A Bridge Between Kingdoms: The Marxist Aesthetics of Georgi Plekhanov

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Socialist Realism, the official artistic method of the Soviet Union, has remained a contentious but inadequately explored topic in historical scholarship. While its tenets that art must adhere to a realistic form and serve a didactic purpose have been well noted, its intellectual origins remain an open question. The arguments put forward by previous scholars regarding the genesis of Socialist Realism have largely focused on ahistorical analyses or conflated the similarities between it and previous aesthetic theories with causality, resulting in unsatisfactory conclusions. In my thesis, I argue that the ideas contained in Marxist theory concerning art and their development by the influential Russian theoretician Georgi Plekhanov must be considered among the intellectual foundation of Socialist Realism’s doctrine. Beginning with an examination the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I argue that a critical framework for judging and proscribing art was established in their theories of ideology and social development. Turning to Plekhanov’s writings on art, I argue that he developed this framework into a
stringent criticism or bourgeois and modern art alongside a staunch support of realistic and utilitarian art, thus strikingly predicting the tenets of Socialist Realism. Having illustrated that Plekhanov was able to construct a prescriptive aesthetic doctrine solely from Marxist ideas, I conclude that through his writings and widely noted influence over Soviet thought, Plekhanov’s ideas form a hitherto unexplored avenue for investigating the origins of Socialist Realism that avoids the failings of previous inquiries and will prove beneficial to future research on this subject.
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Introduction

The portrayal of the transition from capitalism to communism as “the ascent of man from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom” is among the most eloquent statements made by the founders of Marxist theory, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. But it is with no small amount of irony that many people view this statement today, as its promises that the necessities inherent in capitalism, a “struggle for existence” against “alien” and seemingly uncontrollable social forces, ¹ will disappear have been glaringly unfulfilled in the communist experiments of the twentieth century. With their labor camps, industrial quotas, and unfettered despotism, “communist” states such as the Soviet Union could be said to bear more resemblance to the “kingdom of necessity” that Marx and Engels described than one of freedom. One of the most arresting examples of the oppressions of “necessity” in the Soviet Union was Socialist Realism, its official artistic method since the doctrine’s inception in 1932-34. ² Under the precepts of Socialist Realism, art was assigned the extra-aesthetic, utilitarian purpose of inculcating

² There is some disagreement over the exact year in which to assign the “creation” of Socialist Realism. Some works provide the date of 1932, such as Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, Third Edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 3. Other works, such as C. Vaughan James, Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), X, and Abram Tertz, George Dennis, trans. The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 148, affix the creation of Socialist Realism to 1934. In Soviet Literary Theories 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 145-6, Herman Ermolaev provides details that clarify this disagreement. The first mentions of Socialist Realism were made in mid-1932, shortly after the Soviet government’s liquidation of all independent literary and artistic organizations and their replacement with government organized artistic unions (i.e. the Soviet Writers Union) which Socialist Realism was declared to be the official method of. However, the meaning of Socialist Realism and an elucidation of its principles was only provided, however, at the 1934 First Congress of Soviet Writers. Therefore, despite its clumsy appearance, I believe that “1932-34” best represents the period of Socialist Realism’s creation.
in its audience a view of life approved by the Communist Party. Claiming to have a
correct outlook on the world, the Party tasked artists with reflecting this optimistic and
tendentious view in their works in order to educate the Soviet populace. Proscribing the
form and content of all contemporary bourgeois art, Socialist Realist works were to
maintain a realistic style while portraying the heroic proletariat engaged in the
construction of socialism. With its wholly prescriptive approach that dictated the
content, form, and function of art, it is not difficult to consider that in Socialist Realism
the “kingdom of necessity” had added Soviet artists, and Soviet art itself, to its domain.

While the tenets of Socialist Realism are well documented, its intellectual
precedents and influences remain an open question. A large body of scholarship has been
devoted to examining the origins of Socialist Realism, but the surprisingly slim variety of
conclusions found therein leave much unanswered and many avenues of research have

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3 This description of Socialist Realism is drawn from the speeches given at the 1934 First Congress of
Soviet Writers that gave the first elucidation of its tenets. For a collection of the major speeches given
there, see Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Writers’ Congress. Edited by
H.G. Scott. (London: Martin Lawrence Limited, 1934). The speech which opened the Congress by Andrei
Zhdanov and most succinctly defined Socialist Realism is also contained in Andrei A. Zhdanov, Essays on
the famous description of Socialist Realist writers as “engineers of the human soul” whose “artistic
portrayal should be combined with the ideological remolding and education of the working people in the
spirit of socialism,” revealing the utilitarian function assigned to Socialist Realism. His speech also presses
writers to place themselves “under the leadership of the Communist Party, with the thoughtful and daily
guidance of the Central Committee” for the purpose of “educating themselves and…improving their
ideological equipment,” emphasizing that it was the views of the Party they were to reflect in their
“optimistic” and “tendentious” works. See Zhdanov, “Speech at the First All Union congress of Soviet
Writers, 1934” in Essays on Literature, Philosophy and Music, 12, 10, 15, 12, and 13, respectively. While
Zhdanov’s speech touches upon the prescribed realistic style of Socialist Realism and attacks Bourgeois art,
these aspects are most fully expounded upon in the speeches given by Karl Radek and Nikolai Bukharin.
Radek claims that “the literature of dying capitalism has become stunted in ideas…and this triviality of
contend is fully matched by the triviality of form displayed by bourgeois world literature,” and takes
particular issue with the modernist author James Joyce, whose work he describes as “heap of dung,
crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope.” See Karl Radek,
“Contemporary World Literature and the Tasks of Proletarian Art,” in Problems of Soviet Literature, 151
and 153. Bukharin is equally hostile to modern art, arguing that the “universal decadence in which all
bourgeois humanity is now living” has led to the formalist innovations of modern art, which Bukharin
describes as an “impoverishment of the elements of content” leading to “the suicide of the given form of
art.” See Nikolai Bukharin, “Poetry Poetics and the Problem of Poetry in the U.S.S.R.” in Problems of
Soviet Literature, 206.
been neglected. Most prominent among these unexplored routes is the possibility that Marxist aesthetics, the ideas and precepts regarding art and culture contained in Marxist theory, may have played a decisive role in Socialist Realism’s formation.

Previous scholarship has typically posited an antithetical relationship between Marxist aesthetics and Socialist Realism, with the latter’s prescriptive and utilitarian approach to art contrasted with the apparently descriptive and analytical approach of the former. While Socialist Realism dictates what art should be and do, Marxist aesthetics is seen as a tool for examining how a work of art came to be and lacking the criteria necessary for forming a rigid criticism that would dictate a “correct” artistic method. Furthermore, Marxist aesthetics is providing no support for a utilitarian approach to art, to works of art or ideas concerning art that, like Socialist Realism, assign artistic products a purpose beyond that of providing aesthetic pleasure, such as acting as a vehicle for the dissemination or exploration of ideas, a instrument of mass agitation, or means of edification. These apparent dissimilarities have led scholars who have examined Socialist Realism’s origins to dismiss Marxist Aesthetics as a possible ideological influence. Furthermore, those who have examined these two views of art alongside each other have argued for their complete incompatibility and portrayed the two as separated by a gaping ideological chasm. When compared with the Socialist Realist “kingdom of necessity,” Marxist aesthetics has been depicted as a veritable “kingdom of freedom.”

As I will argue in this essay, this perception of an oppositional relationship between Socialist Realism and Marxist aesthetics is based on the neglect of vital tenets of Marxist theory that impinge upon art and how these tenets were employed and developed
in the writings of Georgi Plekhanov (1857-1918), one of the founders of the Russian Social-Democratic movement and an influential Marxist theorist. While the basic concept of Marxist aesthetics, that art is the reflection of consciousness and ultimately conditioned by social and material exigencies, does present itself as a solely descriptive and analytical approach to art, wider principles of Marxist theory and their implications can easily be used to form a more rigid and prescriptive approach. Specifically, by positing that art reflects consciousness, Marxist aesthetics positions art as a reflection of an ideological and false consciousness, an obfuscated and misconstrued outlook of the world arising from ignorance and class interests. Additionally, Marxist theory also contains a specific and particular view of society and development, one of class struggle, economic determination, and impending revolution, which the viewpoints presented in art can be compared to and judged by. A critical framework for evaluating art is thus sketched out in Marxist aesthetics. This framework was developed and employed by Plekhanov in his writings into a prescriptive view of art that I have termed his “developed orthodoxy,” which strikingly anticipated Socialist Realism. Utilizing the Marxist concepts of ideology and the its vision of society, Plekhanov repeatedly criticized bourgeois art, from anti-proletarian dramas to the formalist experiments of modern art, for reflecting a false, ideological view of the world and explicitly prescribed that a Marxist view be adopted by artists and reflected in their art. Furthermore, Plekhanov deployed Marxism’s view of society as engaged in class conflict to argue that a utilitarian approach favoring art that performed extra-aesthetic functions was an inevitable and beneficial aspect of this process, while he himself came to endorse art that served a didactic purpose. Thus, in his enmity to the art of the contemporary bourgeoisie, his
prescription that art reflect a particular view of life, and his support for utilitarian art, Plekhanov developed an aesthetic doctrine that closely resembled Socialist Realism. By basing his doctrine on purely Marxist ideas, and by maintaining and transmitting these ideas in his writings and influence up to the eve of Socialist Realism’s creation, Plekhanov’s “developed orthodoxy” can be seen as an intellectual bridge connecting the “kingdom of freedom” of Marxist Aesthetics and the Socialist Realist “kingdom of necessity,” suggesting a new way by which the latter’s origins can be conceived.

With the neglect of this intellectual bridge connecting Marxist aesthetics and Socialist Realism, previous research into the roots of Socialist Realism has centered around two different, and unsatisfactory, poles. Most prominently, a “totalitarian” explanation is often put forth in which Socialist Realism is characterized as the product of the expansion of Stalinist tyranny into the cultural sphere. Though accurately depicting the promulgation of and mandatory adherence to Socialist Realism as government enforced, the scholars advocating the totalitarian explanation exclusive focus on these facts has led them to ignore possible intellectual antecedents that may have informed the doctrine itself. By centering their studies on how Socialist Realism was implemented and used, these scholars have relied upon events succeeding its creation to explain its origin. Rather than providing analyses of the doctrine of Socialist Realism and ideas that may have influenced its tenets, the totalitarian explanation has ignored the intellectual history of aesthetics in Russia and the Soviet Union while essentially reading the politics of Socialist Realism’s use back into its genesis. These failings are addressed by the “heritage” explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins. Attempting to locate ideas and aesthetic theories that may have played a role in shaping the doctrine of Socialist
Realism, scholars adhering to the heritage explanation have typically focused on the utilitarian aesthetics of the nineteenth-century Russian radicals or the modernist concepts of the twentieth-century avant-garde. While well-researched and informative, these studies also fail to produce a convincing argument. Though the ideas of the Russian radicals were strikingly similar to the prescriptive and utilitarian approach to art of Socialist Realism, scholars arguing that they influenced Socialist Realism have largely relied on Soviet pronouncements to that effect and failed to persuasively illustrate that these ideas could have exerted any influence over a doctrine composed nearly a century after their heyday.

Most recently, heritage scholars have put forward the argument that Socialist Realism was the result of influences stemming from the modernist avant-garde. This striking assertion not only notes the similarities between the ideas of the avant-garde, but can also point to the fact that these ideas were pervasive in the Soviet Union on the eve of Socialist Realism’s promulgation, putting forth a strong argument. The scholars that have put this argument forward, however, have consistently ignored the equally pervasive influence of Marxism at that time. Neglecting the role that Marxist theory played in influencing the Soviet avant-garde, these scholars have, to my mind, neglected a vital component that would have made the idea that the avant-garde was able to influence the Soviet government more palatable and ultimately rendered their views rather one-sided. Thus, considering the generally ambivalent results of research into the origins of Socialist Realism, I believe that uncovering the previously undiscovered bridge of Plekhanov’s “developed orthodoxy” will greatly benefit future investigation into this subject.
The “Totalitarian” Explanation of Socialist Realism’s Origins

In the writings comprising the “totalitarian” historiographical category, one finds not only the most homogenous explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins, but also the oldest; as its first exponent was Max Eastman’s *Artist’s in Uniform: A Study of Literature and Bureaucratism*, published in 1934, the same year as the first major articulation of Socialist Realism. In this work, Eastman argues that “the artistic experience of the Soviet Union [up to 1934] can only properly be described as a failing struggle of the creative spirit against…subservience to a rapidly consolidating bureaucratic caste, and subservience to a State Religion.”

The two components which Eastman argues as coming to dominate Soviet arts by 1934 – the bureaucracy and the “state religion” – are also what he identifies as the hallmarks of Stalin’s ascent to power. Thus, the rise of Stalin is directly linked to the fall of the arts, and the promulgation of Socialist Realism, in the Soviet Union.

Eastman sees Stalin’s bureaucracy and his “state religion” as two insidious and mutually reinforcing factors that allowed him to politically and intellectually dominate the Soviet Union and its culture. Regarding Stalin’s “state religion,” Eastman argues that, in contrast to Lenin and Trotsky, Stalin consciously cultivated the “metaphysical” aspects of Marxism which placed an emphasis on the Hegelian inheritance of “essences” and dialectics and generally presumed penetrating insight into the underlying and

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inevitable movement of history. With Stalin thus claiming to possess the only “correct” interpretation of Marxism and a prescient understanding of history, Eastman argues that he used these claims as a means to denounce and marginalize his enemies within the Party while fostering a cult of personality and gain followers. Eastman describes how as this process continued, Stalin was able to create and staff an enormous bureaucratic apparatus with his devoted followers, allowing him to consolidate his power and eventually dominate the Soviet Union. 5

Eastman argues that between these two factors, the “bigotry of Marxist metaphysics” and the “brutality of Stalinist bureaucracy, literature as a vitally incisive, thinking human function…[had] been silenced, watered down, banished, or destroyed [in the Soviet Union].” 6 This occurred as Stalin and his followers, claiming to possess a “correct” knowledge of and insight into the world and possessing the resources of a growing bureaucracy, launched an “aesthetic inquisition” to purge the Soviet arts of “Trotskyites” and any others that did not properly conform to Stalin’s vision. 7 Following this “decade of devastation” 8 of the Soviet arts, Eastman describes how Stalin had sufficiently consolidated his “dictatorship in the field of arts and letters,” to decree that the compulsory method of artistic creation would be Socialist Realism, with its “obligation to idealize party leaders.” 9 Thus Eastman argues that Socialist Realism was the culmination of a process in which “bigotry and bureaucracy stamp[ed] out creative life” in the Soviet Union, and “the slightest glimmer of artistic independence…of seeing

5 Eastman, Artists in Uniform, see pp. 175-216.
6 Ibid., 96
7 Ibid., 165.
8 Ibid., 36. Eastman considers Stalin’s rise and concomitant attacks on the arts to have begun with Lenin’s death in 1924 and continued until 1934.
9 Ibid., 171 and 19, respectively.
or creating distinct from that dictated by the expediencies of the political power…was the object of attack.\textsuperscript{10}

With his characterization of Socialist Realism as little more than propaganda and his argument that its genesis lay in the tyrannical demands of the Stalinist dictatorship, Eastman put forward the essential aspects of the totalitarian position concerning the origin of Socialist Realism. Throughout numerous studies, the argument Eastman put forward regarding the origin and character of Socialist Realism has been decidedly echoed. Such is the case with Nicholas Timasheff, who in his work \textit{The Great Retreat} (1946) asserts not only that Stalin “coined the term” Socialist Realism, but that under it “the only task of literature was that of fulfilling the social directions of Stalin.”\textsuperscript{11} In \textit{The Country of the Blind} (1949), George Counts and Nucia Lodge sharpen the polemical edge of the totalitarian explanation when they describe Socialist-Realist-dominated Soviet literature as one of the “weapons” employed by the Soviet government in its system of “mind control.”\textsuperscript{12}

While the totalitarian explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins may be viewed as a product of the animosity of Western scholars towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War, this argument is somewhat deflated by the fact that it has remained extant in numerous studies to the present day. One can find evidence of this in the argument put forth by noted historians Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg that Socialist Realism was “imposed” by Stalin and the Politburo upon Soviet writers who were then

\textsuperscript{10} Eastman, \textit{Artists in Uniform}, 126.
compelled to churn out “crude and lifeless propaganda.”

Jeffrey Brooks includes Socialist Realism as one of the products of Stalin’s personality cult in his monograph *Thank You, Comrade Stalin!* (2000) and describes it as a “grossly unequal arrangement in which writers worked under the authority of cultural bureaucrats to promote the government’s…agenda” and as being used by “the leaders and supporters of the Stalinist system…to enlarge the domain of their moral and intellectual claims.”

Lastly, David MacKenzie and Michael W. Curran write in *Russia and the USSR in the Twentieth Century* (2002) that “narrow-minded Socialist Realism” was enforced by “party authorities…[who] viewed culture as a weapon to propagandize and mobilize the masses.”

Thus, the echoes of Max Eastman’s original argument that Socialist Realism was a vehicle for propaganda decreed into existence by Stalinist tyranny can still be heard to this day. Though a number of salient points raised by the totalitarian viewpoint are beyond dispute, such as the fact that it was implemented under governmental auspices and the only artistic style allowed in the Soviet Union, the exclusive focus on these facts by scholars ultimately provides only a partial understanding of its subject. Specifically, these studies focus on the use that was made of Socialist Realism following its creation and neglect any historical examination of Socialist Realism’s intellectual origins or links with preceding aesthetic doctrines or ideas. As has been shown, scholars that put forward the totalitarian explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins pay orient their studies towards

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examining how Socialist Realism was employed and enforced by the Soviet government. While this use of Socialist Realism in limiting artistic freedom and promoting utilitarian art in the decades after 1934 is undeniable, the penchant many of the above scholars displayed for telescoping this use back into the doctrine itself does little to analyze how it was formed. In their focus on the events that succeeded the creation of Socialist Realism, these scholars largely neglect the aesthetic ideas and theories that preceded it and any causal influence they may have exerted upon the doctrine of Socialist Realism. When proponents of the totalitarian viewpoint do examine Socialist Realism alongside anterior artistic movements, they place it in a purely negative relationship with them, severing all continuity and giving the impression that Socialist Realism burst forth from the head of a collective bureaucracy *ex nihilo*.\(^{16}\) This willful “bridge” burning is largely a result of the general dismissal of the ideas and theories underpinning Socialist Realism by the scholars positing the totalitarian explanation as a whole. By providing no deeper analysis of Socialist Realism’s theoretical articulation than to characterize it as propaganda, the totalitarian explanation obfuscates not only an important component of Socialist Realism itself, but also a means towards understanding its historical origins. Thus, while the totalitarian focus on the image of Socialist Realism as a one-dimensional tool of oppression put in place by the Stalinist dictatorship does provide some insight into the establishment of Socialist Realism, this focus is ultimately too myopic to offer anything but an incomplete and ahistorical analysis of its origins.

\(^{16}\) For an example of and argument that Socialist Realism broke with, or lacked links to, the past, see Riasanovsky’s and Steinberg’s portrayal of Socialist Realism as the complete negation of the preceding artistic avant-garde movements of the 1920’s; Riasanovksy and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 607-8. Also, Eastman repeatedly portrays Stalin as sharply breaking with Lenin’s and Trotsky’s apparent support for artistic freedom, see Eastman, *Artists in Uniform*, 126-149, for his chapter devoted to Trotsky’s views on art; and see pg. 211 for his assertion that Lenin would not approve of Stalin’s cultural control.
The “Heritage” Explanation of Socialist Realism’s Origins

The shortcomings of the totalitarian position are particularly glaring when compared to those writers who pursue a “heritage” explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins. While accepting the bureaucratic promulgation of Socialist Realism as put forth by the totalitarian explanation, these authors reject the concomitant totalitarian insinuation that Socialist Realism was solely the product of Stalinist authoritarianism. As noted previously, the analyses provided by the authors expounding the heritage explanation can be broadly described as attempts to discern the aesthetic lineage and ideological antecedents of Socialist Realism, to place it within a continuum of Russian culture and thought. In their attempts to recognize this continuity, these writers have generated a body of scholarship that identifies the particular artistic components of Socialist Realism and its underlying principles regarding a didactic and utilitarian function of art. By identifying these elements and then attempting to discern their formative intellectual and aesthetic influences, the exponents of the heritage explanation provide an astute analysis of Socialist Realism and put forth engaging attempts at explaining its origin.

The first Western study to fully expound the “heritage” explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins was Rufus Mathewson, Jr.’s monograph, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (1958). Mathewson argues that a “direct line of inheritance” can be established between Socialist Realism and the ideas concerning aesthetics put forward by
nineteenth-century Russian radical literary critics. Examining the writings of three of the most prominent of these literary critics, Vissarion Belinsky (1811-1848), Nikolai Dobrolyubov (1836-1861), and Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828-1889), Mathewson highlights their development of two intertwined prescriptions for literature: a concept of “utilitarian aesthetics” which “call[ed] on literature to serve social change” by critiquing society and depicting means for social improvement; and their advocacy of a the “creation of a more effective and more successful literary hero” that would provide its audience with an edifying and motivating example for pursuing such changes.

Mathewson finds the origin of the “utilitarian aesthetic” in the critical writings of Belinsky and his views that works of art are “freighted with intellectual and moral significance… [and have an] obligation to convey moral ideas.” This stress on the role of art in performing an extra-aesthetic, didactic function is then traced by Mathewson into the ideas expressed of Dobrolyubov, who he sees as developing Belinsky’s concepts in a direction that “always…favor[ed] the prescriptive element…that viewed literature as perform[ing] a kind of…service.” Mathewson continues on to argue that these views concerning the instructive service prescribed for literature led Dobrolyubov to enjoin writers to depict, as “fulfillment of their public responsibilities,” a new literary hero: “the new man.” This “new man,” who would be “active …would know his own strength, who his enemies were…[and have] the energy and courage to put his principles into practice,”

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18 Ibid., 14-15.
19 Ibid., 28.
20 Ibid., 48.
was an integral aspect of Dobrolyubov’s utilitarian aesthetic in that by depicting him writers would be providing an edifying example for their readers to emulate.\textsuperscript{21}

Mathewson concludes his study of the of nineteenth-century radical critics by citing Chernyshevky’s novel, \textit{What is to be Done?} (1863), as “a perfect point-by-point illustration” of the utilitarian aesthetic. Chernyshevsky’s book is populated by Dobrolyubov’s “new men” whose active and rational pursuit of the betterment of society is only interrupted by occasional digressions into instructive exposition. The utilitarian morality of “enlightened self-interest” and “love of mankind” animate Chernyshevsky’s characters, doctrines that “direct their lives and which their lives, in turn, illustrate.”\textsuperscript{22} In short, Mathewson presents Chernyshevsky’s novel as the culmination of the radical critics’ “conversion of art into an educational medium,” of their utilitarian demand that the artist “pass judgment” on life and depict “what should be” in favor of “what is.”\textsuperscript{23}

Having firmly identified the principles of the nineteenth-century utilitarian aesthetic, Mathewson turns to the principles of Socialist Realism as laid out at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934. In these tenets, Mathewson finds an “overall dependence” on the nineteenth-century radical critics’ prescriptive definition of literature’s proper function as one of didactic service to society and the promotion of inspiring and proactive heroes.\textsuperscript{24} In his examination of the speeches delivered at the Congress, Mathewson finds that Socialist Realism was predicated upon the concept of “serv[ing]...the cause of socialist construction” by means of “reflecting and publicizing” this process. This service was ensured by the fact that literature was to be optimistic,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext{21}{Mathewson, Jr. \textit{The Positive Hero in Russian Literature}, 51-52.}
\footnotetext{22}{Ibid., 75.}
\footnotetext{23}{Ibid., 68-74.}
\footnotetext{24}{Ibid., 20-21.}
\end{footnotes}
tendentious and “propagate specific political values.” While Mathewson notes that the specificity of Socialist Realism’s demands on literature went beyond those of the radical critics of the nineteenth-century, he argues that this difference was “merely in degree, not in kind, as far as the fact of commitment is concerned.” Mathewson further connects the ideas underlying Socialist Realism with those of the nineteenth century when he turns to the specific functions of the “positive hero” that was called on to inhabit Socialist Realist works. Relating that the hero in Socialist Realism was meant to be an “admirable representative of political virtue” and “inspire [the reader] to emulation,” Mathewson concludes that these were the exact effects that Dobrolyubov’s and Chernyshevsky’s “new men” were intended to have.

