Introduction: boundaries of the spectacular

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The Russian modernist era was remarkable not only for the extraordinary energy that infused all the arts, but also for the fact that this energy was so often generated by collaboration between artists working in different media – poetry, drama, film, painting and music. To date, however, the interaction of the arts as such has rarely been the subject of special study: most analyses have concentrated on well-known figures or groups (Maiakovskii, Pasternak, Diaghilev's Ballets russes) rather than attempting a broader picture.[1] This collection of essays aims to widen the discussion, not only by introducing some less familiar artists and writers (including women as well as men) alongside major names, but also by raising questions about the general principles of collaboration, adaptation and appropriation that operated in the age of Modernism, and about the relationship between Modernism and other artistic schools (in particular realism) so far as the interaction of the arts is concerned. It concentrates on 'spectacular' art forms (painting and theatre) not only because the early twentieth century was the time at which Russia first attained international standing as a producer, rather than a consumer, of top-quality work in these forms, with artists such as Bakst, Goncharova and later Malevich, Eisenstein and Lissitsky enjoying the respect and indeed awe that had been extended to their literary predecessors Tolstoi and Dostoevskii, but because the modernist era did so much to revise the relationship between the visual arts and Russian literature (a relationship that had traditionally been rather distant, as will be argued in more detail below).

The second element in the title of our introduction, 'boundaries', with its apparent emphasis on divisions and constraints, might appear to do little justice to the spirit of Modernism in its Russian variant, which was dominated by a neo-Romantic view that the purpose of boundaries was to be surmounted. In her 1934 poem,

'Vskryla zhily' (I opened my veins), for example, Marina Tsvetaeva drew a parallel between blood-letting and the poetic utterance, both of which overflow the limits of everyday vessels and measures, just as the actions of their originator in mutilating her body transgress customary notions of self-preservation and self-restraint.[2] Boris Pasternak, whose second collection bore the programmatic title *Poverkh bar'erov* (Over the Barriers), was equally, though less flamboyantly, concerned with the theme of the dissolution of self. Poems such as 'Margarita' (1919) dissolve the boundaries between human and natural worlds, between subject and object, and in 'Gorod' (Town, 1916), from the cycle *Epicheskie motivy* (Epic Motifs), the lyric subject, identified at first as a passenger upon a train, slips at the end of the poem beyond the figuration of personal identity, as observed and observer shift places, and the speaker imagines himself *outside* the train:

> Где горизонт, как рубикон,
> Где сквозь агонию громленой
> Рябины, в дождь бегут бегом
> Свистки и тучи, и вагоны.
>
> [Where the horizon is a rubicon,
> And through the death-agony of the thunderstruck
> Rowan, into the rain rush at full pace
> Whistles, clouds, and carriages.][3]

The traditional hierarchy of 'foreground' and 'background', of 'animate' and 'inanimate' is disrupted, and viewing-points are combined, as in a post-impressionist painting.

As this second example illustrates, boundaries between different art forms were as subject to assault as any other kind; indeed, here the assault upon the traditional divisions of 'self' and 'other', 'narrator' and 'narrated', is also dependent upon a substitution of the representative principles of painting for the traditions of lyric poetry. As Robin Milner-Gulland reminds us in the introduction to an essay included here, 'Khlebnikov's Eye', 'the period of the European "Modern Movement" (*c.* 1880–1930) witnessed close interaction between the various forms of art: a Mallarmé and a Debussy, a Schoenberg and a Kandinskii, a Picasso and an Apollinaire could be linked not only by ties of friendship and co-operation, but by a feeling of common purpose across normal generic boundaries'. Milner-Gulland goes on to mention one manifestation of

artistic syncretism during the 'Modern Movement', the fact that 'practitioners of one art frequently operated at a serious level in other territories': to the Russian artists that he cites, Filonov, Kandinskii, Pasternak and Maiakovskii, might be added Leonid Andreev (writer and pioneer of photography), Kuz′ma Petrov-Vodkin (painter and memoirist), Sergei Eisenstein (film director, artist and writer), Mikhail Kuzmin (composer and poet), Elizaveta Kuz′mina-Karavaeva (poet and creator of religious embroideries), Elena Guro (writer and painter), Varvara Stepanova and Ol′ga Rozanova (painters and writers) – and the list is still by no means exhaustive. In some cases, the engagement with alternative forms was to prove personally liberating, as in the case of Kuzmin, a minor composer turned major poet, or of Leonid Andreev, whose photographs display 'a lyrical sensitivity to physical beauty unexpected in one whose writings concentrate almost exclusively on philosophical and psychological probing and make minimal use of external description'.[4]

