

FASTER, HIGHER, STRONGER, COMRADES!



SPORTS, ART, & IDEOLOGY
IN LATE RUSSIAN AND
EARLY SOVIET CULTURE

TIM
HARTE

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*Sports, Art, and Ideology
in Late Russian and Early Soviet Culture*

Tim Harte

T H E U N I V E R S I T Y O F W I S C O N S I N P R E S S

The University of Wisconsin Press
728 State Street, Suite 443
Madison, Wisconsin 53706
uwpress.wisc.edu

Gray's Inn House, 127 Clerkenwell Road
London EC1R 5DB, United Kingdom
eurospanbookstore.com

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Printed in the United States of America

This book may be available in a digital edition.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Harte, Tim, author.

Title: Faster, stronger, higher, comrades!: sports, art, and ideology in late Russian and early Soviet culture / Tim Harte.

Description: Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, [2020]

| Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019044435 | ISBN 9780299327705 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Sports—Social aspects—Russia—History.

| Sports—Social aspects—Soviet Union—History.

| Arts, Russian—Themes, motives. | Sports in art.

| Sports in literature.

Classification: LCC GV623 .H37 2020 | DDC 796.0947—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019044435>

For

Jenna, Isaac, and Hazel

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Acknowledgments

This book has been a long time in the making. Its origins hearken back not only to when I was starting out in graduate school and happened upon Osip Mandel'shtam's sports poems but also to my youth, when I played and followed sports in the way many American kids do. That I grew up an avid athlete—and sports fan—does not bestow on me the unique right to expound on sports and Russian artistic culture, the subject of this book, but it does give me a special appreciation for the competitive thrills, unadulterated joy, and undeniable value of athletic activity. Throughout *Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades!* I have tried to take sports at face value and not follow the example of scholars, artists, and others who have construed sports as veiled metaphors for labor, war, or sex. Even through the prism of art, sports deserve to be explored for what they are: a modern pastime and popular form of entertainment that may divert us from more serious matters but nevertheless offer the chance to dream of glory and revel in physical excellence.

Initial research for this book was conducted while I was in Russia in 2005–6 on a Title VIII Research Scholar Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research Fellowship, both of which were administered through the American Council of Teachers of Russian (ACTR). During this and subsequent trips to Russia, I gained access to crucial unpublished materials and rare film in the following archives and libraries: the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI); the Manuscript Division at the State Russian Museum (GRM); the National Library of Russia; the Lesgaft National State University of Physical Education, Sport, and Health; and the

Russian State Documentary Film and Photo Documents. Bryn Mawr College, where I teach, has made so much of this research—and writing—possible.

Many have helped me along the way. While writing this book, I had the good fortune to be able to draw upon the unparalleled insight and editing prowess of the now, alas, late Elizabeth Allen and her husband, James Sloan Allen, who took over when illness intervened and who generously maintained his wife's highest standards for scholarship and collegiality (to say nothing of her profound appreciation for baseball). Linda Gerstein likewise stepped in to provide much-needed advice, historical expertise, and unfailing support. Equally instrumental in the creation of this book were John Malmstad and William Mills Todd III, both of whom informed the scope of my scholarship in their own respective, special ways.

For valuable feedback and assistance, I am particularly grateful to Nikos Axarlis, John Bowlt, Julia Chadaga, Tom Conley, Helena Goscilo, Aleksandr Lavrentiev, Tatiana Nikolskaia, and Barry Scherr. Aleksandr Lavrentiev kindly provided me with several images. And in Bryn Mawr's Department of Russian, Dan Davidson, Billie Jo Ember, Bella Grigoryan, George Pahomov, Marina Rojavin, Jane Shaw, and Irina Walsh provided not only invaluable advice and help but also an indispensable atmosphere of collaboration and camaraderie. Others who ably assisted were Margarita Bugreeva, Iliana Chaleva, David Karen, Elena Kolikova, Christina Lodder, Angelina Lucento, Camilla MacKay, Matthew Mangold, John Muse, Connor Odekirk, Sjeng Scheijen, Dan Torday, Michael Tratner, and Mechella Yezernitskaya. In addition, I should underscore my appreciation for the support provided by Gwen Walker, who pushed this project toward the finish line at the University of Wisconsin Press, and by others there, including Ivan Babanovski, Nathan MacBrien, Sheila McMahon, and Anna Muenchrath. In Bryn Mawr's Library and Information Technology Services, the always helpful Arlene Zimmerle and Del Ramers (a 4:06 miler in college, I discovered over the course of my research) assisted me in preparing film stills and digital images for the book, while the staff at a number of museums and institutions—including the State Russian Museum, the State Tretyakov Gallery, the A. A. Deineka Picture Gallery of Kursk, and Princeton's Marquand Library of Art and Architecture—helped me in attaining other images.

Lastly, I have a number of family members to thank for their support and athletic-aesthetic sway. The fact that my late maternal grandfather, Willis L. Jones, was the longtime football, basketball, and track and field coach at Madison West High School makes it all the more fitting that the University of Wisconsin Press is publishing this book. Meanwhile, my parents, Ken and Marilyn Harte, instilled in me a love for not only sports but also the arts. Both my father and my brother, Will Harte (who shares my passion for sports, art, and Russia),

helped me formulate the title for this book, among other things. And finally, I would like to thank my wife, Jenna Webster, and our children, Isaac and Hazel, for patiently putting up with so much sports-related activity—be it my competitive running, my rooting for this or that team, or my writing about sports—over the years, and it is to them that this book is dedicated.

Note on Transliteration and Translation

The transliterations in this book follow the Library of Congress system with the exception of Russian names within the text, which follow those transliteration practices most familiar to Western readers (e.g., Mayakovsky, Gorky, Nikolay, Valya). Spellings for all bibliographic information, however, adhere to the Library of Congress system. The translations, meanwhile, are my own unless otherwise indicated.

Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades!

Introduction

The Beauty and Idealism of Sports

In the 1919 foreword to *Retribution* (*Vozmezdīe*), an unfinished long poem begun in 1910, the Russian poet Aleksandr Blok elucidated his *poema*'s origins and the societal currents at play in this semi-autobiographical verse epic. Recalling the “manly trend” (*muzhestvennoe veian'e*) in Russia that he associated with the initial formulation of *Retribution* and with political and cultural events of the day, Blok remarked: “Inseparably connected to all of this for me was the blossoming of Greco-Roman wrestling in the circuses of St. Petersburg; crowds of thousands showed an unprecedented interest in it; among the wrestlers were true artists; I will never forget the match between a hideous Russian heavyweight and a Dutchman whose muscular system presented the most perfect musical instrument of rare beauty.”¹ Blok marveled at the “unprecedented” popularity in late Tsarist Russia of wrestling, which he in hindsight perceived as looming over—and even presaging—the war, revolution, and cultural upheaval that transpired in Russia in the 1910s. But why would a Symbolist poet such as Blok opt to highlight the impact of athletics on the creation of *Retribution*, going so far as to state in his foreword to *Retribution* that “all movement and development of the *poema* were closely linked for me to the development of the muscular system”?² Sports and art, often perceived by intellectuals as manifestly divergent endeavors, had fused for Blok in a manner that proved quite fruitful as he connected the “rare beauty” and physical harmony of the athletic human body to his own lyrical verse and creative ambitions.³

Blok, in fact, was not alone at the time in aestheticizing modern sports and tapping into a pervasive enthrallment with the physical. Across Europe and the

United States, artists witnessed a burst of athletic activity and events—most notably, the modern, international revitalization of the Olympic Games in 1896—and often chose to draw upon these in their work. Suddenly popular at the end of the nineteenth century, competitive sports such as tennis, soccer, and wrestling grabbed the attention of both the artistic elite and the urbanizing masses, as did newer sports such as cycling and auto racing, which arose in conjunction with modernization and a flurry of technological innovation that had expanded the limits of human speed and strength at the turn of the century. But sports offered artists more than just an in-vogue, up-to-date theme. Signaling a social and physical transformation of humanity, modern athletics presented poets, painters, and filmmakers with a potent source of creative stimulation.

The power, grace, and competitive fervor of athletes indeed induced a wide range of artists to tap into the aesthetic—and ideological—potential found in modern society's eager turn toward the physical. In both subtle and not-so-subtle ways, sports prompted a new unprecedented robustness and exuberance in art. As the urge to convert the energetic spirit and allure of modern sports into meaningful, socially relevant art increasingly preoccupied artists, some delighted in the physical beauty on display at sporting events, while others reveled in the raw excitement of athletic competition and the collective ideals tied to organized athletics. It is this artistic preoccupation with sports—particularly within the context of early twentieth-century Russian culture—that constitutes the subject of this book. By assuming the role of athlete, striving for the physical harmony and freedom found in athletic play, or creatively immortalizing fleeting moments of athletic action, Russian and early Soviet artists responded with active enthusiasm to the widely popular sports movement and elevated it as a prominent motif of art in the modern era. At the same time, the natural vitality, excitement, and revolutionary potential of athletics demanded—and generated—an intensity and innovative, idealistic spirit that Russian writers, painters, filmmakers, and photographers pointedly fostered in their work. Sports, it soon became clear, could not only entertain but also inspire, as a new world bolstered by athletics beckoned.

Sports Defined

Sports, first and foremost, entail play. For the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, author of the seminal *Homo Ludens* (1938), play hinges primarily on three central attributes. First, play is voluntary, a free act; second, play exists at a remove from “ordinary” life and thus proceeds from human imagination by deviating from the “real”; and third, play possesses a distinct limitedness in time and

space, given that it “contains its own course and meaning.”⁴ Modern athletics resoundingly met these criteria fundamental to Huizinga’s understanding of play, for sports constitute a voluntary athletic activity that exists in an on-field sphere removed from everyday reality, with a well-defined start and finish. Both sports and art, in fact, can be closely linked to the ludic, and as Huizinga emphasizes in his study, “culture arises in the form of play.”⁵ Hence, the human urge toward play provides a conceptual springboard for not only art and sports but also philosophy, law, and even more immediate matters such as war (“on the playing fields of Eton”), as a primal ludic impulse underscores the human desire to create and compete in a wide variety of cultural contexts. In probing play’s influence on these facets of culture, Huizinga stresses art’s inherent link to play by equating integral elements of this play to those of poetry: “The affinity between poetry and play is not external only; it is also apparent in the structure of creative imagination itself. In the turning of a poetic phrase, the development of a motif, the expression of a mood, there is always a play-element at work.”⁶ An explicit playfulness, Huizinga suggests, lies at the heart of human creativity, whereby poets and other artists have exploited artistic forms and tropes in a manner somewhat comparable to the way a tennis player might hit a backhand or a boxer might bob and weave. So it comes as no surprise that artists have often admired and even emulated athletes, sensing a shared compulsion toward play.

Sports, however, differ from art and other forms of creative play through a consistent reliance on competition and a conscious effort on the part of athletes to demonstrate physical excellence. Since antiquity, athletic play has been linked to the concepts of both *arete*, a Greek word signifying notions of moral virtue and excellence, and *agon*, a Greek word denoting competition (and at the root of the related *agony* of defeat). *Arete* and *agon* can be difficult to distinguish, given that an athlete’s compulsion toward excellence and the quest for victory tend to overlap. Do athletes, one might ask, instinctively aim for excellence, or is it more a matter of merely winning (“at all costs”) the contest and outcompeting an opponent? Throughout the modern, early twentieth-century era, yet especially in the early Soviet period, many wondered whether athletic activity should be focused on improvement of one’s skills or on the thrill of competition. Should sports, in other words, be primarily an expression of humanity’s urge toward some physical ideal or a thirst for victory?

In an extensive discussion of the sports spectator’s appreciation for athletic beauty, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht emphatically favors *arete* over *agon*, given what he sees as the encapsulation of *agon* in our understanding of *arete*: “Striving for excellence always implies competition, whereas competition does not necessarily imply striving for excellence.”⁷ *Arete*, Gumbrecht emphasizes, entails an

active awareness of *agon* but not vice versa. The athlete's zealous drive for physical distinction satisfies spectators' desire to witness remarkable displays of physical prowess and provides a euphoric perspective on sports, a perspective that has informed many an artistic depiction of athletic action and its unique vitality. But while Gumbrecht perceives *arete* through the very specific prism of the spectator's yearning to witness impressive athletic feats, that is, demonstrations of excellence, *arete* might also be understood as epitomizing lofty physical achievement in itself and signaling the desire for a stronger, faster humankind—physiological perfection of an elusive sort (i.e., there is always a faster race to be run or another record to be broken). As a brief, fleeting manifestation of human greatness, sports have stirred audiences—and artists—and propelled them toward the ambitious ideals of humankind.

At the turn into the twentieth century, both the ideals of athletic *arete* and the competitive thrills of *agon* figured significantly in modern culture, fueled by a revival of ancient Greek notions of athletic excellence that had particular appeal among artists (and ideologues) and by the emerging social phenomenon of popular sporting events, which provided audiences with a steady stream of hardnosed contests. To understand the appeal of competitive sports spectacles to early twentieth-century artists, we might delve somewhat further into the Greek notion of *agon*. According to Gregory Nagy, *agon* for the ancient Greeks signified more than mere competition: it also constituted an assembly of observers and athletes, who would subsequently compete in various events at these assemblies. Nagy suggests that crowd and competition merged through *agon* in ancient Greece: "*Agon* conveys not only the social setting for an activity, namely, an assembly of people, but also the activity itself, namely a contest. The implicitness of the notion of contest in the word for 'assembly' reflects a basic institutional reality about the ancient Greeks: whenever they came together in whatever was called an *agon*, they competed."⁸ Nagy's linking of "assembly" with competition highlights an aspect of sports that fascinated early twentieth-century artists, for modern athletics likewise offered exciting public events—that is, assemblies—at which impressive, often great athletes competed before audiences emotionally engaged in the athletic festivities. When Blok attended wrestling matches at the St. Petersburg circus, he relished not only the physical excellence and artistry on display but also the dramatic quality of these popular competitive events that turned him and other spectators into enthused, active participants.

Competitive athletic play, it follows, constitutes a form of performance, thus allowing theatricality to have become a fundamental characteristic of modern sports.⁹ Although not theater per se, sporting events present an opportunity for athletes to perform in front of excitable crowds that more often than not revel

in the athleticism on display. “Sport is a great modern institution cast in the ancestral forms of spectacle,” Roland Barthes has noted.¹⁰ Citing the historical function of theater as progenitor of a society’s shared experience, Barthes ascribes a similar function to the spectacle of modern athletics, and he sees sporting events providing even greater spectator involvement, given the vocal role of the audience at such contests. “Whereas in the theater the spectator is only a voyeur, in sport he is a participant, an actor,” Barthes observes.¹¹ Through their physical displays of excellence, athletes engage audiences in ways that go well beyond the underlying competition. Much like the “cinema of attractions,” terminology applied by Tom Gunning to early silent cinema that privileged exhibition over narrative, modern athletics, which in many respects emerged alongside early cinema, have appealed directly—and swiftly—to audiences through explicit demonstrations of physical strength and beauty. “The cinema of attraction,” Gunning asserts, “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle . . . that is of interest in itself.”¹² Early twentieth-century audiences attending sporting events, like those at early cinema performances, discovered a direct, spontaneous form of entertainment, albeit entertainment that drew upon physical prowess, competitive exhilaration, and athletic ideals.

In light of their affinities with play, theater, and film, we might ask, how should sports and athletics technically be defined, and what qualifies as a sport? Signifying a form of explicitly rigorous play, the terms “sport” (from the Old French word *desport* [leisure]), “sports,” and “athletics” remain open to some debate and even confusion. Throughout this book the plural noun “sports” will be used to refer to both athletics in general and various specific athletic activities, as is the accepted practice in American English. In the United States, use of the singular “sport” to denote the broad phenomenon of athletics can come across as somewhat antiquated and Anglocentric. I will therefore resort to the English language’s singular “sport” only when referring to individual types of athletic activity (e.g., the sport of tennis). The singular noun “sport,” it can also be contended, connotes leisure, that is, “time off,” a concept sometimes at odds with the intense, highly competitive nature of modern athletics and, in particular, the lofty ambitions of Russian and early Soviet sports. In Russian, however, the singular *sport* is used, and the plural of *sport* does not even exist. And while the Russian term *atletika* translates as “athletics,” by the 1920s *fizkul’tura*—a neologism for “physical culture”—had emerged as the Soviet term for a variety of popular state-sanctioned athletic activities. As for the individual athlete, in Russian both *atlet* and *sportsmen* (the plural being *sportsmeny*) can be used, although *atlet* proved the more common term in prerevolutionary Russia before *sportsmen*—and the plural *sportsmeny*—gained prominence after 1917.

Even though the term “sports” can signify a wide range of activities, from hunting to basketball to board games, this study will focus mostly on the modern era’s competitive activities that captured the public imagination by requiring movement, strength, and coordination, thus falling under the rubric of athletics. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “athletics” signifies “the practice of physical exercises by which muscular strength is called into play and increased.” Such a definition helps pinpoint the cultural phenomenon of competitive athletics that took off in Russia—and elsewhere—at the turn into the twentieth century. It was principally a conspicuous surge of vigorous physical activity that bolstered the energetic, “muscular” spirit of the time, as urban dwellers across Europe became avid, active participants (and spectators). Hence, a sport such as chess falls outside the parameters of this study.¹³ Hunting, meanwhile, comes closer to adhering to my conceptual framework, but it ordinarily lacks the competitive, organized element that typified the modern sports movement. I will therefore dwell predominantly on the following sports, all of which found their way into the era’s art: soccer (football), rugby, boxing, tennis, track and field, cycling, basketball, wrestling, weightlifting, gymnastics, rowing, and even horse racing. These were the athletic activities that flourished at the start of the twentieth century, appealing to participants, spectators, and many artists.

The accent on competition, however, draws into question some of the more popular athletic activities at the time. One might ask, for example, whether the circus wrestling that Blok lauded would in certain instances belie my relatively narrow definition of sports as a competitive endeavor, given wrestling’s modern notoriety for staged displays of strength and ferocity that have often veered away from *agon* for the sake of dramatic spectacle. Yet at least some prerevolutionary wrestling tournaments—mostly of the Greco-Roman variety—featured genuine competition that compelled wrestlers to demonstrate their prowess by battling for legitimate results. And even when this wrestling became marred by match fixing and predetermined results, the wrestlers at least strove to create the impression of authentic athleticism. Other circus acts, on the other hand, fall outside my understanding of sports, for even as tightrope walkers, trapeze artists, and clowns juggling on unicycles demonstrate great physical skill (and artistry), their performances never quite qualify as a sport or as competition.

