

*Reorientalism: From Avant Garde to Soviet National Form*

Nariman Skakov

360 pages, 2025, £35 (paperback)

Columbia University Press

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*Reorientalism* reveals how avant-garde modernists adapted to the new Stalinist reality by carving out a slender space for continued formal experimentation in the physical spaces of the Soviet Union's colonial frontiers of Central Asia and through the Stalinist formula of "national in form, socialist in content." Intervening in the Paperny/Groys debate about the difference or continuity between the avant-garde and socialist realism, Skakov challenges this binary, arguing that in the period between 1929 and the start of the Second World War in 1941, the leading giants of the Soviet avant-garde – Viktor Shklovsky, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Dziga Vertov, and Sergei Eisenstein – created a new form of "late modernism."

This "late modernism," Skakov convincingly argues, was forged in and through the state building projects of the Soviet Union's Central Asian "Orient," Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan; the giant Stalinist modernization projects such as the Turkestan-Siberia railway and the Great Fergana Canal; and broader processes of industrialization and modernization. For Skakov, these material processes emerged alongside an interest and fascination in Central Asian "primitive" folk and ornamental forms, which like the new commodity frontiers that materially nourished the Soviet Union, came to culturally repair, redeem, and "reorient" Soviet socialist modernism. As Skakov puts it, the marginality of Central Asia was "essential for the consequent radical transfiguration of the late Soviet modernist project. Imbued with foreignness, Soviet Central Asia was a space of compensation, a place, a locus, a site, where creative energies of modernism were able to get a second wind, albeit in altered form" (3).

Each chapter constitutes a case study in how a leading Soviet figure through his or her contact with Central Asia remade both their career and key socialist aesthetic categories: matter, vision, sound, and time. Chapter one examines Shklovsky's reformulation of *ostranenie* as "clarity" in and through the Turkestan-Siberia railway. Chapter Two roots Rodchenko and Stepanova's transformation of photomontage from a constructivist practice of contraposition to one that imitates "an uncut photograph" (122) in their photobooks of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which celebrate the Republics' transformation from peripheral commodity frontiers to liberating, industrial powerhouses. Chapter Three argues that Vertov's shift from the silent kino-eye to his embrace of sound is rooted in a celebration of folklore and the "Soviet people's creative voice," one premised on the reduction of the Eastern Republics to a part of "the homogeneous Soviet collective" (192). And Chapter Four examines how Eisenstein's time in Mexico and then

Alma-Ata during the Second World War led to an embrace of the vernacular and ornamental forms associated with the national “primitive,” refashioned as “a key component” of a universalizing and internationalist “progressive socialist art” (266).

*Reorientalism* is an extraordinary book. Bringing together original archival research and exquisite formally attentive close readings, Skakov remaps the geography of Soviet modernism, bringing the Soviet Union’s peripheries to the fore. Thus, unsurprisingly, it has already been recognized as a field-changing book in Slavic Studies. But the book also poses broader questions about the fields of global modernism and postcolonialism and their ability to speak to the Soviet context, and vice versa.

While *Reorientalism*’s archive consists of cultural artefacts produced within the socialism of the Soviet Union, its theoretical apparatus largely relies on modernist and postcolonial scholarship that has at its core a critique of the commodity form and capitalist imperialism, or a Third-Worldist critique of Western colonialism. And his translation of these terms from the capitalist to the socialist world creates some problems. Three brief examples will suffice. In Skakov’s glossing of debates about modernism’s relationship to imperialism, he turns to Fredric Jameson’s paradigmatic essay “Modernism and Imperialism.” Skakov offers a peculiar deconstructive reading, arguing that “[b]ecause of th[e] structural condition, wherein the Other is distanced and made imperceptible to most inhabitants of metropolises, modernism’s formal experiment becomes a means to expose the absence of subaltern agency. A modernist text thus comprises an intricate veil concealing the indecency of capitalism” (17). However, Skakov fundamentally misreads Jameson, whose argument is not about the agency of the Other, but rather about a crisis of perception within the imperial center when commodity production is globalized. Moreover, for Jameson, modernism is a response to capitalism’s veiling, but modernism itself is not the veil. Whether this crisis of perception is present within the Soviet Union of the 1930s is an interesting question, but cannot be taken for granted.

