

# UCLA

## UCLA Historical Journal

### Title

Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds. *The Landscape of Stalinism: the Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*. (Studies in Modernity and National Identity) Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. 2005. Pp. xvii, 315. \$25.00

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/09p6569b>

### Journal

UCLA Historical Journal, 21(0)

### Author

Todorov, Boris

### Publication Date

2006

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2006 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman, eds. *The Landscape of Stalinism: the Art and Ideology of Soviet Space*. (Studies in Modernity and National Identity) Seattle and London: University of Washington Press. 2005. Pp. xvii, 315. \$25.00

We are presented with the paperback reprint of an inspiring collection of essays dealing with the cultural life in the Soviet Union during the late 1920's and the 1930's. Among the many commendable features of the book is the versatility of the authors' approaches and the dialogue which the separate articles maintain with each other. The reader is not only allowed into the heart of the culture under Stalinism, but is offered the chance to sneak into the working space of scholars of different background and interests who keep the spirit of intellectual conversation. The biggest danger is to get lost in the labyrinth of topics, methods and perspectives which the two editors have not been completely able to disentangle clearly from each other.

The editors have arranged the twelve essays in three groups according to an implicit understanding of Soviet culture emanating from a center enveloping territory and people within its ideological projects. We see discussed first, the arrangement of space within the artistic work of the period, next, the active policy of involving, or "mobilizing", the subjects with the new visions of time and space, and finally, the imprint of the ruling culture over the "blank pages" of the spacious Soviet territory. Such a choice is perfectly legitimate since the Soviet Union under Stalin is the clearest example of a totalitarian state and, consequently, an antithesis to pluralism. Yet, the different authors are far from the understanding that culture was just an expression of a Kremlin-dictated propaganda; through deep analysis and original interpretation of the versatile material they come with sometimes surprising explanations of the phenomena of Stalinist culture.

The least expected approach seems to be that of R. Cox who studies Soviet commercial advertizing. The mechanisms of Soviet economy do not easily explain advertizing's function. Proceeding from the concept of *kul'turnost* (culturedness) and from R. Williams's argument that consumer culture is not a function of the availability of goods, Cox explains the imaginary consumer bliss in the public space with the general picture of a harmonious, "cultured" and implicitly obedient society. E. Dobrenko pursues the relationship between state and individual further, building upon the concept of social navigation. Studying three independent aspects of textual and visual culture: postage stamps, tourism journals and popular, narrative, geography, Dobrenko treats the construed knowledge about the geography of the Soviet Union as a dynamic intercourse (this dynamism shows best in the dramatic

transformation of the "tourist" from a hidden enemy into a "subjugator" of space) between state and citizen.

These two essays, included in the second part of the collection together with R. Taylor's analysis of the techniques used in conveying the image of an utopian society in Soviet musicals, are preceded by five articles on Soviet art in more static terms. B. Groys's study of painting and architecture offers a rather helpful explanatory scheme for the self-reproductive models of artistic creativity. The demands for an "art of totality" which had to avoid both indifference to meaning and neglect of function made independent creation impossible. But Groys goes even further in explaining whence the need for this "art of totality" came in the first place. By a comparative discussion of Soviet and Fascist art, he concludes that the observance of formal-aesthetic criteria would imply an outside observer, while one cannot stay outside within a totalitarian system. A diametrically opposed approach is used by J. Plamper who analyzes the accepted norms of spatial arrangement in Stalinist painting from the perspective of art critique. Focusing on A. Gerasimov's *Stalin and Voroshilov in the Kremlin*, Plamper explains the circular arrangement in the socialist realist compositions with the understanding of a harmonious, fixed, motionless system centered in the political, and symbolic, nucleus – Stalin himself. The motionless harmony of socialist realist art is further explained by K. Clark's essay on the sacralizing of Soviet space which treats the cultural reality of Stalinism as an ongoing communication between an immanent and a transcendental ("higher-order") space.

The dynamic tension between the state and the creative artist reappears in E. Widdis's discussion of the presentation of the geographical versatility of the USSR in the cinema of the late twenties. Widdis's argument develops around the concept of conquest (her rendition of the Russian *usvoenie*) of the Soviet space not as a self-imposed projection of the center upon the periphery, but as a chain of mutually transforming contacts. The essay opens part three and is followed by two examples of the contrary approach: the appropriation of previously unreachable space from the center. J. McCannon is interested in the struggle of Soviet explorers with the "Tabula Rasa" of the Arctic, while M. Ryklin studies the construction of the Moscow subway. In addition to the dimensional differences in their subjects – horizontal versus vertical, McCannon and Ryklin choose to emphasize the opposite aspects of the ideologically charged issues. The latter directs his scope over the verbal discourses surrounding the construction of the "Metro" while the former draws the attention to the real-life embodiment of Socialist civic discourse in the heroic behavior of the Arctic explorers, particularly the members of the *Cheliuskin* ice-breaker expedition who spent more than three winter months in an improvised camp on the ice. Thus, the two essays are

mutually complementary since together they best substantiate the inextricable connection between word and act in the Stalinist historical context.

All the eleven essays written especially for this collection treat the phenomena of Soviet culture as belonging to the concrete space and time of Stalinism. The authors, sometimes explicitly so, adopted M. Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* and proposed interpretations proceeding from their view of the historical context. It is only M. Epstein's concluding essay, comprising material written in the 1980's, that breaks this principle and studies a number of *topoi* related both to the appropriation, and consideration, of Russian space in a rather ahistorical way, as deeply embedded within a perennial Russian cultural tradition. The inclusion of Epstein's essay has been possibly meant to remind the reader that the authors deliberately leave the field of discussion open to further contributions. Such contributions might easily switch the attention to the practical concerns behind many of the issues discussed in the book: advertizing fulfils particular economic functions even without a free market; the huge expenditures on the construction of the Moscow Metro might have been considered strategic investments; Soviet musicals were possibly meant not only to carry messages, but to attract viewers; Arctic exploration was expected to offer new communications' routes between European Russia and the Far East; the *usvoenie* of Central Asia had its immediate economic stakes. Stalin's dictatorship in the 1930's and its ugliest consequences: the Great Terror of the 1930's, the devastating famine in Ukraine, and the paranoid censorship on all levels of public communications, inevitably make the student of the period wary of traps of all sorts. Treating the cultural history of the period under the stigma of ideology is certainly the more secure way – no matter whether the focus is placed on the production of culture by party and state or on their acceptance, rejection or manipulation by the citizen. But a more practical approach to cultural and social history might yield good fruit as well and this is a direction which future studies of Stalinism may pursue.

*Boris Todorov*

*University of California, Los Angeles*

---

Lee Grieveson. *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press. 2004. Pp. xiii, 348. \$24.95

The topic of silent film has hardly gone overlooked by film historians; indeed, literature on the topic has mushroomed over the course of the past