And how does Soviet *fizkul’tura*, which profoundly informed the nation’s sports scene in the 1920s and 1930s through an emphasis on group gymnastics and mass sports parades, fit with my definition? Not so well, it would seem, yet such physical activity cannot be ignored. Technically a form of athletics and, without a doubt, an activity requiring the strength and flexibility essential to the era’s sports, *fizkul’tura* came to symbolize a strain of Soviet athletics that

placed physical fitness and collective goals above competition. What began as displays of strength in the traditional Russian circus became popular postrevolutionary calisthenics and, ultimately, sports festivals with hundreds of athletes performing athletic exercises in unison (e.g., on Moscow's Red Square). *Fizkul'tura* often proved a means to an end. It may have been used by Soviet authorities to squelch spontaneity and competitive play, yet it also facilitated the rise of an athletic ideal in society and art. Hence, *fizkul'tura* merits our full—if wary—attention, for it underscored an increasing appreciation at the time for the body's physical potential and beauty.

Athletic Beauty

Few can deny the beauty—that is, aesthetically pleasing play—in sports. A pinpoint pass, an acrobatic kick, a graceful serve, or a lightning-quick jab can send shivers down the spine of a discerning spectator. Yet beauty rarely, if ever, constitutes the central aim of sports, for competition and a thirst for victory ultimately trump artistry, even in judged athletic events such as figure skating and gymnastics, which reward aesthetic comportment. Nevertheless, along with the competitive thrust of athletic play inevitably come physical displays of great artistry and beauty so essential to sports' appeal to a diverse array of spectators.¹⁴ The fluid movement of the human body as it engages in athletic performance arguably produces aesthetic moments that can enrich the viewing experience for sports audiences, be they screaming fans or inquisitive artists, who have so often marveled, consciously or not, at the grace, skill, and coordination of the competing athletes. And while the objective for athletes has typically been success (i.e., winning), the athletic urge toward excellence and the pursuit of victory have generated remarkable demonstrations of physical beauty and, some commentators would even maintain, art.

Artists themselves have claimed that athletes are capable of producing an art form all their own. Blok, as quoted earlier, viewed athletes as “true artists,” while Vladimir Nabokov commented at length on “the beauty of the very art of boxing.”¹⁵ Similar claims come from more recent American writers, for instance John Updike (lauding baseball players such as Ted Williams, “who always *care*; who care, that is to say, about themselves and their art”), Norman Mailer (labeling the sport of boxing “body art”), Joyce Carol Oates (referring to boxing as “the only human activity in which rage can be transposed without equivocation into art”), and David Foster Wallace (exalting the professional tennis player as “a transcendent practitioner of an art”).¹⁶ Do Blok, Nabokov, and the others overstate their case? Maybe so, but one can hardly fault them for their exuberance and for discerning a special artistry in the respective sports

and athletes they creatively extol. It is undeniable that superior athletes exhibit great *artistry*. But the connections between athletics and art nevertheless remain elusive. Benjamin Lowe, whose *The Beauty of Sport* probes the intersection of sports and art, as well as the issue of whether athlete can equal artist, cites Georg W. F. Hegel's claim that the work of art is superior to the work of nature (the athletic act) but simultaneously suggests, "If one accepts the basic premise that sport is an art form and the athlete is an artist, then sport can be interpreted in aesthetic terms."¹⁷ Yet even without elevating the athlete to the level of artist, we can still perceive sports through an aesthetic prism, which is what Blok, Nabokov, and other artists in Western Europe and Russia attempted to do at the start of the twentieth century. Athletes generally do not feel the need to create "art" on the playing field or to present their play as "beautiful," yet poets, painters, and filmmakers succeeded at the time in shifting sports onto an aesthetic plane.

The author of *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, Gumbrecht remains somewhat wary of construing sports as art. Citing Kant's analysis of aesthetic experience and, in particular, the notion that a work of art must be produced intentionally, Gumbrecht suggests that it is "going a bit too far" to conceive of athletes as artists, yet he recognizes—and unabashedly celebrates—the aesthetic experience available to spectators at sporting events. Athletes do not, as a rule, consciously aspire to art, and thus the lack of artistic intention denies any possibility for true art, but "by the criterion of subjective universality, sports certainly seem to qualify as aesthetic experience."¹⁸ "Subjective universality," Kant's term for a widely held subjective opinion on what is beautiful, underscores Gumbrecht's contention that the "aesthetic experience" of audiences at sporting events differs very little from that at more canonized forms of aesthetic experience, such as concerts and theatrical dramas, even if the emotional experience might be more intense, given the tendency of sports spectators to root passionately for their favorite players or teams. And as Gumbrecht points out, the impressive sprinting of Jesse Owens will never on its own belong in a museum, whereas Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films documenting Owens's victorious races and jumps at the 1936 Berlin Olympics surely transformed his athleticism into a cinematic work of art that compellingly—and controversially—conveyed the beauty of the human body and the steadfastness of the human spirit.

Whether or not sports constitute art—and I tend to think that they do not—is ultimately not that consequential. What this book stresses is that a broad array of artists in the early years of the twentieth century perceived sports as worthy of their artistic attention and thus sought to enrich their own art with a semblance of athletic beauty, vigor, and *arete*. At the same time, painters, writers, and filmmakers realized that emulating the qualities of sports could bolster,

broaden, and even transform their creative probing of human experience. Some artists fashioned themselves as athletes, creating art out of their own enthusiasm for athletics, while others evoked the unique perspective of avid sports spectators who at once relished the competition and appreciated the aesthetic form of sports. Still others offhandedly incorporated conspicuous elements (the uniform, the ball, the team, etc.) of contemporary athletics into their work, as if to take part in this transformative phenomenon. Witnessing the popular ascendancy of sports in modern society, in elite competition as well as everyday play, many artists wanted in on the action.

Sports in History and Art

Since antiquity, the sometimes complementary, sometimes dueling concepts of athletic victory and athletic excellence have been amplified by societal attitudes toward sports and by art devoted to these sports. In Classical Greek culture, athletics—especially athletics of the competitive sort that glorified both individual feats of excellence and the thrill of victory (the words “athlete” and “athletics” derive from the Greek noun *athlon*, meaning a “prize” or “reward”)—occupied a central position, as attested by odes to victorious athletes, pottery decorated with drawings of athletic young men, sculptures of nude athletes, and descriptions of athletes in literature. In the earliest Greek literary depiction of athletics, Homer provides a lengthy account (in Book 23 of *The Iliad*) of funerary games for Achilles’s friend Patroclus, who fell fighting the Trojans. At these athletic games, Greek warriors engage in high-spirited competition, such as chariot races, footraces, wrestling, and boxing, that, in the words of Stephen Miller, “celebrate life in the face of death, but more than anything else express a basic joy of living.”¹⁹ Vitality, competitive intensity, and an urge for physical excellence all became a lasting legacy of ancient Greek athletics and its manifestation in the era’s art.

Whereas Homer’s *Iliad* celebrated the communal ideal of athletics, irrespective of any hard-nosed competition, subsequent Greek art stressed individual success on the athletic field. Victory, above all, became the focus of ancient Greek sports and art, particularly at the four well-established athletic festivals that comprised a Panhellenic athletic circuit: the Olympic Games, the Pythian Games, the Isthmian Games, and the Nemean Games. Although these festivals included religious ritual as well as art-related competition (e.g., poetry contests), the emphasis fell on competitive sports like track and field, wrestling, and chariot races. As the oldest of these early athletic festivals, the Olympic Games—held in Olympia in honor of Zeus every four years between 776 BCE and 394 CE—offered citizens from Greek city-states the chance to achieve

fame through their physical prowess, which Greek poets such as Pindar lauded (“O father Zeus, give honor to this hymn for a victor at Olympia / and to his now famous *arete* in boxing,” writes Pindar in his oft-cited *Olympian Ode* from 464 BCE).²⁰ Typically delivered at the major Greek athletic festivals, the victory ode (*epinicion*) celebrated great athletic feats and the glory of winning. The victory ode, Mark Golden notes, was “less preoccupied with what sets any one win or winner apart than with the transcendent nature and import of victory itself.”²¹ In a society that prized both *agon* and *arete*, it is not surprising that heroic notions of athletic triumph became the impetus for enduring poetry.

Pindar’s victory odes point to the competitive vigor that infused Greece’s athletic and artistic cultures. Other celebrations of Greek athletic culture can be widely seen on vases, coins, amphorae, and sculpture. In particular, vase paintings from the sixth and fifth centuries BCE reveal a society devoted to honoring the physical activities of the gymnasium, a word that comes from the Greek adjective *gymnos*, meaning “naked,” and the verb *gymnazein*, “to perform in the nude”; accordingly, vases often featured images of naked young men engaged in athletic activity. As A. F. Boe and L. I. Olson argue, in ancient Greece “the body, perceived as the source of all good and happiness, was the key to spiritual salvation. And the beauty most highly revered was the nude body of the perfectly muscled, youthful athlete.”²² In that spirit, artists glorified the naked athletic body with its godly implication of spiritual perfection (and, of course, *Eros*). And with this glorification of nude competitors came rapid advances in drawing and sculpture, as a growing awareness of the human body resulted in portrayals of athletes that appeared increasingly lifelike and refined anatomically, such as Myron’s iconic *Discobolus* sculpture and the *Doryphorus* and *Diadumenos* sculptures of Polykleitos.

An elevated vision of athleticism and of the ideal Greek athlete plays an equally important role in Plato’s *Republic*. There, sports are a central component of moral education for youth in the ideal city-state. Physical training—or what Plato called *gymnastikê*—and athletic contest were to help foster in members of the elite guardian class a healthy, beautiful body and a harmonious soul.²³ Viewing athletics as critical to the model city-state’s organic order and collective harmony, Plato laid the groundwork for physical training in literary and political utopias while also giving artists a philosophical justification for elevating sports as a basis for the foundation of the ideal society and as an indispensable activity for the exemplary citizen.

After the decline of ancient Greece, athletics and notions of athletic greatness went into something of an eclipse. In ancient Rome, for instance, military duty took precedence over sports, which became the pursuit of slaves. Successful gladiators may have often been featured in mosaics, wall paintings, and

sculpture, but sports never became a priority for the period's artists. And during the Middle Ages equestrian sports, most notably jousting, a military activity primarily practiced by the nobility, predominated and frequently showed up in art but less as a sport than as combat.

We can postulate, however, that the Renaissance, with its attention to antiquity, revived an artistic appreciation of sports. Albrecht Dürer's work is a case in point; as one of the most celebrated—and prolific—painters of the Northern Renaissance, he discovered explicit educational value in sports. Having depicted jousting scenes in early woodcuts, Dürer—a wrestler and fencer himself—adopted the model of the German medieval fighting manual (*Fechtbuch*) to produce drawings of wrestling and fencing for the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian I, who compiled manuals on various “princely activities.”²⁴ Dürer's highly naturalistic fencers and wrestlers engaged in aggressive, athletic actions that blurred the lines between athletic competition and military combat.

A more lighthearted rendering of athletics appears in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1565 painting *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap*. In the panoramic scene, Bruegel depicts inhabitants of a village, among them many children, playing sports on an ice-covered river. They skate, spin tops, and take part in the old Dutch game of *kolf* (a precursor to both golf and ice hockey). Bruegel highlights the everyday simplicity and carefree quality of such rural sports, as—in seeming defiance of the painting's somber colors and cold, barren scene (and eponymous bird trap)—the children frolic on the ice. We might also see in such “low” sports a mockery of “high” religion represented by the riverside church that looms in the background. A painter linked to the carnivalesque and its implicit mocking of order and authority, Bruegel celebrates the liberating, subversive nature of sports play in *Winter Landscape with Skaters and a Bird Trap*.

The carnivalesque strain in premodern sports, as well as their aspirational, educative promise, come further into focus in the work of François Rabelais, the French Renaissance writer often cited as epitomizing Mikhail Bakhtin's conception of the carnival. In Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, a sixteenth-century novel in five volumes, sports contribute to the irreverent chronicle of the lives of its two eponymous heroes, both of whom are giants. Chapter Twenty-Two of Volume One, for instance, consists primarily of a long list of games and sports played by Gargantua. Many are long-forgotten sports (“cup and ball,” “twirl and whirl,” etc.) or activities of a scatological or sexual nature (“shit in your face,” “sow your wild oats,” etc.), but a few sports familiar to modern-day readers stand out: “bows and arrows” and badminton, most notably.²⁵ And in the next chapter Rabelais describes the activities, both scholarly and athletic,

that Gargantua's tutor Ponocrates (Powerbrain) has his pupil take on to further his humanistic education. In addition to geometry, astronomy, music, and reading come gymnastic exercises and the game of *jeu de paume*, which during the Renaissance became known in England as court tennis. Played indoors by the aristocracy, *jeu de paume* proved a noble pursuit for Rabelais and, when taken up by Gargantua and Ponocrates, provides "their bodies the same uplifting exercise they had earlier given their souls."²⁶ The ability of "elegant" court tennis to lift the human soul suggests that even for Rabelais sports could be refined and enriching. Later in Rabelais's novel, in fact, a monk interprets an enigmatic prophecy with overt apocalyptic overtones as referring to a game of *jeu de paume* (while Gargantua sees it as allegory for the suffering of evangelical Christians in France); as the monk explains, "'The water: that's the sweat they work up. And all that about the guts of sheep and goats, why, that's the strings on the racquet.'"²⁷ In playful, carnivalesque fashion, Rabelais blurs the line between sports and religion, elevating sports to unexpected heights.

Jump ahead to the early part of the nineteenth century and it was the sport and spectacle of boxing that most appealed to a diverse range of participants and spectators, from the working class to the nobility. Boxing attracted both painters and poets with its rough, primal "manliness" and egalitarianism. In *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), Washington Irving gives an account of his travels in Europe, where the "literary man" Buckthorne remarks, "What is a boxing match but an arena, where the noble and illustrious are jostled into familiarity with the infamous and vulgar?"²⁸ For many artists pugilism indeed bridged the divide between social classes and between high art and folk culture. Growing in popularity throughout England and continental Europe in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, boxing not only caught the eye of painters like William Hogarth, Charles Turner, and Theodore Gericault but also inspired a wide array of writers, from James Boswell to Charles Dickens (while subsequently appealing to Americans such as the painter George Bellows and the writer Jack London).

One of the most noted literary explorations of pugilism can be found in the Romantic poetry of George Gordon (Lord) Byron. Having taken up boxing soon after completing his education at Cambridge in 1806, Byron earned his stripes as a pupil of former English boxing champion and "professor of pugilism" John Jackson. Trainer to an impressive group of young, aristocratic men in England, Jackson found his way into Byron's 1811 poem "Hints from Horace": "And men unpracticed in exchanging knocks / Must go to Jackson ere they dare to box." Jackson is also mentioned in an authorial note to Byron's long satiric poem *Don Juan*, which features a healthy dose of pugilism amid its "epic" account of sexual and physical conquest. In the early nineteenth century,

Kasia Boddy argues, “writers and artists found in pugilism not only a subject-matter, but the basis for a method,” an aggressiveness that certainly pertains to Byron, who drew upon his own boxing exploits to produce a forceful romantic style of verse that was almost as popular as boxing at the time.²⁹

The rise of boxing in the nineteenth century coincided with a gradual cultural shift away from traditional field sports that had long been the domain of the aristocracy. In Great Britain and elsewhere in the Western world, 1850—give or take a decade—marked the beginning of an athletic era in which well-established, aristocratic pastimes such as hunting and riding gave way to the more modern sports of rugby, rowing, soccer (i.e., football), track and field, tennis, and cycling. The proliferation and institutionalization of these sports ensued, whereby the increasing egalitarianism of sports shaped not only the modern athletic landscape but also modern culture.

It was in Great Britain’s stratified Victorian society where modern sports first gained momentum. The long reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901 witnessed a remarkable transformation of British sporting activities, as aristocratic, expensive field sports receded with the rise of popular athletic activities and events open not merely to the upper class but also to the urban masses. Factories Acts that were passed in 1847 and 1850 limited the workday to ten hours and reduced Saturday hours for workers, while unions made some gains boosting their members’ wages, thus giving the urban workforce more time and a modicum of financial leeway for leisure-time activities. Somewhat better pay and the development of a better food supply for cities led to improvements in workers’ eating habits, which in turn resulted in more energy for athletic games.³⁰ Much of the change in British attitudes toward sports, however, initially occurred within the country’s elite “public” (i.e., private) schools. Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School between 1828 and 1841, rejected field sports for their antisocial nature and considered them “a waste of time”; although never an ardent proponent of physical education, Arnold prioritized cricket and soccer over traditional field sports, discovering in the newer sports a means to diminish the vast social gulf existing at the time between the country’s upper and upper-middle classes.³¹ What arose in British society and culture at this time was the doctrine of “Muscular Christianity,” which stressed manliness, morality, teamwork, and an athletic approach to life, all of which advanced sports as a worthy pastime for young men. Hence, spiritual growth through athletics became a valued endeavor and an essential aspect of daily existence at British schools and universities.

A vivid reflection of England’s emerging athletic culture and its spiritual parameters can be found in the verse of A. E. Housman, who played an early role in inserting modern sports into high art. In Housman’s 1896 *A Shropshire Lad*,

several poems contain more than a passing reference to sports, most notably “To an Athlete Dying Young,” “Is my team ploughing,” and “Twice a week the winter thorough.”³² Housman, a classicist who taught at University College London and Cambridge, mixed athletics and issues of mortality in Homeric fashion in the elegiac “To an Athlete Dying Young,” which trumpets the athletic exploits of a young man who has since died: “The time you won your town the race / We chaired you through the market-place; / Man and boy stood cheering by, / And home we brought you shoulder-high.” Housman shifts from athletic victory to subdued funeral procession, as the young, triumphant runner is suddenly carried not in triumph but in mourning (“To-day, the road all runners come, / Shoulder-high we bring you home, / And set you at your threshold down”). A stark contrast arises between the vitality of athletic glory and the static finality of death.