Similarly, towards the end of the book, Skakov uses Walter Benjamin’s description of World Exhibitions in *Arcades Project* as “‘places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish’ where assemblages (of objects and peoples) promote consumption” (256) to analyze the Soviet All-Union Agricultural Exhibition (VSKhV), which advertised a plethora of basic foodstuffs and agricultural machinery. But Benjamin’s argument is specifically about World Exhibitions’ glorifying of commodity’s “exchange value” over its “use value” and its “seduction” of “masses, forcibly excluded from consumption” to “identify with the commodity” (18). I am not convinced that Benjamin’s analysis of the phantasmagorias of bourgeois life on display at World Fairs can be applied to a decommodified Soviet Union showing off the provision of basic reproductive supplies that are, ostensibly, available to all.

Third and finally is the concept of unevenness itself, which is crucial to Skakov’s account of the shift from the avant-garde to late

modernism. “The early avant-garde,” he writes “celebrated unevenness of development, while the late modernists sought to abolish it in the service of progress” (19). The opposition Skakov sets up between unevenness and progress, however, is confounding. “Unevenness” is a staple of Marx, Lenin, and then Trotsky’s writings, helping explain how the imposition of capitalist social relations on non-capitalist spaces often worked in and through more archaic forms, creating odd amalgams of the most modern and most primitive side by side. But “unevenness” was also important in theorizing why it was that the most ‘backward’ places could, like Russia in 1905 or China in 1925, often become the most revolutionary. Progress is baked into the conception of unevenness, not opposed to it.

My goal here is not to nitpick small errors, but rather to suggest that many of the book’s concepts can only be directly transposed from a global capitalist to a socialist context through misreadings that strip them of their materialist core. And these misreadings raise foundational questions about how we define colonialism and imperialism, and about the relationship between their epistemological and economic aspects. Such questions are at the heart of Skakov’s project, particularly his titular theory of “reorientalism.” “Reorientalism” both marks the Saidian Orientalism that Skakov sees as driving late modernism and draws attention to how the period of Stalinist shock industrialization saw the anti-imperialist and internationalist impulses of the avant-garde subdued and “reoriented” into colonial state-building, modernization projects in Central Asia.

But here too the question of the category’s translatability arises. While Said’s *Orientalism* is emblematic of academic postcolonial theory’s privileging of fuzzier notions of cultural and epistemological subjection over exploitation, extraction, and unequal exchange, the concept retains a materialist core. As Said explained in a later interview, Orientalism is an “operative and effective knowledge” produced and shaped by the West’s (primarily the French and British Empire) “milking” of the non-West for resources (191). Orientalism, then, names a discourse underpinned by the violent processes of colonial extraction that led to unequal exchange and the under- and de-development of European colonies. Is the Soviet Union’s modernization of the Central Asian Republics materially comparable to the British Empire’s operations in, say, Egypt and India, and is Soviet late modernism thus similarly overdetermined by such a colonial discourse? There are sometimes hints of this, as in Skakov’s discussion of “cotton fever” in Uzbekistan, but the material relations and trade between the Russian core and Soviet peripheries are never fully discussed, either on their own or comparatively in relation to the French and British colonial practices that are the material basis of Saidian Orientalism. Without this, Orientalism risks becoming a vague, ill-defined term.

In this, Skakov would have benefitted from an engagement with the work of Timothy Brennan, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus, and Sharae Deckard, who have persuasively shown the limits of a postcolonial critique severed from an analysis of the actual material conditions of

imperialism and colonial extraction; they provide the conceptual apparatus for a comparative postcolonialism, and a new rethinking of modernism and realism, rooted within the unevenness of the capitalist world-system as a totality. But Skakov's analysis of Soviet late modernism's entanglements with its own colonial practices also poses important challenges for those of us working within this theoretical lineage. *Reorientalism* demands that we confront the colonial relations that structured the Soviet state, a state that both grew out of an anticolonial revolution and was materially and intellectually foundational to so many other anticolonial revolutions. And it compels us to wrestle with how to include the cultures and aesthetics of the socialist world within the broader framework of the unevenness of the capitalist world-system.