

# CHAPTER 6

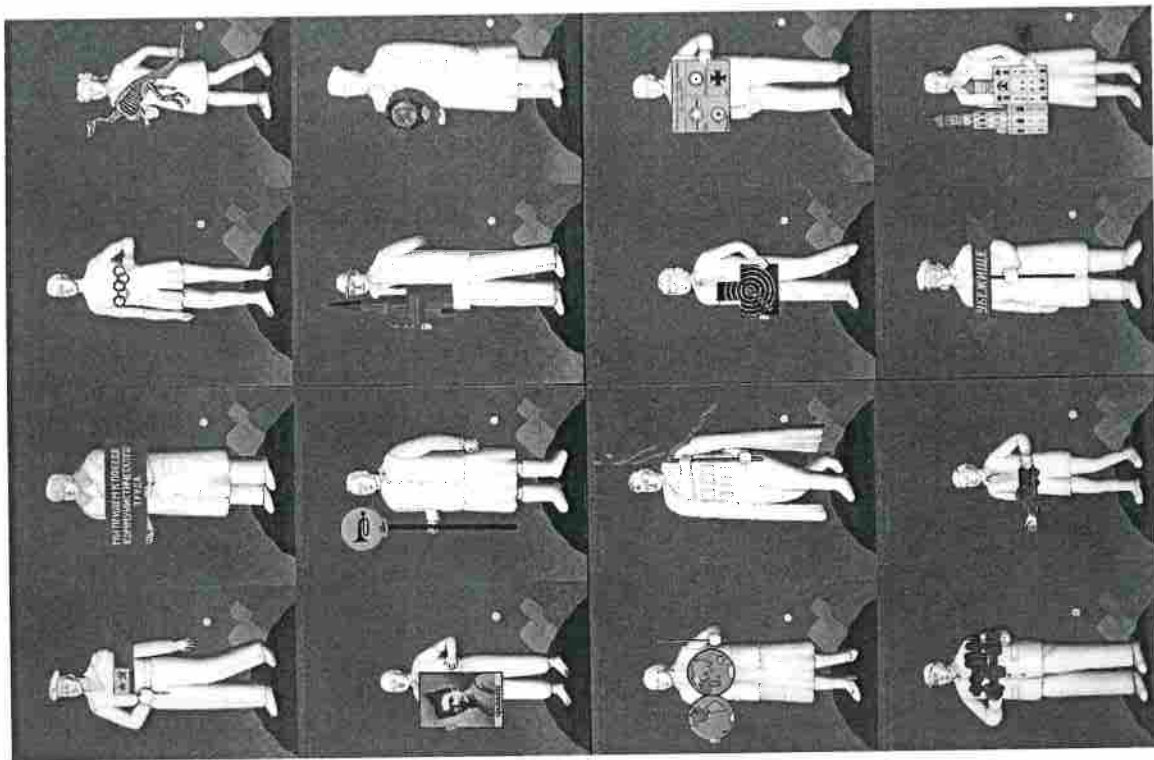
## LIVED TIME / HISTORICAL TIME

6.1

### LOSING THE ENEMY

In Moscow in May 1987, even a foreigner could sense that the myths of revolutionary history were lifting like mist. Old political meanings were being challenged under *glasnost*, but what the future held was still anybody's guess. Gorbachev had been General Secretary of the Communist Party since March 1985. Newspapers and television, while in no way governed by market forces, were open to critical reflection and debate. Novelists were publishing manuscripts that had languished in desk drawers for decades. Journals like *Novyi Mir* (New World) functioned as public forums for discussions of the Soviet past, economic reform, Orthodox religion, and political elections. "Unofficial" art that was exhibited openly at Kutsnetskii Most (which was also the black market for books) included the work of Grisha Brushkin, whose painting *Fundamental Lexicon* (1976) sold that summer at a Sotheby's auction for £242,000 (\$412,828). Moscow television aired the U.S. television special "The Day After," a post-nuclear war melodrama condemning the futility of Cold War military strategy. A young West German pilot flew, unnoticed, across the nuclear-militarized zone and landed his small plane on Red Square without resistance.

But if gestures of opposition in the public sphere had become frequent in the Soviet Union, the structures of power were still largely intact. Party hierarchies, bureaucratic bottlenecks, networks for the allocation of scarce resources (apartments, consumer goods, vacation accommodations) persisted during *glasnost* much as before. The urban landscape—strikingly green to the Western eye—was still unchanged, its monumental buildings

6.1 Grisha Brushkin, *Fundamental Lexicon*, fragment, 1976.



62. Igor Makarevich, "Gorbachev's," 1988.

surrounded by "empty" spaces that attested to the absence of capitalist urban land values, its streets and stores denuded of advertisements and all but the smallest of signs, so that the noninitiate walked obliviously past shops, restaurants, and leisure centers. State grocery stores were adequately stocked. Tea, coffee, and sugar were not yet in short supply. Street vendors sold fresh vegetables and strawberries. Champagne and Georgian wine could be purchased at state liquor stores, but the drinking of vodka was officially discouraged under Gorbachev. Working people had a surfeit of rubles, which had an official exchange rate of slightly better than parity with the US dollar. They complained that there was nothing new to buy.

It must be said that restricted access and networks of privilege made visiting a pleasure for foreign academics. Few in number, we were housed almost exclusively in the Gostinitsa Akademii Nauk (Hotel of the Academy of Sciences), just off Leninskii Prospekt at the Otkriabskaia metro station. I was there for the first time, accompanying a U.S. physicist who had been invited by the Landau Institute.<sup>1</sup> Our two-room suite was comfortable enough, complete with humming refrigerator and black-and-white television. It had abundant pseudo-nineteenth-century furniture and patterned

drapes and wallpaper, reflecting the fashionable tastes of high Stalinism. There were politically innocuous pictures on the wall, and a remarkable chandelier constructed from what looked like five glass coffee jars, each screwed into a red plastic base. The bathroom had tiles in three colors, randomly arranged. The large windows leaked only somewhat around the edges. Our sole deprivation, as springtime temperatures dipped into the low forties, was that there was neither heat nor hot water—not only in these rooms, not only in this hotel, but in the entire Moscow district during a several-week period of repairs.

Nearby Gorky Park was safe and pleasant. The red brick walls of the Kremlin, failing to measure up to Western photographs, seemed anything but an evil and foreboding fortress. Lenin's mausoleum on Red Square appeared incongruously flanked on one side by the colorful cathedral of St. Basil and on the other by GUM, the three-story, three-hall, iron-and-glass-roofed, late-nineteenth-century, state-owned shopping arcade with commodities sparsely populating the lower floors and noisy birds nesting in the rafters. As I had just finished the manuscript for a book on Walter Benjamin, a visit to Moscow, capital city of twentieth-century socialism which Benjamin had visited sixty years before, seemed entirely appropriate. My status as a tourist was short-lived, however, due to the network of Moscow's intelligentsia. On the second day, through the family connection of a Landau mathematician, I was brought to the Institute of Philosophy on Volkhonka Street and introduced to a small working group surrounding a young but highly regarded philosopher, Valerii Podoroga, senior researcher at the Sector of the Philosophical Problems of Politics. Podoroga had written his dissertation on Theodor W. Adorno, and we had that in common. He had read my book on Adorno, which was available in the library of the Academy of Sciences, a fact that I found surprising—as they did my appearance with neither official invitation nor the standard peace-group affiliation.

Podoroga had been holding a series of increasingly tolerated "underground seminars" at the Institute, in order to consider seriously philosophers

and theorists formerly dismissed as “bourgeois”: Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, Merleau-Ponty, Barthes, Adorno, Benjamin, Foucault. He was not the only person in Moscow writing on European continental philosophy, nor even the only philosopher writing on Adorno. But he and his close associates were unique in appropriating the methods of Western theorists in order to launch a sustained, critical analysis of Soviet culture. In going beyond a critique of *political* totalitarianism, this group was breaking new ground. Indebted particularly to the theories of the Frankfurt School and of Michel Foucault, their project was to criticize power by philosophizing from cultural phenomena—architectural forms, literary texts, cinematic practices, the modalities of everyday life—and it was here that our interests touched closely. At dinner in Podoroga’s home I met Mikhail Ryklin, also a philosopher at the Institute and a friend of Podoroga since student days. He launched into a lecture on Walter Benjamin’s *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*—in fluent German. Ryklin was thoroughly acquainted with French poststructuralism as well. I was impressed generally by the European language skills of these intellectuals, long isolated from the West. Numerous Institute members, many of whom had never been abroad, addressed me freely in German, French, or English, while I was only beginning to enter the world of Russian script. The fact that our collective communication reached a level of intellectual rigor, however, was due to the translation skills of Elena Petrovskaia, a young woman working with Podoroga, who as a child had attended the English-speaking United Nations school in New York. Petrovskaia, then writing her dissertation on the image of the Indian as the enemy “Other” in the American intellectual landscape, acted as translator for our official talks and informal conversations. Her American English was flawless, and she transported not only our words but also our souls across the linguistic divide.