At the same time as sports ascended in Great Britain, across the ocean in the United States the passion for competitive athletics was not far behind. America’s democratic ideals proved well suited to the ideals of modern sports: widespread participation in the popular athletic games of the day, plus rising numbers of sports spectators, reflected the country’s cultivation of individual rights and mass democracy. As in ancient Greece, athletics constituted an integral part of everyday life and culture in late nineteenth-century America, aided by industrialization and urbanization that increasingly afforded citizens the opportunity to engage in a range of leisure-time activities—foremost among them, sports. Incorporating both ancient Greece’s exaltation of individual athletic glory and the team-oriented sports culture that predominated in England, an American athletic ethos of courage, fortitude, and egalitarianism took shape overnight.

Walt Whitman was likely the first American artist to meld sports and democracy, as he articulated a keen appreciation of the human body and its physical potential. An avid baseball player and swimmer in his youth, Whitman promoted corporeal vigor and created, according to Harold Aspiz, “a physical-culture hero—a figure of matchless physique and the prototype of future American manhood.”³³ Embracing the equality and idealism inherent in modern sports, Whitman glorified in his verse raw human physicality, which he deemed a necessary ingredient of the creative process, and homoerotic sensuality. In his poem “I Sing the Body Electric,” Whitman sings the praises of the human body and its physical, thrilling—“electric”—powers, as notions of corporal perfection permeate the rapturous verse: “The love of the body of man or woman balks account, the body itself balks account, / That of the male is perfect, and that of the female is perfect.” At the very conclusion of “I Sing the Body Electric” Whitman extols “the exquisite realization of health,” providing an inspired

version of the oft-quoted line from the Roman poet Juvenal, “a healthy mind in a healthy body” (*mens sana in corpore sano*).³⁴

Whitman’s rapture over the human body and its athletic potential would find a visual equivalent in the work of Thomas Eakins. Whitman and Eakins, Toney Frazier writes, possessed a “shared vision . . . that drive and endurance is most eloquently expressed in the bodies and movements of ordinary citizen athletes, [which] signaled a new appreciation in American art of how common pastimes can reflect a national ethos.”³⁵ Expanding upon Whitman’s physical aesthetic, Eakins highlighted the United States’ burgeoning athletic movement and its dignified spirit. Early on, Eakins shifted away from an academic style toward contemporary content and an explicit—and homoerotic—presentation of the human body in all its full physical glory.³⁶ Modern athletics offered an expansion of artistic subject matter at the time, and Eakins would gain renown for his series of rowing paintings from the 1870s, when the sport enjoyed increasing popularity in the United States.³⁷ Working in a style of concentrated realism, Eakins produced nearly thirty paintings, drawings, and watercolors of rowing, most notably the 1871 painting *The Champion Single Sculls (Max Schmitt in a Single Scull)*. And he would also go on to paint boxers and wrestlers.³⁸

In continental Europe, meanwhile, the development of modern sports in large part followed the lead of Great Britain and the United States, albeit with some initial resistance toward competition, given that throughout the nineteenth century the elite of Europe initially had little use for competitive sports. In Germany, gymnastics exercises instituted at the beginning of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Ludwig Jahn through his movement system of *Turnen* predominated as a nationalist form of physical education, while in Sweden similar exercises were introduced by Henrik Ling, who hoped to reawaken the ancient (i.e., Viking) masculine roots of the Swedes.³⁹ The Czechs and Slovaks likewise promoted a nationalist *Sokol* (Falcon) movement that entailed *Turnen*-like gymnastics. And in the second half of the nineteenth century, France merged the utilitarian and leisurely with competition through the bicycle (*le vélodipède*), a modern invention that quickly grew in popularity among both Sunday pleasure-seekers and racers in Europe. Competitive sports, in particular soccer, would eventually take hold on the continent, but for several decades much of Europe—and European art—resisted the British sports craze and its emphasis on the individual athlete, instead favoring noncompetitive, collective physical fitness that could bolster the health of European society.

Competitive sports, however, would ultimately prevail over more collective approaches to athleticism, as the increasing zeal for athletic competition culminated in the modern Olympic Games. Organized in 1896 by Pierre de Coubertin, these games were to provide a means for nations to compete peacefully

in the sports arena and to showcase their finest athletes. Coubertin, an educator who saw the developmental value of sports, believed that a lack of physical prowess among young Frenchmen had led to the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian War.⁴⁰ Yet instead of emulating the Germans and their *Turnen* exercises, Coubertin looked toward Great Britain and the United States, which Coubertin visited in 1889 (and where he met the vocal physical fitness proponent Theodore Roosevelt). By 1892 Coubertin set about reviving the ancient Greeks' legendary athletic festival (earlier unsuccessful attempts had been made between 1859 and 1889 in Greece), and in 1894 the International Olympic Committee was formed. The inaugural 1896 Games, held in Athens, Greece, met with mixed success. But the Olympic movement, like the modern sports movement, would only expand with time.

Although multifarious and reflective of respective national cultures, modern athletics took hold as a widespread movement with a set of shared qualities at the turn into the new century and only expanded with time. Historian Allen Guttman has delineated seven characteristics of the modern sports movement: secularism (sports no longer pointed to "the transcendent realm of the sacred" as it often had in ancient Greece), equality (there was to be no exclusion, at least in theory, "on the basis of social class, religion, ethnicity or gender"), specialization, bureaucratization, rationalization, quantification, and a preoccupation with records.⁴¹ Although certain countries would resist aspects of these broad parameters for sports as outlined by Guttman, by the start of the twentieth century the various defining qualities of modern athletics were facilitating the quick ascension of sports as a ubiquitous, essential component of both modern society and modern culture.

Russia and Sports

In comparison to the rapid emergence of modern sports in the West, the arrival of organized, popular sports in Russia came relatively late, whereby a broad yet far from widespread athletic movement arose in the 1860s before exploding a half century later. Russia's belated interest in athletics has generally been attributed by sports historians to conservative tendencies in the country and the slow spread of industrialization and urbanization throughout a predominantly rural society.⁴² Thus competitive sports up until the turn into the twentieth century remained predominantly the privilege of the upper classes.⁴³ In the 1860s, Russia's ruling elite were drawn in particular to tennis, which they played on the courts of places like The Neva Lawn Tennis Circle in St. Petersburg. And as the sport caught on in the nation's capital, members of Russia's

royal family began honing their own tennis skills, in what surely was a sign to the Russian populace at large that sports did indeed have value.⁴⁴

Soccer, a less aristocratic affair than tennis, came to Russia from England via Germany. Although several Russian soccer clubs formed before the turn of the century, English teams generally dominated soccer in Russia until 1908. As the Russian level of play began to improve and the sport gained in popularity, newspapers of the time reported a growing tension between foreign and Russian soccer teams. In contrast to tennis, which remained a relatively private pursuit without large audiences, soccer allowed for public participation in the ritual of competitive athletics, and although it was only in 1912 that Russia established its own national association of soccer, Russian athletes and fans alike quickly began to take a passionate interest in the sport. In 1913, for instance, three thousand paying fans attended an international soccer match in Moscow between Russia and Sweden.⁴⁵ And by 1914, a total of 155 soccer clubs existed in thirty-three cities throughout Russia.⁴⁶

The popularity of other sports grew at a similar pace in Russia. Yachting, to give one example, had taken root two centuries earlier during the reign of Peter I, but it too experienced a burst of popularity at the end of the nineteenth century when the St. Petersburg Yacht Club assumed an important place in Russian social and recreational circles. During the long winters, however, well-to-do Russians put down their racquets, lowered their sails, and laced up their ice skates, which soon led to numerous skating clubs and competitions. Clubs for cycling, the most popular sport in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, also sprang up all around Russia, as this newfangled athletic and recreational pursuit became the first modern sport to gain popularity in Russia beyond Moscow and St. Petersburg. At the time, wrestling and shooting flourished as fashionable club and professional sports in which Russians achieved notable success at the international level. And both horse racing and gymnastics likewise gained popularity. As early as the 1880s, the Russian academic Petr Lesgaft had begun teaching physical education in St. Petersburg, and his Society for the Encouragement of the Physical Development of Student Youth—renamed the Lesgaft State Institute of Physical Culture after the 1917 Revolution—both capitalized on and deepened the Russian public's involvement in gymnastics and other athletic activity.⁴⁷ All told, by 1914 more than twelve hundred official sporting clubs existed throughout Russia.⁴⁸

Sports did not, however, meet with unconditional acceptance in Russia. At times, sweat and competition evoked scorn, as conservative elements of society were often unwilling to tolerate these unabashedly physical activities that “smacked not only of the flesh, but of materialism,” as James Riordan, author

of seminal work devoted to Russian and Soviet sports history, puts it.⁴⁹ In fact, a pronounced edge of class disparity permeated Russia's burgeoning enthusiasm for athletics. Whereas in the more advanced industrial societies of Europe greater leisure time provided workers with myriad opportunities for athletics, Russia's working-class athletes initially had difficulty finding the time, opportunity, or means for sports.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, following the revolutionary stirrings of 1905, factory owners became more inclined to introduce soccer to their workers "as an attempt to encourage a form of civil loyalty and to divert their employees from revolutionary and other disruptive actions."⁵¹ Sports and politics thus began to intersect as various disparate layers of Russia's urban society increasingly partook in the athletic activities of the modern age.

The revival of the Olympic Games played a particularly influential role in the development of modern sports in Russia, although that influence was somewhat slow in coming. Russia at first followed the Olympic movement from afar; despite the efforts of Aleksei Butkovsky, a Russian representative to Coubertin's original IOC, no Russians participated in the 1896 Olympics in Athens, and only a handful of Russian athletes traveled to the next three Olympics (seven Russian athletes, for instance, competed in the 1908 Games in London).⁵² Hence, the Games initially stirred little interest among the Russian populace. But the 1912 Summer Games in Stockholm marked a significant leap forward, as 178 Russian athletes participated in a wide variety of events (Russia was the only non-Scandinavian country to field athletes in all thirteen athletic categories comprising these Stockholm Games).⁵³ This sudden competitive drive on Russia's part reflected not only the country's newfound passion for sports but also an array of nationalist insecurities, as Tsar Nicholas II insisted on a strong showing by Russia to bolster its stature on the international stage.

As sports gained in popularity, Russia's writers and painters hardly remained oblivious to the trend. Long before the rise of sports as a popular pastime in Russia, Aleksandr Pushkin had alluded to Byron's swimming in *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgenii Onegin*, 1833) and Mikhail Lermontov had highlighted boxing in his poetry (e.g., "A Song about Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich, His Young Bodyguard, and the Brave Merchant Kalashnikov" ["Pesnia pro tsaria Ivana Vasil'evicha, molodogo oprichnika, i udalogo kuptsa Kalashnikova," 1838]). But it was really with the publication of Lev Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* in 1877 that sports began to enjoy significant stature in the artistic culture of the day. Skating, tennis, and horse racing all figure in this novel, which was not surprising, given the fact that Tolstoy, an avid bicyclist, relished physical activity and declared that athletics constituted a necessary ingredient for an individual's well-being.⁵⁴

While taking root in Russia throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, sports intersected with the idealistic thinking of the Russian artistic

intelligentsia. Modern athletics, although not utopian in any strict sense, brought about a new mode of behavior oriented explicitly toward a better future, for sports offered attractive means for achieving the goal of an ideal—or at least vastly improved—human being. The strength, speed, health, discipline, and even purity (i.e., good hygiene) implicit in sports provided the focus of this athletic idealism, as physical fitness and competitive vigor helped highlight a path forward for the era's "New Man" (*novyi chelovek*) to emerge. "New" people of active body and mind, it was believed, would achieve a physical and emotional harmony. As early as midway through the nineteenth century, Russian thinkers began referring to athletics ("The soul, much like the body, has its own gymnastics, without which the soul will wither and fall into the apathy of idleness," noted the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, father of sorts to the Russian intelligentsia).⁵⁵ A prominent case in point would be Nikolai Chernyshevsky's highly influential novel *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat'?*, 1863), in which the radical Rakhmetov balances physical fitness with revolutionary activity: "Gymnastics, physical labor to develop his strength, and reading were Rakhmetov's personal pursuits."⁵⁶ Here an athletic lifestyle bolstered the Russian urge to merge art and revolution. In the 1860s, Irina Paperno argues in her study of Chernyshevsky, "literature was almost universally regarded as an all-encompassing 'guide to life' (Chernyshevsky's term)," prompting not only "a wide expansion of art into life" but also the emergence of rational—and athletic—"New" men of action, such as that found in *What Is to Be Done?*⁵⁷

Tolstoy, meanwhile, emphasized his own evolving state of harmonious well-being when recounting his physical and mental development in *A Confession* (*Isповед'*, 1882): "My muscles were growing and getting stronger, my memory was being enriched, my ability to think and to comprehend was becoming greater; I was growing and developing. Feeling growth within me, it was natural for me to believe that perfectibility was indeed the law of the universe and that in this idea I would find the answers to the questions of my life."⁵⁸ Muscular (and mental) "perfectibility," Tolstoy suggests, underscored the era's emerging physical ideals. And we also have the lofty sentiments of Anton Chekhov, who remarked on bodybuilding athletes at the 1883 opening of Moscow's Russian Gymnastics Society, which a then-healthy Chekhov helped found: "These are the people of the future. And there will come a time when everyone will be just as strong as them. In this is the wellbeing of the country."⁵⁹ From the start, athletics afforded effective means by which to progress toward that radiant future that the Russian artistic intelligentsia so vividly envisioned and actively pursued at the time.

The revolutionary thrust of early Russian athletics, it therefore follows, cannot be ignored. To reach a harmonious future, Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy,

and others had advocated living by ambitious, athletic ideals, whereby sports and physical fitness contributed to the complex cultural tapestry behind the revolutionary events of 1905 and 1917, events clearly geared toward actualizing this better future. As Richard Stites maintains in his extensive exploration of utopia in early twentieth-century Russian and Soviet culture, “Utopianism, social and cultural experimentation, and drastic self-conscious innovation—symbolic and concrete—occur in the midst of all major social revolutions of modern times.”⁶⁰ Extrapolating from Stites, one can see how an innovative “self-conscious” activity like sports complemented the revolutionary, utopian ethos of the era; it could be argued, in fact, that revolution began with the self, as protorevolutionary athletes set out to transform their own physiology in ways that foregrounded the much more decisive actions of revolutionaries. Sports, moreover, helped bridge the large divide that existed at the time between the rural utopia envisioned by the radical Russian intelligentsia in the late nineteenth century and the Marxist urban ideals sought for once modernization and the technological revolution occurred at the turn of the century. Through sports, Russians could use their bodies in a physical, organic fashion while simultaneously emulating the efficiency of the machine. Russia’s most revolutionary Futurist artists accordingly aspired to transform the human body to achieve a physique that would be both pure and machine-like.⁶¹ As poet Sergey Tretyakov later explained in 1923, “And so, what guided Futurism from the days of its infancy was not the creation of new paintings, verses, and prose, but the production of a new human being through art, which is one of the tools of such production.”⁶² And if, as various critics have argued, Russian modernist artists dreamed of altering reality—and themselves—through their art, then athletics and *fizkul’tura* constituted a very convenient means by which to fulfill such dreams. Hence, athletic activity and artistic treatment of this athleticism played into the idealism that would facilitate the overthrow of both the social and political status quo in Russia.

In the Bolshevik state, the idealistic scope of Soviet sports noticeably widened, at least at first. In the early 1920s, two groups, the hygienists (*gigienisty*) and the more doctrinaire Proletkul’tists (proponents of Proletarskaia kul’tura), advocated for an ambitious national system of athletic activity—the gymnastic exercises and sports parades so essential to Soviet *fizkul’tura*—that deemphasized competition for the sake of egalitarianism, physical fitness, and health.⁶³ Discussing the broad concept of hygiene in the early Soviet state and its fusion of cleanliness, health, and *fizkul’tura*, Tricia Starks notes that “the cleansed body . . . became the material manifestation of the revolution’s success.”⁶⁴ And sports spectatorship in the early Soviet period likewise reflected the era’s purifying, idealistic direction, for as Robert Edelman has noted, “Watching sports in the

USSR was not supposed to be an end in itself, a pleasurable way of passing time. Rather, its clearly didactic goal was to improve the health and efficiency of the nation by demonstrating the benefits of exercise while instilling values of honesty, obedience, discipline, culture, sexual equality, and selflessness.⁶⁵ This didactic approach to watching athletes in action was especially evident in the 1920s, as demonstrated by the lengthy scenes of sports and sport spectatorship in the era's groundbreaking avant-garde cinema, which likewise strove to shape the Soviet populace and lay the foundation for a model Marxist society.

At the forefront of all the revolutionary idealism in early Soviet society was Leon Trotsky, who when discussing issues relating to revolution, art, and the emergence of a "superman" in 1924 emphasized the "radical transformation" of humans through "psycho-physical training."⁶⁶ A bold visionary among the first Bolshevik leaders, Trotsky concluded his essay on *Literature and Revolution* with the following: "All the arts—literature, drama, painting, music and architecture will lend this process [of psycho-physical education] beautiful form. More correctly, the shell in which the cultural construction and self-education of Communist man will be enclosed, will develop all the vital elements of contemporary art to the highest point. Man will become immeasurably stronger, wiser and subtler; his body will become more harmonized, his movements more rhythmic, his voice more musical."⁶⁷ Echoing the sentiments of Russia's pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, Trotsky believed that *fizkul'tura* could bring about the harmony of the "New" Soviet individual. As John Hoberman notes, Trotsky's "New" sportsperson would not be a "superathletic" type but rather something along the noncompetitive, egalitarian lines of what the early Soviet hygienists envisioned.⁶⁸ And the arts, Trotsky emphasized, had an essential role to play in such idealism existing at the heart of early Soviet sports. While early Soviet artists such as the poet Aleksey Gastev promoted the mechanization of man in ways that favored industrialization and labor over athletics, other artists—such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Gustav Klutssis, El Lissitzky, and Dziga Vertov—presented sports in a relatively free-spirited way, as they created groundbreaking work that merged the revolutionary potential of both athletics and art. By the end of the 1920s, however, the collective spirit and striving of early Soviet athletics had begun to peter out. Trotsky, for instance, was removed from power in 1927, while the egalitarian vision of sports promoted by the hygienists and Proletkul'tists evaporated amid the rise of Socialist Realism. Stalinist art may have glorified athletic achievement, yet it lacked the creative ambitions and ideals of sports-related artistic work in Russia from the 1910s and 1920s.

