



Language of Art as Language of Utopia

Natalia Ershova (✉) 

Peter the Great St. Petersburg Polytechnic University (SPbPU), St. Petersburg, Polytechnicheskaya, 29,
195251, Russia

ershova@yandex.ru

Abstract

This essay for the inaugural issue of *Technology and Language* looks at language and technology coming together in avant-garde art, Russian futurism and constructivism. When words become a visual elements in the composition of new worlds, the creation of words can be seen as a way of breaking with the thinking of the past, but it can also be viewed as a social technology for the construction of a new life. Artists and poets experimented with graphic and phonetic images of the words. Though constructive principles and laboratory methods of creation were thought to be universal, the ideas of effectiveness and economy were not accepted unanimously. Viktor Shklovsky, founder of the formal school of philology, did not consider poetic language subject to regulation by principles of economy. Still, the creation of a new language united all the schools of the avant-garde and builders of proletarian culture, which found expression in sound poetry, *zaum*, *novoyaz*. Conceived between 1910 and 1920, they were a tool for utopian projects and creative development.

Keywords: Avant-garde art; Language creation; Constructivism; Artistic and social utopia; Viktor Shklovsky

Аннотация

В этом эссе для первого выпуска журнала “*Технологии в инфосфере*” (“*Technology and Language*”) рассматривается соединение языка и технологий в авангардном искусстве, русском футуризме и конструктивизме. Когда слова становятся зримым элементом в композиции нового мира, создание новых слов можно рассматривать как способ разрыва с мышлением прошлого, а также как социальную технологию для построения новой жизни. Художники и поэты экспериментировали с графическими и фонетическими образами слов. Хотя принципы конструктивизма и лабораторные методы творчества претендовали на универсальность, идеи эффективности и экономии не были приняты единодушно. Виктор Шкловский, основоположник формальной школы в филологии, не считал, что поэтический язык может подчиняться законам экономии. Тем не менее, создание нового языка объединило все школы авангарда и создателей пролетарской культуры, что нашло отражение в звуковой поэзии, зауми, новоязе. Созданные в период 1910-1920-х годов, они стали инструментом для утопических проектов и развития творчества.



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The language of modernist art changed the relationship between artist and audience. An understanding of the language of XX century art might be achieved by various approaches. One of them is to draw parallels with the language of the visual arts of the avant-garde with its tendency to single out some prototypical forms that affect a spectator, a tendency which was manifested in an analytic type of creation and in abstraction. The abstract language of art with the disappearance of story-telling and even of subject-matter brought about different types of connections inside the work of art and a changed relationship between spectator and artist, reviving such activities as solving mysteries and finding clues for the coded messages. Fragments of words, ciphers, and letters scattered disorderly in the paintings of futurism demonstrate the dynamics of modern life and the disruption of routine relations and logic connections. They are mixed up with details of landscapes, still-life, and portraits, showing the quick passing of time and interrupting discrete way of perception. Russian futurists, such as Olga Rozanova, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, drew on the power of the written word to attract attention. In this, they were inspired by handmade street advertising billboards. But still, this use of words do not take us closer to the meaning of the artistic message, so one will have to address an interpreter. Kazimir Malevich wrote in the catalogue of the exhibition "Tram B" about several of his works: "the content of the works is unknown to the author" (Malevich, 2000, p. 14), and thus the art critics of today are still occupied with finding an explanation. In these paintings which the artist himself defined as "illogical realism," fragments of words leave a "semantic shadow" only (Malevich, 2000, p. 17).

Letters, words, and lines exposed their graphic image and phonetic performance. As soon as we pass from the theoretical notion of a language of art to the visual image of words in avant-garde painting, we enter the sphere of an experiment where the "book of an artist" is of special interest since it exhibits characteristic techniques such as the distortion of the typographic, the creation of an equality between words and arbitrary arrangements of letters, the return to expressive handwriting along with a total denial of printing technology and the layout of a page. Letters, words, and lines were to expose their visual qualities. Visual experiments with words were close to the poetic ones, in both cases the understanding of language shifts from semantics to graphics, from phonetics to sound and visual appearance (fig. 1, 2). Poetry melted into drawings and into music. Those experiments were inspired by an idea of the word's liberation from the burden of habitual meanings. But actual revolutionary change was associated with *zaum* which dates back to Alexei Kruchenykh's declaration "The Word as it is" of 1913 where he claimed that "new verbal form creates new content" (Terekhina & Zimenkov, 1999, p. 44). Futurists expressed their conviction that the future could only be depicted with the help of new words that never existed before. *Zaum* appeared in the course of a poetical revolution dedicated to the free creation of words. It presupposed new rules of perception, mostly spontaneous and often connected with the