There were others whom I came to know during this and subsequent visits—Nellie Matroshilova, head of the Department of the History of Philosophy and an expert in German phenomenology, who would host Jürgen

Habermas’s visit to Moscow the following spring; Mikhail Kuznetsov, specialist in contemporary German philosophy who now writes on the philosophy of computer technology and cyberspace; Tatiana Klimenkova, influenced by Foucault and one of the first Russian philosophers to concern herself with feminist issues; Natasha Avtonomova, the Institute’s first researcher in the work of Jacques Derrida; Elena Oznovkina, translator of Husserl into Russian; Dmitrii Khanin, aesthetic philosopher and John Dewey expert, who had first escorted me to the Institute and now teaches Russian Literature at Colgate University—and many more. But these three personalities would be the pivot around which our subsequent collaboration turned: Valerii Podoroga, idiosyncratic and brilliant, esoteric in a way considered charismatic by his colleagues, at times blunt and bungling—the very prototype of a Russian philosopher; Mikhail Ryklin, openly communicative, fluent in four languages, and impressive in his knowledge of various theoretical traditions which he delighted in parrying with Nietzschean black humor; Elena Petrovskaia, willfully energetic, able to copy an impressionist painting with the same mimetic skill as translate a text, and raised with a precocious confidence from having been at home on both sides of the Cold War world. Their personalities gave expression to the various objective possibilities that existed at the time. As a specifically Russian philosopher, Podoroga’s interest in Western theory was tactical, a means of prying open the past of his own, national culture in its pre- and postrevolutionary forms, whereas Ryklin saw himself more in international terms, affirming the intellectual and aesthetic *avant-garde* whether it showed itself in Moscow, Paris, Berlin, or New York. Petrovskaia prefigured a new hybridity, choosing to adopt values from both East and West. She loved Moscow, but specifically for its contributions to international culture. Unimpressed with Western materialism, she used the privilege of her family’s foreign travel for one purpose, to acquire a collection of recent books that would have made any Western academic envious, and these circulated widely among her Moscow friends.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that I had been schooled in Western Marxism had everything to do with my desire to enter into a collaboration. And yet this Marxist orientation was of little interest to my Moscow counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Granted, at the level of the Academy of Sciences, philosophers had been exposed to a sophistication of Marxist theory lacking in the ideology of Marxist-Leninism. (The general Soviet public did not read Marx himself.) The French Marxist Louis Althusser visited the Institute of Philosophy during the Brezhnev years; the rehabilitation of the Hungarian Georg Lukács had been signaled by a recent translation of his aesthetic theory. But these thinkers spoke to an older generation than the one with whom I was becoming involved. In the Soviet Union, the *sheshtidesiatniki* or “sixties generation” was that of Petrovskaya’s parents—and, indeed, of Gorbachev himself. They were born in Stalin’s time, their childhood experiences were of war, they came to maturity during the era of Khrushchev’s reforms. As students they discovered the writings of the young, humanist Marx, and many later sympathized with the spirit of the Prague Spring of 1968—the call for “socialism with a human face.”<sup>4</sup> There was a time lag between this sixties generation and the one that I had encountered as a student in the United States and Germany at the very end of the decade. Podoroga and Ryklin, my peers, considered themselves already beyond the neo-Marxism of the Gorbachev generation. But if their politics differed from mine, the terms of our critical analyses were close. We understood culture as fundamentally political, operating on the body in a material sense. The machinery of modern power was not so much hidden behind the ideology of mass utopia as it was produced by it. Intrinsic to the politics of modernity was the potential for the abuse of power against the collective, and at the same time in its name. These were problems that neither Western capitalism nor Soviet socialism had managed to resolve.

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I returned to Cornell and started formal study of Russian, committed to a sustained collaboration—although how such a project would be financed

was far from clear. U.S. government funding during the Cold War was geared to area studies, and I was neither a Soviet nor a Russian specialist. Moreover, the critique of problems of power *common* to both systems was hardly a Cold War research priority. The MacArthur Foundation was receptive to less typical projects, however, and we were grateful for its funding on several occasions. The first was for a reciprocal exchange of visitors to take place in early 1988.<sup>5</sup> It necessitated obtaining official permission from the Soviet side, which I had bypassed on my first visit, and access to which meant passing through the red-curtained, bookless offices of the high-placed bureaucrats of the Academy. Their power, it was rumored, was in inverse proportion to their scholarly productivity, and any request that was not their own initiative was met with suspicion. Our exchange was to entail, as the first stage, a January visit to Moscow by a two-woman team, myself and Nancy Ries, a Cornell graduate student of anthropology who specialized in Soviet culture. That two women alone wished to comprise an official delegation was enough to raise eyebrows; that an anthropologist wanted to do field work in civilized Moscow was close to a scandal.<sup>6</sup> The second part of the proposed exchange, to bring younger members of the Institute to Cornell in April, went clearly against protocol, as the list approved for travel to the West generally did not reach below department heads. As one Moscow friend put it: “It is a firm conviction that only chiefs of the tribe are to enter the Wonderland.”

Just weeks before our January visit, official invitations for Ries and myself arrived. Podoroga’s and Petrovskaya’s permission to travel to Cornell was granted, likewise, at the eleventh hour. But the authorities did yield, setting a precedent on which we would rely in the future.<sup>7</sup> I spent the fall of 1988 preparing a series of lectures analyzing problematic aspects of the common, radical democratic heritage of our political systems, and delivered them at the Institute of Philosophy in January–February 1989.<sup>8</sup> In May and June I was back in Moscow to give talks in Podoroga’s “underground seminar” and lecture on Walter Benjamin at the Belorussian University in Minsk.<sup>9</sup> Plans

were made for a special Benjamin issue of the *Soviet Yearbook of Philosophy* for 1990, published by the Academy of Sciences, that would include the first Russian translations of his works (sections from his "Moscow Diary," among others), and contributions by Podoroga and myself.<sup>10</sup> The group around Podoroga coalesced into a working collective, continuing to develop a political critique of Soviet culture and expanding to attract philosophers from Minsk, the Baltic republics, and Bulgaria, as well as Moscow intellectuals and artists from outside the Institute.

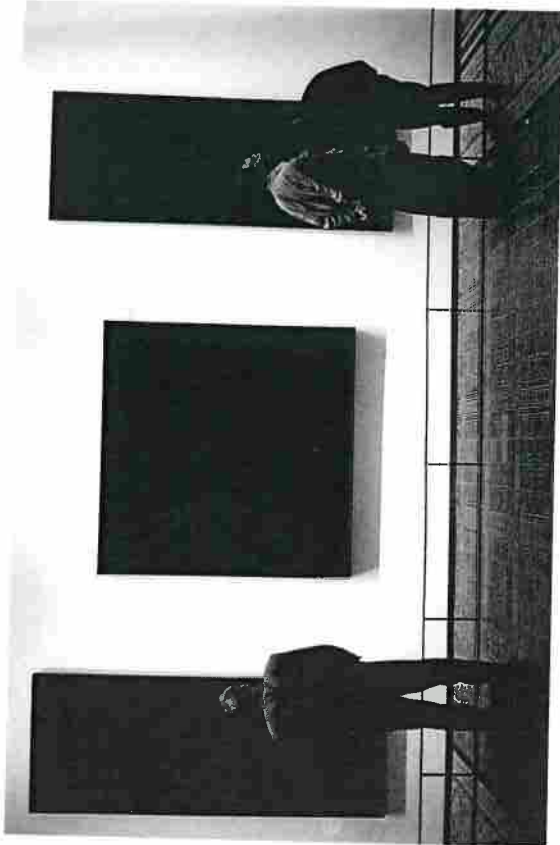
Western visitors became more frequent. I urged Fredric Jameson to contact Podoroga's group when he went to Moscow in October 1988, and he became an integral part of our collaboration.<sup>11</sup> Jürgen Habermas's official visit to the Institute of Philosophy took place in April 1989. A trip to Paris in that month allowed me to make preliminary arrangements with Jacques Derrida for a visit to the Institute the following spring. My trips back and forth (and consequent access to reliable telephone and mail communication) made it possible to help organize two events initiated by members of the Institute that one year earlier would not have taken place.<sup>12</sup> The first was an International Conference on Martin Heidegger, October 17–19, 1989, on the occasion of Heidegger's hundredth birthday.<sup>13</sup> This conference broke old rules by including young philosophers as participants, dispensing with the traditional Marxist-Leninist ideological framing, and having as its stated goal the opening up of channels to Western philosophical debates. Clearly, the younger Russian philosophers saw Heidegger (even more than Habermas)



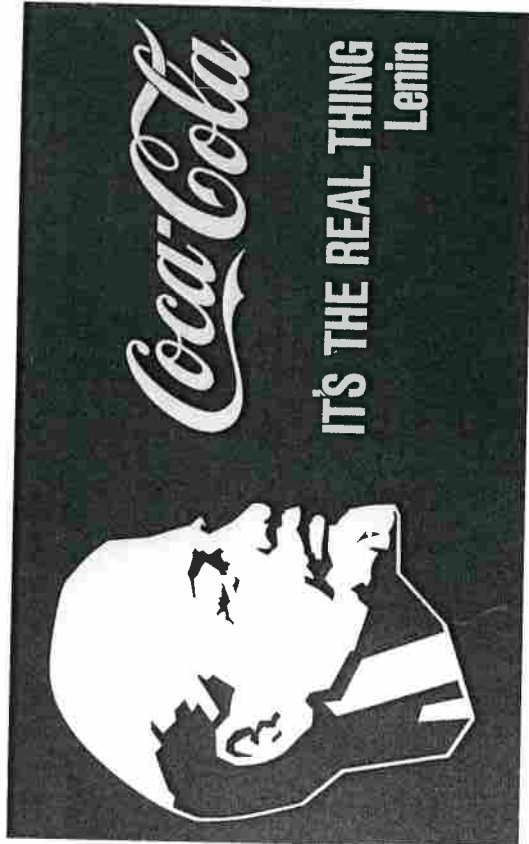
6.3 Jacques Derrida at the Institute of Philosophy, Moscow, April 1990. Photo by Mikhail Ryklin.