Thus, while he recognizes the promulgation of Socialist Realism by the Communist Party, Mathewson is able to provide a supplementary, historical account of its origins by investigating its principles. By seriously considering Socialist Realism’s doctrine of a politically committed and didactically oriented aesthetic, Mathewson is able to locate a salient ideological “heritage” in the ideas of the nineteenth-century radical critics. This identification of the parallels between, and the subsequent linking of, Socialist Realism and the radical critics’ utilitarian aesthetics has gained wide currency and been put forward by a number of noteworthy scholars. Nicolas Berdyaev’s argues that Chernyshevsky’s advocacy of the “the subservience of literature and art to social aims” directly anticipated the “type of culture which triumphed in communism.” This is echoed by American historian Adam Ulam’s claim that, “in his [a]esthetic views and

26 Ibid., 228.
criticisms, Chernyshevsky must be considered an ancestor of Socialist Realism.”

Lastly, this particular argument is even given the seal of approval by the famed thinker Isaiah Berlin who writes that with Socialist Realism, the Soviet Union had “returned…to the canons of Belinsky and the social criteria for art.”

While the above quotations reveal the wide acceptance of locating Socialist Realism’s intellectual origins in the ideas of the radical critics due to the striking parallels between them, they also reveal one of the major deficiencies of this particular argument: that it is only based on parallels. These writers have not truly constructed any bridge between Socialist Realism and the nineteenth century, they have only identified similarities, albeit noteworthy similarities, between two aesthetic doctrines that are separated by over half a century of intellectual and artistic development. Little attempt is made to explain how the ideas of utilitarian aesthetics were transmitted or maintained during these intervening events. This criticism is cogently articulated by Régine Robin in her work *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (1992), where she critiques previous studies linking Socialist Realism with the nineteenth-century radical critics as “mistaking anteriority for causality.” While Robin attempts to amend this flaw by focusing on the recurring polemics between proponents of utilitarian and autonomous art in the nineteenth century and arguing that this debate remained extant until the promulgation of Socialist Realism, she ultimately only illustrates recurring arguments over the function of art and does not succeed any better than her predecessors in constructing a concrete bridge between Socialist Realism and the nineteenth century.

Further criticisms of this widespread reliance on the parallels and similarities between Socialist Realism with the ideas of the radical critics are raised by Abram Tertz\textsuperscript{31} in his essay “On Socialist Realism” (1960). Though Tertz provides a very similar description of Socialist Realism’s didactic function as the above heritage proponents, he locates its parallels in a very different era. Tertz claims that Socialist Realism was “founded on the concept of Purpose with a capital P,” and that “the Purpose is an all embracing ideal, toward which represented reality ascends in an undeviating revolutionary movement…To direct this movement toward its end and to help the reader approach it more closely by transforming his consciousness – this is the Purpose of Socialist Realism,” and concludes that “The Purpose is Communism…a [Socialist Realist] poet not only writes poems but helps, in his own way, to build Communism”\textsuperscript{32} Tertz thus lucidly elaborates upon the prescribed “function” which Mathewson describes Socialist Realism as performing: an edifying role in which the artistic product would educate and guide its audience towards the ultimate historical goal of Communism.

Having articulated Socialist Realism’s function, Tertz addresses the claim that Socialist Realism was an evolution of, or was indebted to, nineteenth-century Russian literature and criticism and finds it less than plausible. Recounting that those writers criticized society and searched for answers, that their intellectual and creative praxis was centered on a striving questioning, Tertz argues that they had little in common with the

\textsuperscript{31} “Abram Tertz” was the pseudonym of Andrei Sinyavsky a literary scholar at the Gorky Institute in Moscow. In 1959 his book \textit{The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism}, a double work containing the cited essay along with an original short story satirizing the typical Socialist Realist novel, was smuggled out of the USSR and published in the West, later followed by other works of his. In 1965, Andrei Sinyavsky was arrested and sentenced to seven years in a labor camp, apparently for his illegal publishing activities. While the temptation to dismiss him as irrevocably biased is great, I believe that, while he had a personal stake in denouncing Socialist Realism, he provides a unique “insider” and well-informed view on the subject.

\textsuperscript{32} Abram Tertz, \textit{The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism}. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960), 150.
self-assured “Purpose” found in Socialist Realism and instead locates its precedent elsewhere in history. Observing that “not since the Middle Ages have men possessed such an exact knowledge of the meaning of the world’s destiny,” Tertz draws a parallel between the God-centered literature of that time, which was bent towards the view that life proceeded according to divine will, and the Socialist Realist view of the progress towards Communism. Ultimately, Tertz does not attempt to argue that Socialist Realism evolved out of medieval ecclesiastical literature and only employs this parallel for the demonstrative purpose of criticizing attempts to link Socialist Realism with the nineteenth-century utilitarian aesthetic. In doing so, however, Tertz sheds light on the differences and distance between Socialist Realism and the radical critics’ utilitarian aesthetic and highlights the need for conclusive links between the two doctrines.

Returning to Mathewson, one finds that he does attempt to connect Socialist Realism with the nineteenth century through an examination of the ideas of Lenin and Russian writer Maxim Gorky. While his analysis of Gorky’s novel *Mother* (1907) reveals it to be an example of politically committed literature that recreated Dobrolyubov’s “new men” archetype in its main characters, Mathewson seems to consider pointing out this similarity to be sufficient, as no attempt to concretely link this to either the radical critics or Socialist Realism is made. Mathewson’s examination of Lenin is rather flawed by its narrow use of sources to support rather broad conclusions. Of Lenin’s statements directly concerning art, Mathewson chooses to look only at his 1905 article “Party Organization and Party Literature.” Mathewson’s decision to isolate

34 Mathewson, Jr. *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 165-176. While Gorky was present at the 1934 Congress which laid out Socialist Realism, and in fact delivered a speech there, Mathewson does not draw any implications of continuity from this fact.
this article from Lenin’s other statements regarding literature and art is made all the more confounding by his abrupt dismissal of the controversy over whether this article refers only to journalistic writing or also to belles-lettres. Thus, any bridge connecting Socialist Realism and the nineteenth century that Mathewson could construct from this incomplete examination of Lenin would have to be viewed cautiously and critically. Ultimately, however, Mathewson’s conclusion that Lenin’s 1905 article advocated the “principle of outright political partisanship in literature” and bore the “accent” of the radical critics’ utilitarian aesthetic fails to construct such a bridge, only repeating his previous identification of parallels.

In his stated reason for examining Lenin’s 1905 article, Mathewson reveals the second major shortcoming of his attempt to link Socialist Realism with the nineteenth-century utilitarian aesthetic. Mathewson writes that his analysis of Lenin’s article as the source of Socialist Realism’s demand for politically committed literature was determined by the fact that it had been repeatedly invoked by contemporary Soviet sources as justification for that commitment. That Mathewson reached the same conclusions regarding the meaning of Lenin’s article is not, by itself, unusual or troubling. What is troubling is that it is but one instance of his uncritical acceptance and general

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35 Mathewson gives no explanation why he is neglecting Lenin’s other writings that undoubtedly deal with creative, as opposed to journalistic, literature. He does note that that the “question of the ambiguity” of Lenin’s intentions in the article revolve around his use of the Russian word “literatura” which means both journalism and belles-lettres. Mathewson goes on to write that this question can be set aside since “Judging from several comments Lenin made on works of fiction it is quite clear that, when he was in his “functionalist” mood, he in fact made no distinction between the two kinds of literatura.” He then directs his readers towards one quote of Gorky’s in which Lenin is cited as describing the latter’s Mother as being “very useful” for workers to read. Aside from this one second-hand quote, Mathewson does not reveal what the other “several comments” Lenin’s were that display a “functionalist mood” and does not distinguish between the two kinds of literatura. See Mathewson, Jr. The Positive Hero in Russian Literature, pg. 157 for his dismissal of the ambiguity surrounding the 1905 article, and pg. 174 for the Gorky quote he refers to.
36 Ibid., 156, 164.
37 Ibid., 157.
recapitulation of the officially sanctioned views of Socialist Realism’s origins as put forth by the Soviet authorities. Earlier in his work, Mathewson writes that

“…the radical critics’ influence is diffuse in the years after the revolution and is seldom acknowledged. But [their] importance…was to receive more and more explicit statement in critical pronouncements after the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, and to receive ultimate official sanction in the declaration of literary policy made by A.A. Zhdanov in…1946.”

Unable to construct his own bridge linking Socialist Realism’s origins with the nineteenth-century radical critics, Mathewson resorts to employing Soviet statements to that effect as evidence of such origins. It therefore becomes clear that the first attempts at formulating a heritage explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins were not by Mathewson or any of the other scholars reviewed above, but by the Soviet authorities and only after Socialist Realism’s promulgation. Thus, with his 1946 declaration that Socialist Realism is “carrying on…the best traditions of nineteenth-century Russian literature, traditions established by…Belinsky, Dobrolyubov, Chernyshevsky…and scientifically elaborated by Lenin,” Zhdanov reveals himself to be the first proponent of the heritage explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins.

The problems inherent in Mathewson’s uncritical acceptance of these Soviet pronouncements are cogently raised by Gleb Struve in his work, *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin* (1971). Struve notes that under the influence of Stalin’s refocusing of Soviet priorities from world-wide revolution to the maintenance of

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38 Mathewson, Jr. *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 21. Andrei Zhdanov was at the time the chairman of the Supreme Soviet and the head of Soviet cultural policy from World War II until his death in 1948. He is also notable for delivering the opening speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, at that time he was the head of the Leningrad Communist Party. For more information, see Riasanovsky and Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 552-3, and; Thomas Riha, ed. *Readings in Russian Civilization, Vol. III: Soviet Russia, 1917 – Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 693.

“socialism in one country,” a resurgent Russian nationalism was fostered by the Soviet government. “A good Soviet citizen had to be a good Soviet patriot,” Struve writes, “and patriotism no longer meant pride in the ‘conquests of the Revolution’…it also implied pride in Russia’s past.”

It is in this resurgent nationalism, which peaked during and immediately after the Second World War, that Struve finds the reasoning behind Soviet attempts to retroactively link Socialist Realism with the Russian radical critics. Thus, while Mathewson cites Zhdanov’s 1946 declaration as a “conclusive sign” of the overarching influence of the radical critics on Socialist Realism, Struve sees it as a symptom of the rampant nationalism and “glorification of everything Russian” that followed the Second World War.

In Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory (1973), C. Vaughan James largely confirms Struve’s view that Stalinist-era nationalism led to an inordinate emphasis on the formative influence of the nineteenth-century critics on Socialist Realism, writing that the process of de-Stalinization under Khrushchev led to an official “re-examination and restatement” of Socialist Realism’s origins. This reassessed narrative, which James draws upon in his study, sees the importance of the radical critics largely receding behind the idea that Lenin laid the foundation of Socialist Realism by developing the critics’ concepts and adding his own. James’ work, and the post-Stalinist narrative upon which it is based, can thus be seen as a concerted effort to locate

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41 Mathewson, Jr. The Positive Hero in Russian Literature, 133-4.
42 Stuve, Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, 358-9.
43 James, Soviet Socialist Realism, 2-3.
44 Ibid.
in the writings of Lenin the hitherto undiscovered bridge between the nineteenth century and Socialist Realism.

Despite this reassessment of its heritage, James provides a definition of Socialist Realism that largely conforms to previous descriptions of its utilitarian function and prescription of a specific worldview, writing:

‘Realism’…means art that sets out to present a comprehensive reflection and interpretation of life from the point of view of social relations; ‘Socialist’ means in accordance with the policy of the Communist Party. Socialist Realism is therefore based on a direct relationship between the artist and the process of building a new society; it is art colored by the experience of the working class in its struggles to achieve socialism.45

Unlike previous assessments, however, James argues that underlying this definition are three distinct principles: narodnost, klassovost, and partiinost,46 each of which he claims is manifest in the writings of Lenin. Briefly put, James posits a process in which the concept of narodnost, deriving from the tenets of the nineteenth-century radical critics and demanding that art, by critiquing the social order and giving voice to the desires and grievances of the people, be accessible to the masses and perform a didactic function in society,47 was adopted by Lenin and refracted through the concept of klassovost. Klassovost refers to the orthodox Marxist concept that the ideas expressed in works of art are representative of the class background and ideology of their creators,48 which James argues led Lenin to view that the best way of achieving narodnost in art was to imbue it with the klassovost, or class viewpoint, of the most advanced and ‘correct’ class: the

45 James, Soviet Socialist Realism, 88.
46 Literally “people-ness,” “class-ness,” and “party-ness,” respectively. As James notes, “these are awkward terms to translate, and we have not thought necessary to do so,” Ibid., 1.
47 Ibid., 3-7.
48 Ibid., 8-9.
proletariat as embodied by its “vanguard” – the Communist Party.\footnote{James, \textit{Soviet Socialist Realism}, 22-37.} James finds the need to ensure that art reflect this specific viewpoint at the basis of \textit{partiinost}, which refers to the specific, Party-oriented political commitment of Socialist Realism.\footnote{Ibid., 13.}

The value of James’ analysis is ultimately depreciated by his credulous acceptance of anecdotal sources, the strained interpretations applied to other sources, and an almost complete neglect of Lenin’s writings that actually pertain to art. Lenin’s support for \textit{narodnost} is illustrated by James by citing several scattered statements, none of which are actually Lenin’s: a quote attributed to him demanding that art should be rooted in and understood by the masses, a statement by his wife, Krupskaya, claiming that Lenin admired the utilitarian verses of the nineteenth-century poet Nekrasov, and another attributed quote in which he proclaims his admiration for Chernyshevsky’s novel \textit{What is to be Done}?\footnote{Ibid., 6, 26, and 20, respectively.} James locates the concept of \textit{klassovost} in Lenin’s 1912 article “In Memory of Herzen.” Rather than addressing any of Lenin’s writings that explicitly deal with class ideology, James stresses this one article, which puts forth a periodization of the Russian radical and revolutionary movements, and argues that Lenin articulates a progressive continuity between each period, with each succeeding movement incorporating and improving upon the ideas of the preceding period due to an increasingly “correct” class outlook.\footnote{Ibid., 17-22.} This sloppy use of sources is capped by James’ lack of attention to almost all of Lenin’s writings on art; the closest he comes is extrapolating the principle of \textit{partiinost} from Lenin’s much examined 1905 article “Party Organization and Party Literature” by repeating Mathewson’s and the Soviet’s
interpretation of Lenin’s demand that literature come under the control of the Party as referring to belles-lettres.\(^\text{53}\)

Despite these failings, James presents a thought-provoking narrative which brings to light the possibility that specifically Marxist concepts, such as his *klassovost*, may have played a role in Socialist Realism’s origins. By pointing to the fact that Marxists, as followers of a “scientific socialism,” considered themselves to be in possession of a correct and infallible *Weltanschauung*, and that this viewpoint could and should be reflected in their art, James inadvertently raises the question of whether it was this belief that counted more than the tradition of utilitarian aesthetics. If one were to excise the *narodnost* tradition from James’ analysis, the Marxist conviction that there exists a ‘true’ view of society that is achieved by its most advanced elements and reflected in their art would remain. Could not this belief in a ‘correct view’ have formed a criterion for judging art or a basis for prescribing certain functions or themes that need not have relied upon the traditions of non-Marxist radicals?

This question is somewhat touched upon in Katerina Clark’s seminal work, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (1980). Largely eschewing analyses of Socialist Realism’s theory and principles by themselves, Clark’s focus is centered on examining the novels associated with Socialist Realism. Viewing this vast number of works as a whole, Clark posits that at their most basic, they essentially told the same story which she terms the “master plot,” which consists of two major components: the “positive hero” and the “fulfillment of a state-sponsored initiative.” Echoing the descriptions of Mathewson

Clark relates that the term “positive hero” refers to the type of protagonist used in the Socialist Realist novel, who consistently does the ‘right thing’ and eventually achieves a kind of enlightened “revolutionary consciousness” through the fulfillment of a state-sponsored initiative, such as assisting in the building of a factory. Clark continues on to detail that this growth of the positive hero is to be viewed as a ritualized parable in that “the phases of [the positive hero’s] life symbolically recapitulate the stages of historical progress as described in Marxist-Leninist theory…the novel’s climax ritually reenacts the climax of history in communism.”

Thus, Clark posits that the hero of the Socialist Realist “master plot,” who symbolically achieves a higher state of “revolutionary awareness” by assisting the state in the literal building of socialism, was symbolic of the idea that the people of the Soviet Union were being “raised up” and led towards a communist future.

What is particularly fascinating about Clark’s analysis is the intellectual and specifically Marxist heritage to which she links this “master plot.” Discussing the revisions that Lenin made to traditional Marxist theory - his belief that a “revolutionary vanguard,” the Communist Party, was needed to educate and guide an insufficiently class-conscious proletariat - Clark argues that this essentially pedagogic relationship was manifested in the “master plot” of Socialist Realist novels. Returning to her analysis of the “master plot,” Clark underlines the fact that the Socialist Realist hero only “grows” and achieves a higher “revolutionary consciousness” by working with or for the Soviet

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54 While Mathewson’s comparisons of the Socialist Realist hero with the “new men” of the radical critics’ utilitarian aesthetic have already been noted, Tertz describes the Positive Hero as the “cornerstone” of Socialist Realism whose innumerable virtues are capped by “the clarity and directness with which he sees the Purpose and strives towards it.” See Tertz, The Trial Begins and On Socialist Realism, 157-173.
55 Clark, The Soviet Novel, 46, 64.
56 Ibid., 10.
57 Ibid., 65, 256-260.
government in the construction socialism. Clark ties this directly to the Marxist-Leninist concept of the “revolutionary vanguard” that formed the theoretical basis of the Soviet government. Clark thus concludes that as the Soviet government enforced Socialist Realism, it lauded those works that reflected its own views of society and its particular role therein, with these officially approved works in turn acting as a model template from which other authors worked and then created a recurring “master plot” which recapitulated the same idealized elements in order to perform its didactic purpose.\(^{58}\)

Though Clark ultimately argues for a “textual” origin of Socialist Realism, that certain exemplars were consistently cited as models for Socialist Realist authors to emulate, and is less interested in divining Socialist Realism’s intellectual origins, her position on the heritage of Socialist Realism’s “master plot” points to intriguing possibilities in that regard. Clark’s argument that, under the auspices of the Communist Party, a view of society in keeping with Marxism-Leninism was consistently depicted in the works of Socialist Realism provides an alternative means of conceptualizing the origins of its didactic function. Rather than seeing Socialist Realism’s purpose of inculcating particular beliefs or a particular worldview as a holdover from the nineteenth-century radical critics, Clark’s insights point to the idea that Marxist theory itself may have played a role, perhaps even a preponderant one, in its genesis. By positing that Socialist Realism was the result of the Communist Party’s fostering of works that recapitulated their own views on society stemming from Marxist theory, that the “master plot” was the textual embodiment of the Marxist theory of history, Clark can be seen as suggesting that these views were in themselves sufficient to guide and shape a particular aesthetic doctrine.

These possibilities of a decidedly Marxist influence on Socialist Realism have unfortunately not been explored in the most recent studies of Socialist Realism’s origins. Instead, the ‘heritage’ argument of its origins has been taken in an unexpected direction, as both Boris Groys in *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1992) and Irina Gutkin in *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic* (1999) illustrate in their attempts to locate Socialist Realism’s origins in the ideas of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. Describing the “basic spirit” of the avant-garde movement as “the demand that art move from representing to transforming the world,” Groys writes that this demand was fundamentally met, in spirit if not in form, by the didactic nature of Socialist Realism, which “proceed[ed] from th[e] same conception of educating and shaping the masses [held by the avant-garde].” Though Groys stops short of arguing that the avant-garde had a direct role in the creation of Socialist Realism, Gutkin does attempt to make this argument. She proceeds to do this by folding the Marxist political movement into a wider avant-garde paradigm and stressing that “all [the] avant-garde movements – symbolist, futurist, Marxist-communist - …were ultimately concerned with the identical problem: the development and implementation of a modern utopian scheme that would effect the leap from the present to the future.” Gutkin sees this compatibility of goals as enabling the Communist Party to adopt in the principles of Socialist Realism the avant-garde’s conception of art as transformative, didactic tool for hastening this leap to the future. Her attempts to substantiate this connection are ultimately fruitless, however, as she is unable to prove that the ideas of the avant-garde had any impact or influence on the

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60 Ibid., 36.
Party authorities that formulated Socialist Realism. Thus, in her conclusion that Socialist Realism’s tenets were the embodiment of the utilitarian aesthetics of Russian theorist and avant-garde forerunner Vladimir Solovyov, we are once more presented with an exclusive reliance on parallels and similarities between ideas rather than any indication of the process of how these ideas were transmitted or actual proof of causality.\(^{62}\)

Though their exploration of a novel paradigm for examining the origins of Socialist Realism is commendable, both Groys and Gutkin misstep, I believe, in placing nearly all the weight of their narratives upon the ideas of the avant-garde and slighting the possibility that Marxist theory, particularly as applied to art, may have played a more active and influential role than they perceive. Groys largely ignores Marxist theory in his work while Gutkin erroneously asserts that no coherent Marxist aesthetics existed and largely sees Marxism as opening up an intellectual space that was receptive to the independently conceived ideas of the avant-garde.\(^{63}\) But these assessments seem to have been made without consulting the outstanding study of Socialist Realism’s origins in Herman Ermolaev’s *Soviet Literary Theories, 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism* (1963). In this work, Ermolaev examines many of the same “avant-garde” organizations and theorists as Groys and Gutkin, such as the Proletkult and LEF,\(^{64}\) and reaches a similar conclusion regarding their influence on Socialist Realism. Ermolaev’s thorough research, however, reveals a very different intellectual source of inspiration,

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\(^{63}\) Ibid., 18.

