogenic factors, the officialdom always managed to convince its communal counterpart that the source of the latter's troubles and miseries resided abroad.

In communal life there were no actions other than speech acts: everyone was drawn into a process of "serial" talking (be it relatively harmless gossip or extreme cases of verbal abuse). As a result, "with the passage of time, the monstrous dough of spoken kitsch rose,"³² leavened with the yeast of the Dionysian sensibility characteristic of relations within peasant families, collectives, and agrarian sects—relations marked with autochthony of collective somatics and ruled by speech rituals. This echoes Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's "Law of the Commune" (which Gilles Deleuze identifies with the so-called oral mother).³³ Being involved in the pan-Slavic movement, Masoch (whose favorite poets, besides Goethe, were Aleksandr Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov) was undoubtedly familiar with the writings of the Russian Slavophiles (notably Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kirievskii) who, long before him, idealized and promoted an orthodox version of the "Law of the Commune" under the aegis of the lofty concept of *sobornost'* (ecclesiastical communality).³⁴ Thus, it should come as no surprise that after haunting Europe for such a long time, the specter of communality had finally come to settle on Russian soil.

The concept of communalism can be traced back to the Petrashevtsy of the 1840s or to Mikhail Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* (1863). In this book we learn about people who—in addition to working together—are also voluntarily engaged in communal living. In *Revolutionary Dreams*, Richard Stites writes that long before the revolution there had been cooperative-communal apartments (*artel'nye kvartiry*) rented by people of the lower classes who hired themselves out for temporary work in the city: "Groups of workers [usually peasants, brought into the towns by rapid industrialization] would hire a communal apartment, share the rent, buy food and dine together, and even attend leisure events in groups."³⁵ According to Stites, fifteen people in one large room, with their beds circling a table, was a common "residential pattern."

Utopian projects aiming at the creation of communes were popular in the 1920s. The members of OSA (Union of Contemporary Architects)³⁶ saw the residential commune (*dom-kommuna*) as the only solution to the housing shortage. But this was not their only goal. OSA theorists insisted that in order to have communist consciousness, one had to live communally. In Lunacharskii's words, "communal life is based not on compulsion and the need to herd together for mere self-preservation, as it had been in the



1.2
Aleksandr Rodchenko, page
from the magazine *USSR in
Construction*, no. 12, 1933.

past, but on a free and natural merging of personalities into superpersonal entities” (fig. 1.2).³⁷

In 1921 there were 865 house communes in Moscow. Three years later the Bakhmetevskaia Commune was organized, and in 1928 the AMO (automotive workers) Commune. In 1931, Stalin voiced his hostility to *uravnilovka* or *obezlichka* (leveling). The epoch of communal egalitarianism came to a halt. After the Sixteenth Communist Party Congress, Lazar’ Kaganovich was mandated to cancel the projects linked to utopian living, and by 1932 communes ceased to exist. As Stites points out, “The actual housing system of the 1930s, still persisting in the center of large Soviet towns, was a parody of communalism. The *kommuna* gave way to the so-called communal apartment (*kommunalnaia kvartira* or *kommunalka*). And between the *kommuna* and the *kommunalka*, the social and psychological gap was enormous.”³⁸

In summary, the urban peasantry of Stalin’s epoch not only swallowed and assimilated other forms of class identity (such as proletariat and intelligentsia), but also built their own “house of being,” known as communal speech (or “communal-speech-corporeality”). The very notion of difference had gradually dissolved into the swamp of the Same, and the wizardry of the political language game triumphed over the rhetoric of class consciousness. Thus, the thesis of Stalin’s book *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics*—that language is politically predetermined but class-free—literalizes the ultimate “ends” of Stalinist “means.” And since the (post) revolutionary avant-garde had initially associated itself with the proletariat, the dissolution of the latter is part of what prompted the former to “fling [it]self into the sun” or (which is the same thing) to commit suicide by becoming a vehicle for the glorification of Stalinism. Evidently, the phenomenon of dissolution of class consciousness in the “lower depth” of urban peasantry and the retreat of the proletariat “beneath its bar” (as Lacanians would put it)³⁹ is what appears to be in agreement with the Benjaminian notion of “unconscious proletariat” or, for that matter, the “political unconscious.” In his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Peter Sloterdijk argues that “since proletarian existence is defined negatively, . . . positive ego can only be achieved by de-proletarianization.”⁴⁰ This offers an additional explanation why the proletariat had to wither in the USSR (as revolutionary negation gave way to Stalinist affirmation).