1 Aleksandr Kosolapov, *The Manifesto*, 1983.



12 Visitors contemplate three paintings by Ad Reinhardt at the retrospective exhibition "American Art in the Twentieth Century," Berlin, 1993. Photo by Susan Buck-Morss.



13 Aleksandr Kosolapov, *Symbols of This Century*, 1982.

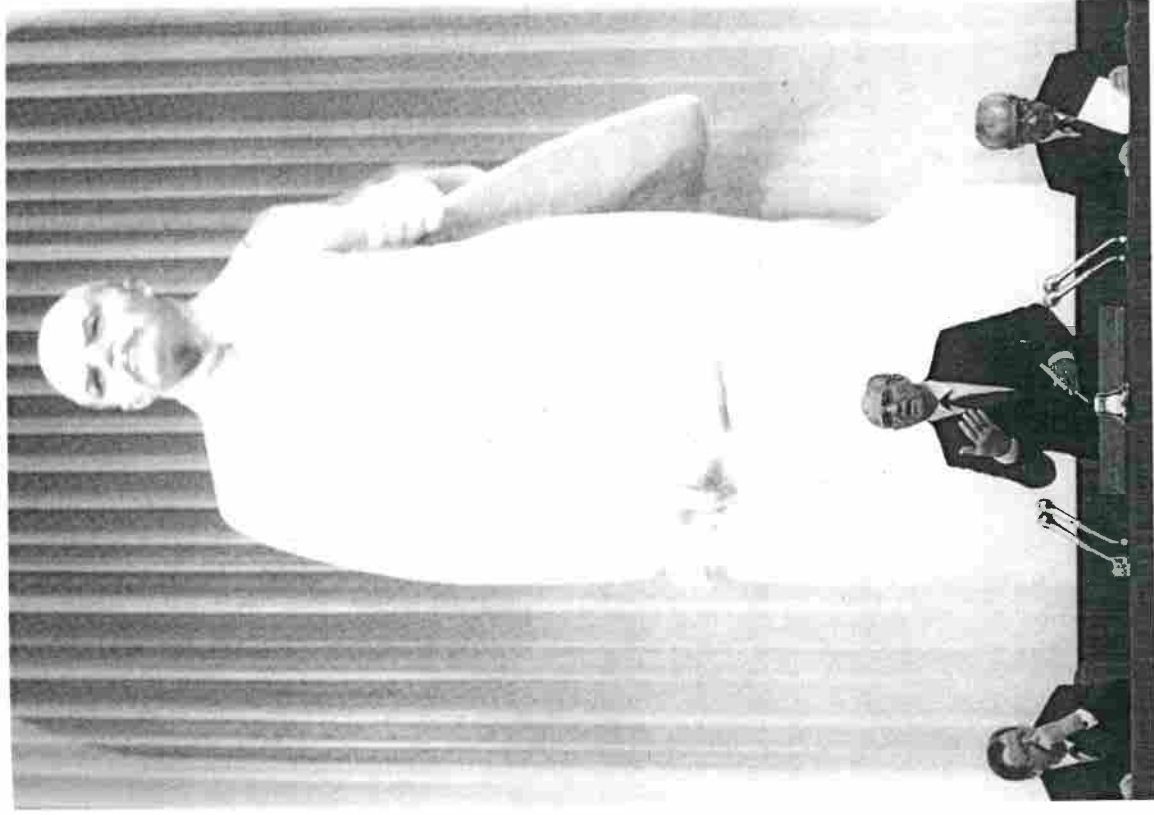
as a fundamental departure from the intellectual lineage of Hegel-Marx-Lenin.<sup>14</sup> A debate ensued during the conference among the German participants that rehearsed the “case of Heidegger”—his Nazi connection—to which V. N. Bibichin made the telling reply that the whole issue was not so very significant; Nazi or no, Heidegger was indisputably “bourgeois,” and what was truly remarkable in the Moscow context was the fact that he was being discussed seriously at all.

This was the heyday of East-West exchanges. In January 1990, with the official title of “Co-Chairwoman of the International Soviet-French-American Symposium,” I was back in Moscow with Jean-Luc Nancy for a workshop of deconstruction.<sup>15</sup> Derrida’s ten-day visit took place in April. He was hosted by Podoroga, who in the fast-changing situation had risen to considerable institutional power as head of a newly created institute sector, the name of which marked its experimental nature: the Laboratory for the Study of Post-Classical Philosophy, Literature, and Art. Derrida was accompanied by his wife, a professional psychoanalyst who spoke Russian, having lived as a child in Moscow where her father was assigned as a journalist after World War II. Marguerite Derrida was of great interest to the psychoanalytic community, long suppressed in the Soviet Union but never entirely eliminated. Jacques Derrida drew crowds at the Institute and at Moscow State University, young students who, if they did not understand every philosophical move, knew one thing definitively, that Derrida was a “scandal.” His visit took place during the anniversary of Stalin’s death—this was perhaps when “specters of Marx” first appeared to him.<sup>16</sup> He has since written about this trip (or rather, written about not writing about it) in an essay entitled “Back from Moscow, in the USSR.”<sup>17</sup>



The historical constellation changed with each visit. When Ries and I came in January 1989, Gorbachev was at the height of his power. Confirmed as President of the Supreme Soviet the previous October (while maintaining

his position as General Secretary of the Communist Party), he called for elections in March of a 2,250-member Congress of People's Deputies, a new institution that was to function as a lower house of the legislature.<sup>18</sup> When I returned to Moscow in May and June, the new Congress was in session. Still largely comprised of party members (85 percent represented the Communist Party, while the rest represented unofficial opposition groups), the deputies were remarkably outspoken and irreverent of party discipline, defining themselves from the beginning as an autonomous political unit. Debates on the floor were televised live from the Kremlin, reaching audiences in Eastern Europe as well. The issues discussed included economic reform, ethnic autonomy, ecological damage, putting an end to one-party rule, and criticisms of the unpopular Afghanistan war which had recently been concluded. These proceedings were followed enthusiastically by an addicted public. Few workplaces lacked a television tuned in constantly to the Congress of People's Deputies. People went strolling in the park with portable radios held to their ears. It was in fact thrilling to witness the construction of a democratic public sphere. Even with access to power still funneled through party membership, there was a wonderful freshness to political life, and a sense of public participation that was direct and unpretentious.<sup>19</sup> I remember standing by the metro entrance at Red Square at the end of the day's session and observing the deputies (multiethnic, mainly young, women as well as men) walking across the square to take the metro home (there were no black limousines in sight). They were but-tholed freely by people waiting to take up with them issues they had just been debating on TV. As a working principle, *glasnost*' had come to mean: "Whatever is not expressly prohibited is allowed." The television show *Vzgliad* (Glance) interviewed disgruntled Afghanistan War veterans, and instructed viewers on how to shop on the black market by discerning the difference between forged Levi Strauss bluejeans and the real thing. In 1989 the hit movie was *Malenkaia Vera* (Little Vera), which depicted alienated youth and featured explicit sex.<sup>20</sup> We had a special viewing of it at the Insti-



6.4 Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary of the Communist Party, 1985.

tute of Philosophy as part of the latter's newly established Film Club. There was round-table discussion at the Dom Kino (House of Cinema) on the topic: "Umer li Marx?" (Is Marx Dead?) The answer—yes—might, I felt, be considered healthily materialist.