\(^{64}\) The Proletkult, an abbreviation for “Proletarian Culture,” was an umbrella organization set up shortly after the February, 1917 Russian Revolution. Its goal was the creation of a new culture for the Proletarian epoch, and advocated the destruction of all art from previous periods of history. This, along with its constant agitation for autonomy under the Bolshevik regime, led to conflict with the Soviet government and its liquidation in the early 1920s. See Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin*, 27-29. LEF, an acronym for Left Front of Art, was an organization composed of leftist futurist artists that is perhaps most famous including famed poet Vladimir Mayakovsky among its members. Founded in 1923, LEF survived intermittently until 1929. See Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories*, 73.
namely Marxism, for many of these avant-garde ideas than do Groys and Gutkin and thus casts doubt upon their view of it exerting a negligible influence.

Ermolaev defines Socialist Realism as a “method of literature and criticism to be used in portraying reality in its revolutionary development and in creating works purporting to inculcate the masses with the spirit of socialism,”65 which harmonizes well with previously noted descriptions. Underlying this definition, Ermolaev argues, are numerous inheritances of theory from earlier Soviet literary and aesthetic ideas which reveal that Socialist Realism had much closer ties with them than is typically noted. Ermolaev writes that Socialist Realism’s “optimistic and purposeful inten[tion] for the socialist education of the masses” was in complete accordance with the theories put forward by avant-garde organizations such as the Proletkult, the Smithy, and the October group. Furthermore, Ermolaev notes that the methods of artistic creation and criticism advocated by the Pereval group and RAPP in the 1920’s were both “nearly identical” to the definition of Socialist Realism as put forward in 1934, while Socialist Realism’s “emphasis [on] topical utilitarian art” echoed the ideas of the avant-garde groups Litfront and LEF.66 While this linking of Socialist Realism with the immediately preceding ideas of the “avant-garde” clearly presages and complements the work of Groys and Gutkin, Ermolaev is unique in that his work reveals that nearly all of the groups whose ideas

65 Ermolaev, Soviet Literary Theories, 6.
66 Ibid., 204-5. The Smithy was a group organized in Moscow in 1920 by poets who advocated a proletarian orientation in literature and chose industrial themes for their works; the October group was founded in 1922 and centered around the journals Oktybar (October) and Na Postu (On Guard) and vehemently attacked “fellow travelers,” artists that sympathized with, but did not belong to, the Communist Party; the Pereval (The Pass) group was founded by writers that had seceded from the October group in 1924 due to its anti-fellow traveler stance; RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) was a major organization founded in 1928 that came to nearly dominate the literary scene until its dissolution by the Soviet government in 1932 and advocated proletarian and utilitarian art, Litfront was the name taken in 1930 by a group of left-wing artists within RAPP. See Struve, Struve, Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin, 28, 77, 229, 221, and, 232, respectively.
contributed to the development of Socialist Realism had been influenced by Marxist theory and labored to apply it to the arts.

Thus, while Gutkin sees the theories underlying the Proletkult movement’s attempt to construct a singularly proletarian, non-bourgeois culture as “the transference of the demiurgic role from individual visionary [avant-garde] artists to the proletariat,”67 Ermolaev’s research reveals them to be directly predicated upon the “Marxist concepts of class struggle and the historically predetermined role of the proletariat.”68 Gutkin sees LEF’s advocacy of an edifying, “life-building” art as the result of the “long search for ultrarealism: a futurological, utopian aesthetic endeavor inaugurated by the symbolists.”69 Ermolaev, in contrast, notes that LEF’s ideas drew heavily upon Marxist concepts; railing against pre-Revolutionary bourgeois culture by arguing that “because the ‘old’ society knew no collective leadership…[its art] was marked by vagueness and symbolism” and advocating that all initiative should come from “the working class and the Party, whose ‘social orders’ in literature were to be carried out by the writer.”70

In sum, Ermolaev reveals aesthetic ideas and theories in the Soviet Union to have been widely permeated by the influence of Marxism in the years preceding the creation of Socialist Realism. Though he ultimately concludes that it was the Party who created Socialist Realism, Ermolaev’s exhaustive research revealing the numerous echoes in Socialist Realism of the preceding Marxian ideas of the avant-garde brings him to posit a relationship of influence or assimilation.71 In doing so, Ermolaev presents a compelling narrative of Socialist Realism’s origins that largely circumvents the pitfalls associated

70 Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories*, 74.
71 Ibid., see pp 139-173.
with the other explanations of Socialist Realism’s origins. Though he acknowledges the
preponderant role of Party demands in Socialist Realism’s creation and does not shy
away from the fact that it entailed the loss of artistic independence of Soviet artists,
Ermolaev avoids the one-dimensional aspects of the totalitarian explanation by
examining the theory of Socialist Realism and its relation to preceding ideas. The flaws
in the heritage position linking Socialist Realism with the nineteenth-century radicals, its
reliance on retroactive Soviet pronouncements and its failure to account for how the
radicals’ utilitarian aesthetic was transmitted to the twentieth-century, are also avoided by
Ermolaev’s examination of a possible assimilation by Socialist Realism of the aesthetic
doctrines directly preceding it. Furthermore, his emphasis on the influence Marxist
theory exerted on this preceding avant-garde movement makes a more convincing case
for their incorporation into Socialist Realism than Boris Groy’s and Irina Gutkin’s
exclusive focus on their avant-garde utilitarianism. In sum, Ermolaev provides an
engaging narrative that begins to address the possibilities of a genuinely Marxist origin of
Socialist Realism as raised by C. Vaughan James and Katerina Clark.

Ermolaev only ‘begins’ to address this possibility largely because he only
examines the end of a process. By limiting his study to only the years between the
October Revolution and 1934, Ermolaev leaves some questions unanswered.
Specifically, one is left wondering if this period was the first time Marxism was applied
to aesthetic matters, and if it was therefore the only source for a Marxist influence on
Socialist Realism. In short, Ermolaev points to, but does not himself explore, a new
avenue for understanding the origins of Socialist Realism: Marxist aesthetics.
The Scholarly Juxtaposition of Marxist Aesthetics and Socialist Realism

Marxist aesthetics refers to the aesthetic principles derived from Marxist theory and can essentially be seen as Marxist art criticism. Drawing upon Marxism’s concept that material conditions determine social, political, and intellectual phenomena, numerous scholars have applied this to the arts to argue that art is also subject to this determination. In his monograph, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1978), Herbert Marcuse provides a succinct description of this prevalent view of Marxist aesthetics when he writes, “there is a definite connection between art and the material base [of society], between art and the totality of the relations of production. With the change in production relations, art itself is transformed as part of the superstructure.”

Thus, in accordance with Marxist theory’s concept of historical materialism, many thinkers such as Marcuse have applied this view to art and argue that it is tied to, and reflective of, the socio-economic foundations of society; as these foundations change, society at large, including art, changes also. This essentially descriptive conception of art - descriptive in that it does not prescribe what art should be but only analyzes what art is - would appear to be at complete odds with the prescriptive approach to art of Socialist Realism, and this opposition has been observed by numerous researchers.

This apparent contrast is noted by Russian literature scholar Max Hayward who boldly writes that Socialist Realism “contradicted almost everything ever said on the

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subject [of literature and art] by Marx and Engels.”73 This sharp juxtaposition continues in *Marxist Esthetics* (1973), wherein Henri Arvon explicitly juxtaposes Socialist Realism with Marxist aesthetics. Noting Socialist Realism’s inherent political commitment and intended utilitarian function, Arvon argues for a “heritage” explanation of its origins and, like Mathewson and the Soviets, links it to the nineteenth-century radical Russian critics and, like James and the Soviets, to Lenin’s 1905 “Party Organization and Party Literature” article.74 To this tradition of prescription and utilitarianism, Arvon contrasts Marxist aesthetics, which he sees largely as a largely descriptive “a method of explanation…[whose] sole purpose is to examine the work of art in the light of historical materialism.”75 In *Marxism and Literary Criticism* (1976), British scholar Terry Eagleton makes an argument similar to Arvon’s, unequivocally stating that Socialist Realism’s demand for a politically committed, utilitarian literature stems from “the nineteenth-century ‘revolutionary democratic’ critics, Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and Dobrolyubov,” and not from Marxist aesthetics, which he likens to a “sociology of literature…[whose] aim is to explain the literary work” that “is rarely if ever accompanied by an insistence that literary works should be politically prescriptive.”76

Twenty years later, in *Marxist Literary Theory* (1996), Eagleton continued to argue for a sharp divide between the descriptive, investigatory nature of Marxist aesthetics and the prescriptive character of Socialist Realism.77 Most recently, in *Bolshevik Ideology and...*

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75 Ibid., 18.
Literature (2000), Roger Cockrell argues that Socialist Realism “lacked any solid Marxist theoretical basis” and cites Rufus Mathewson in support of his assertion that “Socialist Realism…owes far more, in both content and spirit, to the radical Russian critics of the mid-nineteenth century…than it does to Marx [and] Engels.”

It is thus clear that a consensus exists regarding a sharp distinction between the ideas of Marxist aesthetics and the doctrine of Socialist Realism. The former is seen as a tool for examining, analyzing, and understanding art as a product conditioned by society, while the latter adopts a prescriptive and utilitarian attitude towards art, demanding that it reflect certain ideas and ultimately exert an influence on society. This sharp contrast has therefore led previous scholarship to the conclusion that Marxist aesthetics has no place within the origins of Socialist Realism, which are largely located in the heritage of the nineteenth-century radical critics. But this similar conclusion shared by the previously discussed heritage writers and those who have argued for an antithetical relationship between Socialist Realism and Marxist aesthetics is also accompanied by a similar methodological flaw. Both arguments examine two sets of ideas – Socialist Realism and either Marxist aesthetics or the utilitarian aesthetic – that are separated by a significant span of time. Like the ideas of the radical critics, the texts written by Marx and Engels from which Marxist aesthetics are drawn from date largely from the middle of the nineteenth-century. Those who argued that the ideas of the radical critics formed the roots of Socialist Realism provided no bridge between the two doctrines, offered no explanation as to how those ideas were transmitted unchanged through half a century of

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79 The major sources from which orthodox Marxist Aesthetics are drawn are: The German Ideology (1846), Grundrisse (1858), and A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859).
intellectual and cultural development. Those who argue that Marxist aesthetics played no role in Socialist Realism’s origins, on the other hand, offer no examination or explanation of how those ideas could and did change in the same span of time. In short, while only parallels are drawn between the ideas of the radical critics and Socialist Realism, only contrasts are drawn between Socialist Realism and Marxist aesthetics; while no bridge has been located between the former set of ideas, no bridge has been looked for between the latter set.

It is my intention to locate such a bridge between Marxist aesthetics and Socialist Realism, to examine how the ideas of Marx and Engels were developed into a prescriptive and utilitarian approach to art that and transmitted well into the twentieth century. Indications as to the location of this intellectual bridge can be found if we return to Herman Ermolaev’s work and his brief mention of the Russian Marxist Georgi Plekhanov. Ermolaev describes Plekhanov as the “only prominent theorist who made an extensive effort to interpret art from the Marxist viewpoint,” and later writes of how he was cited by numerous groups and theorists, both those that advocated artistic autonomy and those that agitated for artistic prescription, in support of their aesthetic programs and to attack their opponents. In the person of Plekhanov, therefore, we find a Marxist thinker who wrote on aesthetics, occupies the very temporal space that lacks examination, and apparently exerted a considerable influence on subsequent Russian aesthetic thought. Unfortunately, the time frame of Ermolaev’s study precludes a full exploration of Plekhanov’s ideas and thus when he concludes that principles of Socialist Realism were

80 Ermolaev, Soviet Literary Theories, pg. 29.
81 Ibid., see pp. 29-30 for the October literary group’s use of Plekhanov to support their ideas, pp. 39-41 for the theorist Aleksandr Voronky’s use of Plekhanov, pp. 66-7 for RAPP’s use of him, and pp. 96-7 for their use of Plekhanov against the theorist Valerian Pereverzev.
“basically alien” to his theories the reader is in no position to form his own judgment.82 Ermolaev is surprisingly not alone in his neglect of Plekhanov: as no major western study of his aesthetic theories has been undertaken.

By examining what Plekhanov wrote on art and literature, I hope to prove that a bridge does exist between the ideas of orthodox Marxist aesthetics as put forward by Marx and Engels and the principles of Socialist Realism and that this bridge can be found in his ideas. Beginning with an examination of the writings of Marx and Engels, I will show that though their writings on art do largely appear to present a descriptive, analytical approach that conforms to the image of Marxist aesthetics presented in secondary literature, they also contain the criteria necessary for constructing a prescriptive approach to art. By positing that art reflects consciousness, Marx and Engels implied that art can and does reflect a false consciousness, an incorrect view of the world arising from ignorance and class interests. Alongside this first criteria for criticizing art, Marxism also puts forward its own view of the world that is presented as scientifically accurate and wholly correct and providing a basis for which the views represented in art can be compared to and judged by. A framework for approaching art in a critical and censorious fashion can be therefore be seen within Marxist aesthetics and by subsequently turning to an examination of Plekhanov’s writings on art I will illustrate his use of this framework in establishing a wholly prescriptive aesthetic that notably supported a utilitarian approach to art. Relying upon the framework established in Marxism, Plekhanov sharply criticized art he saw as reflecting a false view of the world and repeatedly prescribed that art should conform to the ideas and outlook of Marxism.

In addition to this clear assertion of what art should and should not be Plekhanov also

82 Ermolaev, Soviet Literary Theories, 205.
employed Marxist ideas concerning the class struggle to argue that utilitarian art serving extra-aesthetic purposes such as social criticism, agitation, or edification was an inevitable and beneficial part of this struggle, articulating a clear defense of functional art. By thus proscribing particular forms and subject matter in art, by prescribing that artists and art tendentiously reflect a particular viewpoint, and by advocating utilitarian art, Plekhanov’s approach to aesthetics bore a striking resemblance to Socialist Realism. Plekhanov’s use of Marxist ideas in constructing a prescriptive approach to art during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and his noted influence on Soviet aesthetic thought preceding the promulgation of Socialist Realism can thus be seen as an intellectual bridge; the development and transmission of ideas that has been missing in previous studies of the origins of Socialist Realism. Though a detailed tracing of Plekhanov’s ideas through the numerous aesthetic theories in the Soviet Union during the nineteen twenties and their specific presence in the doctrine of Socialist Realism will not be pursued here; it is my hope that by revealing the exact character of Plekhanov’s ideas and their Marxist origins, future research into the genesis of Socialist Realism will be better equipped to answer the questions that have remained hitherto unresolved.
Marxist Aesthetics: Orthodoxy and Implications

Though Karl Marx and Frederick Engels never wrote extensively on the subject of art or aesthetics, they did touch upon these subjects in their writings and from these remarks it is possible to construct a coherent aesthetic theory that, while overtly descriptive, contains criteria that could be used in constructing a prescriptive approach to art. The most important of the statements made by Marx in regards to art was the inclusion of aesthetics within the “base/superstructure” view of society that lay at the heart of Marxism’s materialist conception of history. Writing that “the totality of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness,” Marx succinctly describes this most fundamental aspects of his grand theory and a distinct process of linear causality. Beginning with the material, the economic foundation, or “base,” of society, Marx argues that this base determines the framework, or “superstructure” of that society which then in turn shapes the social consciousness (“social” consciousness because it is “socially” created by societal influence) of the persons living therein. Refining this idea, Marx asserts that “the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.” Included within the sphere of “intellectual life” – “the ideological forms in which men become conscious,” – are “legal, political, religious, [and] aesthetic”
conceptions.\textsuperscript{83} An all-encompassing picture of society is thus elaborated by Marx in his theory, wherein aesthetics is definitively located among the superstructure’s ideological components. Furthermore, a clearly delineated origin associated with this position is adumbrated which proposes an ultimately socio-economic cause for the ideology which gives rise to artistic ideas. Beginning with the material base of society, the relations of production – generally speaking, the economic organization of society, such as feudalism or capitalism – Marx posits that upon this base and determined by it, a superstructure, society itself, is erected and contains within it various ideologies,\textsuperscript{84} including aesthetic ideas, that are ultimately conditioned by the base and constitute the consciousness of the people. As summed up by Marx and Engels, it is material “life that determines consciousness.”\textsuperscript{85}

In an analysis of ancient Greek art, Marx provides a salient example of this decisive and formative influence exerted by the material base of society on the ideological superstructure it engenders and the art that emerges therein. Endeavoring to explain why the art created in ancient Greece was irreparably fixed to that epoch and culture and could not be genuinely reproduced in modern times, Marx begins by stating that “Greek mythology is not only the arsenal of Greek art but also its foundation.” Marx then poses the rhetorical question of whether “the conception of nature and of social relations which underlies Greek imagination and therefore Greek art possible when there are self-acting mules, railways, locomotives and electric telegraphs?” Thus employing

\textsuperscript{83} Marx and Engels, \textit{Collected Works} vol. 29, 263. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{84} It is important to distinguish Marx’s use of the term “ideology” from its present day connotation. Dating from the end of the eighteenth century, “ideology” originally referred to the broad spectrum of views, convictions and \textit{partis pris} existing in society and unconsciously imbibed by a person. It was not until after Marx’s time that “ideology” came to denote a specific doctrine or belief system, e.g. “Nazi ideology.” See, Leszek Kolakowski, \textit{Main Currents of Marxism}, (New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2008), 126-7.

\textsuperscript{85} Marx and Engels, \textit{Collected Works} vol. 5, 37.
the base/superstructure schematic as laid out in his theory, Marx is able to cogently trace the origins of Greek art. Its “foundation” and “arsenal,” the content of Greek art, is immediately identified as reflecting the particular ideology of Greek mythology. This ideology is then in turn posited as reflecting a particular apprehension of the world engendered and circumscribed by specific material, technological and social, exigencies. The particular conditioning which the base of ancient Greek society exerted upon the ideology of the Greek people is then tied to a specific developmental stage and deemed impossible when new material conditions arise. This last point is given further elaboration when Marx writes that “all mythology subdues, controls and fashions the forces of nature in the imagination and through imagination; it disappears therefore when real control over these forces is established…what is a Vulcan compared with [the iron and steel works] Roberts and Co., [or a] Jupiter compared with the lightning conductor?” 86 The changes in the base of society in from ancient Greece to modern times, specifically the harnessing of the forces of nature, Marx argues, has made the reified abstraction of these same forces that lay at the heart of Greek mythology impossible. Thus, an ideology in which massive feats of metallurgy are solely the domain of the god Vulcan and the control of lightning the province of Jupiter is rendered obsolete and incapable of acting as material for art when these have come under the control of mankind.

Alongside this conception of the content of ancient Greek art having as the product of a base-determined ideology, Marx also puts forward an argument for a similar causation of the form of ancient Greek art. Discussing the oral tradition of epic poetry in ancient Greece, Marx argues that such art “can no longer be produced in their epoch-

86 Marx and Engels, Collected Works vol. 28, 47.
making classic form” in modern times. Much like with the content of Greek art, Marx finds an ultimately material explanation for this obsolescence of a particular art form. In a rhetorical query, Marx asks “is the [traditionally oral] *Iliad* possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press bar the singing and the telling and the muse cease, that is the conditions necessary for epic poetry disappear?”

Thus, alongside a reiteration of the conditioning exerted by the base of society in the “muse” of the *Iliad*, of the ideological inspiration of its content, Marx also highlights the base determination of its form. In the paperless society of ancient Greece it was inevitable that the non-visual arts would be constructed and designed for a specifically oral medium, leading to particulars of form beholden to that format. With the advent of widespread printing in modern times and the displacement of an oral dissemination of poetry with that of a written format, however, the material conditions that gave rise to the unique form of Greek epic poetry – the “singing” and the “telling” – vanished and were replaced by new conditions and thus new forms.

Concluding his examination of the arts of ancient Greece with the statement that “Greek art and epic poetry are associated with certain forms of social development,” Marx succinctly summarizes his use of the base/superstructure paradigm contained in his theory of historical materialism in arguing for an ultimately socio-economic determination of art. In illustrating how the technological and social base of ancient Greek society both defined the forms by which art could be produced and disseminated along with engendering a specific ideology which was then reflected in the content of art,

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88 Ibid., 47.
Marx clearly posits that this material base exerted an enormous and ultimately decisive influence on the arts of ancient Greece. Both in theory and in practice, then, Marx does indeed put forward a concept of art and aesthetics that conforms to the descriptions given to Marxist aesthetics in secondary literature. With the origins or art insolubly tied to first ideology and ultimately the material base of society, Marxist aesthetics overtly presents itself as a “sociology of art” in which description and analysis, not prescription and utility, are the primary approaches towards art.

Maintaining such a view of Marxist aesthetics as only providing a descriptive and investigatory method for analyzing art, however, ultimately means ignoring other, implicit assumptions in Marxist theory that provide additional criteria for forming a markedly more rigid and censorious view of this subject. Specifically, by defining art as a component of the ideological superstructure of society and, in particular, as a reflection of ideology, Marxism leaves art open to the wider conceptions of ideology – of being a “false consciousness” utilized by the ruling class - contained within the theory as a whole. The means of conceptualizing art as a false view of the world beholden to class interests, and therefore a means of criticizing art, is thus provided in Marxist theory. Furthermore, underwriting this notion of ideology is the view that Marxism puts forth of society - as rent by conflict between the dominant bourgeoisie and the exploited proletariat - and history – as inexorably driven by class conflict and economic transformation towards revolutionary upheaval. Backed by claims of scientific veracity, Marxism maintains that it alone offers a correct or truthful depiction of human civilization and, ultimately, a norm against which art is to be evaluated. I will now turn to an analysis of these aspects of Marxism, its concept of ideology and its vision of
society, as their potential for forming a more prescriptive Marxist view of art would be fully developed by Plekhanov.

As has been established, the linear process of causality regarding art’s genesis as sketched out in Marxist theory clearly places art as the product of ideology. In positioning art as dependent on ideology and ultimately, as will be recalled, even considering art to be ideology, it is vital to examine the Marxist conception of ideology itself and to examine the implications it holds for art. The most prominent aspect of the Marxist notion of ideology is the concept of “false consciousness,” that ideology is an ultimately incorrect and illusory view of the world. As Engels described it, “ideology is a process which is indeed accomplished consciously by the thinker…but it is a false consciousness…The real motive forces remain unknown to the thinker…Hence he imagines false or illusory motive forces.” 89 Much earlier, in The Communist Manifesto, Marx and Engels point towards the idea of false consciousness when they criticize the bourgeoisie for failing to realize that their “notions of freedom, culture, [and] law…[their] very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of [their] production” and for the “misconception that induces [them] to transform into eternal laws of nature and reason the social forms springing from [their] present mode of production and form of property.” 90 The base/superstructure paradigm is once more reiterated here, but with the caveat that the determining influence the base exerts on the superstructure is typically unperceived and its ideological products are taken as natural, eternal, and real phenomena. Thus, the ideological superstructure and its components described above by which people become conscious of and apprehend reality are revealed to be

90 Marx and Engels, Collected Works vol. 6, 501.
misapprehensions, incorrect understandings of the natural and social forces at work in reality and the basis of a mystified and false consciousness.