performative and musical context or with the visual arts. Velemir Khlebnikov considered the creation of words an instrument for the creation of a new world creation, a new universe. Language for him was the only way to understand the universal principles of nature (Douglas, 1980). The creation of words is opposed to the «petrification of language» (Terekhina & Zimenkov, 1999, p. 66).



Figure 1. An example of zaum “Vzorval’...”, litograph by Rozanova (Kruchenykh, 1913, p. 11)

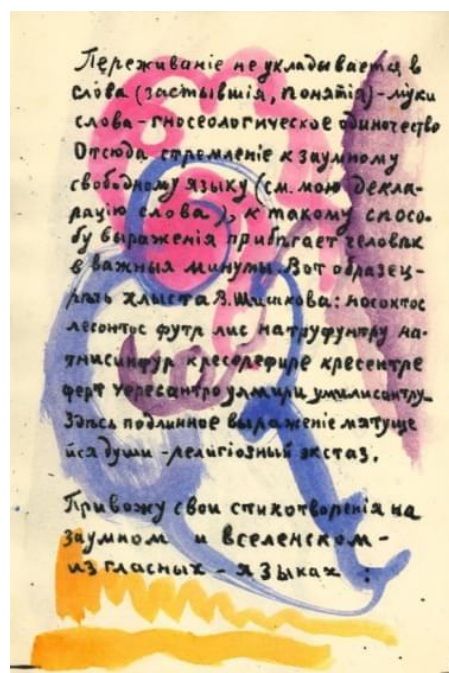


Figure 2. text “Переживание не укладывается в слова...” (“Emotion does not get into words...”) by Kruchenykh (1913, p. 23)

Constructive principles could be applied to the creation of a new material world and a new language. The system of a new language (novoyaz) was aimed at defining and recruiting adherents and keeping distance from hostile social elements and from other cultural traditions. Spoken language preserved the features of old culture, so most of it was of no use for the construction of a new life. It had to be changed to distinguish builders of the new world and would thus perform the role of a social technology. The postrevolutionary period was marked by launching a project of proletarian culture (Proletcult). Alexander Bogdanov thought that language could become an important instrument for constructing the new life.

The idea of construction that was generated for the visual arts in the years 1914-1916 soon turned into a creative principle for building the new life. First soviet art-critic Nicholai Punin characterized it as an embodiment of Alexander Bogdanov's organizational principle. Thus, the term constructivism was widely used in many spheres of social science, humanities, and theory of art. The avant-garde and constructivism had already been associated with a new approach, forward-looking and free from the stereotypes of tradition. As the organizational form for building the new life, it



appropriated social justification. Its logically formed structure made constructivism look like visualized philosophy (Railing, 1995, p. 199). It was also understood as a new type of thinking which is naturally relevant in science and technology but should also be applied in art helping to process subconscious images and turn them into social consciousness (Ioffe, 2006, p. 46). Its aesthetics was oriented toward purity, clarity, and logic as well as originality and the ingenious combination of elements. Constructivism in the social dimension was based on the principle of economy and efficiency. The understanding of constructive principles, however, was far from consensual. Gabo and Pevzner took them for a universal method of creation irrespective of class interests and the construction of social life (Harrison and Wood, 1993, p. 297). They believed in the harmonious unity of pure lines, function, and logic as one finds in architecture. Malevich understood constructivism as a transition (return) to embodied subjectiveness and a betrayal of nonsubjective art (which caused misunderstandings in his relationship with El Lissitsky).

Poetic language is not subject to a law of economy. Principles of the economy of thought and economy of creative force were extremely popular in Russia at the turn of the century. Viktor Shklovsky, one of the founders of OPOYAZ and representative of the formalist trend in the investigation of language investigations, showed in his famous work of 1917 "Art as Technique" that poetry should not defy the general law of economy and effectiveness of speech and put forward an idea of "estrangement." One of the authors he referred to was Herbert Spencer who described ingenious writing as effectively composed in a language that conforms to a principle of economy of reader's attention and mental effort. Shklovsky opposed to this his concern with poetic language which hinders and complicates comprehension because its goal is not an automatic understanding and recognition but artistic vision. The word's function in poetic language is not necessarily that of denotation (Harrison and Woods, 1992, p. 312).