By the summer of 1989, Gorbachev was confronting organized challenges to his leadership from groups claiming that his program of *perestroika* did not go far enough. On July 10, coal miners in Siberia went on strike, protesting against deteriorating working and living conditions. On July 30, approximately three hundred dissident deputies, including Boris Yeltsin<sup>21</sup> and Andrei Sakharov,<sup>22</sup> formed an Inter-Regional Group of People's Deputies that organized the unofficial opposition. On August 18, the fiftieth anniversary of the Nazi-Soviet nonaggression pact (the secret protocols of which had given Stalin the green light to annex the Baltic states), a human chain of a million demonstrators spanned the four hundred miles from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius in protest against continued Soviet domination. When I arrived in October for the Heidegger Conference, enthusiasm for Gorbachev among the intelligentsia had been tempered, whereas Yeltsin, formerly a figure of derision due to his well-publicized drinking bouts, was just back from a legitimizing trip to the United States and was beginning to be taken seriously. The policies of *perestroika* (market reform within the framework of the socialist economy and democratic reform within a one-party political system) were openly challenged as insufficient. Increasingly, in order to maintain popular support, Gorbachev was forced to undercut the bases of his own power: the Communist Party and, ultimately, the Soviet Union itself. In contrast, Yeltsin's call for "Russian" autonomy in opposition to "Soviet" imperialism was producing a new discourse of political legitimization, one that enabled him to build his own power base on the same ethnic principle that supported the demands of the Baltic states, as well as those of ethnic minorities within Russia. Such a political topology left little space for Gorbachev, the leader of the "imperial-

ist" Soviet Union, a political entity based on neither ethnic identity nor its own territorial domain.<sup>23</sup>

On November 9, 1989, the Berlin Wall was opened. The effect of the subsequent toppling of socialist regimes in Eastern Europe was to undermine Gorbachev's domestic power still further, even as—indeed, precisely because—it made him enormously popular as an international celebrity. His global superstardom was achieved by weakening the Soviet Union's traditional image internationally, thus feeding off of a different economy of power than functioned at home. The political entity of the USSR was nothing if not a superpower, so that if Gorbachev was losing "Russian" support to Yeltsin, those who still identified as "Soviets" were becoming alienated as well. But Yeltsin's populism was also thoroughly problematic. While democratic in form, the principle of ethnic autonomy was seriously deficient in terms of democratic content, as outbreaks of resentment in the Baltic states against the indigenous Russian population were already making clear. In this situation, even the most progressive intellectuals at the Institute of Philosophy followed a time-honored tradition of keeping their distance from politics, of whatever stance. They were willing to accept responsibility as the conscience of the country, and to speak out, like Sakharov, as "god's fool" in opposition to established power. But political organizing of even grassroots movements was an altogether foreign idea. This refusal to act politically, which stemmed from deep-seated distrust, indeed cynicism, regarding every aspect of public power and every form of utopian politics, became a contested point between us.

■

The fall of the Berlin Wall affected the nature of our intellectual relationship. Surprisingly, it made collaboration more difficult. Our interest had been in criticizing the past of our respective cultures, using the same theoretical tools to analyze those structures of modern power that had done violence to humanity on both sides of the great divide. Ironically, in ways that



gradually became apparent, the commonality of that project seemed to depend on the very divide that it sought to transcend.

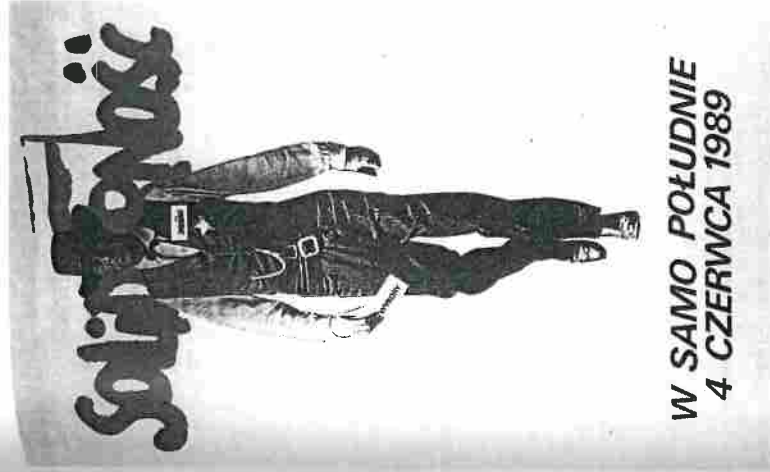
In June 1989, the Communist Party was defeated resoundingly in Poland's elections. Hungary's Roundtable met throughout the summer to negotiate a peaceful transition to a multiparty system. East Germany began to topple in September, Czechoslovakia in October, Bulgaria in November, Romania in December.<sup>24</sup> The League of Yugoslav Communists disintegrated in early 1990. German reunification occurred in spring 1990. These events caused a collapse of structures of signification that had profound effects worldwide. And yet they were not revolutions. The images of dazed and drinking Germans on top of the Berlin Wall gave the world a rush of freedom, but provided little vision of the content of what was to come. The photograph released of Ceausescu's bloody corpse functioned as a sign almost in the commercial sense; advertising the perpetrators as revolutionaries, rather than marking true social change. Satellite television played an unprecedented role as witness, attesting to the reality of change, a situation that encouraged the staging of "revolutionary" events, as if massive social transformation were a matter of gaining access to airtime. It is remarkable how strategically significant television stations became. Their takeover was the contemporary version of storming the Bastille or the Winter Palace.

To claim that the "bloodless" (or "velvet" or "glorious") revolutions of 1989 were in fact no revolution at all is not simply to disagree with how others have defined the term. I am in no way denying what many have argued, that the self-conscious articulation of a "civil society," in opposition to the authoritarian regimes, created a public space in which the power of citizen protest achieved a momentous wave of reforms, culminating in the overthrow of the old guard of Communist leaders. But these new forms of civil society—Poland's Solidarity union, East Germany's New Forum, Czechoslovakia's Civic Forum, Hungary's Opposition Roundtable, the peace and ecology movements—were produced *within* the old regimes, rather than being the consequence of their defeat.<sup>25</sup> The first free elections

were organized by members of the radical wing of the Communist Party itself, although in many cases they were digging their own political graves. The tens of thousands of persons marching in the Leipzig demonstrations of September 25 and October 2 sang the "Internationale" as well as "We Shall Overcome." Alexander Dubček, veteran of the Prague Spring, who on November 20 stood so unforgettably next to Vaclav Havel waving to crowds in Wenceslas Square, had been the author of the doctrine of *socialism* with a human face, not a proponent of socialism's demise. The real surge of critical political energy, including the great dissident literature, belongs to the period before the fall of the Wall. The dissolution of critical thinking began almost immediately thereafter, and it is striking how little original thought subsequently emerged. There was no widespread intellectual renaissance, no cultural rebirth, but rather a recycling of earlier dissident literature, followed by a spate of translations of Western texts. With the collapse of Eastern Europe into the outstretched arms of the West, what was advertised as revolution turned out to be something quite different: economic incorporation—not into the European Community on somewhat equal terms, but into a global capitalist system already in the process of restructuring according to neoliberal rules that marked the end of an era of social democracy. Brazil, not Sweden, was the model of the postsocialist future. But I am getting ahead of my story.

## ONE WORLD

It was during this period of the dismantling of Eastern European regimes that we planned our longest and largest collaboration, a two-week “course” to be held in October 1990 at the Inter-University Centre in Dubrovnik. For several decades the Centre’s courses had played a unique role as a meeting place for scholars and students from the West and Eastern Europe, but up until then no Soviets had participated. That situation changed when Dr. V. S. Stepin, Director of the Moscow Institute of Philosophy, traveled to Yugoslavia in spring 1989 to negotiate arrangements with the Centre. Coincidentally, I was also at the Dubrovnik Centre attending a course on critical theory,<sup>26</sup> and we discussed the feasibility of a new course codirected by Valerii Podoroga and myself. A month later when I was back in Moscow, plans for a Dubrovnik course began in earnest. Two further directors were added: Luchezar Boiadzhiev, a young Bulgarian at the Institute of Art Studies in Sofia, whose colleague, Vladislav Todorov, had been with us as a long-term visitor to Podoroga’s Laboratory, and Fredric Jameson, whose intellect and enthusiasm provided enormous momentum for the project.<sup>27</sup> Invited participants represented a variety of theoretical positions. They included Boris Groys, who had left the Soviet Union for West Germany in 1981 and whose book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (Stalin’s Total Artwork) put forward the bold thesis that Stalin had ironically carried into effect the plans of the very artistic avant-garde whom he had suppressed; Wolfgang Fritz Haug from West Berlin, Marxist philosopher and editor of the journal *Das Argument*, whose most recent work was a pro-*perestroika* diary of the Gorbachev year June 1989–May 1990 (*Das Perestroika-Journal*); Helena Kozakiewicz a “Western” Marxist philosopher from the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in Warsaw,<sup>28</sup> critic of both the old Communist regime and Solidarity’s coalition government that had replaced it following elections unduly influenced by the United States; Peter Madsen, literary theorist from the University of



<sup>25</sup> Polish Solidarity Party election poster, 1989, by Jan Andrez Gorny and Paweł Zazac.<sup>26</sup>

Copenhagen, committed, in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, to rescuing critical reason from anti-Enlightenment attacks; Merab Mamardashvili, a renowned Georgian philosopher of the Soviet sixties generation who had courageously gone against the grain of official dogma to develop his own French-influenced, existentialist philosophy, and who had been the inspirational teacher of both Ryklin and Podoroga; and Slavoj Žižek, Slovenian-Lacanian-Hegelian-postmodernist theorist, trained in Paris, who taught in the United States and had recently run—unsuccessfully—for president of Slovenia.