By returning to the analysis of Greek art put forward by Marx, a clear illustration of the workings of false consciousness and its impact on art can be observed. As Marx had noted, ancient Greek art drew upon a particular ideology, Greek mythology, for its content. This ideology, in turn, was the product of attempts at understanding natural forces at work in the world. The inability of the ancient Greeks to correctly understand these forces, however, had led to a decidedly false view of them which was then carried into their wider ideology and inevitably withered away as these forces were understood and harnessed. Thus, in place of an understanding of the natural phenomena of electrical storms, the Greeks conceived of them as the fury of the gods; while ignorance concerning volcanoes led them to be regarded as the fiery workshops of immortal metal smiths. It is then these incorrect views, the ideology they inform, and the false consciousness which results that is reflected in ancient Greek art. By thus attaching art to the concept of ideology, and therefore false consciousness, Marxism can be seen as positing that art is prone to reflecting incorrect knowledge and can be considered a product of obfuscation.

Along with its presentation of a false view of society, a second major aspect of the concept of ideology in Marxist theory is the role that class interests play in its creation and how it is utilized to support these interests. Marx and Engels write that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas,” introducing the concept that the ideological superstructure of a society is beholden to ruling class’ intellectual hegemony. This is expanded upon with the statement that “the thinkers of the ruling class [are] its active, conceptive ideologists, who…perfect the illusion of [their] class…[and] give its
ideas the form of a universality and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones.”

Thus an element of utility is brought in to the Marxist conception of ideology, which is revealed to be not only an ultimately false worldview but also one which can serve the interests of the ruling class. Providing an example of the process in which the material base of society gives rise to a ruling class and a subsequently utilitarian ideology reflecting its interests, Marx and Engels write that while particular relations of production, such as serfdom and vassalage, had led to the previous domination of society by the aristocracy, this domination was perceived as resting upon “concepts of honor [and] loyalty.” Similarly, the material conditions that gave rise to the prominence of the bourgeoisie, the free market and its concomitant competition and need for a mobile labor force, are maintained by the idealization of these conditions and needs in the concepts of “freedom [and] equality.”

Thus, much like the mystification of natural forces inherent in the ideology of ancient Greece, Marx and Engels argue that the underlying social forces of modern society are also misapprehended and masked by ideology which is ultimately geared towards the maintenance of these forces and the ruling class they support.

The final aspect of Marxism that would later come to form a criterion for the evaluation of art is the particular view of society the theory presents, the course of history it posits, and the claims it makes of being akin to science and thus an incontrovertible truth.

From their earliest pronouncements in the *Communist Manifesto* and on through

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92 Ibid., 60.
93 This “normative vision of society and development” has been synthesized from numerous works of Marx and Engels. Examples of the historical process contained within it, usually termed the “materialist conception of history” or “historical materialism” are most clearly provided by Marx in his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, and by Marx and Engels in their joint works of the *Communist Manifesto*, and *The German Ideology*. The *Communist Manifesto* also shows the pivotal role*
their entire body of work, Marx and Engels consistently put forth a particular image of human civilization. As has been shown, society is viewed in Marxist theory as being ultimately predicated upon material factors which determine both its socio-political organization and its ideological components. These material, specifically economic, factors are, however, not seen as static but as dynamically evolving, with advances in human industry and production repeatedly engendering the collapse of one epoch of economic organization and the emergence of another. In this narrative of historical change, Marxism presents an interesting marriage between fatalistic determinism and active volunteerism. At times, Marxism seems to suggest that these fundamental changes of society are nearly inevitable and predetermined by the forces of production, which develop ineluctably and without guidance towards a new base and thus superstructure. This unavoidable evolution, however, is ultimately given an active, “human face” by Marxist theory in its repeated and heavy emphasis on the role class conflict plays in driving forward and implementing these changes. “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles,” Marx and Engels famously wrote, revealing the onus their theory placed upon class antagonism. For Marxism, each economically conditioned organization of society is composed of social classes, broad groups of people whose position within that organization – such as landowners, merchants, and laborers – confers upon them a particular identity and set of interests. As the economic base of society continues to be developed by these extant classes, however, the resulting new conditions give rise to new classes whose emergent interests place them into conflict with the increasingly outmoded structure and thus classes of their society. For example, in

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that Marx and Engels saw class conflict playing in the course of history; as do Marx’s works *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, and *The Eigteenth Brumaire of Lous Bonaparte*.  
94 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 6, 482.
Marxism’s narrative of history, the collapse of feudalism occurred due to economic development that gave rise to the class of the bourgeoisie, who, linked with the progressive development of the forces of production, came into conflict with the existing system of guilds and vassalage which had become fetters for further development. With the emergent class thus linked with the inevitable development of the material base of society, Marxism sees its triumph and the concomitant reorganization of society is seen as all but preordained. This determinism does not mean, however, that the transformation of society is a smooth and peaceful affair, as the vested interests of the extant ruling classes in maintaining the current order forces the emergent class into violent and ultimately revolutionary conflict with them before the complete remaking of society was possible.

This grand process of material and social change was, according to Marx and Engels, reaching a penultimate climax in their contemporary society. In much the way that incremental changes in production and material conditions had given rise to the bourgeoisie and capitalist society, the progress of capitalist production under bourgeois domination had in turn created “its own grave-diggers,” the emergent class of the proletariat. With society now split between the “two great hostile camps” of the reactionary bourgeoisie and the progressive proletariat, the pattern of history sketched out above was predicted by Marxism to repeat itself in the near future. The inevitable progress of production occurring within capitalism has eroded the foundations of bourgeois dominance, most notably in the form of the ever increasing proletariat and the heightened conflict between these two classes, claims Marxist theory. Contemporary

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95 See, Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 6, 485-6.
96 Ibid., 496.
97 Ibid., 485.
society is thus seen by Marxism as inescapably driven toward the point at which the united proletariat, realizing the insoluble contradiction between their interests and those of the bourgeoisie and the need for radical social change, voluntarily take the path that has been predetermined and violently revolutionize society.

Thus, Marxist theory presents a precise and particular image of both history and contemporary society as formed by material conditions and not only riven by class conflict, but also driven by this conflict towards a higher stage of development. What is particularly notable about this conception, and Marxist theory as a whole, are the repeated claims made by Marx and Engels concerning the fundamental authenticity and scientific accuracy of their ideas. From their earliest polemics with idealist philosophy and various social reform movements to their final writings, Marx and Engels consistently stressed that their theory was in no way a product of ideological illusion or empyrean hopes, it was “not invented,” they wrote, “but merely [the] express[ion]…[of] actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes.”

This claim of a positive, empirical basis for their ideas, and its concomitant implications of truthfulness, was pursued relentlessly throughout their careers. While Marx’s *Das Kapital* (1867), with its use of real-world economic data in an attempt to prove the exploitation of the proletariat by the bourgeoisie and the untenable contradictions within capitalist economy, is perhaps the greatest practical example of presenting Marxism as a thoroughly scientific inquiry; it is the gloss that Engels placed on the theory as a whole in his work *Anti-Dühring* (1878) that most explicitly reveals these aspirations. Engels describes Marxism as having made a “science

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98 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 6, 498.
of socialism,” in that Marxist theory was built upon a “real basis” of empirical facts.\textsuperscript{99} Specifically, Engels cites the theory’s vision of reality, that the history of civilization is ultimately reducible to material developments and moved forward by class struggles which have reached an acute stage in contemporary society, as the factual support of Marxism. Engels argues that this “examination of the historico-economic succession of events” was not only an objective and scientific analysis of the world, but also had led to Marxism’s “discovery in the economic conditions thus created the means of ending [class] conflict,” i.e. its advocacy of a proletarian revolution.\textsuperscript{100} Marxism, from its analysis of conditions to its predictions of conclusions is explicitly considered to be a “science,” a confirmed and truthful explanation of what was, what is, and what will be.

Marxism is thus posited as the truthful and accurate reflection of history, contemporary society, even of reality itself. This is particularly important when one recalls the Marxist conception of ideology as presenting an incorrect, false view of reality arising from a combination of ignorance and class interests. The stark divide that Marxism draws between its own, “correct” ideas and conclusions and those arising from ideology is illustrated by Engels in his concluding remarks on other theories of socialism, to which he had applied the epithet of “utopian” as opposed to the “scientific socialism” of Marxism. Writing that these theories were considered by their founders as “the expression of absolute truth, reason and justice,” Engels argues that these very concepts were, in turn, “different with the founder of each different school [of socialist thought]…since] each one’s special kind of absolute truth, reason, and justice is again

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 634.
conditioned by his subjective understanding, his conditions of existence.”

It is this conditioned subjectivity, this incorrect apprehension of reality, of other ideas of social transformation which, unlike the objectivity and authenticity of Marxism, renders them unrealistic, impractical, and untrue. Engels thus redeployed the concept of ideology – a subjective apprehension of the world ultimately formed by material conditions – and defines all other competing theories of socialism and their constituent absolutes of truth, reason, and justice as products of ideology in contrast to the “science,” and therefore the truth, of Marxism. Marxism is therefore presented as a truthful and exact system drawing its conclusions and basing its theoretical components on an unmediated and scientifically sound comprehension of reality free from ideological obfuscation. Possessing such clarity of vision and correct understanding, Marxism thus places itself and its adherents on a kind of intellectual pinnacle which provides incisive and penetrating insight into, and even the right to judge, the “true” nature of society, ideas, and even art.

In this foregoing analysis, I have endeavored to present the orthodox Marxist conception of art and explore the implications it contains and the surrounding ideas of Marxist theory which can be seen as impinging upon it. Beginning with Marx’s most concrete statements on the subject, his locating art and aesthetics within the base/superstructure paradigm of his theory, an overtly sociological character to Marxist aesthetics that conforms to its depiction in secondary literature is immediately apparent. By positing that art is the product of human consciousness conditioned by ideology, Marxism sets up a particular and precise explanation for the genesis of art’s form and content. Marxism sees the material base of society, the general level and means of production, as circumscribing the way art can be created and distributed – thus the form

of art – and determining a particular ideology, an aggregate of beliefs and assumptions forming a worldview, which then conditions and informs the consciousness of this society’s population. It is from this conditioned consciousness that art springs, drawing upon and reflecting the ideology of its creator and thus able to be traced back to the material conditions of society. Seemingly halting their analyses of orthodox Marxist aesthetics at this point, previous scholars have consistently concluded that this “sociology of art” and its narrow, academic compass of explaining art’s social origins lacks the criteria necessary for explicitly judging art and forming a prescriptive aesthetic. These criteria exist, however, within the concept of ideology in Marxism and the implications it holds for art. While asserting that ideology arises from and ultimately reflects society and its underlying material condition, Marxism also posits that it is a false view of society which ultimately obscures its true nature and motive forces. Whether from an ignorance and inability to truly grasp and comprehend the natural and social world or from the machinations of the ruling class which transforms its own interests into moral absolutes, Marxism unequivocally defines ideology as a false worldview and the consciousness which it conditions, from which art then emerges, as a false consciousness.

Against this incorrect view of reality put forth by ideology, Marxism establishes its own image of history and society. Claiming scientific veracity, Marxism depicts an intertwined process of material determinism and human praxis and conceives of human civilization as driven from one stage of economic organization to the next by the conflict between the dominant and reactionary social class linked to the current social order and the rising, progressive class linked to the emerging new order. This process was seen by Marxism as having reached a critical stage in contemporary society, with the perceived
rapid development of conditions and the heightened conflict between the dominant bourgeoisie and the rising proletariat both seen as indicators of a incipient revolutionary conflagration. Thus, within its overtly analytical and descriptive conception that art reflects social consciousness, Marxism can be seen as establishing the criteria and developing a critical framework with which art can be judged. By maintaining that art is a reflection of consciousness and ultimately of reality as conditioned by ideology, while also claiming to posses correct insight into the true nature of reality, Marxism can thus criticize art that does not reflect or otherwise diverges from its image of society, history, or mankind as being the product of ideology, either from ignorance or from class-based, particularly reactionary bourgeois, obscurantism.

Marx and Engels never explicitly articulated this critical framework regarding art in their writings and, as has been seen, Marx’s most elaborate statements regarding art – his locating it in his theory’s base/superstructure paradigm and his analysis of Greek art – largely conform to the image of orthodox Marxist aesthetics as a descriptive sociology of art. This image, however, is not only eroded by examining the implications contained within these statements but also by examining many of the scattered comments Marx and Engels made concerning art. Such an examination reveals that Marx and Engels were largely operating within the critical framework implicit in their ideas and employing the various criteria that it established. While Marx and Engels cited art that confirmed their theory’s vision of society as evidence for the sharpening of class conflict and the emancipation of the proletariat from bourgeois ideology without comment on aesthetic
quality or merit, their remarks on art that failed to depict reality as revealed by their theory are wholly critical. In a letter to author Margaret Harkness, Engels censures her novel, *City Girl*, for not being “realistic enough,” with realism being defined as “the truthful reproduction of typical characters under typical circumstances.” In particular, Engels pointedly argues that it was in her depiction of the working class that Harkness had failed to achieve this verisimilitude; he writes that

> In the *City Girl* the working class figures as a passive mass, unable to help itself and not even showing (making) any attempt at striving to help itself. All attempts to drag it out of its torpid misery come from without, from above. Now if this was a correct description about 1800 or 1810…it cannot appear so in 1887...The rebellious reaction of the working class against the oppressive medium which surrounds them, their attempts – convulsive, half conscious or conscious – at recovering their status as human beings, belong to history.

Engels thus employs Marxism’s image of society and historical development – the progressive awakening of the working class and its engagement in a revolutionary struggle – as a prescriptive standard by which art is to be judged. Art that fails to depict the “typical characters” and “typical circumstances” as deduced and as decided by Marxist theory is assessed by Engels as being “unrealistic” - it is judged as false.

One of the most remarkable examples of the founders of Marxism viewing art via the critical framework implicit in their wider theory is contained within Marx’s pamphlet *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In his opening overview of the 1789 Revolution, which he considered the quintessential example of the overthrow of

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102 See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 3, 201 for Marx’s comments on the songs sung during the 1844 uprising of the weavers in the Prussian province of Silesia; and Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 11, 104-6 for Engels’ comments on the poetry of the English working class in 1845.
104 Ibid., 90-1.
feudalism by the bourgeoisie and the inauguration of capitalism, Marx comments on the sudden revival of classic Greco-Roman imagery and motifs that occurred around that time. Analyzing this phenomenon, Marx writes that “in the classically austere traditions of the Roman Republic [the revolutionaries] found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their passion at the height of the great historical tragedy.”

The resurgence of classic art forms is seen by Marx as a reflection of the self-serving and self-deceptive ideology of the revolutionary bourgeoisie. Unable or unwilling to grasp and draw inspiration from their own actions and the underlying motive forces at work, the French revolutionaries threw up an inspiring ideological illusion in which they were flatteringly depicted as heirs to Classical civilization. And it was this ideological obfuscation, this false apprehension of reality, which served as the source of, and was reflected in, the art of the time. The revival of Classical art is thus explained by Marx via the framework erected by his theory’s explicit connection of ideology and art and this connection’s implicit connotations.

It is, however, ultimately not a question of whether Marx and Engels strictly and consistently adhered to the critical framework for viewing art that they had implicitly established. The pertinent question is whether a critical framework with the potential for developing into a prescriptive aesthetic was erected in the theory of Marxism. By examining the fundamental Marxist conception of art, locating it within the theory as a whole, and tracing out its logical implications, I have shown that orthodox Marxist aesthetics did indeed establish such a framework. By essentially subordinating art to ideology, orthodox Marxist aesthetics did much more than create a “sociology of art;” it

105 Marx and Engels, *Collected Works* vol. 11, 104.
formulated a number of criteria by which art could be analyzed, evaluated, and judged. By defining art as a product of ideology, Marxism made the implicit claim that art reflected a misconstrued and ultimately false view of the world engendered by ignorance and class interests. Furthermore, by establishing its own view of reality, Marxism provided a standard against which the images and ideas contained in a work of art could be measured. Orthodox Marxist aesthetics thus contains a standard for judging art – its image of reality – and an explanation as to why certain works of art do not meet that standard – the ideological “false consciousness” it reflects. Thus, within the ostensibly descriptive tenets of orthodox Marxist aesthetics, the materials for constructing an explicitly prescriptive aesthetic were created. I will now turn to an examination of how these materials, the criteria and critical framework established in Marxist theory, were used by Plekhanov forming an overtly prescriptive “developed orthodoxy” in his writings on art. In the process, I will illustrate how these writings form an intellectual bridge in which the ideas of orthodox Marxist Aesthetics were developed into an aesthetic which advocated utilitarian art, denigrated bourgeois art in general and modern art in particular, and prescribed that art reflect the views of Marxism; all of which anticipated the doctrine of Socialist Realism.
Georgi Plekhanov: A Bridge Between Kingdoms

It is a testament to his importance and influence in regards to the rise of Marxism in Russia that the appellation “the father of Russian Marxism” is typically found affixed to Georgi Plekhanov’s name.\textsuperscript{106} Beginning his career as a revolutionary in the late 1870’s as a founding member of the Russian Narodnik\textsuperscript{107} organization Zemlia i Volia and later as the leader of the splinter group of Chernyi Peredel, Plekhanov was obliged to flee abroad in 1880 in order to avoid arrest. After settling in Geneva, Plekhanov immersed himself in the study of Marxism and had come to fully embrace the theory by 1883 when he and several other Russian émigrés founded the Emancipation of Labor group, the first Marxist organization linked to Russia. While a well respected thinker in Western Europe, Plekhanov’s importance to the Marxist movement crystallizing in Russia at the end of the nineteenth-century was immense. This rising generation, including Lenin and Trotsky, was reared on Plekhanov’s works, such as Socialism and the Political Struggle (1883) and Our Differences (1885), both of which are notable for their polemical stance against the Narodniki and their wholly original claims that Marxism was applicable to Russia, and his monumental A Contribution to the Question of the Development of the Monistic View of History (1894), wherein Plekhanov presented a history of materialist

\begin{footnotes}
\item[106] See, for example, Samuel H. Baron, Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1963).
\item[107] “Narodnik,” stemming from the root narod, meaning “people,” is the Russian term for an adherent of Narodism, the system of beliefs of the populist movement in late nineteenth century Russia which focused upon the Russian peasantry, at times to educate them and ameliorate their harsh living conditions and at other times to incite them to revolt against the Russian government. The word is typically left untranslated, and I have adhered to this tradition.
\end{footnotes}
thought and a thorough explication of Marxism. Despite not returning to Russia until after the February Revolution, Plekhanov maintained close contact with the Marxist radicals in his homeland and quickly came to occupy a position of leadership in the nascent Social Democratic (Marxist) movement within Russia’s borders. This position was exemplified by his founding of Iskra, the official newspaper of the Russian Social Democrats, with his fellow members of the Emancipation of Labor group and, notably, a young Vladimir Lenin. When, in 1903, the Russian Social Democrats split into the opposing groups of Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, Plekhanov briefly sided with Lenin before breaking with him over the latter’s advocacy of a highly centralized party, his denigration of spontaneous working-class movements not led by the party, and his advocacy of an alliance between the proletariat and peasantry against the Russian bourgeoisie. Adopting an increasingly critical attitude towards Lenin and the Bolsheviks, involving himself more with intellectual pursuits than political matters, and shocking many of his fellow Marxists by fully supporting Russia’s involvement in World War I, Plekhanov’s role as an active leader of Russian Marxists was gradually eclipsed by his former pupil. After thirty-seven years in exile, Plekhanov returned to Russia following the February Revolution where he continued to oppose the Bolsheviks and denounced the October Revolution as a conspiratorial coup before passing away in May, 1918.\(^{108}\)

Despite his rupture with the Bolsheviks, many of Plekhanov’s works and ideas were to remain highly regarded and influential both before and after the October Revolution. In his biography of Plekhanov, Samuel Baron writes that Lenin continued to

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\(^{108}\) For the only monograph in English devoted to Plekhanov’s biography, see Baron, *Plekhanov: The Father of Russian Marxism.*
Pay homage to many of Plekhanov’s writings and recommend them to his fellow Bolsheviks even after their conflict. In his history of Marxist thought, Polish scholar Leszek Kolakowski echoes Baron when he writes that Plekhanov’s works were repeatedly published in the Soviet Union and remained in highly regarded, and also argues that his ideas were of singular influence in shaping Marxism in Russia. This influence is of particular interest in the present study due to fact that, from nearly the beginning of his career as a Marxist, Plekhanov published numerous articles and monographs devoted to the analysis of art from a Marxist perspective. Being among the first to synthesize Marxist theory with art history and criticism, Plekhanov’s title as the father of Russian Marxism is often joined by another – “the father of Marxist aesthetics.” Thus combining a focus on art and a strong influence on Soviet thought, Plekhanov’s writings present a logical starting point for locating the intellectual bridge by which the ideas regarding art contained in orthodox Marxist aesthetics were maintained and developed into a prescriptive aesthetic. While a consensus exists in scholarly literature that Plekhanov pursued only descriptive analyses of art while rejecting a prescriptive or utilitarian approach and thus epitomized the supposed nature of Marxist aesthetics that was wholly dissimilar to the character of Socialist Realism, this view appears to be based more on claims made in the Soviet Union under the auspices of Stalin’s personality cult than on actual investigation into Plekhanov’s works. The unreliable and ultimately mistaken nature of this consensus will become fully apparent when an examination of Plekhanov’s writings on art reveal that based on the critical

109 See Baron, Plekhanov, 216, 257; and Leszek Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, 639.
110 Both Baron and Kolakowski note Plekhanov’s pioneering role in the history of worldwide Marxist thought in developing a Marxist aesthetic. See Baron, Plekhanov, 307; and Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism, 632.
framework implicit in orthodox Marxist aesthetics he developed a clearly prescriptive aesthetic. Employing the critical framework established in Marxist theory, Plekhanov developed an emphatically stringent method of art criticism. Condemning art he saw as a reflection of ideology, Plekhanov prescribed that artists adopt the Marxist view of the world and reflect this in their art. Furthermore, Plekhanov notably employed the ideas of Marxism to support art that performed a social function, using Marxism’s particular image of society and development to argue that a utilitarian approach to art is an inevitable and beneficial component of the class struggle.