Shklovsky considered the intentional creation of something artificial or "artifice" as basic for the distinction between the routine and artistic languages of poetry and prose. (Algebraisation and automatism in routine speech, abbreviation, symbols instead of words are used for the sake of economy.) Similarly, the visual art of cubism and futurism used a "technique of hampered perception" (Terekhina & Zimenkov, 1999, p. 268). *Zaum* as poetic creation took shape with the absurd, with alogism, with "vsetchestvo." It is associated with intuition, the instant rendering of a psychological state, avoiding clarity and logic, thus asserting an idea of the freedom of the arts that is based upon its purpose. Shklovsky was the first to describe *zaum* as a special language of poetry, moreover, he claimed it to be a trait of poetry in general, working with images which authors are not able to define, but which are implicitly present and make poets suffer from the impossibility of their expression. He gives an idea of "sound-speech" – sounds that strive to be language (Russian futurism, 1999, p. 259). This, then, is the difference between *zaum* and *novoyaz*, between two poles for the creation of words: *zaum* emerged at the height of neglecting and negating tradition, *novoyaz* as the construction of a language for the construction of a new life, such that convenience, pragmatism, and economy might allow for it to perform its function as social technology.

Avant-garde art proved to be an apt form of building life in the first years of the



cultural revolution in Russia and many artists thought it to be their responsibility to participate in the process, though it obviously could limit their freedom of individual creation. Boris Grois wrote about Tatlin that his choice in favor of the machinery of the new Soviet state probably seemed a more honest choice to him than a return back to the outdated past. Ideas of spiritual and intuitional origin of art in the Russian avant-garde predetermined a special understanding of technology and its role. It is known that the glorification of machines and the technological advance of big cities was not very typical for the Russian futurists. For the organic trend in avant-garde as well as for the followers of suprematism, technology was an alternative to the spiritual force of a human. It was a question of compatibility of humanity and technology in a philosophical sense. As Grois suggested, the Russian avant-garde tended to share an attitude towards the technical rooted in Russian tradition – it is profane, amateurish, and opposed to the Western outlook. He wrote that Tatlin's tower, as well as other objects, from the beginning to end, were merely works of art, "non-functional machines," comparable to Duchamp's ready-mades (Grois, 1993, p. 366-367). The problem of human abilities (for instance, the "widened vision" methods by Mikhail Matushin) was more typical for the Russian avant-garde. The focus was on the social role of technology in the Soviet period, also on the idea of interdependence in the development of art and technology, and how it was realized within synthetic forms of artistic activities.

The language of artistic utopia and the language of social utopia are instruments for building the new reality. The period of the 1900s to 1920s was marked by revolutionary developments in science, technology, art, and society. The language of the visual arts underwent radical changes. Avant-garde art developed its language through experiments of various "schools" that united masters and their disciples. Goals and tasks of creation could be different, though all of them were united by the idea of breaking with tradition and introducing new methods of expression. A similar process in poetry advanced the idea of word creation. An extreme version of this was language deprived of its former meaning. Sound poetry was ready to join music, and graphic experiments with words and texts were part of visual art. Malevich consistently applied the language of the avant-garde to all these arts: graphic, painting, object, poetry, music. They would achieve their pure suprematic non-subjective state in the New reality (Malevich, 2000, p. 18). Philosophical ideas of the time (energy, economy, organization) were reconsidered in the artistic practice and in pedagogical works. Seeking liberation from the dictatorship of tradition and stereotypes in art and historical approach, the avant-garde formed its own utopian vision of the world. Both languages – those of poetry and the visual arts – in the period of the scientific-social-artistic revolution displayed features of affiliation with various kinds of utopia. It seems that nearly every approach to language of this time inevitably brings us to the language of utopia – from revolutionary romanticism and a pathos of new creation to escapism with its new otherworld reality, from technological optimism to spiritual asceticism. New languages had to play an important role in creating new worlds with their constructive principles that vary from mathematical logic to the intuitive play with meanings. And obviously, the philosophical and social study of languages in that decade from 1910 to 1920 would be reflected in the sphere of artistic creation.

Natalia Ershova



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