Once the regimes in Eastern Europe began to topple, the original working title for the course, “Dis-mantling the Cold War Discourse,” seemed inadequate. We renamed it “Modern Problems of Power and Culture,” under which general rubric we might integrate on a long-term basis the efforts of Eastern and Western scholars to reassess the modern project (it was expected that successful Dubrovnik courses would continue meeting in future years). We still needed a specific title for the first two-week meeting in October 1990. Aware that the act of naming was still an issue of political sensitivity in the Soviet Union, I left the choice up to my Moscow friends. They surprised me with the title, “Philosophical Problems of Postmodern Discourse,”

clearly implying that it was the *times* that were postmodern, not merely the West's discursive forms. Although the choice no longer seems remarkable, at that time it was a radical intellectual move. Until then, even among its proponents, and certainly among its critics (of whom Jameson was one of the most articulate), postmodernity was understood as a condition specific to (late) capitalism and its consumerist, simulacral cultural forms. Perhaps the inclusion of (late) socialist culture within this term should not have surprised me, as I had been arguing persistently for the commonalities of our roots in Western modernity, and "post-" modernity would seem to follow logically as the next step. But such a logical step was in fact a construction of history, not its description. The gesture of including Soviet experience within the meaning of postmodernism was a moment in the process of ideological formation. It had the effect of universalizing the claims of postmodernism as a theoretical discourse with explanatory power, and gave this term pretensions of general legitimacy. Now it was not just a question of a postmodern school of architecture or art existing among other contending schools, nor, as Jameson argued, of a "dominant cultural logic" of late capitalism, but of all contemporary cultures expressing the same "postmodern" world.<sup>30</sup> In short, postmodernism, up until then a phenomenon *within* the cultural field, was becoming naturalized as the name *of* the cultural field, no longer a particular theoretical positioning but the description of a new historical stage. It is clear to me now, although it was not then, that this moment was part of a hegemonic shift in intellectual discourse that was global in scope.<sup>31</sup> Although the term is now so broadly used to describe our age that it is accepted as second nature, it is important to remember that there was nothing self-evident about this outcome: "postmodernism" was not a historical inevitability. But the temptations to see the world through this conceptual lens were strong ones. From the Soviet side the options of moving toward ethnic traditionalism, or of backing the old Communist Party in the hopes that it would transform itself from within, seemed far more dubious. Moreover, in terms of postmodern culture there were ways one could

argue that the Soviet Union was in advance of the rest of the world, having attained this new historical stage *before* the capitalist West. Political cynicism, anti-utopianism, distrust of all totalizing discourses—were not these characteristics of postmodernity already well established in Soviet dissident culture as part of the intellectual legacy of de-Stalinization?

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"To Dubrovnik!" had been the toast each time we met during the eighteen months of planning for the course. "Dubrovnik" became a floating signifier for multiple and various desires. The postcard image of the city shimmered in our dream consciousness as the goal and a new beginning, although no one quite knew of what. The city, the sea, the air did not disappoint us—we had little foreboding of the precariousness of the old town's tranquility. But the pleasures of sensory immediacy made the problematic aspects of our



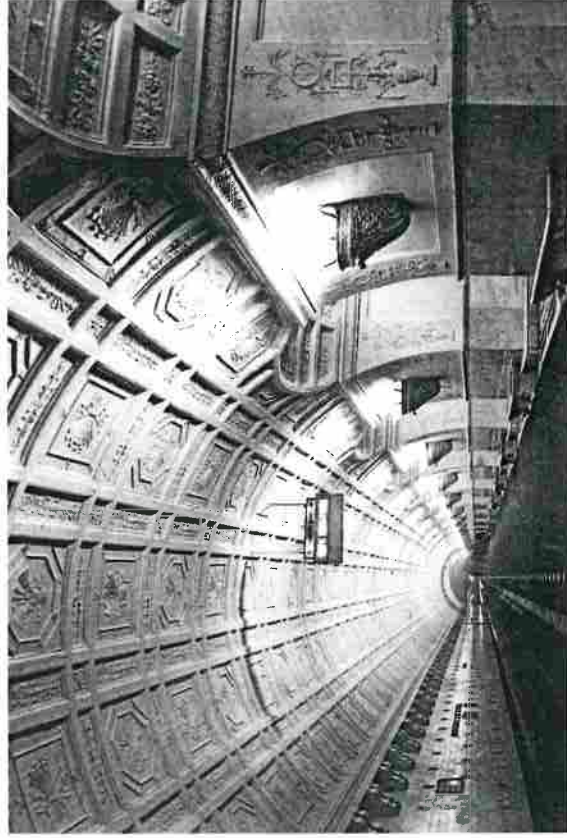
6.6 Dubrovnik, the old city, postcard, 1990.

communication all the more disappointing. There were first of all structural inequalities. The official language of the Centre was English, which, especially for the younger Moscow participants who had never attended an international conference, tipped the intellectual power balance toward the West. Accommodations and rates were lower for Eastern participants, but those on full pension were excluded from dinners in town. Per diem stipends for the Soviets were paid in dollars which many preferred to keep, so that even a sociable coffee or a beer was foregone so as not to squander the hard currency. The Soviets rightly chafed under their second-class economic status (a portent of things to come). I had an uneasy feeling that the list of invited participants was taking on the qualities of a new *nomenklatura*. Some Eastern Europeans felt that the whole conception of the course replicated the superpower dominance which they had hoped was a thing of the past.

But the greatest moments of frustration were within the intellectual exchange itself. The term “postmodernism” was a source of dispute. The young Bulgarian participants, Luchezar Boiadzhiev, Ivailo Dichev, and Vladislav Todorov, whose collaborative contribution was a piece of performance art that featured the mummified founders of the Communist states, were fully comfortable with “postmodernism” as a synonym for their own “post-communist condition.” Merab Mamardashvili disliked the term intensely, calling it a form of “cultural stupidity” because its celebration of the failure of reason “gave up the philosophical battle” and denied the right to think. The questions of what to think and what to do, he claimed, were always new because the world changed, but to describe this world as “postmodern” was a choice, and hence ultimately an ethical decision: “You don’t have to become postmodern.”<sup>32</sup> Helena Kozakiewicz criticized postmodernity from the opposite perspective, that of a critical sociology of knowledge which stressed the social and historical determinants of postmodern discourse as ideology. Peter Madsen warned against the postmodern oversimplification of modernism’s extremely varied reactions to the process of

modernization, ranging from rationalism to surrealism. Natasha Avtonomova cautioned us to distinguish in our own work between investigation and creation, preferring the humbler claims of the former to the arbitrariness of the latter, of which postmodernism could be seen as an example.

My own plea was to seize the term “postmodern” and reappropriate it for the purposes of a common critical strategy—the project that had been the original impetus of our own collaboration.<sup>33</sup> But my Moscow colleagues were now resistant. Rather than stressing what was common to the methods and substance of our critiques of modern power, they seemed compelled to emphasize the differences—despite the fact that we were considering cultural phenomena that the East and West had shared during the process of industrial modernization: early cinema, urban architecture, mass leaders, media manipulation, the mass-utopian myth of industrial “modernization” itself. We had purposely decided to focus at Dubrovnik on ob-



6.7 Stantzia Beloruskaia, Moscow metro, 1951, designed and constructed by Z. Abramova and I. Iararov.

jects of visual culture because these might be more easily accessible to a common analysis across language differences. But shared vision turned out to be as difficult as shared language. Looking at the same images, we did not see the same things. Mikhail Ryklin read the iconography of the Moscow metro—which to any New Yorker must appear glorious—as the epitome of Stalinist terror. Valerii Podoroga interpreted the work of the Bolshevik filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, idol of the Western avant-garde, as giving cinematic expression to the sadomasochistic body produced by Stalin's machinery of power. Boris Groys condemned the entire aesthetic avant-garde, East and West, as the precursor to the Stalinist “aesthetic” project of creating a new society. Vladislav Todorov found a similar aesthetics in Soviet economic practices, in the sense that factories were organized to produce ideology, not products, fabricating the fabulous “working class” as the party's own missing constituency.<sup>34</sup> Against their absolute rejection of the past, Haug, Jameson, and I were intent on criticizing the dream forms of both capitalism and socialism from within in order to salvage the transcendent moment to which they gave expression. Jameson tried to encourage the reconsideration of our position as intellectuals by means of a new cognitive mapping that would describe the postmodern condition self-critically, from the inside, not only as a cultural style but as an economic system and a life-world (in which “cities are modified, bodies are modified”), in order to articulate a leftist politics adequate to the present.