Despite his stature as an originator of the application of Marxism to the study of art, no extended analysis of Plekhanov’s ideas in this area has been produced in Western scholarship. This absence is somewhat offset by his inclusion in a number of surveys of the history of Marxist aesthetics which, along with their brevity, are striking for their near uniform portrayal of his thought. Throughout secondary literature, Plekhanov’s writings on art are never subjected to a thorough interrogation but are consistently portrayed as non-prescriptive, investigatory, and sharply at odds with Socialist Realism. Thus, Henri Arvon contrasts his claim that Plekhanov’s aesthetic stoutly rejected a utilitarian view of art that would condemn it to the role of party propaganda with an overview of the opposite attitude that prevailed in the Soviet Union under Socialist Realism. Similarly, Berel Lang and Forrest Williams’ depiction of Plekhanov as a supporter of artistic autonomy and their concluding statement that “a Marxist can (and Plekhanov did) endorse the trans-individual, disinterested, non-utilitarian character of the aesthetic that

most theorists have deemed essential”\textsuperscript{112} not only rests on slim textual support but also
smacks of a polemic against Soviet policy. As previously noted, Terry Eagleton
emphasized the divergence between a descriptive and analytical Marxist aesthetics with
the prescriptiveness and utilitarianism of Socialist Realism while espousing a heritage
explanation of Socialist Realism’s origins, arguing that it grew out of the traditions of the
nineteenth-century radical critics.\textsuperscript{113} Concerning Plekhanov, Eagleton firmly locates him
on the side of Marxist aesthetics, writing that Plekhanov rejected the radical critics’
“propagandist demands of art [and] refused to put literature at the service of party
politics”\textsuperscript{114} while later distinguishing Plekhanov’s “academic” analysis of art from the
politically motivated criticism of the Soviet Union.\textsuperscript{115}

This image of Plekhanov’s approach to art as wholly descriptive, supporting
artistic autonomy, and thus antithetical to Socialist Realism is also found in studies
dealing with the latter doctrine or with Soviet literary criticism. In addition to this image,
however, one finds the constant and curious deployment of a narrative concerning the
influence of his ideas and their fate in the Soviet Union. The outline of this narrative can
be seen in Herman Ermolaev’s previously noted claims that though Plekhanov’s ideas
were consistently cited by a wide spectrum of artists and theoreticians in support of
arguments both for and against a prescriptive and utilitarian aesthetic, those who
employed his ideas in support of prescription were distorting his concepts which were
ultimately incompatible and unrelated to Socialist Realism.\textsuperscript{116} As Ermolaev’s work

\textsuperscript{112} Lang, Berel and Forrest Williams, “Introduction,” in \textit{Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and
\textsuperscript{113} See pages 25-6 of this paper.
\textsuperscript{114} Eagleton, \textit{Marxism and Literary Criticism}, 44.
\textsuperscript{116} See pages 31-2 of this paper.
illustrates, this narrative maintains the image of Plekhanov as an exemplar of the supposedly descriptive approach to art of Marxist aesthetics whose ideas were antithetical to the prescriptive tenets of Socialist Realism, but also notes that his ideas were used by those that advocated artistic prescription and utilitarianism. An obvious contradiction exists in this narrative of Plekhanov as both an opponent of a prescriptive approach to art and providing support for such an approach. Though this contradiction is ultimately left unexplained, as no analysis of Plekhanov’s ideas or how they could be used to support a prescriptive aesthetic is offered, a clarification as to why this peculiar narrative has come about can be constructed by examining its conclusion in the official anathema placed upon Plekhanov’s ideas in the Soviet Union at the end of the 1920s.

In her study of Socialist Realism, Régine Robin adheres to the above narrative and explicitly writes that Plekhanov rejected artistic prescription and the notion of “social utility” in art, the belief that art should be oriented towards providing a beneficial service to society. Despite this, Robin, like Ermolaev, notes that Plekhanov’s ideas were cited by a wide range of aesthetic theorists, many of whom championed a prescriptive and utilitarian approach to art.  

What is notable about Robin’s treatment is her remark that Plekhanov’s supposed rejection of prescription and utility “explains why he was blacklisted as a Menshevik and as the creator of a passive aesthetic…in the 1930’s.”

This unexplained but evocative statement is elaborated upon by Rufus Mathewson, who describes a philosophical controversy that erupted in the Soviet Union during late 1920’s and early 1930’s which resulted in a schism between one set of ideas dubbed “Leninism”

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117 See Robin, *Socialist Realism*, page 150 for her statements on Plekhanov; and pages 191-200 for her overview of the various Soviet critics and Literary groups of the 1920’s including those cited Plekhanov as an influence and supported a prescriptive aesthetic such as VAPP (the Pan-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), the October Group, and the previously noted RAPP.

118 Ibid., 150
and another termed “Plekhanovism.” Mathewson writes that in 1929 a “new ‘Stalinist’
interpretation” of Marxism had been promulgated, embodied in the term of “Leninism”
and claiming that “Lenin’s major contribution to Marxian theory…[was] his emphasis on
man as the conscious, responsible, and disciplined maker of his own history,” nearly
reversing orthodox Marxism’s belief in the material determination of mankind and
history. These ideas were promoted as not only the “correct” interpretation of reality but
as also providing the basis for a prescriptive and utilitarian aesthetic. As Mathewson
describes, this “Leninism” was contrasted with “Plekhanov’s emphasis on man as the
creature and passive beneficiary of the historical process,” an overt emphasis on
determinism which was considered the basis for a supposed adherence to an analytical
and descriptive approach to art.\(^{119}\) Mathewson goes on to discuss how this creation of a
stark binary opposition between the ideas assigned to Lenin and those attributed to
Plekhanov led to an officially sanctioned denigration of Plekhanov’s aesthetic and all
those who had drawn upon it. Mathewson ultimately argues that these attacks against all
who had cited Plekhanov, and thus the vast majority of aesthetic theorists, were part of a
campaign of “ideologically undermining” the position of independent literary groups
towards the final goal of their liquidation in 1932.\(^{120}\) Despite this clear identification of a
political motive for attacking adherents of Plekhanov’s aesthetic, Mathewson fails to
realize its implication that the denunciation of Plekhanov and the resulting image of his
ideas in the Soviet Union could be less than accurate. Mathewson ultimately accepts the
official definition of “Plekhanovism,” drawing upon it in his description of Plekhanov’s


\(^{120}\) Ibid., 215-7. Mathewson notes that both the literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky (1884-1937), who had
argued against prescription in art, and RAPP, which had favored prescription and utilitarianism in art, both
cited Plekhanov in their theories and were thus roundly denounced.
“determinist beliefs” as engendering a “respect for the [artist]” and artistic autonomy while also distinguishing him from the prescriptive and utilitarian tenets of the nineteenth-century radical critics.\(^\text{121}\)

This agreement between Western scholars and Soviet views under Stalin on the nature of Plekhanov’s aesthetic is brought into full relief by Burton Rubin in an article examining the “blacklisting” of Plekhanov described by Robin and Mathewson. Noting that Plekhanov was “until 1931 revered as the founder of Marxist aesthetics, and his ideas entered into the critical apparatus of almost all Soviet critics,”\(^\text{122}\) Rubin proceeds to recount the successive erosion of this influence. This process began with Stalin’s 1929 criticism that Soviet philosophers had overrated Plekhanov at the expense of Lenin as a theoretician which had led to a passivity in Soviet thought and the inability of “theory to not only keep up with practice, but to guide it.”\(^\text{123}\) Following this broad denunciation, a sweeping denigration of Plekhanov’s ideas was instituted by the Party, resulting in the fall of numerous Soviet theoreticians who had, or were perceived to have, drawn upon them.\(^\text{124}\) Of particular interest is Rubin’s recounting that in March of 1931,

M. Mitin, the new Party spokesman in philosophy, pointed out that… the ‘crude error of proclaiming not only the founding role, but actually the positive role of Plekhanov’s theoretical propositions in literature and art’ had to be corrected. A list of Plekhanov’s errors that Mitin enumerated served as suggested themes for a large number of article and reports that appeared in connection with a discussion of Plekhanov’s literary theories on May 8, 1931.\(^\text{125}\)

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\(^{121}\) Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 147 and 21, respectively.


\(^{123}\) Ibid., 538.

\(^{124}\) Most prominent of these was Abram Deborin (1881-1963), the editor of the Party’s journal on philosophy, *Under the Banner of Marxism*. He was denounced as overrating Plekhanov and removed from the journal in 1931. See Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, 845.

\(^{125}\) Burton Rubin, “Plekhanov and Soviet Literary Criticism,” 539.
Stalin’s denunciation of Plekhanov thus elicited mounting pressure for the erasure of Plekhanov’s ideas and influence from Soviet thought, including aesthetic theory. Alongside such pressure, aptly illustrated by Mitin’s convenient enumeration of Plekhanov’s errors, there was continued insistence from the Party that theorists formulate “a utilitarian literature immediately aiding the fulfillment of the [first Five Year] Plan.” Between these dual pressures, Plekhanov’s aesthetic was deemed too “passive” and unsuitable for supporting a utilitarian approach to art.\(^\text{126}\)

Despite the clear involvement of Stalin and the Party in engineering Plekhanov’s banishment from Soviet intellectual life, Rubin accepts the image put forth of Plekhanov as the proponent of a “passive,” i.e. descriptive, aesthetic. Writing that “tendentiousness in art was [Plekhanov’s] \emph{bête noire}” and that his “impenetrable determination [i.e. adherence to the Marxist belief that material conditions ultimately determine society] led him to embrace the idea…that since what \emph{is}, for the time \emph{must be}, it was unscientific to approach art from the standpoint of what ‘ought’ to be,”\(^\text{127}\) Rubin adheres to the image of Plekhanov put forth in both the Soviet Union after 1931 and in Western scholarship. Rubin, however, is unique among scholarly treatments of Plekhanov in that he attempts to support his view with quotations and analysis of Plekhanov’s writings. Thus, Rubin quotes Plekhanov’s criticism of author G.I. Uspensky’s works as displaying a “prevalence of social interests over purely literary interests” as proof that of his argument that Plekhanov considered utilitarian tendentiousness “a perversion of the artistic sensibility,” while Plekhanov’s conviction that “primitive art is an outgrowth of economic activity” is quoted by Rubin as evidence supporting his claim of Plekhanov’s

\(^\text{126}\) Burton Rubin, “Plekhanov and Soviet Literary Criticism,” 539-40.
\(^\text{127}\) Ibid., 527 and 533, respectively.
“passive determinism.” Rubin’s analyses, however, are flawed; a more thorough reading of Plekhanov’s criticism of Uspensky reveals that he does not condemn the author for his utilitarianism, but actually justifies it in Marxist terms, while the characterization of Plekhanov’s statement concerning primitive art as “passive determinism” ignores the distinctions he made between primitive and contemporary art, the latter of which is heavily influenced by class interests and ideology. Ultimately, Rubin’s argument that Plekhanov’s aesthetic was descriptive and unsuited to prescriptive theories rests heavily upon the Soviet pronouncements to that effect, employing them in his article as confirmations of his views. So strongly does he agree with the post-1931 Soviet assessment of Plekhanov, that, when encountering the use of Plekhanov’s ideas in the nineteen twenties by purveyors of prescriptive aesthetic theories, Rubin describes this phenomenon as an “enigma,” rather than considering the possibility that Plekhanov’s ideas were not as “passive” as the pronouncements of the Stalinist bureaucracy claimed.

Thus, a narrative is consistently put forth in Western scholarship depicting Plekhanov as a proponent of analytical description but also as repeatedly drawn upon to support prescriptive aesthetic theories. With little concrete analysis provided in support, the incongruity contained in this narrative of Plekhanov’s ideas supporting their supposed antithesis is left unresolved. A possible source for this contradiction, however, is revealed when the narrative’s conclusion, the Soviet denunciation of Plekhanov, is

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129 A full analysis of Plekhanov’s criticism of Uspensky and his emphasis on the impact class interests and conflict have upon art will be given below. For the full text of the writings Rubin abstracts these quotes from, “Gl. I. Uspensky” and “Unaddressed Letters,” respectively, see Georgi Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, K.M Cook and A. Fineberg, trans. (Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1980), 37-87, and 263-359.
130 Burton Rubin, “Plekhanov and Soviet Literary Criticism,” 535-6. Rubin specifically cites RAPP and the critics associated with the literary journal On Guard as employing Plekhanov ideas in support of their own.
examined. As has been shown, this denunciation resulted in an assessment of Plekhanov’s ideas that mirrors those of Western scholars. What is also apparent, most markedly in Rubin’s study but also visible in Robin’s and Mathewson’s, is a reliance upon this conclusion to support the narrative itself. Despite the evidence that the Party purposefully constructed this image of Plekhanov and that it was motivated solely by political interests, it has been taken as an accurate judgment of his views regarding art by these scholars who then use it to support their own. Leaving the repeated use of Plekhanov’s ideas in the construction of prescriptive aesthetic theories unexamined, they consistently adhere to an image of Plekhanov’s aesthetic as wholly descriptive and ultimately point to the Soviet denunciation of Plekhanov as supporting this view. With these scholars’ general lack of actual investigation into Plekhanov’s writings repeated throughout the wider body of Western historiography, and their image of him as an advocate of descriptive analysis consistently adhered to, it is plausible to consider that the Soviet condemnation of Plekhanov and his ideas have come to inform, and perhaps even determine, this pervasive assessment of him.

With the idea in mind that the Soviet image of Plekhanov may have come to exert a powerful influence over Western scholarship, it is important to note that outside of the sources just discussed numerous scholars, including historian Robert Tucker, have adopted a far more critical view of the Soviet denunciation of Plekhanov. Rather than accepting the image of Plekhanov put forth after 1929 as an accurate portrayal of his theories, scholars such as Tucker consider the Soviet condemnation of that year and the resulting distinction between Plekhanov’s supposedly erroneous ideas and those of the officially sanctioned “Leninsim” to have been engineered by Stalin towards the creation
of his cult of personality. As Tucker argues, Stalin’s 1929 assertion that Soviet philosophers had overrated Plekhanov at the expense of Lenin was motivated by his desire to both establish Lenin’s preeminence as a thinker and his own. Tucker writes that

Stalin was promoting Lenin’s primacy in philosophy as a vehicle for his own claim to similar primacy. The party’s erstwhile politico-ideological chief was presented as its philosophical chief as well—in place of Plekhanov, the acknowledged father of Russian Marxism...by thus putting supreme philosophical authority into Lenin’s vozhd'-role, Stalin helped philosophers to grasp this broadened conception of that role as applicable to Lenin’s successor [i.e. Stalin].

The denunciation of Plekhanov is thus clearly viewed by Tucker as having a purely political motivation; in asserting Lenin’s infallibility at the expense of Plekhanov, Stalin was in effect asserting his own. As Tucker details it, this claim laid the foundation for the virtual razing and reorganization of intellectual life in the Soviet Union, with Stalin or his supporters successively targeting various disciplines—from economics to literary criticism—for failing to adhere to the correct ideas of Lenin as interpreted by Stalin. Of particular interest is the impact Stalin’s intellectual hegemony had upon the writing of history in the Soviet Union, which was directed away from evaluation and analysis based upon documentary research to the “evaluation…on the basis of deeds.”

Thus Lenin, being the infallible leader of a successful communist revolution could not have underestimated the reactionary nature of the centrist faction of the German Social Democrats, as had been argued in a 1930 article by historian A.G. Slutskii which triggered Stalin’s attacks. And Trotsky’s dispute with Stalin and exile from the Soviet

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132 Ibid., 356.
Union meant that he and his followers had always been the “forward detachment of the counterrevolutionary bourgeoisie.” Though a reassessment of Plekhanov’s revolutionary career is not mentioned by Tucker, it is not difficult to surmise that the image of him put forth by the Soviets under the rubric of “Plekhanovism” came about under this revision of history based upon deeds. Reflecting on the fact that Plekhanov’s deeds included his dispute with the Bolsheviks over revolutionary strategy and his opposition to the October Revolution based on the belief that capitalism would need to be fully established in Russia before the material conditions necessary for a communist revolution could form, it is plausible to consider that they, and not Plekhanov’s actual writings, are the basis for the image of his ideas as “passive” and overly “deterministic” that was promulgated by the Soviet Union and which informed Western historiography.

A certain sense of déjà vu seems unavoidable when examining the scholarly treatment of Plekhanov. Much like the divide repeatedly depicted between Marxist aesthetics and Socialist Realism in wider historiography, an acute juxtaposition has been drawn between Plekhanov’s supposedly descriptive, analytical approach to art and the prescriptive, utilitarian doctrine of Socialist Realism. Even more arresting is the parallel between Western scholars’ acceptance and even use of the Soviet Union’s revisionist image of Plekhanov in their work and the similar acceptance of Soviet pronouncements regarding Socialist Realism’s origins in the ideas of the nineteenth-century radical critics. In the following analysis of Plekhanov’s writings on art, I hope to continue this sense of

133 Tucker, “The Rise of Stalin’s Personality Cult,” 353-6. Assessments of Stalin’s degradation of Plekhanov as among the first steps in the creation of his cult of personality and the subsequent revision of history in the Soviet Union similar to Tucker’s can be found in Roy Medvedev, Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism, Colleen Taylor, trans., David Joravsky and Georges Haupt, eds., (New York, Alfred A Knopf, 1971), 143-9; and Heller and Nekrich, Utopia in Power, 265-7.

134 See Baron, Plekhanov, 337-361, for an account of his opposition to the October Revolution.
déjà vu by illustrating that, much like in their treatment of Marxist aesthetics, previous scholars have misconstrued Plekhanov’s aesthetic in their depiction of it as wholly descriptive and anti-utilitarian. By examining a range of his writings on art I will demonstrate that by utilizing the critical framework sketched out in orthodox Marxist aesthetics and its constituent criteria, Plekhanov postulated a prescriptive aesthetic that clearly supported utilitarian art. Employing the criteria of Marxism’s image of reality, Plekhanov censured works of art that did not correctly portray this image whether in form, such as abstract art, or in content, such as sympathetic depictions of reactionary bourgeoisie. And with the concept of ideology, Plekhanov was able to attribute such deviations to the class-based and flawed worldview of its creator. Thus employing Marxism to delineate what art should not be, Plekhanov also used it to define what art should be; with his proscription of the forms of modern art containing the implicit demand that artists adhere to traditional realistic forms alongside an explicit demand that artists adopt the ideas and views of Marxism and reflect them in the content of their works. Lastly, in a major development of orthodox Marxist aesthetics, Plekhanov argued that in times of class struggle, such as those he lived in, art inevitably takes on a tendentious and utilitarian character, thus justifying his support for art explicitly geared towards a social function. Plekhanov’s ideas and writings can thus be seen as forming an intellectual bridge in which Marxist ideas were developed into a prescriptive aesthetic and transmitted well into the twentieth century.

The first writing Plekhanov produced on the subject of art was his 1888 review of the works of Russian author and Narodnik sympathizer Gleb Uspensky, who wrote a number of sketches and novels focusing on the Russian peasantry. As was previously
noted, Burton Rubin focuses on Plekhanov’s criticism in this article of the “prevalence of social interests over purely literary interests” in Uspensky’s works, and cited it as an illustration of the supposed antipathy towards tendentious, utilitarian literature. What Burton fails to acknowledge is that Plekhanov’s criticism of Uspensky’s writings is directed at the specific interests displayed therein and that the essay as a whole is actually a defense of utilitarian literature animated by Marxist ideas. Early in this article, Plekhanov asserts that a writer is “the product…of the social environment from which he comes…he brings with him into literature its world outlook, customs, [and] ideas.” It is a strict observance of this Marxist tenet that art reflects social consciousness that is at the root of Plekhanov’s critiques of Uspensky and also the basis of defense of utilitarian literature. Specifically, Plekhanov relies on the Marxist concept of ideology to argue that the flaws in Uspensky’s works are the result of the author’s particular Narodnik ideology, his incorrect belief that it was the peasant and not the proletariat that is the progressive class. It was these specifically Narodnik “social interests” that Plekhanov criticizes, arguing that they drove Uspensky to a circumscribed focus in his fiction on the artistically unrewarding milieu of rural life which naturally resulted in works lacking “clearly delineated characters and no subtly depicted emotions.” Plekhanov’s solution to this issue was not to remove all social interests from fiction, but to replace them with interests in line with Marxist ideas. This solution is based upon the fact that Plekhanov relied upon the Marxist idea that consciousness and thus art are socially conditioned to argue in defense of the presence of social interests in art and a utilitarian focus on these

135 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 41; quoted in Rubin, “Plekhanov and Soviet Literary Criticism,” 527.
136 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 38.
137 Ibid., 83.
interests over purely aesthetic concerns. Employing Marxism’s vision of society and
development, Plekhanov argues that Uspensky and his fellow Narodnik writers were
members of a rising social class engendered by changes in the material base of Russian
society. Thus engaged in a conflict with the existing social order, Plekhanov claims that
their utilitarian approach to art, that their art was not created solely for aesthetic pleasure
but was used to investigate social issues towards the goal of changing social conditions,
was a natural and even beneficial aspect of this class conflict. Ultimately, this article
reveals the hallmarks of Plekhanov’s approach to art: the use of Marxist theory to support
a markedly prescriptive criticism and to defend utilitarian art.

A discussion on the 1861 abolition of serfdom in Russia begins the article, with
Plekhanov deploying Marxism’s conception of society and social development to
describe how this change in the material base precipitated a change in the composition of
Russian society. Plekhanov writes that the “collapse of the old economic structure
increased the numbers of raznochintsy” in Russia. These raznochintsy were people of
non-aristocratic origin who pursued formerly restricted opportunities for education and
are identified by Plekhanov as now forming the bulk of the Russian intelligentsia.
Though he notes that they existed before 1861, Plekhanov firmly ties the rise of this class
to contemporary economic changes by arguing that the abolition of serfdom led not only
to a quantitative change in the raznochintsy but that this then occasioned their
organization into a coherent social group and “aroused in them new hopes and new
demands.” Continuing to apply the Marxist schematic of social development, Plekhanov
describes how these raznochintsy, linked to a new economic base, came into conflict with
the existing order in Russia. The hopes and demands put forward by these new
“remained unsatisfied,” Plekhanov writes; “the disgraceful political system, by its very nature alien to any intelligentsia without rank, was increasingly arousing a spirit of opposition in our educated proletariat…[and] forced it to reflect upon the question of ‘what is to be done?’” This opposition to the political system of Russia led naturally to an opposition to the upper classes that composed it and, Plekhanov continues, resulted in the raznochintsy looking to “the people,” the peasant population of Russia, for either support in its “oppositional and revolutionary strivings” or “as a medium in which it could live and work without relinquishing its human dignity and without cringing to any authority.” Plekhanov concludes this opening exposition on Russian society by asserting that this focus of the raznochintsy on the peasantry, this attempt to find in them an answer to “what is to be done” about their discontent with society has led to the “Narodnik trend” within the raznochintsy which was inevitably reflected in their works of fiction. It is this social environment which Plekhanov sees Uspensky and his fellow Narodnik writers as a product of, an environment viewed by him as completely in accordance with the Marxist image of social development. By arguing that changes in the material base of Russian society first led to the rise of a social class, then to burgeoning conflict with the existing order, and lastly to the emergence of a particular ideology which was then reflected in literature, Plekhanov clearly adheres to the vision of society and social development put forth by Marxist theory. In doing so, Plekhanov is able to conceptualize Uspensky’s writings as a product of a Narodnik ideology ultimately engendered by material conditions. Furthermore, Plekhanov’s use of Marxism also allows him argue that, by virtue of their status as an emergent class in an epoch of social change, Uspensky and his fellow raznochintsy writers possessed “certain features” and

“general characteristics”¹³⁹ that explains and even justifies their utilitarian approach to art in which social interests and social questions dominate purely aesthetic concerns.