Artistic approaches to sports in prerevolutionary Russia and 1920s Soviet Russia, I will therefore argue in *Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades!*, did not lead

straight to the widespread glorification of Soviet sports under Stalin, as might be assumed. The “New” Soviet Person so prominent in Socialist Realism was not a direct descendent of the artistically exalted wrestling champions, artist-athletes, and new *sportsmeny* in art of the revolutionary era. Rather, artistic treatment of sports in the first half of the twentieth century can be seen as reflecting Vladimir Paperny’s oft-cited delineation of early Soviet culture—particularly architecture—into revolutionary art of the late 1910s and 1920s (Culture One) and Socialist Realist art of the 1930s and 1940s (Culture Two). Sharp differences existed between these two eras and, it follows, between the manifestation of sports in society and art during the 1920s and subsequent Stalinist period. The Marxist ideals of uniformity and collectivism permeated Culture One. As Paperny puts it: “To mix everything together thoroughly and then spread it in a single layer on the surface of the earth, so that no differences remain between city and country, East and West, rich and poor, physical and intellectual labor, work and leisure, art and life, men and women. This dream in Culture One was held, to an equal degree, by scholars and thinkers, artists and people in positions of power.”⁶⁹ Paperny goes on to observe that Culture One also brought a distinctly youthful orientation together with a machine aesthetic—both of which were amplified through the sports theme in designs, drawings, and films of the 1920s and photographs of the early 1930s. “The machine,” Paperny writes, “became in Russia . . . the very personification of the new era, the new superhero in the image of which artists built themselves and their world.”⁷⁰ Certain artists accordingly fashioned themselves as machine-like athletes participating in the Soviet state’s new way of life.

The idealization of the machine went hand-in-hand with a sense of constant movement in Culture One. The machine-like artist-athlete, the promotion of a healthy, active Soviet populace, and advocacy of permanent revolution made Culture One dynamic. But all that changed under Stalin: “Movement in Culture Two became tantamount to immobility, and the future to eternity.”⁷¹ The radiant future that early Soviet artists had striven toward was “postponed indefinitely” for the populace at large and treated as realized by the Stalinist elite, who demanded celebrations of athletic achievement, idyllic scenes of athletic equipoise, and demonstrations of smiling, often static participants.⁷² Thus the egalitarian dreams of the 1920s gave way to an ideological rigidity in athletics and in the artistic rendering of everyday sports that highlighted the setting of athletic records by elite athletes and that glorified the Stalinist state. This resulted in, for one thing, “the massive displays and pageants that gave Soviet sports its Orwellian or totalitarian image,” according to Edelman.⁷³ Ordinary athletic activity of course continued under Stalin, but Socialist Realist art presented this athleticism in ways that shifted the emphasis away from commonplace

sports toward the Stalinist program. Or as Paperny more broadly puts it, Socialist Realism “raised life to the level of art,” whereby sports became artistic pageant (e.g., Stalinist sports parades) rather than remaining a promising, fruitful component of everyday existence that artists of the 1920s engaged with through the creative process.⁷⁴ Sports accommodated Stalin’s “total aesthetico-political project” (to use Boris Groys’s oft-cited terminology), and sports-related art followed suit through the rise of Socialist Realism.⁷⁵

The main narrative thread of modern athletics in Russian and Soviet art, however, begins at the end of the nineteenth century, when sports, revolution, and revolutionary art were all on the rise. In chapter 1 of *Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades!*—“Herculean Heights: The Cult(ure) of the Circus Wrestler in Pre-revolutionary Russia”—I explore the unprecedented popularity and commodification of wrestling in prerevolutionary Russia as well as its “muscular” (as Blok put it) impact on the era’s art and artists. “Every person can be a Hercules!” proclaimed one famous wrestler at the time; in accordance with such advice, a wide range of Russian artists seized upon the era’s ethos of physical transformation as they fused athletics and aesthetics with an eye toward overturning the status quo. And continuing my exploration of prerevolutionary athletics, I turn in chapter 2 (“Lyrical Games: The Poetics of Russia’s Modern Sports Movement”) to Russian poetry from the 1910s, in particular the Symbolist and Acmeist verse that vied for critical attention at the time and that through investigations of modern sports epitomized a conspicuous shift in poetic sensibilities in the country. Sports offered an important source of quotidian inspiration for poets eager to focus on the human body and the corporeal underpinnings of prerevolutionary Russian culture. And as Blok’s foreword to *Retribution* suggested, the fervent cultural embrace of physicality helped set the stage for the transformative events of 1917.

Although the Russian Revolution wiped away so much of Imperial Russia’s culture, modern sports would provide an important bridge between pre-1917 and post-1917 art. In chapter 3 (“Revolutionary Goals: Modern Sports in Russian and Early Soviet Avant-Garde Art”), I explore the creative rendering of sports—not just wrestling but also soccer and track and field—found in both Russian and early Soviet avant-garde art. Natalya Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, and Rodchenko were just a few of the “Left” painters who imaginatively responded to early twentieth-century athletics, where they discovered ample energy, physicality, and a potent source of cultural subversiveness. By the 1920s, Soviet athletics had become a prominent focus of agitational Left art, particularly experimental films of the era, as I explore in my fourth chapter, “An Eye for Athletics: Silent Cinema and Early Soviet Sports.” In numerous silent Soviet films, scenes of sports and an aesthetic derived from athletics bolstered

filmmakers' revolutionary vision for the new nation. A cause endorsed by a government that was growing increasingly wary of artistic innovation throughout the 1920s, modern sports allowed Soviet Russia's creative Left to maintain its originality but also help shape Soviet life. Chapter 5, "Framing the Future: Sports in Early Soviet Photomontage and Photography," probes the way Left artists such as Klutsis, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko used the photographic medium to promote the new nation's ideological endorsement of sports and *fizkul'tura*. By the early 1930s, in fact, sports photography had become one of the few ideologically safe venues available to Left artists. In the sixth and final chapter of *Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades!*, I explore the tension that arose between innovation and convention as Soviet artists—particularly the writer Yury Olesha and the painter Aleksandr Deyneka—reflected vis-à-vis the popular theme of sports the contemporary cultural shift away from avant-garde innovation toward state-sponsored Socialist Realism. Stalinism by no means eradicated modern competitive sports—and creative perspectives on these sports—in the country, but by prescribing a largely heroic depiction of the Soviet athlete it restricted the relationship between athletics and art while dampening the idealism so integral to early Soviet sports. And summing up in my conclusion those ways that Russian and early Soviet artists responded to the unique allure and promise of modern sports, I then offer a coda on the work of Vladimir Nabokov, who came of age in Imperial Russia's sports-crazed St. Petersburg/Petrograd before immigrating to Western Europe and then America. The modern sports movement, Nabokov's work accentuates, boosted creative attitudes toward both the physical beauty of the human body and contemporary modes of entertainment, as Nabokov and others before him transformed the thrills and ideals of athletic play into vigorous, meaningful art.

Faster, Higher, Stronger, Comrades! is not, of course, the first study to delve into the intersection of art and athletics.⁷⁶ Within the field of Russian art and culture, several important studies stand out, most significantly Mike O'Mahony's *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture—Visual Culture* (2006), an insightful discussion of Soviet *fizkul'tura* and its prominence within Soviet culture. Focusing chiefly on paintings, drawings, and sculpture, O'Mahony devotes some attention to film and literature to paint a more complete picture of the era. O'Mahony, however, dwells exclusively on Soviet art ("Before the Bolshevik Revolution," O'Mahony contends, "sport played a relatively minor role in visual culture").⁷⁷ A similar decision to discount sports in prerevolutionary Russian art likewise detracts from a relatively recent exhibition (and corresponding catalog with essays), *The Russian Avant-Garde and Sport* (2014), at the Olympic Museum in Lausanne, Switzerland. My study, on the other hand, explores the copious pre-revolutionary examples of artistic culture devoted to sports and the way these

artistic treatments of athletics presaged early Soviet work, an approach briefly adopted in John Bowlt's article "Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for the Perfect Physique" (1996), where Bowlt contends that "a physical dimension" helped inspire the Russian avant-garde's concept of "a new human being re-designed and reconstituted, who was to be superior to preceding generations."⁷⁸ And John Malmstad's article "Wrestling with Representation" (2003) dwells on the Russian avant-garde practice of presenting the artist as athlete, who Malmstad convincingly argues became a conspicuous "icon of modernity" in Russia.⁷⁹ Also of note is Louise McReynolds's examination of popular Russian culture at the start of the twentieth century in *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (2003), which includes astute discussion of the public, gender-specific role wrestlers and other athletes played in Russian life at the time.

As athletics transformed leisure-time in the modern world, Russia included, and enthused a broad array of participants and spectators, Russian artists imaginatively delved into physical activity, competition, and sports spectatorship. While it would be an exaggeration to say that a majority of the era's artists in Russia embraced modern athletics, I contend that when artists did take up sports as an approach, theme, or even metaphor, they facilitated sports' widespread, yet now underappreciated effect on twentieth-century aesthetics. The dynamic vitality, beauty, and objectives of modern sports presented artists with a new, highly physical perspective on reality and on human beings' corporeal presence in the world, whereby Russian artists, like their Western counterparts, often expanded their artistic vision to account for the sudden social relevance of sports. My aim, however, is not to give an exhaustive, encyclopedic account of all the Russian and early Soviet art that touched upon athletics. Rather, I explore noteworthy examples to illuminate both the broad impact of competitive sports and *fizkul'tura* on artistic culture in Russia at the start of the twentieth century and the way sports combined with art to contribute to the idealism so evident during the prerevolutionary and early Soviet periods. Sports, often signifying a de-emphasis of the intellectual for the sake of the physical and impulsive, did not suit the needs of everyone, of course, but modern athletics creatively challenged artists in early twentieth-century Russia, prompting painters, poets, and filmmakers to find new aesthetic means for capturing the vigor, excitement, and ambitious scope of this ubiquitous modern phenomenon.

As early as 1909, an editorial in the inaugural issue of the magazine *Russian Sports* (*Russkii sport*) extolled its subject:

Sports—as an extension of art into recreation and amusement, as a representation of the body's possibilities, as a means to express the inquisitiveness of the human spirit—should be a completely normal phenomenon in the

life of individual citizens and all of society. And emerging in such a way as the expression of human needs, sports, it is clear, very often bring rich results from the perspective of social good; thus, it is not surprising that sports always occupy a very prominent place in the life process of all cultured people.⁸⁰

With the relevance of sports in Russia growing at the start of the twentieth century, athletic play would be increasingly perceived as an important “extension” of art, culture, and “the human spirit.” In the eyes of many, sports harbored great possibilities for both the human body and human society. Thus the excitement, spontaneity, and social ideals of sports could hardly be ignored, and thus a wide range of Russian and Soviet artists, expanding their aesthetic engagement with the physical world, quickly jumped at the opportunity to explore such a fresh, exciting facet of contemporary life. Striving toward an artistic ideal, these artists found common ground with the era’s athletes.

Herculean Heights

The Cult(ure) of the Circus Wrestler in Prerevolutionary Russia

What enormous pleasure I get when, after the winner's imperceptibly whispered command of "Surrender," spectators become totally fixated on the wrestling match's final chord, some sort of "bras-rulé" or "tour-de-tête."

Aleksandr Kuprin, "On Wrestling" ("O bor'be"), 1913

Power, agility, physical presence, and a flair for the dramatic: these are just a few of the attributes associated with the modern-day wrestler that have helped transform competitive wrestling's linchpin into larger-than-life athletic icon, a giant among mortals, and the embodiment of extraordinary, often unfathomable strength. Both athlete and showman, the professional wrestler has long maintained a close link to his audience that goes well beyond conventional sports spectatorship into the realm of performance art. "Wrestling is not a sport, it is a spectacle, and it is no more ignoble to attend a wrestled performance of Suffering than a performance of the sorrows of Arnolphe or Andromaque," Roland Barthes remarked in "The World of Wrestling," his contentious *Mythologies* essay from 1957 devoted to so-called amateur wrestling and its staged underpinnings.¹ The spectacle of wrestling, Barthes's essay suggests, occupies a liminal position between athletics and performance, between exquisite physical skill and brutality, between competition and entertainment,

between art and aggression. Attending a wrestling match, at least in Barthes's time, indeed constituted an experience somewhat akin to attending a drama by Molière or Racine. It therefore comes as no surprise that wrestling would enjoy such pronounced cultural clout in the early part of the twentieth century, when modern athletics gained widespread popularity and commodification throughout the Western world. As befits this popular sport's theatricality, the wrestler loomed as one of the largest, most striking athletic figures of the modern era.

In Russia at the turn into the twentieth century, the stature of wrestlers and their sport proved particularly lofty. Appealing to the evolving tastes of the country's urban public, the ancient and primal pastime of wrestling underwent a sudden revival before achieving a surprisingly high level of exposure in the elite as well as popular culture of the day. The hulking "strongmen" who wrestled for enthralled crowds in St. Petersburg, Moscow, and elsewhere triggered a sharp rise in attendance at sporting events while they also provided the impetus for a burst of interest in physical fitness that proliferated throughout the late Tsarist era and well into the Soviet era. From the end of the nineteenth century until the years immediately following the Russian Revolution, wrestling would play an essential, even transformative role in Russian culture. And although the sport would preserve some of its cultural capital immediately after 1917, it ultimately remained a prerevolutionary pastime, for the cosmopolitan, international flavor of wrestling, along with the glorification of its massive, preening superstars, had little place in the more egalitarian atmosphere of 1920s Soviet Russia. Yet it was out of wrestling that the country's sports movement and its ideals materialized. Hence, to understand the unique cultural significance of Russian and early Soviet athletics, one must first grapple, so to speak, with the sport of wrestling and its colossal, often pantomime practitioners.

During the several decades leading up to World War I and the 1917 Revolution, wrestling tournaments in Russia's circuses and at other popular public venues became the talk of the town. A "blossoming of Greco-Roman wrestling," in the words of the poet Blok, ensued.² Thanks to the era's well-publicized competitions, circus strongmen assumed the stature of athletic superstars, as prize-winning wrestlers readily flaunted their huge bodies and impressive physiques before an adoring public (fig. 1). Wrestling, in accordance with its liminal status, subsequently appealed to a wide variety of writers and painters at this time, for both popular, "lowbrow" artists and artists of a more elevated, elite stature seized upon the artistry of these iconic athletes as well as the elation and pain so often experienced by them in the heat of competition. This chapter therefore explores the conspicuous yet insufficiently examined impact of wrestling in pre-revolutionary Russia and the oversized role the sport's massive athletes played in the artistic culture of the day. By probing wrestling's burst of popularity in



Figure 1. Greco-Roman Wrestling International Championship, St. Petersburg, 1910.

the late Imperial era through the prism of Russian artistic culture and its subversive underpinnings, this chapter illuminates the initial desire among Russian writers and painters to integrate their work with the rapid development and social momentum of modern athletics. Ingeniously emulating professional wrestlers and the physical perfection they showcased, Russia's artistic class uncovered a revolutionary source of energy and inventiveness.

The Rise of Wrestling in Russia

At the height of its popularity in Russia, wrestling served as a vivid distillation of the athletic and physical fitness craze that spread across Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century. In compelling, electrifying fashion, the sport combined the era's increasing emphasis on muscular development and athletic prowess with the unique pleasures of sports spectatorship. In prompting a burst of Russian interest in sports, wrestling appealed to both spectators and budding athletes, for fans flocked to the circus to watch the matches while a growing group of physical fitness enthusiasts emulated the impressive physical specimens on display in the wrestling ring. The popular Russian wrestlers of the day would soon become living, breathing billboards for not just wrestling but also

weightlifting, gymnastics, and, more broadly, competitive athletics as a mass phenomenon. “In Tsarist Russia,” Soviet circus historian Yuri Dmitriev has stressed, “there was no other more effective form of propaganda for sports than circus wrestling.”³ As if to accommodate the multiple avenues into athletics, Russia’s wrestling practices would evolve in a complex, twofold manner, whereby both the well-attended Russian circuses of the day and various athletic clubs, modeled after England’s amateur sports organizations, began to thrive. Together these athletic clubs and the circus generated homegrown practitioners of this new cultural-athletic phenomenon as well as a large, passionate group of wrestling devotees, who attended the circus matches and often lifted weights or practiced gymnastics themselves in an effort to improve their own physical capabilities.