The language of communal apartments is both the national disaster and the national heritage of Russia.⁴¹ Whereas in the West communal dwelling usually means the ghetto, in the Civitas Solis (Soviet-style) almost everyone lived in the same sort of ghetto. And inasmuch as communal living is a phenomenon of a minority in Europe and America, communal speech

has not fallen within the purview of elitist theories, whether mainstream or marginal, which focus on discourses of power or resistance but not on the lexicon of what has been defeated, broken, or reduced to the level of verbal garbage.⁴² Alongside communal speech, *homo communalis* also knew another (“Apollonian”) tongue, that is, the voice of power blaring from Soviet radio. On the one hand, this voice can be referred to as the vocalization of *sur-moi* (superego). On the other hand, to fully equate the Soviet regime (and its vocal cords) with *sur-moi* would be too hasty. This entity is constituted due to interiorization of “parental” demands and prohibitions. The means of such an interiorization is at times conscious, but mostly it is unconscious. And yet, considering the tremendous scale of communalization in Russia and how deeply the communal sensibility was rooted in all segments of Soviet life, one may—with some reservations, of course—perceive the authoritarian ego of the state as the communal *moi*’s upper bound, that is, *sur-moi*.

The perplexity of a case study of the relationships between the *kommunalka* and the extracommunal mythical machine is reflected, for example, in my conversation with Kabakov, who argues that:

In one or another form, any figure of communal speech is—on the automatic, subconscious level—saturated with . . . [an] enormous quantity of impersonal constructions that so stagger foreigners. All the impersonal pronouns and verb forms for which English has, in most cases, no equivalent—a large quantity of locutions in principle unconnected to the concrete inhabitants of the apartment, locutions expressive of insufficiency, uncertainty, hope, and so on. The outside world, in short, appears in the form of indeterminate texts. For example: “Today they did not deliver any fresh bread; I stood in line for nothing.” This is a classical construction: “They did not deliver.” Or: “The radiators are cold again today. But yesterday I saw the coal get dumped smack in the middle of the yard.” The external world, that is, appears only via passive verbs. Which is to say nothing of expressions for eviction or making repairs, all of which are accomplished by the neuter *ono* (it). The degree of communal life’s helplessness before the outside world, is on the whole, horrifying. No one in *kommunalka* hammers nails into board or repairs faucets, because all these functions are performed by “it.”⁴³

This observation shows that the communal verbal exchange—especially when it refers to the extracommunal superego—is reduced to predicates. On the one hand, it reminds us that “simple predicative sentences are called affirmative,”⁴⁴ for they endorse the acts of synthesis. On the other hand, it shows a tendency toward what Lev Vygotsky defined as “inner speech” or endophasy.⁴⁵ Using as an example Kitty’s conversation with

Levin in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Vygotsky insists that when the speakers' thoughts are the same, their speech becomes condensed at the expense of omitting the subject of a sentence: "In inner speech, the 'mutual' perception is always there, in absolute form; therefore, . . . it becomes governed by an almost entirely predicative syntax."⁴⁶ Vygotsky continues, "Between people who live in close psychological contact, communication . . . in the fewest words, . . . is the rule, rather than exception."⁴⁷ In his opinion, the child's speech—especially "under the condition of the insufficient isolation"—is "a collective monologue," because it "occurs in the presence of other children engaged in the same activity, and not when the child is alone."⁴⁸ The same terms can be used to describe life in the communal apartments, in which "insufficient isolation" and "collective monologue" were the way of life. This, in fact, may fit the notion of the communal unconscious, not in a Jungian sense, but rather as that which has been conditioned by the extraordinary scale of stereotyping characteristic of the communal ghetto. The notion (introduced above) echoes Félix Guattari's concept of "collective subjectivity"⁴⁹ as well as the Crimean psychiatrist Viktor Samokhvalov's statement that "a human being functions in ways similar to an orchestra: different personalities (enclosed within one's 'I') act like musical instruments."⁵⁰ To make Lacan concrete,⁵¹ we may assert that the communal unconscious is structured like communal speech, and on the strength of the clichédness of the latter, almost everything that is displaced into the unconscious—save for the prelingual (the infantile period of life)—coincides to a significant degree for the majority of communal dwellers.