We had prepared in advance to discuss one literary text in common, a section of Andrei Platonov's novel *The Foundation Pit*. During this discussion, Podoroga began to insist that we simply could not understand the novel without access to both the experience of Stalinism and Platonov's use of the Russian language. His exclusionary hermeneutics were rejected by Western participants unwilling to cede the debate to arguments of national difference. But in our own critiques of capitalism, our neo-Marxist categories remained largely unmodified despite sea-changes in the global political and economic situation. We seemed, generally, to be reviving the official

polarization between Eastern and Western discourses but this time with the positions reversed, the “East” using every stereotype of the Cold War to characterize its own totally unique, totally totalitarian past, and the “West” mouching a standard criticism of capitalist, commodity culture that would have been acceptable in the USSR long before *glasnost*. Neither side seemed willing to give ground in this carnivalesque performance of Cold War rhetoric. Tempers grew short. An incident in which gender relations collided with power relations brought me to the boiling point.<sup>35</sup> Peter Madson pleaded with us in Habermasian terms to “be reasonable!” Jameson later described the dynamics this way:

*Unfortunately Cold War anticommunism has lavishly supplied all possible and imaginable stereotypes . . . so that even experiential truth from the East now looks indistinguishable, not merely from media commonplaces and simulacra but from its most ancient Cold War forms. . . . The more their truths are couched in Orwellian language, the more tedious they become for us; the more our truths demand expression in even the weakest forms of Marxian language—that of simple social democracy say, or even the welfare state or social justice, or equality—the more immediately do the Eastern hearing aids get switched off.<sup>36</sup>*

And further:

*To put it briefly, the East wishes to talk in terms of power and oppression; the West in terms of culture and commodification. There are really no common denominators in this initial struggle for discursive rules, and what we end up with is the inevitable comedy of each side muttering irrelevant replies in its own favourite language.<sup>37</sup>*

Jameson's suggestion that this incompatibility of languages was simply an extension (and reversal) of the dualisms of the Cold War past is not a sufficient explanation. In the Soviet case, the individuals making these Cold War-like arguments, Podoroga and Ryklin, were experts in precisely those forms of critical theory that had been created as a critique of *Western* modernity, and the very gesture of adopting them to criticize Soviet cul-

tural life was an admission of the commonalities of manipulative, mass-culture forms. Podoroga's description of the "cosmocratic utopia" of Plato-nov's *Foundation Pit* as a "catastrophical machine of power" (the book, he emphasized, had important similarities to the novels of Kafka and other non-Russian writers) was expressly indebted to the work of Mumford, Deleuze, and Guattari;<sup>38</sup> Ryklin's interpretation of the Moscow metro iconography used Bakhtin's conception of the collective folk-body against the grain of what he knew was accepted interpretation in the West, not positively, as "a hymn to the common man,"<sup>39</sup> but dystopically, as "horror incarnate."<sup>40</sup>



Our difficulties in communicating need to be understood within the constellation of political events in which the Dubrovnik meeting took place. Every socialist regime of Eastern Europe had collapsed. We were meeting in a "post-socialist" country on the brink of civil war. Only in the Soviet Union was Communist Party rule still intact, and even here its power was shaken. Our problem was not that we were still living in different worlds. Rather, our worlds were fast becoming one, on terms that made critical thinking precarious for reasons other than political censorship, and theoretical collaboration problematic for reasons other than cultural difference. While we had been working to criticize the dreams of the past, we were living through the disappearance of a dream of the present—specifically (and it was one of the dreamworlds of modernity) the dream that each side had about the other. Dreamworlds are not merely illusions. In insisting that what is is not all there is, they are assertions of the human spirit and invaluable politically. They make the momentous claim that the world we have known since childhood is not the only one imaginable. For critical intellectuals from the East, the existence of a nonsocialist West sustained the dream that there could be "normalcy" in social life. For their counterparts in the West, the existence of the noncapitalist East sustained the dream that the Western capitalist system was not the only possible form of modern production. Of

course we each knew that our hopes were not realized in any perfect way by the other side. But the mere fact of the existence of a different system was proof enough to allow us to think the dream possible—something "normal" outside one's own system that allowed one to describe the latter's internal logic as preposterous; some other social organization of human existence that allowed one to think that the given state of things was not natural or inevitable, so that history could still be envisioned as a space of human freedom.

The possibility of difference is the prerequisite for critical thinking, which, distinct from science, is not content to identify what is. It was this possibility that was threatened by the coming together of our worlds. Their merging was not the convergence that Sakharov had predicted in the 1960s, the felicitous scenario of both sides moving toward some democratic-socialist middle ground. Rather, the Second World was disappearing into the First World at the same time that the ideals of socialism were going under even in their Western democratic forms. In this context, the Soviets' insistence on the absolute uniqueness and incomprehensibility for the West of their own modern horrors was an expression of hope. If really existing socialism was merely one variant of modernism, then its collapse into the other variant could only lead to the most pessimistic conclusions. And it was impossible for them to embrace our own Marxist discourse as an alternative without being led in a circle, in terms of the history of their own cultural context, back to the very intellectual constraints that critical thinking had enabled them to escape. The irony, of course, is that Marx, while a rather poor theorist of socialism, had developed one of the most powerful and cogent critiques of that capitalist system which the East was entering, yet it was precisely not as *Marxist* criticism that a protest against incorporation could be raised. Not all texts are legible at all times; censorship can exist even without political constraint.<sup>41</sup> Elena Petrovskaja gives an everyday example:

*I well remember how at the very start of perestroika random passers-by were interviewed by TV reporters—they were asked to give their opinion of what was going on around them, be it changing politics or, perhaps, their daily problems. And many seemed completely at a loss: not because they had nothing to say, but because there were no words to say it with. The old media-inspired clichés, something like “we fully approve and support,” were sensed as absolutely inappropriate.”<sup>42</sup>*

When the structuring topology between words and the world undergoes a seismic shift, it may happen that the truth cannot be said. Certain phrases, certain discourses become inaccessible, while others may suddenly reemerge with new power. To speak of a crisis in language sounds idealist, yet it can be a profoundly concrete historical experience. At Dubrovnik, Slavoj Žižek described such a crisis as central to the events in Eastern Europe, but in this case the critically powerful moment came from arguing for an *identity* between language and reality, reviving the moribund discourse of socialism itself. The attempt by radical groups in Slovenia and elsewhere to close the gap between socialist ideology and socialist reality by taking the old ideology at its word, paradoxically forced the political situation wide open. Žižek described the “inherently *tragic* ethical dimension” of those who “took socialism seriously” and whose role was that of the “vanishing mediator,” a term he borrowed from Jameson:<sup>43</sup>

*[They] were prepared to put everything at stake in order to destroy the compromised system and replace it with the utopian “third way” beyond capitalism and “really existing” socialism. Their sincere belief and insistence that they were not working for the restoration of Western capitalism, of course, proved to be nothing but an substantial illusion; however, we could say that precisely as such (as a thorough illusion without substance) it was stricto sensu nonideological: it didn’t “reflect” in an inverted-ideological form any actual relations of power.”<sup>44</sup>*

Žižek spoke of his experience in Slovenia: “We witnessed a kind of opening; things were for a moment visible which immediately became invisible.”<sup>45</sup> This moment of contingency and choice allowed space for political

agency. But the rhetoric of “taking socialism seriously” was not strong enough to prevent the collapse of that space under the weight of a new ruling ideology, a political myth that immediately rendered invisible “the open, undecided process of its own founding”—the myth of the ethnic nation.<sup>46</sup> The ontology of national belonging bypasses the crisis of language because identities, fixed from the start, are not an issue for debate. One’s mere being—the accident of birth—determines one’s status as friend or foe, so that there is not any need to speak at all.