At the turn into the twentieth century, the broad Russian term *tiazhelaia atletika*—literally “heavy athletics” yet terminology generally denoting the sport of weightlifting (and paired with *legkaia atletika*, or “light athletics,” as the sport of track and field is referred to in Russian)—constituted not just bodybuilding but also wrestling and boxing.⁴ At various international events, Russia’s finest strongmen, popularly referred to as “Herculeses” (*Gerkulesy*), initially competed by lifting weights as well as wrestling, in accordance with the contiguity of these two athletic activities that favored both strength and muscle size. The emergence of organized *tiazhelaia atletika* in Russia can, in fact, be traced back to approximately 1885, when Dr. Vladislav Kraevsky, considered by some to be “the father of Russian athletics,” formed the Circle of Hygienic Gymnasts (*Kruzhok gigenicheskikh gimnazistov*).⁵ Inspired by the St. Petersburg performance of the traveling German strongman Charles Ernest, Kraevsky founded his weightlifting and wrestling club that would subsequently be renamed Dr. Kraevsky’s Circle of Athletic Enthusiasts (*Kruzhok liubitelei atletiki doktora Kraevskogo*).⁶ The explicit aim of this athletic circle was to produce healthy, strong Russians. In an era often noted for its effete, decadent flair, Kraevsky and other aficionados of athletics (e.g., Petr Lesgaft) believed that Russians needed to become stronger, healthier, and more athletic, a lifestyle choice that was seen as an antidote to fin-de-siècle decadence (and homosexuality).⁷ In 1909, the writer and unabashed wrestling enthusiast Aleksandr Kuprin remarked, “I consider wrestling beneficial not merely as a means to develop one’s musculature, and I must admit that I am not a big fan of our weak modern-day body with its flaccid muscles and flabbiness. . . . We fear even the idea of physical pain.”⁸ Like Kraevsky, Kuprin would look to the English and their emphasis on vigorous, healthy amateur athletics as a useful model for Russian sports: “What enormous influence [wrestling] has on the English, on their vitality and health.”⁹ Under the guidance of Kraevsky and spurred on by the influx of

athleticism from the West, particularly England, Russia's first athletic clubs aimed to improve the vitality and health of its members and, it follows, the health of the nation's populace. As the then-popular writer Nikolay Breshko-Breshkovsky wrote in 1911: "In our era of 'blasé' youth with loose joints, youth in whom flows not blood but muddy water, something akin to serum, there now arises a demand for gymnastics, weightlifting, and wrestling. Russia in this respect has lagged behind the other European governments for such a long, long time. And only in recent years have sports quickly gained the rights of citizenship."¹⁰

Just as England's athletic clubs had arisen in conjunction with the rapid evolution of modern sports in nineteenth-century British society, Russia's athletic clubs sprang up as the country's urban populace began to take an active interest in not only wrestling but also other competitive sports such as soccer and tennis. In Russian cities, large and small, athletic organizations flourished throughout the 1880s and 1890s, quickly shifting away from the elitist British model toward something more egalitarian in nature and open to all. Kraevsky's circle of athletes, for instance, may have at first been the domain of the Russian aristocracy and, in particular, officers of the Imperial Guard, but the club soon opened its doors to working-class athletes.¹¹ By 1896 Kraevsky's circle of weightlifters and wrestlers had grown so popular and multifaceted that it effectively split in two, whereby the wealthy Count G. I. Ribop'er, another important figure in the rise of modern sports in Russia, expanded the circle to form the St. Petersburg Athletic Society (*Sankt-Peterburgskoe atleticheskoe obshchestvo*) while the remainder of Kraevsky's club splintered off to merge with a club for cycling (another sport on the rise at the time), the Cycling-Athletic Society (*Velosipedno-Atleticheskoe obshchestvo*). Two years later, in 1898, this Cycling-Athletic Society enjoyed a robust membership of approximately 520.¹²

While Russia's athletic clubs generated the athletes, Russia's circuses generated the spectators. A popular focal point of turn-of-the-century Russian culture, the circus offered an ideal venue for the promotion of Russia's burgeoning athletic culture, as wrestling and its close cousin, weightlifting, found under the big circus tent a diverse audience poised to appreciate the strength and power essential to these two sports. Although not a traditional circus attraction and arguably a large distraction that overshadowed well-established forms of acrobatic artistry, wrestling for better or worse proved well suited to the circus, for it represented that balance of athleticism and performance found in a variety of conventional circus acts. In developing out of the old-fashioned circus strongman routine, competitive wrestling reinforced Russia's growing appreciation for the human body and the body's muscular potential. And although

nineteenth-century circus wrestlers in Russia initially eschewed the label of athlete, by the start of the new century the sport and its hulking stars had become the standard bearers for the modern athletic movement and its widespread appeal throughout the country.

Wrestling discovered an obliging home in the circus. The amphitheater structure of the circus hall, for one thing, offered an ideal place to view matches, while the soft, straw-strewn floor provided a forgiving surface for all the rough grappling and heavy tumbling of the burly wrestlers.¹³ Meanwhile, the circus's long-standing emphasis on extraordinary, enthralling performances by human "freaks of nature" accommodated the muscle-bound wrestlers and their larger-than-life size.¹⁴ Both a heavy-handed manifestation of the refined athleticism that characterized so many circus acts and a harbinger of the enormous popularity spectator sports would come to enjoy among the masses throughout much of the twentieth century in Russia and elsewhere, circus wrestling and its competitive (or seemingly competitive) underpinnings afforded audiences considerable excitement and drama. Dmitriev, however, argues that the era's wrestling tournaments and exhibitions took significant attention away from other circus acts and that "the development of wrestling in circus arenas testifies not to the strength but to the weakness of the prerevolutionary bourgeois circus."¹⁵ Soviet revisionism aside, Dmitriev's comments underscore the overwhelming cultural import of wrestling at the time. Wrestling may have adversely affected the aesthetic purity of the circus spectacle, but the sport's reliance on the circus fortified its artistry, a merging of art and athleticism that would catch the eye of many an artist in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

Wrestling rapidly evolved under the bright circus lights. The traditional "Russian" practice of grappling with belts (*poiiasnaia bor'ba*, or *bor'ba na poiiasakh*)—a style that had originated among the peasantry before becoming a mainstay of nineteenth-century Russian circuses—would soon fall by the wayside in favor of foreign-born Greco-Roman wrestling, which Russians referred to as *frantsuzskaia bor'ba* ("French wrestling"), due to the sport's popularity in France in the 1840s.¹⁶ Much of the credit for this evolution in Russian wrestling can be given to Kraevsky's athletic club and, in particular, to V. A. Pytlyasinsky, a Polish world champion wrestler who joined the club in 1892. Pytlyasinsky brought with him to Russia a deep knowledge of classical (i.e., Greco-Roman) wrestling acquired during his time competing in international tournaments, and it was thanks to Pytlyasinsky's influence at the club that such a dramatic shift occurred in the nation's wrestling style.¹⁷ Instead of hoisting up one's opponent by the belt (*za poiias*), circus wrestlers in Russia began to adopt the West's Greco-Roman, "French" style, which required only the use of the upper body, with anything below the waist off limits. This foreign-born variation on the sport

and its rules soon provided competitors with greater cosmopolitan respectability as well as implicit ties to antiquity, ancient Greece's glorification of the athletic body, and Rome's imperial aggression. Greco-Roman wrestling, moreover, was the style of wrestling on display at the first Modern Olympic Games in 1896, thus endowing this Western variation of the sport with even more clout.¹⁸ And it was due to the pronounced shift in wrestling styles that the sport became one of the most popular attractions in the Russian circus by the turn into the new century. What had begun with pugnacious strongmen performing and preening in the circus ring, calling out to audience members to try their luck against them, quickly evolved into something far more athletic, organized, fashionable, and also appealing to Russia's upper class.

According to the famous Russian wrestler and wrestling impresario Ivan Lebedev, who penned a range of books and articles on wrestling and athletics (e.g., *Russian Strongmen* [*Russkie silachi*, 1910] and *Wrestlers* [*Bortsy*, 1917]), wrestling did not technically become a professional sport in Russia until 1895, when the country's wrestlers switched to the Greco-Roman style.¹⁹ Before 1895, in fact, the Tsarist government had prohibited professionalization of the sport, fearing that it would facilitate the rise of a strong, pugnacious peasantry.²⁰ Upon gaining official approval, professional Greco-Roman wrestling at first entailed a legitimate contest that tested the strength of the *bortsy* ("wrestlers").²¹ Up until 1914, no weight categories existed, and victory could be achieved only by pinning an opponent's shoulders to the ground. If, after twenty minutes, neither wrestler had prevailed, the two competitors would then proceed on to a forty-minute round, and, if necessary, a third round of indefinite length until one wrestler fell; matches were known to go as long as eight or nine hours (today, Greco-Roman wrestling matches consist of three two-minute periods, with points given for various successful moves).²²

At the outset, professional Russian wrestling strove for athletic, competitive legitimacy. Throughout the first decade or so of the new century, circuses and athletic clubs alike promoted the sport not as a staged circus attraction but as a serious athletic activity that celebrated its ancient Greek roots and firmly adhered to the revived Greek ideal of *agon*. Hence, wrestlers from all over Europe and beyond traveled to Russia to participate in the major wrestling tournaments of the day, whereby Russian-trained wrestlers increasingly made their mark on the sport. Reaping the benefits of its shift to the professional, Greco-Roman style, circus-based wrestling grew rapidly in popularity, especially in urban Russia, as some of the most prominent circuses hosted wrestling events that rivaled competitions in the West. In Moscow, the Nikitin Circus held international tournaments for the sport, while in St. Petersburg, two central circuses—the Cinizelli Circus (today the St. Petersburg State Circus) and the Moderne

(located on the Petrograd side of St. Petersburg before being dismantled for its wood in 1919)—likewise promoted a series of high-profile competitions.²³ As Vladimir Nabokov noted in recollections of prerevolutionary St. Petersburg, the Cinizelli Circus became “famous for its wrestling tournaments.”²⁴ Wrestling matches also transpired in nightclubs and theaters, for instance Moscow’s Aquarium Nightclub and the Zoological Garden’s theater, as well as in more unusual venues like skating rinks along St. Petersburg’s Nevsky Prospect or even in movie theaters prior to screenings. Yet it was in the circus that wrestling made its most significant mark.²⁵

The peak in popularity for Russian circus wrestling occurred roughly between 1906 and 1913. With the onset of World War I and the ensuing 1917 Revolution, the sport would begin to lose much of its so-called cultural cachet. But even when the sport flourished, the seeds of its demise in Russia were sown once wrestling tournaments and exhibitions began boosting spectacle over competition. To wrestle legitimately (i.e., competitively) was, in Russian wrestling jargon, to *burit*, or “drill down,” while the staging of matches and their results became known as *shike* (from the French word *chiqué* and, more specifically, *c’est du chiqué*, the French phrase connoting the act of bluffing or simulation). Professional wrestling in Russia became increasingly prone to semi-deceptive simulation. To quote Kuprin’s 1909 remarks on wrestling again, “I know professional wrestling extremely well. For in it, everything is one long parade. Muscles, poses, everything is paraded all the way up to victory.”²⁶ By 1913, the grueling rigors of the sport and the lure of monetary reward for professional wrestlers (and promoters) had begun to compel more and more athletes to arrange results prior to matches, as competitive tournaments gave way to overtly theatrical, staged bouts and a long series of extravagant parades, as the increasingly exasperated Kuprin suggested.²⁷ And with the rise of wrestling “personalities” such as Ivan Lebedev and Ivan Zaikin came a gradual de-emphasis on competition for the sake of theatricality, flare, and stardom. According to Dmitriev, Lebedev—more of an athletic impresario than an athlete—bears much of the responsibility for the conspicuous shift of circus wrestling matches from competitive, hard-fought bouts to staged displays in which the outcome had been predetermined.²⁸ Lebedev, Dmitriev argues, “melodramatized [Russia’s] wrestling tournaments” by introducing prematch parades of the athletes and assigning specific roles and even personae to the wrestlers.²⁹ But while such theatricalization of the sporting event detracted from the competitive, athletic spirit of wrestling, the spectacle succeeded in attracting large audiences—and large profits—in Russia.

The circus setting for the wrestling matches and the increasing ambiguity surrounding the athletic contest’s legitimacy can also be linked to the explicit

theatricality of wrestling that Roland Barthes highlighted. Contrasting “true” wrestling with a false, professional style that went to great pains to obscure its staged nature, Barthes notes: “True wrestling . . . is performed in second-rate halls, where the public spontaneously attunes itself to the spectacular nature of the contest, like the audience at a suburban cinema. . . . The public is completely uninterested in knowing whether the contest is rigged or not, and rightly so; it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle, which is to abolish all motives and all consequences: what matters is not what it thinks but what it sees.”³⁰ Although wrestling in prerevolutionary Russia had more of a genuine competitive edge to it than professional wrestling had in Barthes’s day, the theatricality of Imperial Russia’s most popular spectator sport could not be ignored. Audiences at the time clearly relished the wrestling spectacle—what they saw, not what they thought, to paraphrase Barthes—and grew to appreciate the dramatic moments of the match, as evidenced by an array of art devoted to the sport. According to Barthes, wrestlers would play up their suffering before the public, and while this staged drama was only in its inaugural stages in prerevolutionary Russia, out of the wrestling came not only a Russian appreciation for muscular athleticism but also an appreciation for athletic spectacle and art. Even the Soviet, Stalinist-era *fizkul’tura* parades might be seen as a later-day rendition of the semi-staged circus wrestling from the late Imperial era.

The Cult(ure) of the Wrestler

“Every person can be a Hercules!” Ivan Lebedev exclaimed in 1916 on the very first page of *Weightlifting (Tiazhelaia atletika)*, one of the various wrestling-related books the athlete-turned-impresario Lebedev wrote in the years leading up to the 1917 Russian Revolution.³¹ Exhorting the Russian populace to take up bodybuilding and athletics, Lebedev offered words of encouragement—self-help of a rudimentary sort—to aspiring athletes. Yet given Lebedev’s ubiquity in popular culture of the day, such advice can also be interpreted within a broader historical framework. Anyone, Lebedev suggested, could acquire the strength and assertiveness displayed by the nation’s most successful wrestlers. Although not a trumpeting of revolution per se, Lebedev’s advice suggested that all Russians had it in them to acquire a physique that could help them assert themselves and take certain matters into their own soon-to-be-powerful hands. As if heeding such rousing counsel, Russian writers and painters began to seek inspiration from the era’s most famous wrestlers and even model their behavior after them. A wide variety of Russian artists took an active—sometimes very active—interest in the circus and its wrestling bouts. From Aleksandr Kuprin, who began training with many of the most prominent wrestlers of the day, to Maksim Gorky,

who fraternized with these same wrestling stars, to a host of “left,” avant-garde painters and poets who found in the popular wrestling tournaments a bravado, energy, and corporeal freedom well suited to their iconoclastic attitudes toward convention, Russian artists not only attended the circus wrestling matches but also began to emulate the massive athletes themselves. As athletic avatars of a new world full of physicality and fitness, the era’s wrestlers offered an enticing prototype for writers and painters aiming to assert their own potent, creative, and, in certain cases, revolutionary influence in Russian society.

In the twilight of the late Tsarist era, Russia’s wrestlers emerged as some of the country’s most ubiquitous superstars, featured in countless photographs, newspaper articles, and other popular forms of publicity. Following in the very large footsteps of V. A. Pytlyasinsky and Vilyams Moor-Znamensky (né Aleksandr Znamensky), another popular wrestler from the 1890s who performed in the circus to much acclaim, an impressive parade of famous wrestlers wound its way through late Imperial Russian society. First and foremost among these modern-day *bogatyri* (i.e., heroic warriors, as the nation’s wrestlers were often called in accordance with Russian folklore) was Georg Gakkenshmidt (or Hackenschmidt). Dubbed the “Russian Lion,” despite being a Baltic German from what today is Estonia, Gakkenshmidt moved early in his career to St. Petersburg to train under Kraevsky, and he would subsequently become Russia’s first world champion in 1901.³² Another Baltic German, the two-time world champion Georg Lurikh, won his first world championship in late 1901 in Hamburg, Germany; having been trained by Gakkenshmidt, Lurikh made a name for himself thanks not only to his wrestling prowess but also to his cultured, educated ways and impressive chess-playing abilities (and his womanizing).³³ Then there was Ivan Poddubny, a wrestler from a humble, Cossack background who would go on to win two world championships in Paris between 1905 and 1908.³⁴ After Poddubny came a slightly younger group of celebrated Russian wrestlers that included Ivan Zaikin, who would also gain renown for his exploits in aviation; Ivan Shemiakin, who achieved great success in the wrestling ring throughout the first decades of the new century; and the multifaceted Lebedev. Often referred to as Uncle Vanya (Diadia Vania), particularly after transforming himself from semi-successful wrestler to full-fledged wrestling impresario, referee, and prolific advocate for the sport, Lebedev was credited—or charged, as the case may be—with accentuating the entertainment and commercial value of professional wrestling by means of wrestler parades, costumes, and fixed contests. Featured in the popular sports magazines that proliferated in turn-of-the-century Russia, these and other successful wrestlers earned high cultural status and fame almost overnight.

In various respects, the wrestlers themselves craved the attention and admiration that artists and other notable cultural luminaries suddenly endowed upon them. Despite—or perhaps because of—their burly, rough nature, the sport's colossal superstars sought to elevate the cultural, classical, and even cerebral underpinnings of their corporeal pastime. Experienced wrestlers, at the time referred to as “professors of athletics,” often highlighted their sport's artistic, ostensibly intellectual essence in a concerted effort to downplay its inherent physicality and to raise the stature of athletics in general in Russia, particularly among the Russian intelligentsia. In her discussion of wrestling's central place within late Tsarist-era Russian culture, Louise McReynolds observes how Lebedev “played up images of wrestlers as intellectuals, a nice publicity ploy in the perennial brains-versus-brawn polemic.”³⁵ Consider, for instance, a 1912 article from the prerevolutionary St. Petersburg cultural magazine *Blue Journal* (*Sinii zhurnal*) titled “The Herculeases of the Twentieth Century” (“Gerkulesy XX veka”), which, in addition to featuring a short foreword that noted how “it is hardly a surprise that writers and the common public take such a keen interest in the inner life of wrestlers,” included commentary by “professor” Lebedev on the cerebral, creative mind-set of some of Russia's most popular wrestlers.³⁶ Just as the sport fluctuated between competition and spectacle, the wrestlers and their promoters sought to balance brawn and brute force with a stylized presentation of the athletes' cultural refinement and smarts in order to boost the sport's popularity among Russia's educated classes. Although the wrestlers did not disassociate themselves from their sport's ancient, primitive roots, they went to great lengths to present themselves as elegant, refined athletes. As a result of their successful merging of peasant-like power and well-honed artistry, wrestlers accrued valuable cultural capital and celebrity status, thus prompting writers, painters, and a host of other public personalities to seek out their company. Pre-saging the fusion of celebrity and sports that increasingly prevailed throughout the twentieth century, Imperial Russia's wrestlers attracted a wide range of cultural personages, many of whom wanted to be seen side by side with the huge athletes.³⁷

Most noteworthy at the time was the unbridled enthusiasm of Kuprin, who took the wrestling *Weltanschauung* to new heights. Closely involved with the sport and its rapid development across Imperial Russia, Kuprin fraternized with a number of celebrated wrestlers. In Kiev, where he lived between 1894 and 1901, Kuprin helped establish the Kiev Athletic Society, and it was here that he became an ardent lightweight wrestler as well as a referee (he later refereed at wrestling tournaments in Moscow's *Moderne Circus*). Through the Kiev Athletic Society Kuprin befriended, among others, the future world



Figure 2. The wrestler Ivan Zaikin holding Aleksandr Kuprin (*right*) and Aleksey Budishchev (*left*).

champions Poddubny, Lebedev, and Zaikin. Several sources even suggest that it was Kuprin who persuaded Poddubny to switch from traditional circus wrestling with belts to the more modern, professional Greco-Roman style.³⁸ Kuprin eagerly tapped into the modern ethos of physical strength so vividly embodied by the era's wrestlers. In one famous photograph from 1913, the writer-wrestler appeared with the enormous Zaikin, who has hoisted up Kuprin with his left arm and the lesser-known writer Aleksey Budishchev with his right arm (fig. 2).