But the peculiarity of the language practiced in the communal "lower depths" of Civitas Solis lies in the fact that the decreasing vocalization in endophasy turns into its increasing in communal speech. An explanation can be found in Piaget's description of egocentric speech, which begins to develop at the age of three and disappears on the threshold of school age. At this point it becomes silent and turns into inner speech. As Vygotsky points out, "The decreasing vocalization of egocentric speech denotes . . . the child's new faculty to think words instead of pronouncing them."⁵² The reason for this decreasing vocalization is the child's growing acceptance of the fact that the content of his or her thinking is different from that of the listener. But the case of *kommunalka* appears to be the exact opposite: stereotypization makes egocentric thought comprehensible to others. This is why utterance fails to be repressed in the communal mode of self-expression.⁵³ To be precise, the latter—given that it always remains incomplete and transitory—is not reducible to either egocentric speech (with its "influx of sense") or inner speech (with its reduction to predicates),

nor could it qualify as one-hundred-percent external (social) speech.⁵⁴ Curiously, the phenomenon of nondecreasing vocalization is compensated in communal speech by a decrease of visibility. To clarify this matter, it would be helpful to quote Kabakov, who does not believe that a “genuine visual art exists in Russia.” “Speech,” he says, “is behind everything, I do not see, I speak. I can paint a jackrabbit only because I have a story to tell about it.”⁵⁵ To those who are familiar with the mythological content of socialist realist painting, it turns out to be faultlessly readable: one can easily translate images or even brush strokes into words. The painterly palette of Soviet easel art is fraught with the incarnation of speech referents; therefore, it is not visibility, but psychedelia or “visionary visibility,” as Kabakov puts it. From this viewpoint, visualized messages of the Politburo (i.e., the extracomunal) cannot be adequately analyzed without paying attention to its exclusive addressee and its neglected Other (i.e., the communal).

Like Peter Pan, communal speech never achieves maturity. Its failure to grow up becomes synonymous with eligibility for salvation on the ark of solar-centric metaphor. Thus, in Petr Mal'tsev's painting *Meeting of a Heroic Crew* (1936), we see Stalin and other Politburo members taking a walk with the pilots on an airdrome (fig. 1.3). They are accompanied by children (“young pioneers”) who—on a closer look—appear to have adult faces. The artist's sloppiness turns out to be a revelation: *homo communalis* is a child, and Civitas Solis is the homeland of eternal youth. Such infantilism stems from the fact that the land of the Soviets persistently propagandized itself as a paradise, and therefore Christ's admonition to be “as children” could be suitably reproduced in the paradisiacal rhetoric of the Fathers of the State. They would always claim that “children are the only privileged class in the Soviet Union” and that “children are our future.” The reward for not growing up was a trip not to Disneyland, as is the case for many American children, but to Civitas Solis; yet because it belongs to the realm of representation, the City of the Sun was unfit to dwell in. In order to move in, one had to build it first. And as long as such projects—and modernism was among them—remain uncompleted, the enthusiastic builders will have to huddle in the barracks at the construction site—on the territory of the temporary, not permanent paradise.⁵⁶ Thus, the only vacant place left to serve as heaven-on-earth is the communal ghetto.

The mythographers of Civitas Solis have always managed to ignore its counterpart, the communal. An exception to this rule was the writer Mikhail Zoshchenko, and everyone in Russia knows what happened to him.⁵⁷ For socialist realists, *kommunalka* was unrepresentable, opaque, and impenetrable to the rays of representation. Throughout Stalin's reign,



1.3
Petr Mal'tsev, *Meeting of a
Heroic Crew*, 1936.

communal speech was perceived and treated by the USSR's cultural establishment as the serpent hidden in the "house of being." But in spite of (and simultaneously due to) the sharpness of contrast between the solar-centric and the ghetto-centric, the latter played an affirmative role in signifying the triumph of the former. In this sense the entire communal body of urban Russia can be referred to as an affirmative (or signifying) corporeality.