The crossing of boundaries by artists who were on the whole more prominent in one art form than the other or others is, however, only one way in which the convergence among different art forms during the modernist period made itself manifest. The Russian Romantics, who took their models above all from French contemporaries such as Lamartine, and from Byron, did not share the predilection of German writers of their era for synaesthesia, the blurring of sense impressions such that, say, sounds acquire colour value, or tactile impressions musical note values. But for modernists such as Belyi and Nabokov, the fusion of perception was fundamental to artistic creation.[5] Synaesthesia was more than a trope; it was intimately connected with the creation of multi-genre texts in which verbal, musical and visual texts were integrated in ways directly inspired by Wagner's theories of *Gesamtkunst*, or 'total art':[6] here the *son et lumière* orchestral works of Skriabin, such as *Prometei* (Prometheus), were particularly important. Post-Nietzschean appreciations of Greek tragedy through the prism of Wagner also prompted the composition and staging of neo-classical dramas with emphasis on musical and visual spectacular: one significant contribution to this direction was Tairov's production of Innokentii Annenskii's 'satyr-play' *Famira-kifared* (Thamyris the Citharist) in 1916. Other contributions to the convergence of the art forms included the increasing use of verbal commentaries on visual texts. As Ol′ga Rozanova pointed out in her

essay of 1913, 'Osnovy novogo iskusstva i prichiny ego neponimaniia' (The Principles of Contemporary Art and the Reasons Why it is Misunderstood), avant-garde groups such as the Suprematists used titles which drew attention to the technical devices employed in works of art; a more jaded observer, Maksimilian Voloshin, was to insinuate, in a critique of the avant-garde 'The Donkey's Tail' exhibition, that the titles of the neo-primitivist works on show were often more provocative than the contents of the paintings themselves.[7] Conversely, verbal texts were often accompanied by illustrations, ranging from the spidery vignettes of Konstantin Somov and other 'World of Art' painters, to the dramatic ink and charcoal sketches of Natal′ia Goncharova, while adventurous typography and book production (the use of multiple typefaces, sometimes within one word, and of unorthodox papers and bindings) was to be exploited to its limits in the early books of the cubo-futurist movement.[8]

Another important area for collaboration was the theatre. There are few countries that can boast such a distinguished tradition of stage design as Russia between 1880 and 1940. The many artists who worked in the medium included Goncharova, Larionov, Bilibin, Korovin, Aleksandra Ekster, Bakst, Benois, Tatlin and Liubov′ Popova; artists such as these collaborated on every detail of a production, designing everything from drop-curtains to shoe-buckles and stockings. And in the 1920s, as the constructivist movement gained ground, stage design moved from two into three dimensions, dictating movement as well as satisfying the decorative principle, and absorbing textual elements into the visual structure by means of such devices as the display of banners and notices. In Konstantin Khokhlov's staging of Aleksei Tolstoi's play *Bunt mashin* (Mutiny of the Machines), for example, slogans appeared both as exhortations, rupturing the illusion of direct communication between actors and audience, and as symbolic significations of theatrical space (one part of the huge cage-like structure that formed the set was labelled 'hotel').[9] At the same time, directors such as Meierkhol′d boldly and controversially remade dramas to suit a new view of the theatre as above all a visual medium: a signal event was the performance of Gogol's classic stage comedy *Revizor* (The Government Inspector), played on a claustrophobically cluttered stage, where 'characterisation' was sacrificed to identification by visual cues: petitioners clutched letters decorated with grotesque blobs of sealing wax, and Khlestakov, in Gogol's version an amiable buffoon, loomed in heavy

glasses and a tall hat like a Dostoevskian devil.[10] And the arrival of the cinema offered new possibilities of dramatising verbal texts (an important early example being Iakov Protazanov's extraordinarily rich version of Tolstoi's *Otets Sergii* (Father Sergius, 1918), still one of the most impressive translations of Tolstoyan narrative to the screen).

