

THE REVOLUTIONARY IMAGINARY OF ROBERT BIRD (1969–2020)

Robert Bird, a brilliant theorist and historian of Russian literature and film, passed away on September 7, 2020. When the news reached me, I had just finished paying my intellectual respects to David Graeber, and we were already putting the finishing touches on this volume. I'm afraid I don't have it in me to write two proper obituaries in a row, but before *Contradictions* 2020 goes to press I'd like to offer at least these few, inadequate words to one of my best teachers, a man whose ideas – many still unpublished – have made their way through his influence on me into the pages of *Contradictions*.

One of Robert's longstanding research interests was in the huge outpouring of transformative visions that emerged in the years leading up to and following the revolutions in Russia in 1917. His first book was on the symbolist poet and so-called mystical anarchist Viacheslav Ivanov¹ – one of the many non-Marxists who looked forward to their own kinds of revolution in those days. Ivanov was unhappy with the course that the revolution took under Bolshevik leadership, and he eventually left the Soviet Union, but Robert followed the revolutionary imagination as it developed in other directions.

For example, in the work of the Russian avant-garde. In a series of mostly unpublished texts (and in long, unwritten conversations), Robert reflected on approaches to political engagement in modernist narrative theory. One remarkable body of theory surrounded the phenomenon of early Soviet Communist rituals and mass spectacles, where the question of revolutionary vision was taken literally as a problem of *seeing*. Could a new form of expression enable the masses both to *be* the revolution and to *see* the revolution represented to them (as Viktor Shklovsky put it, in Robert's interpretation)? In a sense, Soviet modernists were seeking in the field of aesthetic practice what György Lukács around the same time sought in the form of political organization: a medium that could make visible the “identical subject-object” of history. Through the party or the spectacle, perhaps the proletariat could both act as history's subject and see itself as history's object, grasping the wholeness of its own reality, in order to change it.

These early Communist experiments were eventually abandoned, but Robert was not one of those who tell the history of Soviet aesthetics as a descent from revolution into

¹ Robert Bird, *The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Viacheslav Ivanov* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

boredom and irrelevance. He followed what he called “the Soviet imaginary” through the new forms it took in the 1930s and later, when the Stalinist call to reshape the world led not only to immense tragedy, but also to a range of creative responses that took the new transformative vision in new directions or reacted against it in new ways. For a scholar, embarking on a project like this meant understanding socialist realism as something more than the simple aesthetic traditionalism that art and literary history have often taken it to be. While socialist realism did signal increased tolerance of more traditional aesthetic forms (in contrast to the more tendentious and unified “proletarian” style that preceded it), socialist realism also led to reinterpretations of traditional realism. Robert wrote especially about Shklovsky and Lukács, who, having earlier theorized in parallel to one another, now crossed paths during Lukács’s Soviet exile and reflected on how literary form could realistically represent a world in historical motion.² At the same time, the Soviet imaginary’s aesthetic ambitions reached beyond the traditional spheres of art and literature, taking up the avant-garde’s earlier impulse to treat life and the world as a sort of canvas for projecting new visions. Major Soviet economic and infrastructural campaigns, as well as campaigns to transform everyday life, were in turn accompanied by artistic and literary projects that supported them, but which also in some ways actively constituted them.³

In his determination to take Soviet and Eastern European socialist thought seriously, and in making the case for this in rich interpretative work building on Communist aesthetic theory in the fullness of its visionary contradictions, Robert Bird helped clear ground that *Contradictions* now covers.

Joseph Grim Feinberg

² Robert Bird, “Articulations of (Socialist) Realism: Lukács, Platonov, Shklovsky,” *e-flux* 91 (May 2018), published online: e-flux.com/journal/91/199068/articulations-of-socialist-realism-lukcs-platonov-shklovsky (accessed Nov. 14, 2020).

³ See, e.g., Robert Bird, “The Poetics of Peat in Soviet Literary and Visual Culture, 1918–1959,” *Slavic Review* 70 (2011), no. 3, pp. 591–614.