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Communal chat stands comparison with the cicadas' buzzing at night in the Crimea or in the Caucasus. The rubbing of their wings and legs, as orgiastic as incessant "logogyration" in communal speech practices, suggests associations with the "magic word" *tieret'* (the act of rubbing), which evokes the case study of Sergei Pankeiev, a Russian émigré artist and one of the Freud's patients.⁵⁸ To Pankeiev, or the "Wolf Man" (as the therapists called him because he had hallucinations of "white wolves sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window"), the word "rub" (*tieret'*) appeared as the most unspeakable of all crypted pleasures, and therefore was not to be mentioned. As a small child, Pankeiev had witnessed either an episode (*Urszene*) of parental love-making or, possibly, a pedophilic act (between his sister and their father), which both frightened and fascinated him. What shocked him was the connection between rubbing and erection, as well as the sight of the pedophile's sexual organ, in the posture of a wolf sitting on its hind legs. But in Russian, the capital "Я" (i.e., "I") written on a white sheet of paper—the "I" of textophilia and the "I" of logocracy—has the same posture as well. The psychosis of individual subjectivity, such as Pankeiev's traumatic experience, differs from the psychosis of communal subjectivity in that the inability to pronounce, in his case the word *tieret'*, is compensated in the communal case by the act of logogyration itself (that is, a partaking in orgiastic talk). Thus, the rubbing involved in masturbation can be equated with the rubbing of word against word, since, in the latter case, it is symbolic constructs (logos, phallus, and their modifications which assume an anthropomorphic shape or, in Pankeiev's nightmares, the shape of inhabitants of a psychedelic bestiary) that become erect. Russian history is the best illustration of the dependency between communal "texturbation" and the reign of the authoritarian "I" of the state. The verbal frictions of the communal body can be interpreted as a mass ritual aimed at "caressing" the organs of state power, which "grow" to turn into organs of violence and repression. Without this collective bodily function (verbal "rubbing"), the priapism of the pedophilic father (read the Fatherland) could never materialize.

Curiously, even in Soviet poetry of the Stalin era, the themes of the “wolf” and the “sister” seem inextricably linked with the fear of metastasizing communal word exchange. When Osip Mandel’shtam asserted that “the wolfhound-century leaps on [his] shoulders, but [he is] not a wolf by [his] blood,”⁵⁹ an echo of the communalization of the subject of repression can already be heard in the metaphor. Boris Pasternak’s poetics is drawn to a different pole: the spell-casting reference to life as a close relative (“my sister life, you are overflowing today”)⁶⁰ hints at the author’s nostalgic striving to put the traits of a family iconostasis (read intimate, humane) back into the “wolfhound-century.”⁶¹

In Pankeiev’s vocabulary, an appeal to one’s “sister life” is seen as a veiled evocation of the verb *tieret*,⁶² for it alludes to the noun *tierka* (grater) and, subsequently, to *sis-tierka* (sis-the-grater).⁶² The latter is the Wolf Man’s portrayal of Vagina Dentata, linked to castration anxiety and thus detrimental to the “organs” of male power. A monument to this petrifying threat is Vera Mukhina’s *The Worker and the Female Collective Farmer* (1937), an enormous sculptural composition, whose characters look like siblings caught off guard while joining their tools (the hammer and sickle) into a dangerously close proximity, thus contributing to the aforementioned anxiety. Combined, these tools fit the allegory of the Clashing Rocks with the narrow passage between them through which a bird of autonomous art once flew (read the full story in chapter 2).

It is no secret that total communality and total power are essentially forms of social perversion. Being sado-masochistic utopias, at times they compensate for the qualitative side of matters quantitatively, as was the case with the USSR. Given this, the “retreat” of communality or individualism in no way guarantees us that one or the other will not resume (or “return”). In nontotalitarian societies, communality and individualism balance one another, forming odd combinations, including so-called neutral and complex terms. *Corporate* structures of a postindustrialist type are associated with the latter. Moreover, in countries where fragmentation and individualism seem to have reached the limit, a nostalgia for collective *corporeality* is most sharply felt. In the United States, for example, this is manifested in the interest in talk shows, which make up a substantial part of television programming and serve as a school for confessional-cathartic communality. In such instances, however, communality takes a contractual form as opposed to an institutional one (known in Russia as *kommunalka*).⁶³

An urge to encounter communal speech “ritual” has always driven Westerners (from Lee Harvey Oswald to Jacques Derrida) to the USSR’s “speech zones”—be it a workers’ hangout in Minsk or the Moscow Institute

of Philosophy. Apparently, this is the ultimate form that Orientalism has taken since the time of perestroika.