One could also mention the imitation of one art form in another. In literature, the modernist concepts of 'collage' or 'montage', and cinematic devices such as the close-up, or use of film segments run in reverse, facilitated the invocation of visuality in extremely diverse ways.[11] Resources now extended far beyond the traditional trope of ekphrasis (the citation of painting in poetry or narrative fiction), and suggested a unity of artistic vision that was quite different from the Aristotelian appreciation that painting and writing were united by their joint striving for mimesis, the exact imitation and reproduction of life (a project that was dismissed with typically modernist scorn by Ol′ga Rozanova as 'plagiarism of nature'), or the Horatian definition, *ut pictura poesis*.[12] As traditional narrative was dethroned in literary texts, and painters became involved in performance (such as the notorious experiments of Goncharova and Larionov in face-painting) the traditional division between literature as temporally defined and art as spatially defined began to be eroded.[13] Nor should one forget the importance of artistic cross-fertilisation in modernist literary theory: the terminology applied to compositional principles in painting, cinema and music began to be used as the basis of Russian Formalists' innovative and rigorous discussions of literary texts in terms of 'viewpoint' (*tochka zreniia*), 'dominant' (*dominanta*) and 'facture' (*faktura*), while later on the performance arts inspired Mikhail Bakhtin's brilliant contextualisations of literary strategies via the concept of 'carnival' in *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable* (Rabelais's World, 1965). The application of terms originating in the criticism of other arts to literary texts could not but heighten the convergence of artistic principles between visual and verbal texts.

In a sense, then, the modernist movement can be seen as an era at which the preference manifested in nineteenth-century Russian culture for the word over the visual image was swept away. No doubt partly because of the predominance of the visual image in religious culture, on the one hand, and because of the Enlightenment's assertion of the primacy of the verbal on the other,[14] the

secular intelligentsia that began emerging in the 1840s had regarded painting as an inferior art form. The Peredvizhniki (Wanderer) movement that emerged in the 1860s was an attempt by painters to lay claim to the high seriousness and the political and moral commitment of literary realism, to a tradition defined by Belinskii as the 'expression of ideas'. As Igor Golomstock has argued, the literariness of Russian landscape painting in the second half of the nineteenth century was evident not only in its choice of subjects (with, for example, Shishkin's paintings of fields and woods recalling the lyrical scenes in Turgenev's novels), but also in its intonation, its preference for the intuitive colour-world as seen by an eye uneducated in landscape painting over the counter-intuitive world of a close observer of nature.[15] An outstandingly gifted example of such a close observer, Vladimir Nabokov, was later to provide his American annotator, Alfred Appel, with a useful tutorial in how to see in the new way. When Appel, following Humbert Humbert's temporary mistress Rita, queried a line in Humbert's 'wistful French ballad', 'a very / blood bath of trees before the blue hotel', with the question, 'Why blue when it is white, why blue for heaven's sake?', Nabokov explained, 'What Rita does not understand is that a white surface, the chalk of that hotel, does look blue in a wash of light and shade on a vivid fall day, amid red foliage. H.H. is merely paying a tribute to French impressionist painters.'[16] In contrast, the paintings of even the most talented Russian realists, Repin and Levitan, evoke the russets, duns, chocolate browns, sandy yellows and sere beiges that harmonise with a lay person's perception of the steppe landscape.

Yet if the modernist era saw painting break from the tyranny of commonsensical observation, and literature in turn absorbing the insights of painting, it also saw something of a backlash on the part of writers against the visual, a contradictory assertion of the uniqueness of literature, its independence from art and music. For some modernist writers, any painting was too literal compared with the cerebral world of verbal creation. Innokentii Annenskii, for example, wrote in 'Chto takoe poeziia?' (What is Poetry?):

> A poet does not create images: he presents problems that resound down the centuries. A vast gulf lies between Dante's Beatrice and Fra Beato's Madonna of the Stars, for all the similarity of the concepts that inspired them. Have you ever pondered the question of why it is impossible to illustrate poetry? Of course, Botticelli's pencil drawings are far more

interesting than Gustave Doré's luxurious banalities, every one of which has the same tempest raging in the background. But even in the exaggeratedly stern lines of the quattrocentista we see not so much Dante as Botticelli's love for Dante. And if Dante Gabriel Rossetti himself had tried to capture Ophelia for us with his brush, though he might make you succumb to the enchantment of his vision, would he really stop you from taking offence on account of that eternal Ophelia who can exist only symbolically, in the immortal illusion of words?[17]