This photograph might be seen as playing on earlier exploits by Zaikin and Kuprin. In “My Flight” (“Moi polet”), one of the various wrestling-related pieces that appeared on the pages of *Blue Journal*, Kuprin describes a plane ride in 1910 with Zaikin, who at the time had taken a break from wrestling to try his luck in the air and fly for two wealthy brothers intent on exploiting “the amazing audacity of this illiterate but courageous, intelligent, and passionate man.”³⁹ Kuprin persuaded Zaikin to take him up in a small Farman plane, but this foray into the skies quickly ended when the two men came close to crashing. After their perilous flight, Zaikin returned to the wrestling ring and Kuprin swore off flying. Through wrestling and aviation, two of the more heroic, awe-inspiring pursuits of the prerevolutionary era, the “illiterate but intelligent” Zaikin bolstered his “New Man” persona in ways that clearly appealed to Kuprin and others.

Anton Chekhov, a close acquaintance of Kuprin’s, did not follow his compatriot’s example by taking up wrestling, but he did help found the Russian Gymnastics Society in 1883 and attend wrestling exhibitions in Moscow in the years leading up to 1904, the year of his death.⁴⁰ One prominent Russian sports magazine from 1909 featured a posthumous article about Chekhov’s fascination with wrestling that quoted the late writer marveling at the physicality of Russia’s wrestlers and remarking on the interest of numerous cultural figures in the athletic spectacle that was professional wrestling. The author of the article describes encountering the famous Russian writer in 1903 at the Olympia Theater, a popular wrestling venue in prerevolutionary Moscow.

After the operetta at Aquarium, Anton Pavlovich [Chekhov], staying at the time in Moscow, set off for Olympia and sat for two hours at the wrestling matches. At intermission, he went out into the garden. Near him stood Vladimir Ivanovich Nemirovich-Danchenko, A. L. Vishnevsky and the acting editor of the newspaper *The Courier*, I. D. Novik.

Having worked at *The Courier*, I was introduced to Anton Pavlovich as an aficionado of wrestling by Mr. Novik.

Anton Pavlovich, gently smiling, turned to me with the following question:

“Tell me, please, why is it that foreign wrestlers always prevail; for, if I am not mistaken, Dr. Kraevsky and Pytlyasinsky have trained many in this art.”

I answered that there were only three Russians able to match their strength with the elite foreign wrestlers, and I referred to them by name [presumably Gakkenshmidt, Lurikh, and Poddubny].

“It is a curious spectacle, but not to exaggerate things, it reminds me of

rooster fights . . . Yes, and all these *gestures* and the tossing over one's head, the overly visible massaging of each other's neck muscles, the bloodshot eyes, and the uneven breathing all evoke at times an unpleasant sensation," noted Anton Pavlovich, "yet in our unhealthy era, there's certainly no harm in looking at these robust fellows.

"And what a fancy people have taken to wrestling! I have been told that K.," Anton Pavlovich gave the surname [Kuprin] of the famous artist and contributor to *New Times*, "trains for hours with athletes, while the writer B.-B. [Breshko-Breshkovsky] is writing a novel based on the life of wrestlers."

The electric bell rang out to announce the resumption of the matches.

Anton Pavlovich, offering me his hand, said: "I myself am certainly not a stranger to sports, for I love, like an apostle, to fish."

We departed. Heading to the editorial office, I recalled Chekhov's words (in his correspondence with A. N. Pleshcheyev): "My holy of holies is the human body, health."⁴¹

Attending wrestling matches at an early stage in the sport's development in Russia, when the nation's wrestlers had only just begun to make their mark, Chekhov might have been put off by some of the theatrical preening, but like others at the time he discerned "art" in the wrestling performance. And it comes as little surprise that accompanying Chekhov at the event were the celebrated theater director Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko and the Moscow Art Theater actor Aleksandr Vishnevsky, for wrestling compellingly integrated the dramatic arts with the era's increasing emphasis on physical fitness. A once much healthier Chekhov, as the author of this short article also notes, had exclaimed in 1889, "My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two take. Such is the program I would adhere to if I were a major artist."⁴² Even before declaring such a healthy, liberated corporeal program and before becoming a "major artist," Chekhov had shown a keen interest in the physical possibilities of the human body, for instance in "A Woman without Preconceptions" ("Zhen-shchina bez predrassudkov"), a short humorous sketch from 1884 featuring an athletic main protagonist who had once worked in the circus: "A man of strength!" exclaims Chekhov's narrator, "I've never known anyone else like him!"⁴³ Although quite ill by 1903, Chekhov nevertheless expressed a sincere interest in the wrestlers and their sport, providing yet another artist's reflection of the era's dramatic move toward "robust" athletic competition and physical vigor.

Russian artists' embrace of wrestling and its athletic stars often took a comedic turn, as self-conscious irony informed much of the athletic-artistic crossover. In fact, a semi-serious lampooning of wrestlers and wrestling customs arose as a popular practice among a wide range of Russian writers, painters, and performers at the time. Even one of the most prominent and respected of Russia's theater directors, Konstantin Stanislavsky, found inspiration in circus wrestling. As cofounder of the Moscow Art Theater (along with Nemirovich-Danchenko, Chekhov's fellow wrestling fan), Stanislavsky tapped into the sport's theatricality as well as the popular fad of simulated wrestling matches and wrestler parades. Elaborating on a series of parodies that the Moscow Art Theater put on as "Cabbage Nights" (in Russian *kapustniki*, an old form of celebration featuring humorous songs and skits) around 1910, the celebrated Russian theater director described in his autobiographical *My Life in Art* a one-time sketch devoted to professional circus wrestling: "There was also a parody of wrestling which was very much in fashion at the time. It was between an elegant, slim Frenchman, played by [Vasily] Kachalov, in a top and feminine pantaloons, and a hefty Russian coachman, played by [Vladimir] Gribunin, in a shirt and rolled-up trousers. There was, of course, no match, only a comic collection of poses, satirizing corrupt judges and wrestlers."⁴⁴ In this same sketch, moreover, the famous Russian singer Fyodor Chaliapin played an Asian wrestler. As suggested by Stanislavsky's remarks, the sport's liminal spot between legitimate competition and the "corrupt" professional practices of the day provided useful fodder for artistic parody and wrestling sketches, which mocked prevailing notions of masculinity and athleticism. Vladimir Gotovtsev, the Russian/Soviet stage and screen actor who performed at the Moscow Art Theater under the direction of Stanislavsky, would recall:

A great number of circus parodies were put on during the 1910–11 season. The famous wrestler [Marinus] van Riel, was present at one such performance. N. Podgorny, an actor in Stanislavsky's Studio, put on a mock wrestling match with him. We set up an "arena" on stage and the Manager (Stanislavsky) took his place at one of the entrances. He was dressed in shiny black knee-boots, breeches, a vest and a top hat. This was his childhood dream come true. He held a staff and, as the emblem of his high office, a bell. The finishing touch of the threatening figure he presented was his stern gaze from under his bushy black brows. Actually, he was impersonating Albert Salamonsky, director of the Moscow Circus.⁴⁵

Inspired by Dutch wrestler Marinus van Riel, the very same Dutchman whom Blok would praise in his foreword to *Retribution*, the Moscow Art Theater actor

Nikolay Podgorny and Stanislavsky captured circus wrestling's carnivalesque spirit with their parody. Reinforcing the popularity of mock wrestling performances, Gotovtsev revels in the circus-like farce that professional wrestling increasingly constituted while he also hints at the sport's relevance to contemporary theater at the time.

A beguiling melding of art, theater, and wrestling took place in the Moscow apartment of the Russian avant-garde painter Aristarkh Lentulov during social gatherings there in the early 1910s. In reminiscences, Lentulov describes how he and his guests, many of whom were prominent artists, mocked the popularity and hyperbolic spectacle of wrestling by staging wrestling parades and even matches.

There were also sports numbers. For example, a parade of wrestlers, as is done in the circus before wrestling matches. I portrayed a referee, the famous Uncle Vanya—I. V. Lebedev, who then enjoyed great success in this walk of life and had created an entire encyclopedia of wise adages and witticisms in response to spectators' excited questions or remarks. For example, "The blow is strong, but what a neck," or "What are two or three mortal blows for an ordinary mortal," "A hit to the wrestler's neck is pure pleasure." . . . No less popular was his manner of proclaiming, "There will be a one-minute break." He somehow broadcast this in a particularly thunderous fashion, breaking off and lowering his voice to a hoarse murmur on the last syllable. . . .

My voice was good enough to imitate Uncle Vanya quite accurately, and I led out the parade, announcing to the public the titles and surnames of the wrestlers. Those portraying wrestlers took off their coats and shirts, and, of course, it was quite enough to die from laughter contemplating in such a state, for instance, [Petr] Konchalovsky with his hairy chest that was as broad as a cupboard, [Ilya] Mashkov with his gorilla-like build, or, for example, [Vasily] Rozhdestvensky, thin as a reed and long and starved like a poor cart horse, while even funnier was [Robert] Fal'k in glasses with his sunken chest. But everyone simply fell on the floor from laughter when I, trying to be witty, presented everyone thusly: "Champion of Western European painting with an orientation toward Cezanne Petr Konchalovsky" or "Champion of Nizhnyi-Novgorod-French painting I. Mashkov," "Madroli-Yakul'mid ([Georgy] Yakulov)—Champion of Simultaneous Painting in Moscow, Vasily Rozhdestvensky—Tula," etc. Sometimes these comic numbers ended in actual wrestling.⁴⁶

As so many were apt to do at the time, Lentulov and his artist-guests reveled in the spectacle of the wrestling while playing on the very ironic overlap of

avant-garde Left art and the sport. Referee “Uncle Vanya” Lebedev, such a popular, ubiquitous figure at the time, offered an enticing model for the host, who emulated the wrestling impresario’s authoritative voice and unconventionality during the mock numbers and athletic enactment of painting styles. As Lentulov went on to explain in these same reminiscences, he even took his Uncle Vanya imitation a step further by sitting on the jury at professional matches at a time when “the public flocked to these wrestling championships but did not believe in the legitimacy of matches.”⁴⁷

Like Lentulov and Stanislavsky, Maksim Gorky would orchestrate his own wrestling matches, but he initially held a contemptuous view of the wrestlers and their loud presence in the turn-of-the-century circus. In a newspaper report from early in his career, Gorky expressed skepticism toward popular circus wrestlers: “All these ‘world-renown,’ ‘unconquerable’ and unbelievably stupid wrestlers are also Lilliputians, all of them have tiny heads on massive bodies, their eyes are dull, their expressions wooden. It is the duty of the press to make the public realize that all these giants and Lilliputians, clowns, magicians, and three-legged freaks are neither rarities nor the result of creative art. They are victims artificially nurtured and especially provided for the public.”⁴⁸ Reflecting on the preprofessional phase of the circus wrestling, when freakishly enormous wrestlers performed alongside other rarities from the circus world, Gorky resisted the growing tendency at the time to perceive circus performance as creative art. In Gorky’s view, those wrestlers embodied both Gulliver with their outsized bodies and the little Lilliputians with their tiny intellects. That view, however, would change.

As the proverbial father of Socialist Realism and a member of the Bolshevik party from its beginning, Gorky could surely detect a harbinger of revolution and cultural upheaval when he saw one. Perhaps he came to see one in the ascendancy of that physical freedom inherent to wrestling. Although he had originally dismissed the wrestlers and their intelligence, or lack thereof, he came to appreciate their unprecedented celebrity in Russian society and what they might portend for the future of Russia. Reminiscences about Gorky by the artist Yury Annenkov suggest that a pronounced change in Gorky’s attitude toward wrestling and wrestlers had occurred in the years before the revolution. Annenkov relates that at the peak of the sport’s popularity in Russia, Gorky fraternized with several of the wrestling stars of the day, for instance Ivan Poddubny. Annenkov recounts: “Our hero, champion of the world Ivan Poddubny, would also come to myza Lentula [Gorky’s home in Finland]. At lunch, having eaten three steaks, he decided to philosophize: ‘In Russia,’ he said, ‘there are three celebrities: myself, Gorky, and Vyal’tseva [a famous Russian singer at the time].’ Gorky responded in full seriousness: ‘I am positively embarrassed: the guests have begun to flatter their host.’”⁴⁹ The flattered Gorky,

Annenkov recalls, would also organize and judge makeshift wrestling matches among friends, including Annenkov himself, to whom Gorky bequeathed the wrestling moniker “Storm of Finland.” And when Annenkov fought against a dark-complexioned gymnast nicknamed “Alfonso XIV of Spain,” Gorky came to Annenkov’s rescue when his “Spanish” opponent nearly choked him. As Gorky quipped, per Annenkov, “‘Here, Your Excellency, we have French [Greco-Roman] wrestling, not bullfighting: there’s no need to finish off your opponent.’”⁵⁰ All of this, of course, may have been in jest, but the popular, international flavor of the sport and its liberated spirit, it is clear, had crept into artists’ perceptions of the wrestlers and their staged personae.

Reflecting wrestling’s prestige at the time, the conspicuous desire of artists to parody, emulate, or simply rub elbows with professional wrestlers confirmed the sport’s cultural stature. Yet the question remains, why did artists take such an intense interest in the wrestlers? Was it simply a matter of fame and celebrity, whereby writers, actors, and painters enthusiastically grabbed on to a fleeting fad that had endowed the wrestlers with overnight prestige? Or did Russia’s creative vanguard glean something more significant from wrestling, discovering in the sport artistic provender that only the huge wrestlers could provide? One could in fact surmise that the wrestlers offered artists a creative, energetic boost and a sense of freedom derived from the unfettered athletic body. While wrestling prompted a writer such as Kuprin to develop a robust authorial persona and a theater director such as Stanislavsky to heighten the intensity of his dramatic productions, it also facilitated Left artists’ dramatic break from the past, as a subsequent chapter of this study will argue. Embodying early twentieth-century Russia’s unique Neoprimativist amalgamation of peasant culture and urban modernity, the wrestler presented a compelling model for modernist innovation and its impulse toward a revolutionary upheaval of artistic convention. The wrestling craze was indeed a slap in the face of elite, effete culture, for it suggested that a new egalitarian spirit in Russian artistic culture had arrived. As John Malmstad puts it, through an embrace of wrestling and other sports, avant-garde artists “broke down age-old distinctions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ subject matter in art.”⁵¹ Simultaneously, writers and painters helped wrestlers achieve a lofty cultural standing in Russian society that further undermined the social status quo. Wrestling became more than just a circus attraction or a sporting event, and wrestlers became more than mere athletes. They personified the emergence of a new sort of corporeal freedom and even a new human order.

As the embodiment of a “New” human specimen full of power and agility, Russia’s champion wrestlers offered vivid proof that the human body could be transformed to suit modern times. And in fraternizing with these transformed

athletes, many of Russia's artists began not only to merge art and athletics but to fashion themselves as athletes. This surely reflected a broader inclination among many in early twentieth-century Russia to aestheticize one's life through the creation of a "larger than life" persona. What has been labeled *life-creation*—or, in Russian, *zhiznetvorchestvo*—emerged as a guiding principle for numerous Russian artists at this time and influenced, I contend, the decision of certain writers and painters to seize upon the physicality of the wrestlers as a guiding principle for their own work and lives. In discussion of *zhiznetvorchestvo*, Irina Paperno emphasizes that much of the impulse to construct life as an aesthetic creation stemmed from Russian revolutionary thought of the 1860s and the ideal of a social utopia. "The central word of the day," Paperno explains, "was 'the new man' (or woman) who had shaken off 'the Old Adam.'"⁵² Citing Chernyshevsky's 1863 *What Is to Be Done?*, which featured the subtitle *From the Tales about the New People* (*Iz rasskazov o novykh liudiakh*), Paperno underscores this famous novel's focus on the "transfiguration" of the modern, progressive man as a revolutionary forerunner of a new world; for Paperno, Silver Age artists' urge toward "life creation" reflected the Russian intelligentsia's growing faith in a new manifestation of humankind and society. Hence, it is not hard to see how the wrestlers and their exceptional power could bolster such ideals, for what better way to build up a "New" self than through weightlifting and wrestling?

In fact, *What Is to be Done?* features a lengthy passage on the weightlifting and gymnastics exercises of Rakhmetov, one of Chernyshevsky's secondary characters. A progressive intellectual, budding revolutionary, and precursor of sorts to the turn-of-the-century wrestlers (or at least to the artists who emulated these wrestlers), Rakhmetov passionately works to develop his body and its physical capabilities, dedicating himself to a good, iron-rich diet and strict athletic regimen. Chernyshevsky writes:

When Rakhmetov came to Petersburg at the age of sixteen, he was an ordinary youth of somewhat above-average height and strength, but by no means remarkable. Out of any ten of his peers, two could probably have gotten the better of him. But in the middle of his seventeenth year he decided to acquire physical prowess and began to work hard at it. He took up gymnastics with considerable dedication. That was all right, but gymnastics can improve only the material available; one has to provide oneself with such material. And so, for a while, he spent several hours every day, twice as long as he practiced gymnastics, working at common labor that required physical strength. He carried water, chopped and hauled firewood, felled trees, cut stone, dug earth, and forged iron. He tried many different kinds of work and changed jobs frequently because with each job

and every change, different muscles were being developed. He put himself on a boxer's diet. He began to nourish himself (precisely!) only on those things reputed to build physical strength—beefsteak most of all, almost raw; since that time he's continued on this regimen. About a year after adopting this program, he set off on his travels and had even greater opportunities to devote himself to building physical strength.⁵³

Like a budding athlete, Rakhmetov transforms himself from an “ordinary” young man into an implicitly superior physical specimen poised to dedicate himself to the revolutionary movement within Imperial Russia. A nineteenth-century bogatyr, Rakhmetov would provide an expedient model for those consumed by both athletics and revolutionary fervor prior to 1917.