“Our raznochints,” Plekhanov writes, “bears a special imprint due to the specific features of his social and historical position.”¹⁴⁰ As has been shown, Plekhanov saw this social and historical position of the raznochintsy as a rising class linked to a new material base and engaged in class conflict with the existing order. It is therefore notable that Plekhanov associates this position, a recurring feature in Marxism’s conception of society, with particular views regarding art. Plekhanov asserts that a raznochinets seeks practical solution[s] and strives to alter the social relations…he is a protester and fighter by virtue of his position. His attention is totally absorbed by struggle…therefore in his case social interests dominate all else…purely literary questions are of little concern to him…He is concerned not to give artistic form to his works, but to grasp and convey the social meaning of the phenomena which he depicts.¹⁴¹

A certain utilitarian attitude towards art, a favoring of creating art for functional ends rather than purely aesthetic ones, is therefore seen by Plekhanov as a characteristic trait of the raznochintsy, a trait conditioned by their location in society and history as an embattled, progressive class seeking to both understand and change society. By using Marxism’s notion of the social conditioning of consciousness alongside its concept of social development, Plekhanov is able to develop an explanation for the raznochintsy’s approach to art. This utilitarian approach is seen by Plekhanov as the product of the raznochintsy’s wider environment of socio-economic change and class conflict in Russia, an environment in which social interests naturally dominate those of aesthetics. Writing

¹³⁹ Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 38.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 39.
¹⁴¹ Ibid., 39-41.
that “Russia is going through a period now in which the advanced strata of its population cannot help being interested in [social] questions. Therefore…interest in social questions will of necessity be reflected in fiction also,” Plekhanov clearly argues that the prevalence of social interests in raznochintsy-authored Narodnik fiction is the unavoidable result of the socially conditioned mindset of its creators.

Having employed Marxism to explain the Narodniks’ focus on social interests in their fiction as the inevitable result of social conditions, Plekhanov’s criticism of Uspensky’s works for containing these features thus seems rather incongruous. This seeming contradiction, however, is explained by the fact that while Marxism’s vision of society and development allowed Plekhanov to justify the Narodniks’ attempts to answer “what is to be done?” and focus on social interests in their fiction, the Marxist concept of ideology compelled him to denounce the specific nature of these interests and the answer they provided. This is illustrated in a revealing passage where Plekhanov, after noting that the utilitarian mindset of Narodnik fiction writers condemns criticism focusing on the aesthetic flaws in their works “to total impotence,” writes that “yet it is not at all absurd, but, on the contrary, perfectly proper to ask how well-founded the views of Russian life held by our Narodnik fiction writers are and whether the main artistic defects in their works do not depend, in part at least, on the mistaken, one-sided nature of these views.”

By describing the views of the Narodniks as “mistaken” and “one-sided,” Plekhanov clearly considers Narodism to be an ideology, a false comprehension and understanding of Russian life. With his previous contention that the prevalence of social interests negatively impacted Uspensky’s works supplemented with this assertion that it is the

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142 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 43.
143 Ibid., 43.
ideology of Narodism producing this impact, it becomes clear that it is not the predominance of social interests in Uspensky’s works that Plekhanov believes spoils them, but the specific ideology of these interests.

Writing that “the predominant social interest of the present day led our Narodnik writers of fiction to portray peasant life, but the character of this life was bound to influence the character of their literary works unfavorably,”¹⁴⁴ Plekhanov reveals the essence of his argument that the ideology of Narodism, with its belief that the Russian peasantry was “the estate called upon by history to renew and reshape all our social relations,”¹⁴⁵ is the source of the defects in Uspensky’s works. Plekhanov argues that, guided by their Narodnik ideology, Uspensky and his fellow Narodnik writers were driven to focus solely on the peasantry in their fiction. Plekhanov thus considers these writers to have placed ideological blinders on themselves which condemned them to then mine an artistically circumscribed and unrewarding subject matter – that their specifically Narodnik social interests led to artistically weak works. Specifically, Plekhanov argues that Narodism had inculcated these authors with an interest in the peasantry, an interest that led them to focus their writings on this social stratum and environment. It is this focus on the peasantry that Plekhanov sees as the immediate source of the artistic defects in Narodnik fiction, arguing that the peasant’s underdeveloped nature serves as poor source material for artistic works. This is illustrated when Plekhanov writes that the peasants’ life and character are “created by the conditions of agricultural labor,”¹⁴⁶ and argues that agricultural labor, unlike urban labor, “devours the whole of a man’s

¹⁴⁴ Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 60.
¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.
¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 58.
mind.” Plekhanov asserts that due to the conditioning effect of this primitive and “devouring” mode of production the peasantry exemplifies the “childhood of mankind…where there is no inner development of the individual.” Plekhanov concludes that the Narodnik’s exclusive focus on such a milieu does not “give much scope to the artist’s brush” and that “only a milieu in which human individuality has reached a certain state of development lends itself well to artistic portrayal. The portrayal of individuals who take part in the great progressive movement of mankind and serve as the bearers of universal ideas is the height of artistic creation.” Plekhanov thus argues that Narodism’s ideological deviation from Marxism’s vision - its belief that it is the peasantry and not the proletariat that is to revolutionize the world - led to a very particular and exclusive social interest. Inspired by this interest in the peasantry, Narodnik writers focused solely on depicting this underdeveloped class, rather than the “progressive,” “urbanized,” and “individualized” proletariat. By restricting themselves to this subject matter, Narodnik fiction writers were bound to reflect the undeveloped and “mass” character of these people, which, as Plekhanov notes, is “by no means a rewarding task for a writer…Shakespeare himself would have found it difficult.”

With this knowledge, it is clear that Plekhanov’s previously noted criticism of Uspensky’s writings as “lacking clearly delineated characters and subtly detected emotions” due to “the prevalence of social interests” is not a criticism of the utilitarian focus on social interests, but a criticism of the specific interests themselves. Guided by the “one-sided” views and interests of Narodnik ideology, Uspensky’s fiction was bound to lack delineated characters and

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147 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 78.
148 Ibid., 58-60.
subtle emotions because the subject matter he was driven to draw upon itself lacked these qualities.

That Plekhanov does not consider the utilitarian character of Narodnik fiction, as opposed to its specific ideological interests, to be a malignant influence becomes apparent when, after having enumerated their flaws, he writes that “one would have to reconcile oneself to [these flaws] if the [Narodnik] writers had really solved the question as to what Russian intellectual…should do.”

Rather than arguing that the utilitarian orientation of raznochintsy fiction towards social interests and attempts to answer “what is to be done” should be excised, Plekhanov actually positions this orientation as Narodnik fiction’s possible salvation. This salvation, however, remains unrealized as Plekhanov reviews the possible answers to “what is to be done” that Narodnik fiction offers: either go to the peasants and either repeat previous fruitless attempts incite them to revolution, settle on the land and face constant police harassment, or, noting Uspensky’s lamentations on the encroachment of “civilization” on peasant life, to not interfere or attempt to change the peasantry.

Concluding that these impractical and useless solutions illustrates Narodism’s “inability to answer” the question of “what is to be done?” and therefore “demonstrates its complete bankruptcy, and we can say that…the works of our Narodnik fiction writers have been sacrificed to a false social doctrine.”

It is thus not its aesthetic flaws that Plekhanov sees as Narodnik fiction’s ultimate failing, but its inability, stemming from its ideological source, to successfully perform a utilitarian function.

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149 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 61.
150 Ibid., 61-5.
151 Ibid., 65.
This moratorium on Narodnik fiction does not extend to all tendentious or utilitarian art, however, as Plekhanov writes of a “viewpoint [that] could reconcile the demands of art with the interest in social questions which…our fiction writers cannot and should not under any circumstance renounce.”\textsuperscript{152} Having previously identified Narodnik fiction as suffering from artistic defects and insufficiently didactic utility, Plekhanov proceeds to prescribe that by abandoning Narodism and adopting a different view of society, raznochintsy fiction writers would not only avoid the artistic failings that now characterize their works, but would also be able to retain the general social interests and utility that he sees as an inevitable result of class struggle and social development.

Plekhanov writes of a “more correct point of view which, without removing the vital issues of the day from [raznochintsy] fiction, would nevertheless lead to the removal of many of the defects that now characterize it.”\textsuperscript{153} Rather unsurprisingly, this “correct” view that Plekhanov advocates as a replacement for Narodism is Marxist theory. Directly addressing Uspensky and his fellow Narodniks, Plekhanov writes that

\begin{quote}

The ultimate conclusions of Marxism constitute an extremely revolutionary socio-political teaching, whereas its basic premises must be acknowledged as objective scientific propositions…Master these propositions well, and you will write quite differently from the way in which you write now.\textsuperscript{154}
\end{quote}

This explicit prescription is accompanied by an example of how by adhering to the scientific premises Marxism raznochintsy authors will produce “works of great social and literary significance.”\textsuperscript{155} Examining the novella \textit{From the Bottom Upwards} by S.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{152} Plekhanov, \textit{Selected Philosophical Works}, vol. 5, 83.
\item\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 43.
\item\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 87.
\item\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 84.
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Karonin, Plekhanov describes how Karonin’s story depicts a young peasant Mikhail Lunin who leaves his home village and becomes a metal worker in a big city while receiving an education. Noting the rich characterization of Mikhail, Plekhanov argues that this is because “the milieu to which Mikhail Lunin belongs permits...a most considerable intellectual and moral development of the individual.” Thus referencing his earlier assertion of the artistic damage that results from a sole focus on the underdeveloped peasantry, Plekhanov claims that a focus on the proletariat will provide authors with a much richer material to work with and therefore avoid the aesthetic pitfalls he found in Narodnik fiction.

As was noted above, Plekhanov claims that adopting a Marxist viewpoint will not only improve a Narodnik author’s works artistically, but it will also allow these works to retain a utilitarian focus on exploring social issues and attempting to answer pertinent social questions. Once more referring to Karonin’s novella, Plekhanov discusses its conclusion in which Mikhail, now a fully urbanized proletarian, reflects on the plight of those he left behind in his home village, “down in the depths where it is dark and cold,” and ponders what he can do to “give them light.” Mikhail, Plekhanov writes, has thus come to face the same question of “what is to be done?” that so occupied the minds of the raznochintsy intelligentsia. Plekhanov argues that this is due to the fact that, unlike the underdeveloped peasantry, Mikhail resides in the milieu of the proletariat, which “causes the person who belongs to it to adopt a negative attitude towards the reality around him.

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156 S. Karonin, real name Nikolai Petropavlovsky, was a fiction writer and contemporary of Uspensky. Though a Narodnik, Plekhanov writes elsewhere that Karonin is exceptional in that he “refutes as a fiction writer...everything he would probably have defended passionately as a publicist,” i.e. Narodnik ideology. Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 89.
157 Ibid., 83-4.
158 Ibid., 82.
It arouses in him the spirit of protest and the urge to fight for a better future.” Not only, then, does a focus on the proletariat afford authors the opportunity of depicting developed, individualized characters, but it will also allow them to directly engage the paramount social question of the day. Furthermore, this “retention of social interests” will have a drastically more efficacious utility, as the proletarian milieu also allows the author to answer the question that both he and his characters will be asking – “what is to be done?” Returning to Karonin’s novella one last time, Plekhanov argues that the attitude Mikhail adopts at its conclusion can lead in only one direction. He writes that Mikhail’s desire to “bring light” to the people, to “do something,” would have inevitably led him to “become a fighter in the vanguard of the proletariat…a Social-Democratic agitator.”

This conclusion, this answer to “what is to be done?” is for Plekhanov as much a part of depicting the milieu of the proletariat as are richly individualized characters and is ultimately “the moral of Mr. Karonin’s short novel, and how much richer his literary activity would have been, if he had been aware of this moral...[and though] Mr. Karonin will probably declare our conclusions to be utter nonsense…this, of course, will not detract from their validity, and will merely injure [his] further literary activity.”

Plekhanov thus concludes his article on a remarkably prescriptive note, claiming that by essentially recapitulating the Marxist view of the development of revolutionary consciousness within the proletariat in their art, writers will produce works of great aesthetic and didactic value. What is especially important about this overtly prescriptive stance is that he arrived at and supported it by applying and developing the critical framework established in orthodox Marxist aesthetics. Of particular note is the use Plekhanov made of Marxism’s conceptions of society and social development to explain

159 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 82-4.
and justify utilitarian art. Positioning the Russian *raznochintsy* within this vision as an emergent social class engaged in a class struggle with the existing order, Plekhanov proceeded to argue that such a position inevitably brought about an overwhelming concern with social questions that would naturally be reflected in art. This defense of the *raznochintsy*’s utilitarian approach to art, their use of it to help decide “what is to be done,” did not, however prevent Plekhanov from criticizing the specific answers that they put forth. Drawing upon the Marxist concept of ideology, Plekhanov argued that the false worldview of Narodism had imprinted its specific social interests, a fixation with the Russian peasantry, upon fiction writers and it was these misguided social interests, and not the general engagement of social interests, that disfigured the works of Uspensky and his fellow Narodnik writers. Plekhanov asserts that the ideology of Narodism lead fiction writers to exclusively focus on the peasantry in their fiction, not only causing artistic defects in their writings but also, and most importantly, occluding their utilitarian function. It was with the express purpose of preventing the artistic flaws found in Narodnik fiction and in maintaining a utilitarian art imbued with social interests that Plekhanov proceeded to explicitly prescribe that Marxism replace Narodism as the motivating force in fiction, arguing that the proletariat is not only an artistically rewarding subject but also that their depiction will allow writers to provide a “scientific” answer to the question of “what is to be done.” Thus, in direct contrast to Rubin’s analysis of this article as illustrating an antipathy to tendentious, utilitarian art, a close reading of it reveals a strikingly different picture of Plekhanov’s ideas. From his explanation of utilitarian art as the natural byproduct of social strife to his concerted effort towards preserving such utility, Plekhanov emerges as a staunch proponent of art
geared towards a social function. And while his criticisms of the social interests of Narodnik fiction might have suggested a condemnation of tendentiousness in art, his unmistakable prescription that art reflect the ideas of Marxism betrays the opposite inclination. Ultimately, Plekhanov’s first work on the subject of art reveals his development of the critical framework established in orthodox Marxist aesthetics into a “developed orthodoxy,” in which utilitarian art is justified and supported, where art perceived as the product of ideology is condemned, and art that conforms to Marxism’s particular view of society and development is prescribed. As the following selection of his writings will show, these tenets of “developed orthodoxy,” whether employed separately or together, were to remain the guiding ideas of Plekhanov’s approach to art for the rest of his career.

The use Plekhanov made of Marxism’s ideas of society and social development to explain and justify utilitarian art in his article on Uspensky is repeated and elaborated upon in his 1905 article *French Drama and French Painting of the Eighteenth Century from the Sociological Viewpoint*. From his opening remarks that French society’s class divisions were “bound to influence the development of [its] art” to his concluding assertion that “in order to understand the way in which art reflects life, one must understand the mechanism of the latter…In civilized peoples the class struggle constitutes one of the mainsprings in this mechanism,” Plekhanov continues his previous emphasis on the influence that class conflict exerts upon art. In the case of eighteenth-century France, this conflict was largely acted out by the ruling aristocracy and the emergent bourgeoisie. But much as in his analysis of the nineteenth-century Russian *raznochintsy*, Plekhanov argues that this conflict conditioned a particular

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160 Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 5, 374 and 396, respectively.
mindset within the rising bourgeoisie, a mindset that was preoccupied with social issues and class antagonisms above all else. Plekhanov ultimately asserts that this mindset was the source of the bourgeoisie’s utilitarian approach to art which privileged critical and inspirational functions over aesthetic pleasure.

Plekhanov begins this article by describing that the theatre in France at the dawn of the eighteenth century was dominated by the genre of the neo-classical tragedy which in form and content drew upon models supplied by ancient Greece and Rome. Plekhanov argues that this dominance in the arts was the product of the dominance of French society by the aristocracy, whose particular notions of decorum and refinement had “become the criteri[a] for judging art.” Under the influence of these prejudices, Plekhanov continues, the once popular comic farces had fallen into disfavor while works such as Shakespeare’s were criticized for “abound[ing] with vulgarisms” and lacking the necessary “noble language” for addressing “the elite of the nation.” The self-image and tastes of the aristocracy, combined with their role as exclusive patrons of the arts, are seen by Plekhanov as having “clipped the wings of art,” pushing it into the suitably “noble” mold of the classics with their main characters of “kings, ‘heroes,’ and…high-ranking persons in general.”

Plekhanov thus argues for a causal connection between the socio-political dominance of the aristocracy, whose tastes demanded a particular aesthetic experience, and the resulting artistic dominance of neo-classicism. Positing such a connection then allows Plekhanov to argue that the dominance of neo-classicism was eroded when the social position of the aristocracy was likewise affected by the rise of the bourgeoisie.

Plekhanov notes the emergence and increasing popularity of the comédie larmoyante, the “tearful comedy,” during the 1730’s in France, and connects this with the

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contemporary growth in the prosperity and class consciousness of the French bourgeoisie. As he had with the *raznochintsy*, Plekhanov deploys the concept of social development inherent in Marxism to argue that by the 1730s changes in the material conditions of French society had led to the emergence of the bourgeoisie, who then adopted an oppositional stance to the existing socio-political order.  

And, again as with the *raznochintsy*, Plekhanov sees the bourgeoisie’s opposition reflected in the content and function of their art. Plekhanov quotes the criticisms leveled by the contemporary bourgeois playwright Pierre Beaumarchais that neo-classicism’s “constant portrayal…of nothing but emperors and kings” was of no concern to him along with his demand that theatre should portray “people of the middle estate,” to argue that the shift from neo-classicism to the tearful comedy’s focus on bourgeois life emerged from a sharp disdain for aristocratic values. Plekhanov, however, sees this disdain as not only engendering the new form of the “bourgeois drama,” but also as animating its explicit purpose. “What do we see in [the bourgeois drama]? A revolt against this or that aspect of aristocratic psychology, a struggle against this or that prejudice or, if you like, vice of the nobility,” Plekhanov writes, arguing that the opposition of the bourgeoisie to the aristocracy had led not only to a new form of drama, but also a utilitarian one geared towards social criticism. Considering the French bourgeoisie to have been engaged in a class struggle with the aristocracy, Plekhanov argues that this mentality was reflected in their art in which “man of the middle estate contrasted his domestic virtues with the extreme depravity of the aristocracy.”

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162 See, Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 5, 381.  
163 Ibid., 382-3.
Concluding his examination of the bourgeois drama, Plekhanov lays particular emphasis on the fact that it was the utilitarian preaching of morals in the new dramas that “most pleased [its] contemporaries.”\textsuperscript{164} Plekhanov, however, ultimately finds that this focus on moral condemnation was at the root of the tearful comedy’s eclipse in popularity and a return of neo-classicism by the latter half of the eighteenth century. Plekhanov begins his explanation of these events by writing that as their class struggle with the aristocracy intensified the bourgeoisie realized that it was “a question not of abolishing aristocratic vices, but of getting rid of the aristocracy itself.” It is this shift in the mindset of the bourgeoisie from “opposition” to “revolution” that Plekhanov sees as inspiring a return to the form of neo-Classicism, but imbued with a new content and purpose. While dramas preaching the moral superiority of the bourgeois had satisfactorily expressed opposition, they “could not serve as an example of a tireless and intrepid fighter…[they] did not inspire heroism,” and it was heroism that the bourgeois needed during this sharpened period of class struggle, Plekhanov writes. Dovetailing neatly with Marx’s own assessment of the situation,\textsuperscript{165} Plekhanov argues that it was in the ancient world, with its republican heroes and slave revolts that that the bourgeoisie found the forms to inspire the needed heroism and the return of neo-classical forms reflected the “revolutionary social aspirations of [the] time.”\textsuperscript{166} Plekhanov thus locates the developing class conflict in France as the cause underlying the development of the bourgeoisie’s tearful comedy and their subsequent return to neo-classical forms. Plekhanov sees these forms as emerging from the class struggle, but also argues that they were employed and

\textsuperscript{164} Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 383.
\textsuperscript{165} See pages 53-4 of this paper.
\textsuperscript{166} Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 384.
valued, and in the case of the tearful comedy devalued, for the utilitarian purpose of assisting in this struggle.

The influence of the class struggle on the development of art that Plekhanov describes was evident not only on the stage in last years of the ancien régime, but also in painting. Repeating the methodology he employed with French drama, Plekhanov traces the impact that the French class struggle had upon painting. Repeating the methodology he employed with French drama, Plekhanov traces the impact that the French class struggle had upon painting, describing how works that exhibited aristocratic sensibilities by painters such as Charles Le Brun and Francois Boucher fell out of public favor due to the rise of the bourgeoisie. Thus relating that the bourgeoisie rejected painting styles associated with the aristocracy, Plekhanov explains that the bourgeoisie soon came to admire Jean Baptiste Greuze and his “moral” paintings that stood as “reproach incarnate before the dissolute and corrupt aristocracy.”

Plekhanov argues that Greuze’s works ultimately suffered the same fate as the tearful comedy and for the same reason, representing the oppositional stage of the class struggle, his works were found insufficiently inspiring, insufficiently utilitarian, for the bourgeoisie’s increasingly revolutionary mindset. Just as he had previously argued that this mindset had dictated a return to the forms of neo-classicism with a revolutionary content in the theatre, Plekhanov now argues that the same process was reflected in the paintings of Jacques-Louis David. With his portrayal of classical subject matter, such as his acclaimed painting depicting Lucius Junius Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic, symbolizing “the political virtue of a revolutionary,” Plekhanov writes that the example of David “shows most clearly that French classicism of the late eighteenth century was

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conservative…only in its form. Its content, however, was imbued with the most revolutionary spirit.” Also, by carefully noting David’s belief that “art should serve the people, the republic,” Plekhanov cites him as an example that the resurgence of neo-classicism in French arts at the end of the eighteenth century was, much like the moral preaching of the tearful comedy, the product of a utilitarian approach to art engendered by a conflict between social classes.\footnote{168 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 390-1.}

In his overview of the arts of eighteenth-century France, Plekhanov thus echoes the assertion he made in his article on Uspensky regarding the decisive influence that the class struggle exerts on artistic creation. Specifically Plekhanov repeats his use of Marxism’s vision of society to again argue that the art of an emergent class acquires a decidedly utilitarian character. As in his argument that the utilitarian presence of social interests in the art of the raznochintsy was an inevitable reflection of a mentality conditioned by class antagonisms, Plekhanov asserts that the moral preaching of the tearful comedy and the search for revolutionary heroes in classical art were the result of a similarly conditioned mentality in the French bourgeoisie. Furthermore, while Plekhanov did not condemn the general presence of social interests in, and utilitarian nature of, the raznochintsy’s art or consider them a blight that should be effaced, he takes a similar view of the utilitarian art of France. Plekhanov writes that as the French Revolution approached, the citizen of that time…was indifferent to works of art not based on the political ideas he cherished. And let it not be said that such art [is] fruitless. This is wrong…French art of the age of Louis XIV also served political ideas, which did not, however, prevent it from flowering magnificently. And as for French art of the revolutionary period, the [revolutionaries] set it on the path which the art of the
upper classes had been unable to follow: it became a matter for the people.\textsuperscript{169}

Notable for its claim that the aristocracy’s use of classical motifs also served a utilitarian purpose, this passage explicitly confirms that Plekhanov had no qualms about tendentious art infused with political ideas. Arguing that such art is not “fruitless” and can even “flower magnificently,” Plekhanov’s own words lay to rest the image of him as an avowed enemy of social interests in art. Furthermore, this same passage is of particular importance for indicating that Plekhanov decidedly preferred certain ideas and a specific utility in art. In his concluding contrast between the art of the “upper classes” and that of the revolutionaries, Plekhanov clearly takes a favorable view of the revolutionary bourgeoisie’s making art a “matter for the people.” Recalling that the bourgeois art he had just described was conditioned by the class struggle in France and explicitly geared towards the utilitarian function of denouncing class enemies and inspiring revolutionary heroism, it becomes apparent that Plekhanov considered this art’s oppositional and revolutionary utility to be a positive characteristic. Coupled with his earlier attempts to preserve and even improve the utilitarian and didactic nature of the raznochintsy-authored fiction, it is clear that Plekhanov not only saw art geared towards a functional purpose beyond that of aesthetic pleasure as the inevitable result of class struggle but also considered such art to be a beneficial component of that struggle.