The outburst of postsocialist nationalism in Yugoslavia and elsewhere, claimed Žižek, was produced out of the logic of Western capitalism, rather than being external to it. It is an attempt to cover over capitalism’s basic social antagonisms and “*inherent structural imbalance*”<sup>47</sup> by imposing “community” (actually the old communist theme) upon it. It is in fact “the fascist dream,” the “impossible” desire for “capitalism cum *Gemeinschaft*,” a desire for capitalism without the ‘alienated’ civil society, without the formal-external relations between individuals.”<sup>48</sup> Žižek concluded: “The only way to prevent the emergence of protofascist nationalist hegemony is to call into question the very standard of ‘normality,’ the universal framework of liberal-democratic capitalism—as was done, for a brief moment, by the ‘vanishing mediators’ in the passage from socialism into capitalism.”<sup>49</sup>

Once the transition was under way, however, talk of a “third way” appeared futile, a “heroic daydream.”<sup>50</sup> The antagonisms again became invisible and the system closed again. Ivailo Dichev’s presentation at Dubrovnik described the Bulgarian experience:

*In [the communist] world you could at least take sides, engage in the struggle led by the situations of desire. But what if you start suspecting that both conflicting representations [East and West] are produced by the same author, that is by power? The ambiguity of your position is multiplied by two, you not only do not know which of the conflicting representations to choose but also whether to choose at all, whether the choice is real, or something like Descartes’ demon is cheating you.”<sup>51</sup>*

Dichev's revealing description of the bleakness of the postcommunist situation, as it appeared to someone unwilling to accept the pseudo-community of ethnic nationalism, deserves to be cited at length:

*[Postcommunism] is a sort of postmodern condition not only because the great discourses of liberation are behind . . . but also because there is no more nature left to come back to. Common sense will object that there exists the normal capitalist world, which represents nature; and really you do not find an "author" behind capitalism in the way the revolutionaries of different types are the authors of communist society. But what is the nature of this nature? . . . Capitalism, [Georg Lukács] insists, has to be based on an overcalculating individual behavior and an irrational whole. There cannot be a project of capitalism nor some sense of the whole; its only principle is, rather, the negation of transcendence [of the given situation]. . . .*

*Looking West for the natural, post-communist countries see nothing. There exists a vast number of means to solve problems of situations but no representation of ends, no idea of the meaning of the whole. . . . Post-communist countries today are haunted by the idea that there was nothing symbolic in the defeat of communism. Tzvetan Todorov wrote that the feeling was like what happened to the woman in Maupassant's story: she borrowed a necklace and lost it, and then worked her whole life to pay its price, only to find out that the pearls were a cheap imitation and that she had ruined her life in vain. Actually it was even worse, as everyone realized the project of communism was but an act of will; on both sides of the Berlin Wall they knew it was not a symbolic reality [in the sense of being] something imposed on men by God or the like—they knew it was a "political decision." The Wall separated neither nations, nor cultures, nor natures of some sort; it was absolutely arbitrary, running between towns, houses, households: it vanished into thin air (except for souvenirs and tourist-guidebooks), as if it had never existed. Thus there is nothing to learn from the fall of communism, no moral to be taken. The enemy left no corpse behind—you have ruined economies, killed people, polluted land, but the transcendence as artefact [communism's "act of will"] is nowhere to be seen; the will to power disappeared in being defeated and one could ask oneself whether one's life had been real at all.<sup>52</sup>*

The so-called transition to capitalism that followed the fall of socialism was an impoverished substitute for the ideal of revolutionary transcen-

dence, providing no new meaning for political life. Symptomatic of this lack was the enormous confusion that resulted from attempts to define the new political terrain in terms of the old binaries of radical and conservative, "left" and "right." Where did present-day communists belong on the left-right spectrum? Were ethnic nationalists radical or conservative? Was cultural pluralism an adequate definition of democracy? Was the capitalist market a meaningful definition of political freedom? Boris Kagarlitsky, active in Moscow politics and frequent contributor to London's *New Left Review* (who was with us at a Duke University conference in March 1990),<sup>53</sup> relates a further confusion: "The pledge of 'steady increases in living standards' became the most important element of the official ideology" of the Soviet Communist Party beginning in the period of Khrushchev's reforms, so that by the 1980s, the official party line was to present

*a picture of communism as a society of consumer abundance. . . . It is not surprising that a generation later many people in our country, raised entirely in the spirit of Communist propaganda, not only see this ideal society in the West, but conclude in all seriousness that "real socialism" has already been built in the United States or Canada.<sup>54</sup>*

To describe this morass of meaning within political discourse as "postmodern," as if naming the "spirit of the times" were enough—as if we could then just lean back and relax, relying on "history" to move us all along through this new, somehow inevitable stage—is to dismiss the responsibility of thinking through the complexities of the present. I suspect Mamardashvili, who devoted his life to the responsibility of thinking, was warning us of this danger when he insisted on the critical, repeated task of philosophical questioning itself, the necessity always to begin again.

If someone had said to us in Dubrovnik in October 1990: "Merab Mamardashvili will die within a month. In half a year this hotel will be in flames. In a year the Soviet Union will disintegrate," could we have done better?



Three months later I was again in Moscow—or rather outside of Moscow, as the city was part of the opposition's domain, and I was attending what was to be the last *Soviet* International Film Festival. Guests invited by the Union of Soviet Filmmakers were housed on the outskirts at Otradnoe, which, as a party retreat, was real estate still controlled by Gorbachev. I was there to participate in a symposium organized by Kirill Razlogov, "The Screen: Dialogue of Cultures," occurring in tandem with the festival running in Moscow that featured "Great European Films Unknown in the USSR," highlighting European and American films from the height of the Cold War era as well as a major Fritz Lang retrospective. A fleet of black cars was at our disposal to bring us into the city, and buses brought a few Moscovites to us for the symposium sessions. But the sense of isolation was not overcome. We were on a political island—a "Soviet" enclave within "Russian" territory.

The events of the past year had changed the power balance definitively. Yeltsin resigned from the Communist Party following his spring election as President of the Russian Federation, dramatically divorcing himself from the old form of political legitimization. Having won the election on a platform of "real economic and political sovereignty" for Russia, his popularity forced Gorbachev to negotiate plans for economic and political restructuring. Gorbachev and Yeltsin at first worked cooperatively on the "Shatalin Plan," a 500-day timetable for a transition to a market economy. But the version Gorbachev presented to the Supreme Soviet was modified to exclude the timetable and preserve more central authority over banking, taxation, and currency. It was approved on October 19. Twelve days later, in a challenge to Soviet sovereignty, the Parliament of the Russian Federation (which supplied 80 percent of the Soviet budget) voted for immediate implementation of the original Shatalin Plan that had Yeltsin's support. On the issue of political restructuring, Gorbachev agreed in principle to negotiate

a new Union treaty,<sup>55</sup> but his plan for a Soviet federation modeled on the United States stopped far short of the national independence that had already been claimed by Lithuania the previous March.<sup>56</sup> Among those opposing Gorbachev's federal plan, some questioned the legitimacy of the Soviet Union itself. Alarmed pro-Soviet forces put pressure on Gorbachev to resist change. Clearly, the positions had polarized, and Gorbachev was caught in between. On December 20, Eduard Shevardnadze resigned as Soviet Foreign Minister, warning that reactionary forces threatened the Soviet Union with renewed dictatorship.

When I arrived in Moscow on January 12, 1991, tensions resulting from the struggle between Gorbachev and Yeltsin for Russian (and particularly Moscow's) political support were palpable.<sup>57</sup> The thematics of the Film Festival symposium were intended to be conciliatory, with various USSR "nationalities" represented in their own right (one "working group" was devoted to "the influence of the screen culture on the development of national cultures and their interactions"). But the Moldovans, particularly, used the symposium as an oppositional forum, calling for their own independent national cinema. Their politics was fully at odds with the new capitalist realities of global film production and distribution that were described in several of the presentations. Podoroga and Ryklin, participants at the symposium, were saddened by the sudden death of Mamardashvili and embittered by efforts to claim him, posthumously, as a great "Georgian" philosopher by politicians who had made his life so difficult all along.

My contribution to the symposium was an attempt to work within—and against—Podoroga's Dubrovnik presentation on Eisenstein by considering, in comparative and historical context, the connection between cinematic representations of the masses and the perceptual violence of the cinema eye, again insisting on a commonality between Eastern and Western forms of modern mass culture.<sup>58</sup> But commonality was precisely what many of the Soviet participants least wanted to acknowledge. What concerned them was the present, and the increasing influence of "Western mass culture"

that threatened to trivialize Soviet cinema, which had striven for greatness as an art form from the historical epics of Eisenstein to the contemporary metaphysical works of Tarkovskii and Sokhurov. The screening at this symposium of a young director's film, *Stalin in Africa*—a spoof about training a Stalin look-alike so that he could make the trip to Africa while the real Stalin stayed home, and ending with the non-sequitur of contemporary footage shot from a car riding down New York's Broadway by night—was received with stony silence. I was the only one to speak, supporting the director's effort. He responded, rather, to the silence of his compatriots, and without humor or irony made a self-confession of "hoologanism." It was clear that political differences had worked their way into cultural policy, and that here, too, the situation had become polarized. There was no agreement among those present as to how much influence from the new, globalized cinema was desirable, or how one ought to evaluate the early Soviet film avant-garde given the changing contemporary conditions. Annette Michelson from the United States, who for several decades had done pathbreaking archival work in Moscow on early Soviet cinema, continued to argue for the politically critical power of the Bolshevik avant-garde, but others took the same position as Groys, claiming that the political commitment of early Soviet cinema culminated logically in the cultural politics of Stalinism. The extreme disparity of views among the participants made the sessions politically revealing. But the symposium was entirely overshadowed by historical events. On January 13, KGB elite troops were dispatched to Lithuania and attacked the Vilnius radio and television center, attempting a pro-Soviet putsch on behalf of the so-called "Lithuanian National Salvation Committee." Fourteen persons were killed and 580 wounded in the assault. On January 16, just three days later, President Bush ordered the bombing of Baghdad and the United States was at war with Iraq.