In her discussion of modernism's exaltation of the “new man” through *zhiznetvorchestvo*, Paperno emphasizes that the era's spirit of “life-creation” merged New Testament themes of renewal, utopian thought derived directly from Chernyshevsky's “New Man,” and the Nietzschean concept of the “super-man.”⁵⁴ Something of a rage among artists and intellectuals throughout Europe at the time, especially amid the fin-de-siècle culture blossoming in Russia's urban centers, Friedrich Nietzsche's credo of individualism and the Superman (the *Übermensch*) complemented the era's entangling of art and athletics. In a 1911 article probing Nietzsche's influence on Russian modernism, the Symbolist Andrey Bely wrote of how the poetic, individualistic “I,” so essential to *zhiznetvorchestvo*, takes shape via the poet's active engagement with reality, which in turn could give rise to new values and a new reality: “‘I’ is not something immobile and immutable within the limits of psychology. Our ‘I’ comes to life in the process of action. . . . Creation concentrated on the self is the creation of values for Nietzsche. In it is the guarantee of life for all of humanity.”⁵⁵ This “process of action”—which the wrestlers emphatically conveyed—would lead to self-creation and, in Bely's opinion, the rise of the poet as herald of an ideal world “for all of humanity.” Championed by avant-garde artists like Vladimir Mayakovsky and Vasily Kamensky, among others, the Nietzschean ideal of the active, individualistic “super-self” inspired the creative, assertive “I” of modernist poets and painters while also serving the era's cult of the body-building wrestler.⁵⁶

Russian modernists, particularly the Symbolists (Blok, Bely) and Cubo-Futurists (Mayakovsky, Kamensky, etc.), sought not only to infuse their verse with personal experiences and individuality but also to portray their lives as an embodiment of the era's idealism. Thus, it is easy to understand why sports-oriented artists presented wrestlers—and themselves, to a certain extent—as athletic pioneers and revolutionaries, the new men of tomorrow who would

actively transport modern reality into the future and trigger a transformation of humankind into strong, liberated beings. Russian society could not fail to benefit. Imbued with this ideal, Russia's prerevolutionary writers (and painters, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters) made themselves artistic wrestlers, so to speak, and made art out of wrestling. Among these writers, Aleksandr Kuprin and Nikolay Breshko-Breshkovsky, different as they were in style, stand out as wrestling enthusiasts who poured that enthusiasm into fiction.

Aleksandr Kuprin's "At the Circus"

Aleksandr Kuprin's infatuation with wrestling went well beyond refereeing matches and having his photograph taken with the era's famous wrestlers. For Kuprin, a practitioner of so-called critical realism linked to the *Znanie* (Knowledge) group of writers to which he belonged, circus wrestling offered an ideal subject for probing physical vitality as well as its sudden evaporation in the face of death. A talented, widely popular writer in Russia at the start of the twentieth century, this "macho realist," as McReynolds has aptly described Kuprin, succeeded in capturing the period's modern, physical spirit on display in Russian circuses.⁵⁷ Kuprin's 1897 short story "Allez!," for instance, highlights the romantic ups and downs of a young circus acrobat, while other circus-related works by Kuprin include the short stories "Lolly" (1895) and "Olga Sur" (1929), as well as the one-act play *The Clown* (*Kloun*, 1897). Yet it was Kuprin's "At the Circus" ("V tsirke"), a 1902 short story rated highly by both Tolstoy and Chekhov, that most comprehensively reflected the writer's affection for circus life and, in particular, the wrestling that proliferated in circuses at the turn of the century.⁵⁸ In "At the Circus," Kuprin puts the spotlight on wrestling, which provides the story its narrative arc and infuses the narrative with a bluntness and vigor reflective of the rugged sport itself and of the author's own appreciation for it. With this story of an intense, dramatic wrestling match and the plight of an awe-inspiring yet ill-fated athlete, Kuprin celebrated the rising, mythic stature and aesthetic power of the professional wrestler in Russia.

As if to highlight the modern era's growing fascination with the human body and Russia's admiration for wrestlers in particular, Kuprin begins "At the Circus" with the disrobing of his protagonist wrestler, G. Arbuzov, in the very first sentence: "Doctor Lukhovitsyn, who was considered the circus's regular physician, ordered Arbuzov to undress."⁵⁹ The doctor, subsequently described as "puny" (6), marvels at Arbuzov's muscular physique and feels a "true passion" for wrestlers, whom he esteems above all other circus performers. Administering to this Herculean patient with means passed along from one generation of physicians to another "since the time of the [ancient] Olympic Games" (5), the

doctor gapes with admiration. Arguably homoerotic, the scene suggests more than mere medical interest, for the doctor relishes the opportunity to inspect such an impressive physical specimen: “When Arbuzov, having freed himself of his starched shirt and having taken off the woven jersey that all circus performers must wear, stood naked up to his waist, the small doctor rubbed his palms with pleasure, walking around the athlete from all sides while admiring his huge, well-fed, brilliant, light-pink body with the sharply bulging protuberances of his hard, wooden-like muscles” (5–6). The voyeuristic doctor, remarking on Arbuzov’s God-given physique, which he finds “more equine than human” (6), gushes that he could deliver a lecture on anatomy with Arbuzov standing beside him. He then lists notable parts of the wrestler’s body for Arbuzov (and the reader): “Do you see these spheres: they are what in anatomy we call biceps. And these are the so-called supinator and pronator muscles” (6). Whether medical, homoerotic, or merely appreciative of physical beauty, the doctor’s perspective at the start of “At the Circus” bespeaks a modern awareness of the athlete’s physique and its potential.

Despite his robust, impressive figure, Arbuzov feels unusually lethargic and weak at the start of “In the Circus.” In explicit terms, Dr. Lukhovitsyn explains to Arbuzov that his symptoms point to a common heart ailment: “Hypertrophy of the heart, this, how should I put it to you, is the type of disease that afflicts all those who take on strenuous muscular work: blacksmiths, sailors, gymnasts, and so on. The walls of their hearts are unnaturally stretched due to constant and extreme exertion, and what arises is that which we in medicine call *cor bovinum*, that is, a bull’s heart. One beautiful day such a heart simply ceases to work, paralysis sets in, and then—*basta*, the performance is over” (8). With technical detail befitting a medically trained writer such as Chekhov (Kuprin, in fact, wrote the story while staying with Chekhov in Yalta), Lukhovitsyn describes Arbuzov’s ailment in detail before recommending that his patient refrain from his scheduled match later that day.⁶⁰ Arbuzov, however, cannot defy the exploitative circus director; wrestling may be a sport, but for Arbuzov it is deadly serious work and a means of sustenance that will ironically cut short his existence.

In “At the Circus,” Kuprin’s narrator, like a passionate spectator, observes all the action with unabashed fascination. Continuing the voyeurism at play in the opening scene with the doctor, Arbuzov’s theatrical pose before the crowd prior to his climactic match becomes the subject of the narrator’s admiration, all of it related in detail indicative of the period’s penchant for athletic spectacle. Kuprin writes:

Arbuzov stood in that typical pose of professional strongmen used for photographs, with their arms folded before their chest and with their chin

drawn into the chest. His body was whiter than that of [the American John] Reber's, while his build was almost flawless: his neck stuck out of the low cut of his leotard like a smooth, round, powerful tree trunk, and on it was supported, freely and lightly, an attractive, reddish, closely shorn head with a low forehead and with the nondescript traits of the face. The chest muscles, extended by the crossing of the arms, appeared under the leotard as two bulging spheres, while the round shoulders emitted the luster of pinkish satin under the blue glare of the electric lights. (31)

Celebrating the classic pose of the professional wrestler, Kuprin describes in glowing yet somewhat depersonalized terms the wrestler's body, whereby the head and face come to constitute a minor, almost irrelevant extremity compared to the wrestler's powerful athletic frame and potent yet ultimately faulty heart.

Kuprin complements the medical details and appreciation for the athletic body with an intricate look at circus life, along with vivid descriptions of the wrestlers' training methods and fighting techniques. Like his fictional doctor, who exhibits "a love for circus spectacle" that is "acute and somewhat ridiculous for someone of his age" (5), Kuprin reveals his own passion for circus life and for wrestling through both the main narrative and the background details. Metaphorically linked to Arbuzov's coronary troubles, such heartfelt affection for the circus and its wrestling bouts emerges as a central motif of "At the Circus." The story includes several secondary characters who, à la Kuprin, relish all the characteristics of circus culture. The Italian clown and acrobat Antonio Batisto, highly valued by the circus troupe for his "inexhaustible invention of new 'numbers'" (14), participates in the spectacle as both a performer and a spectator, demonstrating great knowledge as he "precisely and actively tell[s] about American wrestlers" (16). In a similar vein, one young, large-headed boy, described as a "passionate devotee of the circus" (23), accompanies and aids Arbuzov prior to his match. Peripheral figures watch the wrestling—and other circus acts—with awe and ardor, while Kuprin does likewise.

The Italian Antonio, although a minor character in "At the Circus," reinforces the story's links between athleticism and art. Speaking in a colorful mélange of languages, Antonio provides encouragement to Arbuzov before his final match, explaining how his opponent, the American John Reber, will never achieve the Russian wrestler's impressive level of artistry: "He doesn't have anything here—... *dans le coeur* . . . nothing, no feeling and no *temperament*. He is one big crass butcher, and you are a true *artiste*. You are an artist [*kudozhnik* [*sic*]], and I always derive such great pleasure from looking at you" (18). Here Kuprin, with a good dose of tragic irony, equates the heartfelt intensity of

Arbuzov's wrestling with true artistry, thus suggesting that athleticism could be so much more than a physical act of brute force. Conversely, the animalistic Reber and his fellow American wrestlers, according to Antonio, "have no artistic ambition" (15) and instead have their sights set only on monetary reward. Arbuzov embodies the notion that art can indeed be achieved via athletics, even if it leads to heart failure and the tragic pathos of the wrestler's demise. With loss of all his power, ability, and vitality, Arbuzov pays the ultimate price for his sublime artistry in the wrestling ring.

The wrestling match itself transpires quickly, carried along by Kuprin's prose, which replicates the rapid pace and physicality of the athletic action. As the two athletes size each other up and begin to grab at one another, Kuprin uses a series of gerunds in his description of this initial action to lend the narrative a sense of fluid athletic movement: *vyveryvaia*s' ["wriggling out"], *ukloniaia*s' ["evading"], *upiraia*s' ["leaning"], *dys*ha ["breathing"], *pol'zui*a's' ["using"], and *starai*a's' ["trying"] all appear in the same paragraph. Or consider the following sentence and its string of gerunds several paragraphs later: "Arbuzov resisted, straining [*napriagaia*] his neck, spreading [*rasstavliaia*] his arms wider and bending down [*prigibaia*s'] closer to the ground" (33). To intensify even further the action and excitement of the match, Kuprin focuses on the physical specifics of the contest (e.g., the movement of arms, elbows, wrists, legs, shoulders, and necks). And on multiple occasions, Kuprin compares the actions of the two wrestlers, particularly Reber, to those of animals. Both men initially make a careful, measured motion "like that of two big cats beginning to play" (33); leaning forward and bending his legs, the American wrestler is "similar to a predatory animal planning to pounce" (33). When Arbuzov grabs at Reber, "the American's head, like the head of a vanishing turtle, [sinks] into his shoulders" (33). And as Arbuzov starts to lose his energy and falter, the hoarse sounds of Reber's breath on the back of the Russian's head evoke "the triumphant growl of a beast" (33). The animal imagery, most closely associated with Reber, suggests a contrast between bestial ferocity and athletic artistry. The beast wins, but only by default.

As the failing Arbuzov feebly wrestles the powerful Reber in the later stages of "At the Circus," Kuprin describes how "a physical melancholy grew around Arbuzov's heart . . . and everything for him suddenly became boring, empty, and indifferent: the brass sounds of the music and the sad singing of the lights, and the circus, and Reber, and wrestling itself" (34). We see no drama of a sudden heart attack in the ring but rather a gradual draining of emotion and energy from the body and mind of the wrestler, as sadness and a metaphysical "melancholy" envelope the deflated man, who finally succumbs to Reber. Kuprin describes Arbuzov's psychological state at the end: "In his mind, with a

sharp, high sound—as if a thin string had broken—someone clearly and distinctly shouted: boo-me-rang!” (35).⁶¹ Akin to the ominous “sound of a breaking of a string” that two years later would resonate offstage in Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyi sad*, 1904), Kuprin’s breaking string suggests something physical yet also faintly mystical occurring within Arbuzov. But Kuprin ends his story in a stark, realistic manner with Arbuzov’s demise coming immediately on the heels of his defeat at the hands of Reber: “Then everything disappeared: thought, consciousness, pain, and sadness. And this occurred as simply and quickly as if someone had blown on a candle burning in a dark room and extinguished it” (35). These concluding words of Kuprin’s story offer little solace and almost no room for sentimentality. The burning passion so essential for success in the wrestling ring and so essential to the art of wrestling has vanished in the face of death.⁶²

Passion—whether athletic or otherwise (e.g., metaphorical or religious)—lies at the very core of “At the Circus.” In fact, Arbuzov’s demise and the overlying trajectory of Kuprin’s narrative gradually take on elements of the Christian Passion Play, a dramatic structure well suited to wrestling. Kuprin’s story explicitly occurs during Shrovetide, or *maslenitsa*, which in the Russian Orthodox calendar and other religious traditions as well comes just prior to Lent, when the Passion Play is performed. Thus the central wrestling match assumes the status of a religious drama of trial, suffering, and death, a well-established dramatic formula that also figures prominently in discussion of wrestling by Barthes. Although Barthes examined staged wrestling matches in a later era, he provides an illuminating perspective on passionate suffering in the wrestling ring. Probing the “socially-inspired nuances of passion” inherent to wrestling, Barthes explains that “it no longer matters whether the passion is genuine or not. What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself.”⁶³ Wrestling audiences, Barthes emphasizes, crave the spectacle of suffering, and he goes on to describe how at the end of the day the “impassive, anonymous” wrestler will leave the wrestling hall having been “earlier possessed by moral rage, magnified into a sort of metaphysical sign.”

Like Barthes’s wrestler, Arbuzov in “At the Circus” is no mere performer. He has sensed “some nameless merciless power” drawing him into the wrestling ring, as if he must submit to a higher “power” and give up his life. For Kuprin, the wrestler signified a secularized, modern-day martyr forced to sacrifice himself for his sport and for the passionate spirit of athletic competition. Evoking the customary transfigured protagonist of religious Passion Plays, the wrestler becomes the central player of a modern-day pageant through his physique, his artistry, his passion, and his pain—and in Arbuzov’s case, through his broken heart.

Breshko-Breshkovsky's World of Wrestlers

Besides Kuprin, no writer was more taken with early twentieth-century wrestling than Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovsky. A prolific and very popular writer who thrived through the widespread format of the feuilleton, Breshko-Breshkovsky documented the lives of the era's wrestlers in pulp fiction romans-à-clef that evocatively captured the era's fascination with wrestling. The son of the famous revolutionary Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaya (dubbed the "grandmother of the Russian Revolution"), Breshko-Breshkovsky became one of the first cultural figures in Russia to discern protorevolutionary significance in the wrestlers and in their ability to break down Russia's well-entrenched social and cultural hierarchies.⁶⁴

It should be said at the outset that Breshko-Breshkovsky's prose left a lot to be desired. As Kuprin himself put it in a 1930 foreword to a late Breshko-Breshkovsky novel (*Terrible Strength* [*Žhutkaia sila*]), "N. Breshko-Breshkovsky writes in bright evocative colors without a concern for subtlety. He has at his disposal no soft, delicate brushes, but rather one huge brush, with which in one broad swipe he writes quickly, brightly and at times sloppily."⁶⁵ In various respects, Breshko-Breshkovsky's colorful writing style, its lack of subtlety, and its sloppy, broad strokes suited wrestling well, given the sport's emphasis on swift, strenuous action. His pen, it seems, replicated the heavy swipe of a wrestler's powerful forearm. As the writer V. Korolenko later noted, Breshko-Breshkovsky's characters "have no personality, no physiognomy, only their musculature, deep voice, and to varying degrees an ability to 'grab someone from behind by the belt' and 'to make a bridge.'"⁶⁶ Breshko-Breshkovsky's desire to describe common grappling moves in wrestling (e.g., a bridge) far outweighed his desire—or capacity—to delve into his characters in any substantive way. Yet he proved adept at conveying both the novelty of wrestling and the sport's muscular impact on urban culture at the time. In his two best novels, *Champion of the World* (*Chempion mira*, 1907), which first appeared in 1906 on the pages of the popular journal *Grainfield* (*Niva*), and *Gladiators of Our Times* (*Gladiatory nashikh dnei*, 1908), which arrived less than a year later in *Financial News* (*Birzhevyie vedomosti*), readers found a behind-the-scenes look at circus wrestling along with thinly veiled portraits of some of the country's most famous wrestlers.⁶⁷

Champion of the World recounts the steady rise to prominence of a fictional wrestler, Anton (Antek) Loiko, and provides a vivid picture of professional wrestling in Russia and the role it played in the nation's rapidly changing cultural landscape. Loiko, who hails from a city (presumably Kiev) along the Dnieper River and is taken under the wing of the former wrestling champion

Lemmerman (loosely based on the early wrestling champion Pytlyasinsky), quickly fights his way into the upper tier of Russia's wrestlers and reaches a high-profile tournament in St. Petersburg. And his skills win him popularity among all social classes. That social effect was almost as important to Breshko-Breshkovsky as wrestling itself, and the St. Petersburg tournament illustrates this. Held in an open-air theater that had been in decline—"and would have gone bankrupt if 'wrestling' [*bor'ba*] hadn't come to its aid and saved it from certain death"—the tournament attracts practically everyone.⁶⁸ As Breshko-Breshkovsky explains: "All of Petersburg gathered, beginning with the upper echelons of society and ending with the lower. To the wrestling craze came all classes of society. It was followed and spoken about with equal interest and passion by the titled guardsman-cavalry man and the society woman, the young student, the coquette, the barbershop apprentice and the hooligan. But the most passionate fans of wrestling were the petty bourgeoisie and shopkeepers."⁶⁹ Wrestling, Breshko-Breshkovsky suggests, could break down deep-rooted divisions in society and contemporary culture. And, just as wrestling appealed to a broad swath of Russian society, Breshko-Breshkovsky strove to make his popular fiction about the sport appeal to a wide spectrum of Russian readers.⁷⁰

But the social effects of wrestling would not have occurred without the wrestlers' impressive, unprecedented skills. Like many early twentieth-century Russian advocates of wrestling, Breshko-Breshkovsky believed those skills included mental discipline and adroit judgment. For instance, the manager/trainer Lemmerman explains to a journalist in *Champion of the World*, "Greco-Roman wrestling develops one's mind in a surprising way. In an instant one has to think through and consider so much."⁷¹ The reputation of wrestlers as dim-witted musclemen, Breshko-Breshkovsky emphasized, was undeserved. Moreover, their artistry in the wrestling ring evidently placed them on par with or above conventional artists. In *Champion of the World*, at the open-air theater in St. Petersburg, athletes garner crowd adulation eclipsing that afforded the era's singers and actors: "Even singers were not awarded with such ovations as were these representatives of muscular strength and dexterity. The body and muscles are able to sway audiences in a more direct, primitive way than the voice."⁷² Wrestling, Breshko-Breshkovsky suggests, grabbed spectators through its primitive, muscular essence, in the process benefiting fiction that took up its cause.⁷³

For Breshko-Breshkovsky, wrestling both democratized and enriched the arts. Take, for example, the fictional painter Lyutsyan Monyushko, a central figure in *Gladiators of Our Times*. Monyushko aspires to produce compelling portraits of the most successful wrestlers: "Under the impression of these strong and dexterous people, [Monyushko] envisioned, for the time being in a cloudy and indistinct fashion, a painting from the life of gladiators."⁷⁴ A stand-in for

Breshko-Breshkovsky himself, Monyushko fraternizes with many of the champion wrestlers and begins sketching the wrestler Tampio, a character who also figures in *Champion of the World* and was widely seen as based on the Estonian wrestler Georg Lurikh (who subsequently served as the main inspiration for Breshko-Breshkovsky's 1910 wrestling novella *Finnish God* [*Chukhonskii bog*]).⁷⁵ Hence, the wrestler proves inspirational. Monyushko's wrestler painting will subsequently be praised and appreciated by cultured Russian society, a merging of sports and culture that Breshko-Breshkovsky himself aimed to facilitate through his novellas.