Plekhanov’s use of Marxist ideas to justify and defend the utilitarian art of rising social classes continues in a strikingly polemical article on the Russian literary critic Akim Volynsky. What is most notable about this article, however, Plekhanov lays out in it the use he would soon be making of his “developed orthodoxy” in condemning art

\textsuperscript{169} Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 395. Italics in original
associated with conservative or reactionary classes. Plekhanov’s focus in this article is the type of criticism Volynsky espouses an idealist and descriptive approach to art that is in many ways diametrically opposed to Plekhanov’s. This opposition quickly becomes apparent as Plekhanov quotes Volynsky’s claims of advocating a “philosophical” and “true criticism” that explicitly precludes criticism that is “publicistic,” i.e. utilitarian criticism that condemns or promotes particular ideas or social interests. As Volynsky describes it, his “true criticism” pursues a purely descriptive examination that “reveals the creative process” by which “poetic ideas, after emerging in the mysterious depths of the human spirit, pass through the variegated material of the author’s ideas and views of life.”

Volynsky’s descriptive criticism is thus based upon an overtly idealist conception of the creative process in which artistic inspiration is regarded as emerging independently of social influences. Unsurprisingly, Plekhanov takes immediate issue with Volynsky’s idealism and proceeds to turn Volynsky’s idea on its head, positioning “material of life” as the main source of artistic influence. Plekhanov writes that “the material through which the poetic idea is said to ‘pass’ is provided by the social environment surrounding the artist, and the poetic idea itself, no matter in what ‘depths of the spirit’ it is born cannot help being influenced by this environment.” Plekhanov thus deploys the basis of Marxist aesthetics, that “life determines consciousness” and therefore artistic ideas, against Volynsky. In support of this view that “the history of the arts of any given country is the fruit of its social history,” Plekhanov recounts his history of French art as described above. Redeploying his use of Marxist ideas to argue that social conditions and the class struggle largely determined the course of art in

171 Ibid., 160.
172 Ibid., 163.
eighteenth-century France, Plekhanov repeatedly attacks Volynsky’s idea that the
creative process only “takes place in the writer’s head.”

Plekhanov concludes what he considers a complete refutation of Volynsky’s ideas
by writing that he was able to do this because his materialist criticism is based on an
“objective science” and proceeds to dub his system as “scientific aesthetics,” making
plain his use of Marxism’s claim to scientific authority. Most interestingly, Plekhanov,
having just demonstrated the descriptive and explanatory capabilities of this scientific
criticism, of his “developed orthodoxy,” states that this criticism “is at the same time
truly publicistic criticism.” Plekhanov explains that, as with art, it is the influence of the
class struggle that imparts a tendentious and publicistic nature to his criticism. Citing
examples such as the paintings of Jacques-Louis David and the tearful comedy from his
history of French arts, Plekhanov once more puts forward his argument that art produced
during times of class conflict are invariably utilitarian and tendentious, that they are “full
of publicistic spirit.” Plekhanov now extends this argument to criticism as well, writing
that “in all transitional social epochs [criticism] is infused with the spirit of publicistics,
and actually becomes publicistic…it is inevitable.” Writing that his own criticism “too is
the fruit of this development,” Plekhanov has clearly brought the conclusions he arrived
at by studying past “transitional epochs” to bear on contemporary times. Armed with
Marxism’s “scientific” view of the world, Plekhanov had been able to explain and defend
the tendentious, utilitarian art and criticism of past epochs as the natural results of class
conflict. Plekhanov now argues that his own current era was a period of similar conflict
and he is therefore justified in applying his previous conclusions to contemporary art.

174 Ibid., 172-6.
Plekhanov illustrates the manner of this application when he ends his article on Volynsky by citing the publicistic criticism made by the bourgeois Frenchman Francois Guizot during the Restoration as a model for his own. Plekhanov notes that during the class conflict between the bourgeoisie and the reinstated French aristocracy Guizot had condemned aristocratic art and “argue[d] that the artist should not pander to the caprices of the upper classes…[and] advise[d] the poet to serve no one but the ‘people’ with his lyre.” Having highlighted the proscriptive and prescriptive aspects of this criticism, Plekhanov writes that

The scientific criticism of the present time has every right to resemble Guizot’s criticism in this respect. The only difference is that the subsequent historical development of modern society has defined more accurately for us the contradictory elements that went to make up the ‘people’ in whose name Guizot condemned the old order, and has shown us more clearly which of these elements is of truly progressive historical significance.\textsuperscript{175}

As these concluding lines illustrate, Plekhanov argues that as the class struggle of Guizot’s epoch had led to him to denounce the art of his class enemies and demand that artists orient their art towards a social service, the contemporary class struggle of Plekhanov’s time justifies the same kind prescriptive criticism. By essentially locating himself within a transitional epoch in accordance with Marxism’s conception of history, Plekhanov is thus able to apply his arguments that publicistic criticism and utilitarian art are inevitable and even beneficial aspects of past class struggles to present circumstances. Marxism has thus provided Plekhanov with an imprimatur to pursue an overtly tendentious criticism and support of utilitarian art. Lastly, it is also clear from the passage above that the Marxist understanding of modern society had provided Plekhanov

\textsuperscript{175} Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 177.
with a stark delineation of its “progressive elements”- the proletariat - and, implicitly, its reactionary elements – the bourgeoisie - giving him a clear target for his criticism.

Thus motivated by the idea that he was aligned with the emergent and progressive class of the proletariat during a time of class struggle, Plekhanov brought the full weight of his “developed orthodoxy” to bear against contemporary bourgeois art. Utilizing the ideas he had derived and developed from Marxist theory, Plekhanov proceeded to articulate a remarkably stringent criticism in which he attacked bourgeois art on the grounds that it reflected, and was thus disfigured by, bourgeois ideology. Illustrating the harsh attitude that Plekhanov adopted towards contemporary bourgeois art is his review of Knut Hamsun’s drama At the Gates of the Realm, which he describes as “redolent of impotent senility,” and producing “a completely inartistic impression of artificiality.” The cause of these unforgiving descriptions was the play’s sympathetic depiction of the main character, Ivar Kareno, whose stated goal in the play is “to destroy the workers.” Writing that Hamsun depicts Kareno as selflessly devoted to his idea, Plekhanov argues that this depiction “does not correspond to the truth” because “the idea of ‘destroying’ the proletariat cannot inspire selflessness for the simple reason that it is engendered by a feeling that is the direct opposite of selflessness: the egoism of the exploiters.”

Plekhanov explains that this deviation from the “truth” which he detects in Hamsun’s art, a truth colored by Marxist beliefs, is a reflection of the current state of bourgeois ideology. Plekhanov writes that when the bourgeoisie was “young” and occupied the historical role of a progressive class, “it hated despotism and more or less sympathized with liberation movements,” and this mentality was reflected in the characters of its literature and the subjects of its art. But now “social relations have changed

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176 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 590-605.
radically…[bourgeois society] is on the decline…and is now ready to applaud despots and trample in the mud the emancipatory aspirations of the working class,” and it is this current, reactionary bourgeois ideology that Ivar Kareno represents. Concluding his assessment of Hamsun’s play and the impact of bourgeois ideology upon it, Plekhanov writes that “it must be acknowledged here that the anti-proletarian bias of modern [bourgeois] philistines is most detrimental to the interests of art.” Essentially arguing that Hamsun’s play was irreparably flawed due to its deviation from the “true” view of society provided by Marxism, Plekhanov found the source of this failing in the impact of bourgeois ideology. Deploying Marxism’s view of social development, Plekhanov argued that the contemporary bourgeoisie has come to occupy a place of obsolescence and reaction in society, and finds this embodied in their ideological hatred of the progressive proletariat. As in his earlier criticisms of the Narodnik fiction writers, Plekhanov finds that this ideology, this “one-sided” view of life, is not only reflected in bourgeois art but is also the source of its aesthetic defects.

The most interesting and explicit example of Plekhanov’s deployment of his “developed orthodoxy” against contemporary bourgeois art can be found in his monograph Art and Social Life (1912). While he continues to assert that, as with Hamsun, the content of bourgeois art was irreparably damaged due to its ideological source, Plekhanov extends this argument and claims that the abstract forms of the emerging trends of modern art were also the product of the declining bourgeoisie’s ideology. While prescribing that the adoption of a Marxist viewpoint would obviate these supposed failings in this work, Plekhanov also displays clear support for utilitarian art in contemporary times, arguing that only the most egotistical of bourgeois artists

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177 Plekhanov, Selected Philosophical Works, vol. 5, 608.
could produce non-utilitarian art in the face of the modern class struggle. His last work on the subject of art and aesthetics, *Art and Social Life*, much like his first piece of criticism on Uspensky nearly thirty years prior, reveals that far from being an advocate of a purely descriptive and analytical approach to art, Plekhanov used Marxist ideas to explicitly prescribe what art should and should not be.

The immediate focus of Plekhanov’s attention in *Art and Social Life* is an examination of which of the two contrasting approaches to art is correct: the utilitarian approached defined by Plekhanov as the belief that “the function of art is to assist the development of man’s consciousness, to improve the social system;” or, as Plekhanov describes it, the “art for art’s sake” approach which holds that “art is an aim in itself; to convert it into a means of achieving any extraneous aim…is to lower the dignity of creative production.”

Plekhanov, however, immediately asserts that it is not a question of correctness, but a question of the social conditions which give rise to each approach. Despite opening with this neutral and descriptive position, the argument that Plekhanov pursues within this work leaves no doubt that he decidedly sees utilitarian art inscribed with Marxist ideas as “correct.” Beginning with an examination of the art for art’s sake view, Plekhanov cites Russian writer Alexander Pushkin and the French Romanticists of the nineteenth-century as prime examples of this approach to art. Noting Pushkin’s conception of the role of the poet as put forward in his poem “The Rabble” as being that of singing a “sweet song” and citing the Romanticist poet Théophile Gautier’s assertion of the “absolute autonomy of art” and his descriptions of those who support utilitarian art

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as “goitrous cretins,” Plekhanov proceeds to examine the social conditions that gave rise to such views. In Pushkin’s case, Plekhanov observes that the writer at one time did support utilitarian art, that prior to the 1825 Decembrist Revolt in Russia he wrote numerous poems with explicit function of social criticism and cites his poem “Freedom,” with its lament that “men suffer under whips and chains…and haughty peers abuse their power” as an example. Plekhanov argues that Pushkin discarded a utilitarian approach to art only after the suppression of the Decembrists and the repression that followed under the reign of Nicholas I. Positing that Pushkin was greatly alienated by the “tedium and shallowness” that had come to blanket Russia, Plekhanov argues that this illustrates the fact that “the belief in art for art’s sake arises whenever the artist is out of harmony with his social environment.”

Turning to the French Romanticists, Plekhanov notes a similar disharmony in their environment, quoting Gautier’s description of the disdain the Romanticists held for “nearly everybody…who earned their living by prosaic conditions.” Plekhanov argues that Romanticism arose due to the fact that it was “difficult for the French youth to accustom themselves to the sordid, prosaic and tedious life of the bourgeoisie” after the massive ferment of the Revolution and Napoleonic era, “which had deeply stirred all human passions.” For both Pushkin and the Romanticists, then, Plekhanov employs the basic Marxist assumption that “life determines consciousness” and connects the “disharmony” they had with their social environment, their despair over their situation or their disdain for their peers, to an approach to art that rejected utilitarian considerations and saw art as existing only for art’s sake. This

179 Plekhanov, *Unaddressed Letters & Art and Social Life*, 156 and 157, respectively.
180 Ibid., 153.
181 Ibid., 154-6.
approach, Plekhanov argues, “was for them a refuge from [the] sordidness, tedium and vulgarity” they saw in surrounding them in society.  

Plekhanov’s argument that an artist’s social “disharmony” leads to a rejection of utilitarian art would seem to be at odds with his previous claims that a similar attitude in the Russian raznochintsy and the French revolutionaries had led these groups to embrace functional art. Plekhanov explains, however, that the disharmony these artists experienced in regards to the established social order was offset by their harmony with the new order that was beginning to emerge. Once more enlisting the example of the French painter Jacques-Louis David who devoted his art to serving the revolutionary cause at the end of the eighteenth century, Plekhanov writes that “David…[was] well aware that behind [him] marched the serried columns of the third estate, which was soon…to become everything…consequently, [David’s] feeling of disharmony with the prevailing order was supplemented by a feeling of sympathy with the new society…[that] was preparing to replace it.” Thus reiterating his previous analyses on the relationship between emergent social classes, class conflict, and functional art, Plekhanov argues that David’s utilitarian approach to art was the result of his disharmony with the dominant socio-political order and his harmony with the revolutionary French bourgeoisie.

According to Plekhanov, David embraced a utilitarian approach to art in order to aid a social movement in France that shared his feelings of opposition to the established order and, most importantly, promised a resolution to these sentiments in the overthrow and reorganization of French society. Plekhanov then contrasts David’s harmony with the revolutionary movement with Pushkin’s despair following the crushing of the Decembrist Revolt which dashed his hopes for social change in Russia at the time. What could be

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described as the “hopeful disharmony” of David is also contrasted by Plekhanov with the French Romanticists, who, he argues, experienced only a superficial and snobbish disharmony with their social environment. The Romanticists, Plekhanov writes, were bourgeois themselves and had “no objection to the bourgeois social relationships; all they wanted was that the bourgeois system should cease producing vulgar social habits.” The only way, Plekhanov asserts, that the Romanticists’ demands could be fulfilled was with a revolutionary creation of new socio-economic relationships and thus new habits; but, being bourgeois, the Romanticists would have rejected this solution. Therefore, their disharmony is just as insoluble as Pushkin’s, leading Plekhanov to “amplify,” as he describes it, his former conclusion regarding the origins of the belief in art for art’s sake, a belief that “arises when artists and people keenly interested in art are hopelessly out of harmony with their social environment.”

It is not without some sympathy that Plekhanov considers the advocates of art for art’s sake, whose inability or unwillingness to find a means or a hope of changing their environment has led them to escape into art devoid of social function. This sympathy perceptibly erodes, however, when Plekhanov proceeds to trace the results of art that is made for its own sake from the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. As will be seen, Plekhanov’s increasingly hostile attitude towards art for art’s sake is due to the fact that while he used the basic Marxist idea that “life determines consciousness” to explain its origins, he employs the Marxist concept of ideology to judge its results. As Plekhanov had previously asserted, the French Romanticists were members of the bourgeois class and, despite their disdain for the “vulgarity” of bourgeois society, had no desire for fundamental social change. Thus pointing towards the idea that the Romanticists were

invested in bourgeois ideology, Plekhanov pursues this idea when he discusses their notable hostility to the nascent socialist movement of the time. Citing the Romanticist Gautier’s attacks on the emerging socialists, Plekhanov writes that despite his conscious contempt for bourgeois society, Gautier was operating with a fundamentally bourgeois view of the world and its growing hostility to the proletariat. This “narrowed outlook,” Plekhanov writes “prevented [Gautier and the Romanticists] from absorbing the progressive ideas at the time.” This opposition to bourgeois vulgarity alongside an essentially bourgeois hostility to social reform thus rendered the Romanticists’ “revolt…absolutely fruitless.”

Though concluding that the bourgeois Romanticists’ revolt against the aspects of society they detested was of no practical importance since they, as bourgeoisie themselves, rejected progressive ideas and movements; Plekhanov proceeds to argue that it did have particular artistic consequences. Their fruitless revolt, Plekhanov writes, “imparted to the Romantic heroes that stilted and affected character which in the end led to the collapse of the school. Stilted and affected heroes cannot be considered a merit in artistic works.”185 Though Plekhanov does not elaborate on this process, it is interesting to note his emphasis on the “heroes” of Romantic literature as particularly affected by the farcical revolt of their creators. It is tempting to surmise that Plekhanov was insinuating that the lack of heroism in the real world, their failure to impart real meaning and action into their “revolt,” rendered them incapable of crafting convincing heroes in art. What is clear, however, is that Plekhanov has not only identified bourgeois ideology as the source of bad art, but also as the source of the Romanticists’ adherence to the belief in art’s for art sake. By adopting an oppositional, “disharmonious” attitude toward their social

environment, the Romanticists placed themselves at a crossroads regarding art: they could remain in disharmony with their society and employ their art as an idealist escape; or they could “harmonize” with the burgeoning socialist movement which promised a revolutionary solution to their problems with society and then approach their art as forming an ancillary support to this solution. The Romanticists’ rejection of the latter path, however, would seem to Plekhanov to have been all but predetermined, since, despite their critiques of the bourgeoisie, they were themselves bourgeois and therefore ultimately beholden to an ideology dedicated to maintaining the status quo. Thus arguing that bourgeois ideology ensured the “hopeless disharmony” of the Romanticists and their belief in art’s for art sake, Plekhanov also argues that the “fruitless revolt” stemming from this ideologically supported disharmony afflicted the Romanticists’ art with “stilted and affected” heroes and led to the school’s collapse. The apparent sympathy with which Plekhanov first described the proponents of art for art’s sake has already started to give way to harsh criticisms of art that holds itself aloof from social life and of the bourgeois ideology which supports it.

Plekhanov’s hostility to the belief in art for art’s sake and its underpinning bourgeois ideology only becomes more apparent as he turns to the French Romanticists’ successors, the Realists. Focusing on the Realist author Gustave Flaubert, Plekhanov describes how he, similar to the Romanticists, criticized the crudeness of the bourgeoisie and referred to them as “vulgarians.” Plekhanov therefore sees Flaubert as occupying a “disharmonious” relationship with his social environment and notes that he maintained a commitment to art for art’s sake with his insistence that Realist art should be an objective representation of reality and not concern itself with “pass[ing] moral judgment” on what
it depicts. As he had previously with the Romanticists, Plekhanov argues that even though Flaubert disdained the bourgeoisie, he was himself bourgeois and held typically bourgeois views of the progressive movements that held the solution to his alienated relationship with society. Quoting Flaubert’s description of a socialist society as “a great monster which would swallow up all individual action, all personality, [and] all thought,” Plekhanov concludes that this “hater of the bourgeoisie was fully at one with the most narrow-minded ideologists of the bourgeoisie. And this same trait is to be observed in all his contemporaries who professed art for art’s sake.” Perhaps overreaching in his claim that all French Realists shared Flaubert’s bourgeois ideology, Plekhanov nonetheless sees it as the source of the flaws in Realist art. “Turning their backs in hostility on the great liberation movement of their time,” Plekhanov writes, the Realist artists “excluded the most interesting ‘specimens’ [from their art]…those which possessed the richest internal life.” Plekhanov contends that by excluding the most engaging section of modern society from their works due to their bourgeois ideology, the Realists were left with nothing to objectively depict but the “petty thoughts” and the “petty passions” of “commonplace middle class existence,” inevitably resulting in a petty art. Plekhanov therefore considers the Realists’ art to be marred by bourgeois ideology even as these artists disdained the bourgeoisie. Driven by this disdain to an oppositional attitude to society but also compelled by their own bourgeois mindset to reject the possibility of aligning themselves with the emergent proletariat, Plekhanov sees the Realist artists as having trapped themselves into the depiction of the very “pettiness” and “vulgarity” they scorned and the creation of flawed art. Plekhanov’s analysis of the French Realists thus echoes

186 Plekhanov, Unaddressed Letters & Art and Social Life, 178-82. Plekhanov does not cite the sources of Flaubert’s quotes.
the criticism he made of the Russian Narodnik authors twenty years previously. Just as he had argued that the Narodniks’ ideological view of the world led them to focus on the artistically unrewarding peasantry, Plekhanov now argues that the bourgeois ideology of the Realists led them to exclude the most artistically rewarding subjects in their society: the rising proletariat.

Plekhanov asserts that it was from the suffocating milieu of the Realists that the school of Naturalism emerged and, quoting the former Naturalist author Jorik-Karl Huysmans, “soon landed in a blind alley, in a blocked tunnel.” Plekhanov relates how the Naturalists continued the Realists’ attempts to objectively depict reality, minus the proletariat, but with the added component of attempting to understand and portray their characters through “physiology or pathology.” Plekhanov, however, views this attempt to impart a more profound content into their works as abortive, because the Naturalists’ ideologically rejected the Marxist “science,” which explains that individuals can only be understood and analyzed by understanding that they are “determined by social relationships.” With their bourgeois ideology ensuring their ignorance of how to truly understand the subjects they depict and keeping the “modern working class” beyond their scope, Plekhanov argues that the Naturalists had nothing left “but to relate once more the love affair of the first chance wine-merchant with the first chance grocery woman.” This unceasing depiction of such flat and uninteresting subjects, Plekhanov concludes, resulted in Naturalism’s becoming “uninteresting, boring, [and] even revolting.” Plekhanov writes that this result is the “blind alley” referred to by the Huysmans, that Naturalist artists were trapped by their own bourgeois ideology and art for art’s sake beliefs into objectively depicting a society shorn of its most interesting aspects and prevented from
achieving any deeper understanding of what they depict.\textsuperscript{187} As can be seen, however, from his analysis of Naturalism and his examinations of French Romanticism and Realism, Plekhanov considers all of the art produced by bourgeois adherents of art for art’s sake as mired in a “blind alley.” The sympathy he showed for the disharmony that drove them to reject utilitarian art quickly recedes as he discusses their persistent hostility to the rising proletariat and the socialist movement that would have provided them with the means to act upon their criticisms of modern bourgeois society. By repeatedly refusing to “harmonize” with the socialists, Plekhanov sees the artists discussed above as revealing their fundamentally bourgeois outlook on life. This bourgeois ideology had diverted their attention away from what the Marxist view of society had deemed the most artistically rich material of modern society, the proletariat, in addition to the means of “scientifically” understanding the uninspiring material they \textit{did} depict. This permeation of bourgeois ideology into their works of art led Plekhanov to conclude that these works were not only artistically flawed, but by essentially disseminating the bourgeois outlook in their works, these “believers in the theory of art for art’s sake [became] conscious defenders of a social order based on the exploitation of one class by another.”\textsuperscript{188}

Ultimately then, Plekhanov considers the efforts of the three major French trends of art for art’s sake in the nineteenth century as complete failures due to contemporary bourgeois ideology; with their works suffering artistically from this ideology, but also in that its very presence in these works undermined their attempts at artistic neutrality – at art for art’s sake – as they broadcast an essentially bourgeois view of life to their audience.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid., 186.
Though focusing primarily on the impact that ideology has upon art, Plekhanov’s analyses of the major currents of nineteenth-century French art continued to be informed by his unwavering conviction that the class struggle as laid out in Marxist theory exerted a decisive influence on artistic development. Arguing that the art of the Romanticists, Realists, and Naturalists was underwritten and marred by the anti-proletarian character of bourgeois ideology, Plekhanov is clearly working under the assumption that this ideology was colored by the burgeoning conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Furthermore, his concluding remarks that these artists had become defenders of the bourgeoisie because of the ideological content of their works would seem to suggest that he saw this same conflict as rendering impossible the neutrality of art. Turning to an examination of early twentieth-century art, Plekhanov places the class struggle at the core of the development of contemporary art, arguing that it has led to the emergence of a utilitarian approach to art by the bourgeoisie. Although nineteenth century artists such as Gautier and Flaubert held conservative prejudices, Plekhanov explains, since their time “these prejudices, owing to the greater acuteness of the social contradictions [i.e. a heightened class struggle], have become so strongly developed in artists who hold to the bourgeois standpoint that it is now incomparably more difficult for them to adhere to the theory of art for art’s sake.” Though he does not state this explicitly, Plekhanov seems to believe that the disharmony artists once experienced with bourgeois society that led to their belief in art for art’s sake has been overshadowed by the rising proletarian threat to this society. This threat has strengthened and pushed to the fore these artists’ fundamental attachment to bourgeois society, bringing about their “harmonization” with it and thus a turn to utilitarian art dedicated to serving the bourgeois reaction. As
Plekhanov bluntly states, “bourgeois art is becoming belligerent.”\footnote{Plekhanov, \textit{Unaddressed Letters \& Art and Social Life}, 195-7.} Once again employing Marxism’s concepts of social development to explain the inevitable emergence of utilitarian art during times of class struggle, though this time amongst the bourgeoisie; Plekhanov also repeats his use of this vision to condemn this art as reflecting an ideological and therefore false view of society.