It was not only painting, but also performance, which excited suspicion. The emphasis in Russian realism on the ideal, on literature as the expression of a possible as well as (or sometimes rather than) a plausible world meant that the direct audience response to which theatrical performance exposed itself was seen as constraining rather than enabling. Twelve years after Griboedov had lamented 'the fussy suit of clothes' – that is, the dramatic form – in which he had been forced to dress the 'magnificent' idea behind his comedy of Moscow manners, *Gore ot uma* (*Woe from Wit*, 1824),[18] Gogol had the anti-hero of his play *Revizor* turn to the audience and denounce them for their delight in the spectacle with the famous line, 'Why are you laughing? You are laughing at yourselves.' A similarly coercive attitude to the audience (inimical to the spirit of the traditional theatre, with its emphasis on audience collaboration) is evident in Meierkhol′d's productions of the 1920s, with their hortatory banners and restructuring of the stage as a tribunal. And, as Barbara Henry reminds us in her study of the concept of 'theatricality' in modernist culture, the modern movement in Russia was not entirely free of the hostility to spectacle which had characterised puritan sensibilities since the Middle Ages. Even after 1905, when Symbolists and post-Symbolists alike became interested in the theatre as a means of reaching a broader audience, tension between poetry and performance remained. Meierkhol′d's 1906 production of Blok's *Balaganchik* (The Little Fairground Booth) was controversial for the freedoms that it took with the original text, as were the same director's later adaptations of Gogol and Griboedov.[19] It is significant that some of the most successful modernist theatrical spectacles were wordless (for example, the Stravinsky–Benois *Petrouchka*) and that cases where writers employed the dialogue form for plays that were never intended to be staged were far from unknown (a case in point being Gumilev's neo-classical drama *Actaeon*).[20]

The essays in this collection accordingly deal not only with

harmonious co-creation, the fusion of artistic resources, but also with tension; with the reinforcement of boundaries as well as with challenges to these. Such areas of conflict are reflected in numerous studies of the 'sister arts' in European culture. In recent decades, the anti-syncretic orthodoxy, with its resistance to 'interart' perspectives, has been challenged by structuralism, semiotics and intertextuality – new approaches which tend to treat a culture broadly as one large field of meanings where no *essential* difference between verbal and visual art forms can be discerned.[21] That is not, of course, to say that distinctions cannot be made between the verbal and the visual, or that there is any generalisable method for analysing the shared cultural code within which (let us assume) literature and the visual arts operate. As many works on European literature and art have shown, the most rewarding method of investigating this relationship is to study the ways in which the boundary between the verbal and the visual is drawn and redrawn in a particular culture of a particular era. On the level of close formal analysis, much has been done to interrogate – and in large part to undermine – the privileging of the literary and the temporal over the visual and spatial in literary and art criticism, and in cultural theory more generally.[22]

This book does not claim to make a major new contribution to the above theoretical debates. But it undoubtedly draws on the insights they have generated, assuming, first, that 'interart' investigations of a culture must cast their imaginative net wide, to include not only studies of adaptations (the reworking of a text from one medium in another), but also artistic affinities and cross-fertilisation more generally; second, that attempts to demonstrate the superiority, or indeed inferiority, of verbal media to visual forms of representation deserve cultural–historical deconstruction rather than intellectual credence; and, third, that artistic inter-relationships are profitably regarded as demonstrations of the dynamic relationships between genres, as manifestations of intertextuality.