It was difficult for us not to believe that these events had been coordinated.<sup>59</sup> It appeared at the least that both former Cold War opponents were willing to close an eye to the activities of the other. The simultaneity of the

Lithuanian crackdown and the outbreak of the Gulf War was a devastating experience for us because it demonstrated how quickly and easily, on both sides, the machinery of violent state power could be reassembled despite the absence of Cold War justifications. But these events also revealed how far apart we still were in our instinctive political reactions. My colleagues responded with immediate alarm to the tragedy of the events in Lithuania, whereas I, with my enthusiasm for *glasnost'*, was willing to give Gorbachev the benefit of the doubt regarding the degree of his involvement. Nor could they appreciate how troubling it was for me to witness the reassembly of the patriotic war machine of American power that had been challenged only by so much citizen effort during the Vietnam War.<sup>60</sup> It was the way television mediated these events that made the experience so distressing. The telltale sign to my colleagues of Gorbachev's complicity in the Lithuanian crackdown was the fact that the Moscow evening news program, *Vremia*, reverted almost immediately to the propagandistic rhetoric and visual censorship of the pre-*glasnost'* era. What was most upsetting to me was the complicity of the supposedly independent voice of CNN with U.S. government policy, so that the chauvinistic language of television coverage folded seamlessly into the official government line. In the lounge of the Dom Kino, I watched CNN footage of the bombing of Baghdad, which alternated between groundshots of the exploding bombs as an aesthetic spectacle of fireworks over the city, and the technically depersonalized, video game representations sent back by the "smart bombs" themselves. The chauvinistic good humor of those images of destruction sickened me. Russians in the lounge mistook my sentiments, assuring me that Iraq was armed with Soviet weapons which most definitely would not work. Afterward I sat with my friends in Podoroga's kitchen. We got drunk. Had we spoken out publicly that night against both events, might we have made a difference?

January 1991 marked the end of our era of innocence. The relatively unqualified optimism that underlay our exchanges had depended on the fact that we were moving along with the political current. As a department head at the Institute of Philosophy, Podoroga was now an established figure. Ryklin was an internationally published theorist of Russia's literary and artistic avant-garde<sup>61</sup> and had just been awarded a grant by the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme for philosophical research in Paris. Petrovskaia had left behind her student status and was a published philosopher in her own right. Now a full professor, I had become some kind of Phil Donahue of intellectual exchange, building "bridges" (as Donahue called the live, satellite television dialogues he hosted with Vladimir Posner between citizens of New York and Moscow) over which we intellectuals passed with little bureaucratic difficulty and substantial financial support. The mood of political power was changing, however. Gorbachev had been a cosmopolitan figure, but now "cosmopolitanism" (the code word for Jewishness among Russian anti-Semitic groups) was under attack. Political leaders still played on a global stage, but they felt far less constrained by the opprobrium of a general audience. That was the lesson of the Lithuanian crackdown, and it was the lesson of the war in the Gulf as well. Television, the most powerful medium of political life, showed itself to be vulnerable, on both sides, to appropriation by the "wild zone" of sovereign power—the war zone that I had described in my earliest Moscow lectures on the modern, mass-democratic state. Those lectures had discussed a future crisis of sovereign legitimacy within the superpowers as a consequence of the disappearance of the Cold War enemy. In the USSR in 1991, this crisis was in full swing.<sup>62</sup> It culminated in the abortive coup of August 19–21, which sounded the death knell of the Soviet Union as a sovereign form.

Circumstances surrounding the August 1991 coup are still obscure, as the version that has been offered to the public leaves several key questions

unanswered.<sup>63</sup> The accepted narrative is that it was planned by reactionary Soviet officials backed by the KGB, who placed Gorbachev under house arrest in the Crimea and on August 19 made the by now predictable first move of taking over the Moscow television station. Vice President Ianaev announced at 6:00 a.m. that Gorbachev was ill, and that he was in charge as head of the "State Committee for the State of Emergency."<sup>64</sup> Hundreds of tanks took up key positions on Moscow streets. Yeltsin forces formed an opposition, taking their stand in the Russian White House and using every technological medium at their disposal to challenge the constitutional legitimacy of the emergency decrees. They did not hesitate to call the coup leaders "criminals" and "traitors"—that is, enemies of the true "state," which by "defending" Yeltsin himself appeared to personify. He telephoned George Bush and John Major, receiving assurances that neither the United States nor Great Britain would grant legitimacy to the coup. He used a ham radio frequency to repeat the charge of criminal illegality to the outside world, and was in contact with journalists from Radio Liberty in Munich, the Voice of America, and the BBC.<sup>65</sup> Most dramatically, Yeltsin attracted the cameras of foreign reporters with a fiery speech atop one of the army tanks surrounding the White House. Seen on television throughout the world, his speech was ostensibly addressed to those unarmed citizens encircling the White House for its protection who had come out in answer to Yeltsin's appeal, and who, representing "the people," were the symbol of his own democratic legitimacy. In this narrative, which dominated the reports of Western commentators, Yeltsin appeared as "the right person at the right time," almost single-handedly putting a stop to the nefarious leaders of the coup.<sup>66</sup>

Kagarlitsky has suggested the plausibility of a different version, however. He speculates not only that Gorbachev was a party to the coup from the start, but that Yeltsin, too, had been informed of the plans, and agreed not to intervene in return for guarantees that he would be allowed to stay in power. According to this version, the coup, staged just one day before the compromise Union treaty was to be signed, was meant to ensure law and

order in the period of transition to a new political form of power-sharing between Russia and the Soviet Union, and to protect the ruling center against the centrifugal force of non-Russian "nations" for self-determination. But, Kagarlitsky's speculation continues, Yeltsin suddenly changed the scenario by going back on his agreement to remain neutral and, despite all his rhetoric of constitutional legality, in effect staged a countercoup, demanding that "all the power structures on the territory of the republic should be put under the control of his government," an act which, Kagarlitsky notes, was in violation of the constitutions of both the USSR and Russia.<sup>67</sup> Whatever version of the events is correct, their effect was to destroy Soviet legitimacy definitively, initiating a wave of declarations of independence among the republics. On December 8 the presidents of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus announced that the Soviet Union had ceased to exist, proclaiming a new "Commonwealth of Independent States." On December 25 Gorbachev resigned, and the Russian flag, replacing the Communist hammer and sickle, was raised over the Kremlin.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that the Gulf War, too, was evidence of a crisis of sovereign legitimacy, this time for the United States as a world superpower.<sup>68</sup> The crisis was handled by projecting onto a new enemy, personalized in the figure of Saddam Hussein, the same morally absolutist discourse of "good versus evil," freedom versus totalitarianism, that had been used against the Soviet "evil empire" during the Cold War—even though it was Hitler with whom Hussein was explicitly compared.<sup>69</sup> In fact, President Bush's saber-rattling rhetoric can perhaps be understood as having more to do with reestablishing the legitimacy of U.S. superpower sovereignty in the post-Cold War era than with any actual Iraqi threat. The whole scenario of "Desert Storm," along with "Desert Shield" during the preceding months, was a televised, double-feature replay of the "political imaginary" peculiar to the United States, including its characteristic form of legitimating the use of violence against its enemies. Specifically, Bush's performance of sovereignty was a mythic, monologic reproduction of the *spa-*

*tial* terms prototypical of the U.S. political imaginary.<sup>70</sup> What defined the "enemy" was the geopolitical crime of crossing the border into the "sovereign state" of Kuwait.<sup>71</sup> As defender of the boundary principle of national sovereignty, Bush drew a "line in the sand" that would be held at any price.<sup>72</sup> In fact, the line was arbitrary because there *was* no officially ratified delimitation between the two nations, and border disputes had been going on for decades.<sup>73</sup> But once Bush drew his line, in his words, there was to be "No concession. No negotiation for one inch of territory."<sup>74</sup> In order to hold that line, a technologically terrifying war machine was deployed that caused the death of hundreds of thousands,<sup>75</sup> devastated the infrastructure of Iraq,<sup>76</sup> and resulted in enormous ecological damage when the oilfields burned in Kuwait.<sup>77</sup> What was new in the case of the Gulf War, however, was the use of television—a cyberspace distinguished precisely by its *lack* of geopolitical boundaries—as an instrument for reconstructing the myth of the spatial system of nation-state sovereignty, and of the United States unshaken as the world's only superpower with the military capacity to sustain it.



The collaboration we had created was a creature of *perestroika*, no matter what we might have thought personally of Gorbachev's politics. When the Soviet Union disintegrated, waning power translated into waning interest among certain funders, while others turned, understandably, to more pragmatic projects.<sup>78</sup> War in Yugoslavia made the continuation of our Dubrovnik course impossible. It was almost two years before we met again—time enough to reflect on what we had been living through. Although we experienced these events as intellectuals, hence with only a very narrow and some would say hopelessly distorted point of view, we were bodily engaged, moving through passport controls, struggling with languages, experiencing the changing environment with all of our corporeal senses. I never met the "Russian people," let alone the "working class." I met and knew individuals; and under privileged conditions, in an abundance of different sensory