Plekhanov’s use of the “correct” Marxist view of society to judge art can clearly be seen when he proceeds to examine the recent utilitarian art of the bourgeoisie, first by revisiting Knut Hamsun’s \textit{At The Gates of the Realm}. Plekhanov repeats his earlier criticism of Hamsun’s sympathetic depiction of the travails of the proletariat hating Ivar Karen, and but now elaborates that “Hamsun based his play on an idea which is in irreconcilable contradiction to reality. And this has vitiated the play to such an extent that it evokes laughter precisely in those places where the author intended the action to be tragic.”\footnote{Ibid., 189-191.} A similar judgment is leveled at the play \textit{Le Repas du lion} by Francois de Curel, in which Plekhanov finds a wholly distorted view on labor-management relations. Plekhanov cites a section from Curel’s play in which the main character, Jean de Sancy, is haranguing a group of workers on strike by comparing them to jackals and the bourgeois owners to a lion. Plekhanov quotes Sancy’s monologue in which he describes that “a horde of jackals follows the lion in the desert to enjoy the remains of his prey. Too weak to attack a buffalo, too slow to run down a gazelle, all their hope is fastened on…the king of the desert….When the lion is satiated, it is the turn of the jackals to dine…When the lion roars, the jackals lick their chops in expectation.” Particularly piqued by this depiction of workers as scavengers dependent upon the stronger, faster,
and generally superior bourgeoisie, Plekhanov argues that “there is not an atom of truth in this idea…it misrepresents the character of social relations of contemporary society.” While he admits that jackals do nothing to secure the lion’s food which they then enjoy, Plekhanov demands to know “who will venture to say that the workers employed in any given factory contribute nothing to the creation of its product? It is by their labor, obviously that it is created…and if anybody resembles a jackal who feeds on what is obtained by the efforts of others, it is the bourgeoisie.”

Thus, in his critiques of both Hamsun’s and Curel’s dramas, Plekhanov tacitly employs the “scientific” worldview of Marxism to denounce these works as portraying a false image of society. Citing the “artificiality” of Hamsun’s treatment of Kareno and the “twisted psychology” of Curel’s Sancy, Plekhanov argues that these “grave defects…are a natural consequence of the utter unsoundness of [the plays’] basic idea,” i.e. the bourgeois outlook on the world.

While he had previously seen the influence of bourgeois ideology as narrowing and impairing the art of the nineteenth century, Plekhanov sees art such as Hamsun’s and Curel’s that directly base themselves on this ideology as irreparably flawed, writing that if “a false idea is made the basis of an artistic work…it inevitably detracts from its aesthetic merit.” Expounding upon this point, Plekhanov cites the British critic John Ruskin’s belief that artistic merit is tied to the loftiness and authenticity of the sentiments it expresses, that “a maiden may sing of her lost love, but a miser cannot sing of his lost money.” Plekhanov argues that art depicting the worldview of the bourgeoisie has come to express the same sentiments as those of a miser mourning his treasure, eliciting no sympathy or interest, only derision and contempt. Plekhanov explains this as reflecting

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192 Ibid., 199.
the fact that “as a class ripens for doom, the art engendered by its emotional experience falls into decay,” thus employing Marxism’s view of development to explain and justify his unequivocal denigration of utilitarian bourgeois art.

Expounding upon his conviction that adherence to art for art’s sake has become a near impossible task due to the modern class struggle, Plekhanov writes that an artist “with a thinking mind and a responsive ear cannot remain an indifferent observer of the civil war going on in modern society. If his field of vision is narrowed by bourgeois prejudices, he will be on one side of the ‘barricade’; if he is not infected with these prejudices, he will be on the other.” While reiterating his earlier explanation of the rise of utilitarian art among the bourgeoisie, this passage is also notable for revealing that Plekhanov assumes that those “not infected with bourgeois prejudices,” the proletariat and its supporters, are also behind a “barricade” and will therefore pursue a utilitarian approach to art. While this idea will be explored shortly, the immediate interest of this passage is its conclusion, in which Plekhanov writes that

not all the children of the bourgeoisie possess thinking minds…[and] do not always have responsive hearts. For them it is easy even now to remain consistent believers in the theory of art for art’s sake. It eminently accords with indifference to social – and even narrow class – interests. And the bourgeois social system is perhaps more capable than any other of engendering such indifference. When whole generations are educated in the celebrated principle of each for himself and the devil take the hindmost, the appearance of egoists who think only of themselves and are interested only in themselves, is very natural.

Here Plekhanov asserts that, despite the “civil war” in society that compels most artists to orient their art towards aiding one side or another, there are still some artists that pursue

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193 Plekhanov, Unaddressed Letters & Art and Social Life, 188.
194 Ibid., 200.
195 Ibid., 200-1.
art for art’s sake. Having dropped all references to “disharmony,” as engendering a belief in art for art’s sake, Plekhanov sees bourgeois artists, concerned only with themselves and wholly egocentric, as the remaining practitioners of non-utilitarian art. Though he notes that this egoism renders people indifferent to all social interests, even the class interests of the bourgeoisie, Plekhanov employs the Marxist tenet that “life determines consciousness” to argue the egoism itself is as a product of bourgeois society and ideology in which people are conditioned to be self-centered and self-serving. Thus arguing that the belief and practice of art for art’s sake is only possible by the most extreme bourgeois egoists, Plekhanov identifies this egoism as the driving force of the emerging modernist trends in art such as Symbolist poetry and abstract painting, and as the source of their defective content or their complete lack of content.

Though Plekhanov does not explicitly call attention to it, he essentially treats the egoism he considers to be driving many of the modern adherents of art for art’s sake as an ideology, in that he sees their egoism as erecting a particular view of reality – “the only reality, [their] ego”196 - which then informs, and damages, their art. Such an approach is illustrated his treatment of the Russian Symbolist poet Zinaida Hippius, whose work Plekhanov views as a prime example of the egoism driving modern art for art’s sake. Plekhanov begins by quoting from the preface she wrote to her own Collected Verse: that in the world today “every ego has now become separate…isolated from every other ego, and therefore incomprehensible and unnecessary to it.” Plekhanov, describing Hippius’ statement as revealing a severe individualism, essentially takes this as her ideological worldview, a view in which Hippius and those around her are separate, isolated, and unconnected egos. As he had with other ideological worldviews, Plekhanov

argues that this egoist worldview has determined both the function Hippius sees for her art and the art itself. Deploying more quotes from Hippius’ preface, Plekhanov describes her rejection of the “possibility of communication through poetry,” and links this with her claim that she composes poetry “in a whisper, to [herself], in hints that are clear only to [herself]” and not for other people. Drawing a clear line between her “egoistic ideology” and her stated belief that poetry is a near cloistered affair, Plekhanov argues that such a view is the natural result when “individualism is carried to such an extreme.” Plekhanov contrasts Hippius’ belief that poetry cannot be a means of communication with a “correct” view of poetry’s function, writing that “poetry is one of the media through which people communicate with each other.” Though this definition is presumably not from Marxism, Plekhanov employs this “correct” view of art as he typically does with Marxist ideas – contrasting the “correct” with the ideological. Plekhanov proceeds to argue that the function which Hippius’ ego compelled her to assign to art also influenced her art itself and irreparably damaged it. Quoting lines from her poetry, such as one in which she promises to “love myself as my god,” and another which includes the lines “Give me that which in this world is not,” Plekhanov argues that Hippius’ poetry was completely infused with her ego and revealed “no interest in what is going on in society around [her],” and concludes that a poet of such egoism and indifference has indeed “lost all capacity of communication with other people.” Plekhanov thus sees Hippius’ “egoistic ideology” as trapping her in a worldview in which all people are, like her, isolated and indifferent to one another. As with other ideological worldviews, Hippius’ own severely impacted her art which she treated as a whispered monologue concerning only herself. Lastly, Plekhanov again wields “correct” knowledge, this time about
poetry, to argue that Hippius’ writings of “decadent mysticism” fail to achieve the communicative purpose of poetry. While John Ruskin says that a miser cannot sing of his lost money, Plekhanov essentially argues that an egoist can only sing to himself.

Though Plekhanov’s critiques of Hippius’ poetry focused on the content produced by modern and egoistic art for art’s sake, his criticisms of the emerging trends of abstract painting centers on the forms of these works, which, he argues, reflect a lack of content engendered by the same egoism. Plekhanov sees the desiccation of content in modern painting and its concomitant innovative formalism beginning with the Impressionists and what he considers to be their “complete indifference to the idea content of their works.” Noting that in their works the Impressionists focused on the “sensation of light” and considered that “the chief dramatis persona in a picture is light,” Plekhanov treats these artists as suffering from a kind of “egoistic ideology,” similar to that of Hippius. The Impressionists’ narrow focus on the “sensation of light,” Plekhanov argues, revealed their wider indifference to life, writing that “an artist who confines his attention to a mere sensation is indifferent to emotion and thought.” As elsewhere, Plekhanov argues that this constricted world outlook negatively impacted their art. Specifically, Plekhanov sees the Impressionists’ indifference to “emotion and thought,” to real human content, as preventing them from moving beyond the creation of “pretty landscapes” to the creation of great works of art. Citing Leonardo da Vinci’s painting The Last Supper, Plekhanov argues that what made this painting great, namely its human emotional content, would have been lost if an Impressionist had painted it. While da Vinci strove to portray the emotions and state of mind of Jesus and his disciples at this fateful dinner, Plekhanov writes, an Impressionist’s interests “would have been centered not on what was going on

in the hearts of Jesus and his disciples, but on what was happening on the wall of the chamber.” Focusing on painting “patches of light,” an Impressionist, Plekhanov asserts, would have neglected the “terrific spiritual drama” of the event, and the “specific importance of the fresco would have been infinitely less.” Concluding that the Impressionists’ works were “quite superficial” and that they “did not go deeper than the ‘husk of appearances,’” Plekhanov clearly sees their indifference to social life, their burgeoning egoism, as having negatively impacted their art. He argues that by ignoring people and emotions and focusing only on optical effects and formal techniques, Impressionists deprived their work of meaningful content while replacing it with a superficial attention to form. Writing that many modern painters have continued the Impressionists’ “concentration of interest on the ‘outer husk of appearances,’” Plekhanov argues that this persistent indifference to real content in their painting has forced them to “devise ever more astonishing and ever more artificial light effects,” resulting in “paradoxical canvases” and a “crisis of ugliness in art.” Plekhanov thus firmly maintains that a focus on formal innovation in modern painting results in flawed art and arises from a lack of content.

Plekhanov’s argument that the “egoistic ideology” of the bourgeois practitioners of modern art for art’s sake in painting has robbed their art of all content and resulted in abstracted forms continues as he cites the schools of Symbolism and Cubism as evidence of this trend. Describing Cubism as “nonsense cubed,” Plekhanov argues that this school’s “ostensibly artistic exercises” and unique forms are the result of artists’ egoistic belief that they “they are entitled to portray [objects] and assign meaning at their own will and pleasure.” Interestingly, Plekhanov notes that Cubists and Symbolists are both

schools that have recognized “the mistake of the Impressionists” and attempted to move beyond a sole focus on superficial phenomena and seek ideas and content for their work. Plekhanov, however, sees these attempts as futile and only resulting in a continued lack of real content in their art due to their egoism and indifference to social life. “A man’s stock of ideas is determined and enriched by his relations with [the] world,” Plekhanov writes, “and he whose relations with [the] world are such that he considers his ego the ‘only reality’ inevitably becomes an out-and-out pauper in the matter of ideas.” Plekhanov considers that modern believers in art for art’s sake, like other artists he viewed as blinded by ideology, to have been likewise afflicted by the very egoism that allows them turn their backs on the class struggle and create non-utilitarian art. With no other source for ideas, Plekhanov argues, modern artists have had to turn inward, into their own fallow minds in search of inspiration and content for their art, but have only succeeded in creating incomprehensible imagery that “does not evoke anything resembling aesthetic pleasure.”\(^{199}\) Thus, from his original argument that it was an overwhelming egoism that allowed bourgeois artists to continue creating non-utilitarian art, Plekhanov proceeded to connect this egoism with the development of formal innovation in painting which he sees as reflecting a lack of content. With the Impressionists and their followers, Plekhanov saw their complete indifference to real, human content as producing superficial art that increasingly devolved into “ugliness” and was incapable of greatness. Plekhanov sees modern painters, such as the Cubists, who tried to go beyond superficiality as handicapped by their lack of real ideas and emboldened by their egoism to distort any object based on their whims, producing

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paintings that complement Zinaida Hippius’ poetry – art that has nothing to say to a world it cares nothing for.

“It appears, then,” Plekhanov concludes, “that in present-day social conditions the fruits of art for art’s sake are far from delectable.”

What is also apparent is that Plekhanov, adhering to the Marxist ideas of his “developed orthodoxy,” criticized and dismissed every trend, school and artist that he has examined. While sympathetic to the efforts of the nineteenth-century artists – the Romanticists, the Realists, and the Naturalists – who attempted to practice art for art’s sake, Plekhanov based his critical appraisals of their results on his conviction that these works were marred by the bourgeois ideology that underwrote them. Though refusing to consciously orient their art towards supporting bourgeois society, the persistent refusal of these artists to depict the progressive and artistically rewarding proletariat led Plekhanov to argue that this both weakened their art and revealed their fundamental allegiance to the capitalist social order, essentially making them bourgeois apologists. Turning to the twentieth century, Plekhanov argued that the sharpening class struggle had driven nearly all bourgeois artists to create utilitarian art that was wholly inartistic and unsympathetic as it unabashedly promoted the worldview of their decaying class. Plekhanov also argues that the creation of non-utilitarian art in contemporary times was only possible for the most egocentric bourgeois artists, who, he argued, turned out paintings whose attention to form masked a lack of content and poetry whose self-indulgent nature rendered it incomprehensible to other people. While the majority of *Art and Social Life* is devoted to clear proscriptions of the form and content of bourgeois art, it ends with an equally clear prescription. Plekhanov concludes his final work on art and aesthetics by writing that

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it can be said with certainty that every more or less gifted artist will increase his power substantially if he absorbs the great emancipatory ideas of our time. Only these ideas must become part of his flesh and blood, and he must express them precisely as an artist. He must be able, moreover, to form a correct opinion of the artistic modernism of the present day ideologists of the bourgeoisie.

Plekhanov thus ends his last writing on art as he ended his first: with a clear prescription that artists embrace “the great emancipatory idea” of Marxism. As he had with the raznochintsy over twenty years previously, Plekhanov argues that artists who to wish escape the ideological morass that prevents them from producing great art should imbibe Marxist ideas and “express them precisely as an artist,” harkening back to his claim that depicting the revolutionary proletariat was the highest pinnacle of art. Of particular interest here, however, is Plekhanov’s explicit demand that Marxist artists form a “correct opinion” of modern art which undoubtedly matches his own, thus prohibiting them from employing the forms of Impressionism, Cubism, and any other art that is a product of “present day ideologists of the bourgeoisie.” Lastly, Plekhanov’s repeated assertions throughout his writings that utilitarian art is an inevitable product of the class struggle and his clear statements in this work that in contemporary times only the most egotistical bourgeois would not produce utilitarian art, make it clear that he assumes this Marxist art will have a functional orientation, “to assist the development of man’s consciousness, to improve the social system,” as he himself defined it at the opening of Art and Social Life.

Conclusion

Thus, far from being the proponent of a purely descriptive approach to art that that he is consistently portrayed as, Plekhanov in fact approached art as a stalwart of artistic prescription. From the beginning of his career to its end, Plekhanov repeatedly defined what art should and should not be and did so by relying upon the critical framework sketched out in Marxist theory and employing it in the ideas of his “developed orthodoxy.” While the writings of Marx and Engels largely approached art in a seemingly purely descriptive and sociological manner, within this approach and the in wider theory of Marxism itself there lay the elements necessary for constructing a far more strict and exacting framework for viewing art. By positing that art reflects consciousness, Marxist aesthetics also posited that art can and does reflect an ideological false consciousness, an incorrect view of the world based on ignorance and class interests. Alongside this, Marxist theory claimed to present a scientifically accurate image of society and social development containing the idea of an ongoing class struggle between emergent classes fighting towards the next stage in civilization against the reactionary class currently in power. Orthodox Marxist aesthetics thus established a framework for leveling strict judgments against art: art that does not reflect reality as defined and valued by Marxism is the product of an obfuscated view of the world often resulting from ideology of a particular social class. It was this Marxist framework that Plekhanov drew upon in the creation of his “developed orthodoxy” and applied in his writings on art. Adhering to Marxism’s concepts of ideology and its image of society and
social society development, Plekhanov criticized numerous works of art as being marred by ideological content and for failing to properly reflect and depict the aspects of society Marxism deemed most important. Such was the case with his criticisms of Narodnik fiction, and nearly a century of bourgeois art, from Romanticism to Cubism. In each of these schools and trends, Plekhanov saw their content as imprinted with and afflicted by their creators’ ideology. With Narodnik fiction, Plekhanov argued that Narodism’s false view that the peasantry and not the proletariat was the vehicle of progress was the source of the artistic defects in these works, as it had led authors to solely depict the artistically unrewarding peasantry. In the arts of France during the nineteenth century, Romanticism, realism, and Naturalism, Plekhanov similarly argued that these schools were weakened by the bourgeois ideology that underwrote each of them and prevented a depiction of what Plekhanov and Marxism deemed the most important and rewarding stratum of French society – the proletariat. Plekhanov’s view that contemporary bourgeois ideology was artistically debilitating continued in his examination of works that consciously preached it, such as Knut Hamsun and Francois du Curel, which deviated so far from the “truth” as taught by Marxism that he considered them to be wholly inartistic. Plekhanov’s final use of the concept of ideology to criticize art is also his most unique, as he argued that not only the content, specifically the lack thereof, but also the innovative forms of modern art such as Cubism were a reflection of an extreme egoism that had developed among the bourgeoisie and had resulted in works that he barely deigned to refer to as art.

While Marxism’s conception of society and development was used by Plekhanov alongside the concept of ideology in his criticisms of art as a means of comparing what
was in art to what should be in art, he also, and quite originally, used it to justify and support utilitarian art. Relying upon the course of history sketched out by Marxism, that fundamental changes in the material base of society engendered new classes which entered into conflict with the dominant classes of society; Plekhanov argues that this conflict inevitably produced a utilitarian approach to art. This is most clearly illustrated by his examination of the art of eighteenth-century France in which Plekhanov argued that in their struggles against the aristocracy the rising bourgeoisie consistently created whole genres of drama and painting that were consciously oriented towards serving the social functions of condemning their enemies and inspiring their partisans. Not only considering the development of a utilitarian approach to art as inevitable during times of class conflict, Plekhanov also revealed his support for this approach numerous times. In his analysis of the Russian raznochintsy, Plekhanov believed that the presence of social interests in and didactic function of their art was of such a benefit that he consciously strove to preserve them. Most prominently, Plekhanov argued that in contemporary times only the most egotistical bourgeois could not create utilitarian art dedicated to a social cause, tacitly indicating that he expected Marxist art to be wholly utilitarian in character.

Finally, the numerous prescriptions concerning what art should be that are contained in Plekhanov’s criticisms are capped by his explicit prescriptions that artists should adopt Marxist ideas and reflect these in their art. In his directions to the raznochintsy, Plekhanov clearly prescribed that in adopting Marxism their art should henceforth depict the proletariat as it developed a revolutionary consciousness and answered the very question they were asking – “what is to be done?” In regards to modern artists, Plekhanov’s similar demand, that artists depict the ideas of Marxism – the
idea of the revolutionary proletariat – was accompanied by the injunction that they also
abandon the formalist innovations he saw as associated with the bourgeoisie and the
understanding that this art would be of a utilitarian nature.

Plekhanov’s ideas concerning art thus remarkably anticipated the tenets of
Socialist Realism as laid out in 1934. As with the doctrine of Socialist Realism,
Plekhanov claimed to have a “correct” understanding of society, of its development, and
its constituent elements, both progressive and reactionary. For both Plekhanov and
Socialist Realism, this understanding lay at the basis of their similar proscriptions and
prescriptions concerning art. Considering contemporary bourgeois art to the product of
decadence, both Plekhanov and Socialist Realism proscribed this art’s mystical and
bourgeois content along with its abstract forms. Concomitant with these proscriptions
was Plekhanov and Socialist Realism’s prescriptions that art should be realistic in form
and depict a particular worldview centered on the proletariat. Furthermore, both
Plekhanov and Socialist Realism championed utilitarian art that would serve an extra-
aesthetic purpose, with Plekhanov’s support for didactic and inspirational art that would
“support the development of man’s consciousness” mirroring Socialist Realism’s
edifying and transformative purpose.

It is, however, more than just parallels and similarities that link Plekhanov and
Socialist Realism. While previous scholars have identified parallels between Socialist
Realism and preceding aesthetic doctrines, such as the nineteenth-century Russian
radicals, they have failed to convincingly argue that these anterior theories exerted any
influence on Soviet thought before or during Socialist Realism’s promulgation. With
Plekhanov’s ideas one not only finds striking similarities to Socialist Realism but also
ideas that were being put forth well into the twentieth century and widely acknowledged to have greatly influenced Soviet aesthetic theories up to the early 1930s. Combined with the incorporation of many of these same theories into Socialist Realism that has been increasingly noted by recent scholarship, the idea that Plekhanov’s “developed orthodoxy” informed the doctrine of Socialist Realism appears as an intriguing possibility.

Ultimately, the vast distance that previous scholars have seen separating the “kingdoms” of Marxist aesthetics and Socialist Realism is bridged by the ideas and writings of Georgi Plekhanov. By illustrating how Plekhanov developed the supposedly descriptive ideas of Marxist aesthetics into a stringent and prescriptive approach to art that anticipated Socialist Realism, I hope not to have simply shown that Plekhanov was a “bridge between kingdoms,” but to also have provided future scholars with a new avenue for investigating the origins of Socialist Realism.
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