■

In *The Eclipse of Solar Mythology*, Richard Dorson shows how deeply “solarism” was rooted in the Victorian mentality, which had an unfailing appetite for Eastern myths, religions, and folklore. The connections between Orientalism and the “solarized” psyche of nineteenth-century Europeans unfold themselves in Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: “The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of History, Asia the beginning. . . . Here rises the outward physical Sun, and in the West it sinks down: here rises the sun of self-consciousness, which diffuses a nobler brilliance.”⁶⁴

The hubbub concerning Gorbachev’s Russia, which reached its zenith in 1988, may be termed an instance of Orientalism.⁶⁵ In the 1920s and 1930s, Western intellectuals like Walter Benjamin, René Etiemble, Louis Aragon, and André Gide invested their Orientalist aspirations into the Russian revolutionary (read communal) experiment, for they perceived it as the model for the universal future. A diametrically opposite ideogeme emerged in the late 1980s, when it became clear that the promise of the communal future was not going to be fulfilled. Instead, contemporary Russia is beginning to resemble the historic past of Western Europe and America, in particular the moment of “wild” capitalism at the turn of the century.

This new image of Russia has led to a dramatic reversal of the previous Orientalist paradigm: the utopian worldview has given way to a nostalgic one in which the communal is identified with “yesterday” rather than with “tomorrow.” At the end of the 1980s, Russia became for the West what the Orient had been for it in Victorian times: a target and object of sublimated desires, fantasies, intrigues, and self-deceptions. Speaking of Orientalist ventures, one should mention the “success” of Sotheby’s 1988 auction in Moscow, which—to the naked eye—seemed completely dream-like, because almost everything that was “sold” at this auction in point of fact (due to the absence of a Western market for the local art) did not possess an “exchange value.” Rather, it had to do with *potlatch* (archaic expenditure). As in the period when anthropological expeditions were undertaken to the jungles of the Amazon River to study the Baroro or Nambikwara Indians, *potlatch* continues to be present—albeit partially—in the processes of converting signs and symbolic values (e.g., East/West exchange). Being an integral part of Orientalism’s symbolic economy, *potlatch* is endowed with a potential that in the early 1970s enabled Henry Kissinger to strike a deal with Leonid Brezhnev, who—according

to a story I heard from a friend—agreed to give exit visas to 20,000 Jews in exchange for . . . an American car, a Chevrolet Monte Carlo. If true, such an exchange between the superpowers would be the most outstanding example of geopolitical “potlatch.” Years later, on April 29, 2000, after dinner at the American Academy in Berlin, I asked Kissinger if the story was true. He confirmed it, but added that the car was a Cadillac, not a Chevrolet.

Civitas Solis: Ghetto as Paradise

The embryo of disintegration of Civitas Solis was conceived in 1961, when Stalin’s mummy was carried out of Lenin’s mausoleum. Ironically, the “dispersal” of the mausoleum’s inhabitants cannot be regarded as anything other than the “master plot” of decommunalization.⁶⁶ The still pending question is what the communal will turn into while authoritarian power is being replaced by the power of money. Everyone who visits Russia regularly notices the intensive growth of real estate prices in hard currency. The reason for this lies not in the foreigners’ desire to buy apartments there, but that in Russia there are only two “prestigious” cities, Moscow and St. Petersburg. Everyone who becomes rich in Siberia, the northern regions, or anywhere else buys apartments in the best areas of these two cities. Here is an example of how this occurs. Let us say that somewhere in the center of Moscow three different families live in one big communal apartment. A *nouveau riche* buys (through an agent) three small private apartments in peripheral areas. He then offers each of the three families the ownership of an individual living space. As a rule, they accept such deals. Meanwhile, the family of the wealthy person moves to the now vacant communal apartment. As a result, the rich gradually settle into the center of the city and the poor move to the outskirts. Thus, the Soviet dichotomy of power/communal is turning into the Western dichotomy of center/periphery. The Soviet city ghetto, which hitherto was not aware of the differences between the center and the periphery, must face this new reality.