In the first section of the book, 'The Arts Reflected in Literature', our contributors examine how Russian literature of the modernist era reflects the visual and performance arts. Konstantin Barsht's essay, 'Defining the face: observations on Dostoevskii's creative processes', analyses the importance of painting in the work of a writer who was seen by many important Russian modernists (among them Viacheslav Ivanov, Innokentii Annenskii, Anna Akhmatova,

Dmitrii Merezhkovskii, Zinaida Gippius, and not least Mikhail Bakhtin) as ancestor and inspiration. In his pioneering analysis of the sketches with which Dostoevskii adorned the manuscripts of his fiction, Barsht shows that for Dostoevskii, drawing was an embodiment of the verbal text, an essential parallel to and expression of the compositional instinct. (One might contrast the significance of illustration for Pushkin, for whom 'doodling' and 'scribbling', to evoke the poet's own ironically self-deprecatory terminology, were complementary rather than intimately associated forms: to quote *Evgenii Onegin*:

> Пишу, и сердце не тоскует,
> Перо в забытьи не рисует
> Близ неоконченных стихов
> Ни женских ножек, ни голов.
>
> [I write and my heart no longer feels anguish,
> My pen does not draw in forgetfulness
> Next to the unfinished verses
> Women's little feet or women's heads.][23])

But Barsht goes further than simply pointing out the relevance of Dostoevskii's doodles to the progress of his literary composition. He also sets out a wide-ranging and extremely thought-provoking analysis of Dostoevskii's interest in the visual arts (which is clear, for example, in his travel writings), and of the visual domain in Dostoevskii's fiction. He deals not only with the citation of paintings (a famous example is Holbein's *Crucifixion*, which plays a pivotal role in *The Idiot*), but also with the ways in which Dostoevskii's handling of the visual differs from classic realism. Barsht suggests that Dostoevskii's characters are *liki* (a term borrowed from Orthodox theology) rather than types; their physical features are intended not so much to be mimetically suggestive as to reflect a psychological and metaphysical existence beyond the obvious. It was this aspect of Dostoevskii's art which was to prove attractive to such visually rich Russian modernist writers of a later generation as Andrei Belyi, above all in his great novel *Peterburg* (St Petersburg).

The next essay, Catriona Kelly's 'Painting and autobiography: Anna Prismanova's *Pesok* and Anna Akhmatova's *Epicheskie motivy*', examines a number of different areas in the relationship between modernist poetry and the visual arts. These include the circulation of portraits of poets, and the way that these established a canonical

view of the modernist poet's physical appearance; the importance, for marginal figures in the modernist movement, of painting as a mediating source for methods of representing biographical realia not hallowed in literary tradition; and the relationship between cubist painting and visual punning in modernist poetry. The essay examines two contrasting approaches to self-portraits in verse, as manifested in Anna Akhmatova's *Epicheskie motivy* and Anna Prismanova's *Pesok*. Born, unlike Akhmatova, in a town that had not captured the mind of earlier writers, and so did not allow her access to the poetic topoi that were available to Akhmatova writing of St Petersburg, and without Akhmatova's reputation as a famous beauty, Prismanova did not see painting as the mere material of poetry. Instead, she employed references to, and artistic methods taken from, the contemporary arts in order to break with the constraints of the acmeist aesthetic which dominated the émigré literary circles in which she moved, and to find an original and effective way of representing a landscape that had been a blank space in Russian literary culture: the Baltic coast.

If Prismanova's *Pesok* (first published in 1946) is an illustration of how the impact of the modernist movement was felt in émigré Russian culture well beyond the 1920s, the next essay deals with the revival of Russian Modernism in the Soviet Union after Stalin's death. During the early 1960s, modernist trends in literature and the visual arts, for many years treated as highly disreputable, were rehabilitated (albeit partially and temporarily). One of the more prominent figures in this revival was Andrei Siniavskii, a writer for whom the visual arts were always vital to literary enterprises. As Jane Grayson shows in her essay, this special relationship of the visual and the verbal, as reflected notably in imagery and metaphor, is a structuring principle of much of Siniavskii's work. For Siniavskii, art always presents reality filtered through a particular human consciousness, or, to put it another way, reality 'seen' through a particular pair of human eyes. This 'situated' quality, in Siniavskii's view, gives art an ethical as well as a human charge – but it is also connected to a specifically modernist subjectivity, an emphasis on the breakdown of totalising views (omniscience), a rebellion against the socialist realist myth of a unified nation and unified viewing-point.

Not only painting, but performance, was crucial to literary representations in the modernist era. Alexander Zholkovsky's study of Zoshchenko's 'Monter' (The Electrician) and 'El′vira', 'Mikhail