Breshko-Breshkovsky's close ties to popular culture in prerevolutionary Russia make his slightly later involvement in silent cinema all the more understandable. One of the first Russian writers (along with Kuprin, incidentally) to write a screenplay for the silent screen, he closely participated in several Russian film productions, most notably *Wrestler behind the Black Mask* (*Borets pod chernoï maskoi*) in 1913.⁷⁶ No print remains of *Wrestler behind the Black Mask*, but a discussion of the film on the pages of *Blue Journal* in August 1913 describes at length its plot, which centers on the black-masked wrestler Kostan'iario, who has murdered a banker by means of a "double nelson" wrestling hold, prompting the detective Stroev to infiltrate the world of circus wrestling. Stroev doggedly pursues his suspect by pretending to be a mask-wearing wrestler himself, whereby he attempts to expose Kostan'iario in the circus arena. Breshko-Breshkovsky, who not only wrote this screenplay but also played the role of the circus director in the film, would go on to write a 1915 sequel, *The Adventures of the Athlete Kostan'iario* (*Prikliucheniia atleta Kostan'iario*), but it was the 1913 film that, in the words of the *Blue Journal* piece, "was the first to introduce the public to the interesting, unique world of athletes so well known to the [screenplay's] author."⁷⁷ More sophisticated, creative treatments of wrestling than those of Breshko-Breshkovsky would appear at this time in Russia, but as both his film work and fiction attest, Breshko-Breshkovsky enthusiastically transported the popular sport into the artistic sphere, whereby integration of athletics into Russian art proceeded apace.

Championed early on by writers such as Kuprin and Breshko-Breshkovsky, wrestling would provide subsequent Russian artists with ample material for both innovation and agitation, which in time undermined the nation's well-established artistic hierarchy. The circus wrestler, as ensuing chapters will show, had set the stage for a broader iconoclastic embrace of athletics in Russian literature and painting. Indeed, the ability of the wrestler to embody a new, modern vitality would soon be shared by other athletes and transposed into a wide variety of artistic forms. By 1913, wrestling's popularity as a spectator sport may

have peaked, but the sport continued to exert a powerful influence on the nation's artistic culture throughout the remainder of the prerevolutionary period and well into the early Soviet period, as attested to by Blok's verse, a variety of Russian avant-garde paintings and productions, and early Soviet artwork that came on the heels of the 1917 Revolution. Protorevolutionary at its core, wrestling had helped overturn the cultural status quo and establish a space for athleticism in the once rigid artistic hierarchy of the country. Wrestlers ultimately succeeded in realizing their potential as prototypes for a new, egalitarian world in which strength and athletic prowess would be increasingly valued.

2

Lyrical Games

The Poetics of Russia's Modern Sports Movement

Modern athletics, as the popularity of wrestling in prerevolutionary Russia makes clear, had captured the attention and imagination of quite a few early twentieth-century Russian artists. Soon enough, the burst of athletic activity that occurred in Russia during the 1900s and 1910s would make its mark on the development of major poetic trends in the prerevolutionary era, as Symbolism's airy flights of fancy gave way to more physical poetic inclinations. The spontaneity and corporeal freedom found in athletic action facilitated a pronounced shift in aesthetic sensibilities at the time, as high art merged with low art while tradition was cast aside for the sake of the new. In drawing upon the modern era's physical orientation in their written work, poets, among other artists, discovered a wellspring of subversive inventiveness and creative energy.

This chapter probes the unexpected insertion of sports into the Russian poetic lexicon in the early 1910s, particularly through Symbolist and Acmeist verse, which vied for critical attention at the time. The rise in popularity of athletic games—not only wrestling but also soccer, tennis, gymnastics, and so on—was accompanied in Russia by a significant recalibration of poetic sensibilities, as exemplified by the transition from the lofty mysticism of Russian Symbolism to the relatively grounded, physical orientation of Acmeism—followed by the powerful slap of Futurism—in the 1910s. Aleksandr Blok, once a chief practitioner of Symbolism, would move away from the mystical, esoteric qualities of Symbolism to seize upon an athletic, active lifestyle, and he would

later offer a paean to prerevolutionary Russia's great circus wrestlers in his aforementioned 1919 foreword to *Retribution* (1910–21). Blok's turn toward the physical had a meaningful impact on his verse, most notably in *Retribution* but also in other, shorter pieces of poetry that reflected a disenchantment with Symbolism's theurgical tenets as he aspired to become a man of action and physical prowess. At the same time, a fascination with soccer—and the terminology of soccer—would figure in the poetry of Valery Bryusov, a founding father of Russian Symbolism whose renunciation of the movement helped broaden the scope of the period's verse. As a reaction to Symbolism, Acmeism would prove particularly well suited to the unabashed athletic spirit of the era. The poet Osip Mandel'shtam, a principal member of Russia's Acmeist school, cheered the rise of athletics in St. Petersburg and at his former school in St. Petersburg, penning in 1913 and 1914 a handful of poems devoted to sports. Although far from athletic himself, Mandel'shtam highlighted the joy found in projecting athletic action through an artistic lens. The verse of Blok, Bryusov, and Mandel'shtam, I contend, reflected the capacity of sports to invigorate pre-revolutionary Russian culture, as these three poets discerned wide-ranging artistic and social ramifications in the blossoming of modern athletics.

Wrestling with Symbolism: Aleksandr Blok

Whereas Kuprin documented the exaltation and pathos of professional wrestling and Breshko-Breshkovsky celebrated the everyday world of champion wrestlers, Blok came to perceive the sport of wrestling through a much broader social, historical, and poetic lens. The era's wrestlers, Blok emphasized retrospectively in 1919, embodied the country's turn toward the physical, while they also served as a potent conduit for the impending transformation of Russian society. Blok made explicit his vision of the wrestler as an agent of change in the foreword to *Retribution*, a key, albeit unfinished long poem that marked an important transition in his career. Blok wrote in his *Retribution* foreword (and elsewhere) that the "crisis of Symbolism" resulted in poets questioning the metaphysical underpinnings of their Symbolist worldview. The popularity of wrestling and other athletic activity supplied an attractive alternative.¹ Fluctuating between the mystical ideals of Symbolism and prosaic concerns of the contemporary world, particularly those pertaining to Russian culture, society, and politics, Blok found enormous artistic—and political—potential in circus wrestling.² As the foreword to *Retribution* suggests, wrestling—along with related activities like weightlifting and gymnastics—induced Blok to move away from his rarefied Symbolist

roots toward a more dry-eyed, pragmatic, and hopeful perspective on his native land, fate, heroism, and history. A work “full of revolutionary premonitions,” as Blok himself wrote, *Retribution* encapsulated the poet’s belief that modern athletes, most notably the circus wrestlers, were harbingers of the revolution, expediting change in Russia’s social and artistic culture. Out of modern athletics, so vividly embodied by the wrestlers, came a new sense of power and social potency for the poet and, it follows, the Russian people.

As Blok maintained in the foreword to *Retribution*, a “manly trend” (*muzhestvennoe veian’e*) linked his *poema* not only to circus wrestling but also to a wide range of cultural, political, and even meteorological events that had occurred in 1910 and 1911. From the unprecedented prominence of the anguished, aging Swedish playwright August Strindberg, to the death in 1910 of three major cultural figures—Leo Tolstoy, the painter Mikhail Vrubel’, and the actress and theater manager Vera Komissarzhevskaja—and to the assassination of Russian prime minister Petr Stolypin, the murder of the Ukrainian boy Andrey Yushchinsky, and the unusually hot summer of 1911, the times were full of portents for Blok, at least in retrospect. Even abroad, certain incidents, such as rail workers’ strikes in London and the Agadir Crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, portended to him social upheaval and war. Throwing athletics into this mix of art, politics, and meteorology, the poet suggested that circus wrestling had contributed to the transformational energy and rhythms—a “unified musical pressure” (*edinyi muzykal’nyi napor*)—pervading Russian society and culture during these years.³ In the circuses of St. Petersburg, Blok had discovered an expression of the era’s apocalyptic, revolutionary potential as well as a potent amalgamation of physical life and art.

Throughout much of 1911, when his work on *Retribution* began in earnest, Blok found himself drawn to athletics and everyday physical activity, as an avid spectator and participant. In addition to attending the wrestling matches documented in the *Retribution* foreword and in a handful of letters he wrote at the time, Blok took up the popular athletic pastimes of weightlifting, bicycling, and roller-skating while also developing a keen interest in another facet of modernity, aviation (which he would refer to, along with wrestling, in his *Retribution* foreword).⁴ Like Kuprin, who enthusiastically emulated the wrestler-aviator Zaikin, the Symbolist poet took note of the new sports of his age and harbored aspirations to become something of a modern athlete himself as he simultaneously infused his own work with this athleticism. “Modernist anti-intellectualism,” Harold Segel argues in his discussion of sports and their popularity among a wide range of early twentieth-century European writers, “favored action over contemplation and the passive culture of the word. Sensing a certain insufficiency in being a man of letters, the writer now strove to become a man

of action as well.”⁵ Blok, it seems clear, embraced a particular form of this physical resistance to intellectualism as he assumed an athleticism inherent to the modern “man of action.”

In a lengthy letter to his mother from February 1911, Blok described not only the sessions of massage therapy he had begun in an effort to combat the fatigue and depression plaguing him at the time but also his adoption of a strict gymnastics and weightlifting regimen intended to improve both his physical and mental health. As this 1911 letter suggests, Blok looked to modern athletics as a compelling alternative to the romantic mysticism so often associated with his rise to prominence as a leading Russian Symbolist and as one of Russia’s most revered poets of the day. Alluding to his initial work on *Retribution*, Blok writes:

The fact of the matter is that I feel very strong physically (and, it follows, morally), and I therefore have many plans that for the time being are indistinct. Perhaps I will go to some sea to swim, maybe I’ll go abroad or maybe I’ll go somewhere in Russia. I feel that finally, at the age of 30, I have experienced a great crisis that is reflected in [*Retribution*] and in my sense of the world. I believe that the last “shades” of “decadence” have retreated. I most certainly want to live, and I see ahead of me many simple, good, and appealing opportunities, which I did not see earlier. On the one hand, I am a “social animal,” I have an enthusiasm for current affairs and the need to interact with people, all the more substantively. On the other hand, I am physically strong and very seriously inclined toward physical culture, which ought to go hand in hand with one’s spirituality. I have no objection whatsoever to getting my blood flowing (I am going today to consult with a masseuse) and to doing gymnastic exercises.⁶

A desire “to live,” Blok admitted to his mother, underscored his interest in physical fitness as he turned away from the remote Symbolism of his younger years toward a more vigorous lifestyle and a substantive reformulation of his poetic voice. Hence, physical culture and an explicitly athletic perspective on the modern world would inform the development of Blok’s verse, in particular the poetry he wrote at the time.

When considering Blok’s artistic—and athletic—transformation in the early 1910s, we might look at several stanzas of a short untitled poem he wrote in 1912.

И вновь—порывы юных лет,
И взрывы сил, и крайность мнений . . .

Но счастья не было—и нет.
Хоть в этом больше нет сомнений!

.....

Что через край перелилась
Восторга творческого чаша,
И всё уж не мое, а наше,
И с миром утвердилась связь,—

И только с нежною улыбкой
Порою будешь вспоминать
О детской той мечте, о зыбкой,
Что счастьем привыкли звать!⁷

[And again—the bursts of youthful years,
And outbursts of strength, extreme views . . .
But there wasn't happiness, nor is there now.
No longer is there any doubt about this!

.....

That overflowed
The cup of creative rapture,
And everything is no longer mine, but ours,
And a link to the world has been established,

And only with a gentle smile
Will you at times recall
That childhood dream, a vacillating one,
That we got used to calling happiness!]

A celebration of the athletic vigor—"the bursts of youthful years" and "outbursts of strength"—inspiring the poet at the time, this short poem reflects a profound change in Blok's worldview, albeit a "vacillating" one, as "creative rapture" and a tentatively joyous, life-affirming connection to the world arise in conjunction with his enthusiastic commitment to physical activity in 1911. In a similar vein, the first and last stanzas of another of Blok's poems from 1912, "I bless everything that was . . ." ("Blagoslovliaiu vse, chto bylo . . ."), illustrate the

poet's transition toward an appreciation of physical existence on his path forward in life: "My attentive eyes gaze, / And the heart beats, rising, in my chest / In the cold murkiness of a snowy night, / continuing its true path" (Gliadiat vnimatel'nye ochi, / I serdtse b'et, volnuias', v grud', / V kholodnom mrake snezhnoi nochi / Svoi vernyi prodolzhaia put').⁸ A comparable ethos of vigor permeates Blok's famous 1914 poem "Oh, how desperately I want to live . . ." ("O, ia khochu bezumno zhit' . . ."), in which the poet expresses a desire to grapple with life rather than dwell in some noumenal realm via his art. The well-delineated path and development of the poet, a striking trend in Blok's oeuvre that Soviet critic Dmitry Maksimov probed at length in conjunction with *Retribution*, were to be profoundly shaped by physical fitness, which Blok thought should complement his spiritual, artistic side.⁹

For Blok, modern athletics signaled not only a new self but also a new era. In another short poem linked to *Retribution*, "In the fire and cold of troubles . . ." ("V ogne i kholode trevog . . .," 1910–14), Blok writes, implicitly to his sister, of a new epoch that will arise amid his turn to autobiographical introspection in *Retribution* and elsewhere and amid his interest in physical culture.

Я верю: новый век взойдет
Средь всех несчастных поколений.
Недаром славит каждый род
Смертельно оскорбленный гений.

[I believe: a new era will arise
Among all unfortunate generations.
No wonder every family is glorified
By a mortally insulted genius.]

Promise of a "new era" permeates Blok's verse at this time, as premonitions of revolution and war, along with athletics, colored his personal views of both his times and the future. In this poem, much as he would do in his long poem *Retribution*, Blok fixates on generational continuity and notions of revolution—whether political or personal—pointing to the vague possibility that through the physical he might be able to overcome the intractable patterns of fate and history embedded so deeply in familial habits.

Personal sentiments conveyed in Blok's correspondence with his mother likewise point to both a new phase of physical fitness in the poet's life and a new era of athleticism in Russian urban culture. In the same February 1911 letter

cited earlier, a revitalized Blok touched on his burgeoning interest in wrestling as he linked the sport and other manifestations of the era's athletic ethos to his own art.

Wrestling interests me greatly as does any sort of strengthening of the muscles, and these interests have already begun to occupy a very specific place in my life; somewhat unexpectedly for me (a year ago I was very far removed from such things), my artistic work has become intertwined with this. I am capable of enthusiastically reading articles on the peasant question and . . . the most vulgar novels of Breshko-Breshkovsky, who . . . is closer than Valery Bryusov . . . to Dante. All of this is a sphere completely foreign to you. As a means of explanation, I could say that in this is my Europeanism. Europe should present in form and in the flesh all the most elusive content with which every Russian soul is filled. From this comes the constant need for form, mine in part; form is the flesh of an idea; in the world orchestra of the arts the art of "track and field" and actual "French wrestling," which is an exact copy of ancient wrestling from Greece and Rome, do not settle for last place.¹⁰

Remarking on Breshko-Breshkovsky's "most vulgar" (*poshleishie*) wrestling novels, Blok discerned in the popular novelist's physical orientation a Dantesque depth far more germane to his own current personal state and to Russia at the time than the decadent verse of Russian Symbolists such as Bryusov (who himself would soon discover in athletics a source of creativity). Moreover, Blok found in wrestling a "Europeanism" that complemented through "flesh" and "form" the abstract musings of the "Russian soul," musings so prominent in his earlier Symbolist verse. In high culture's "world orchestra," a mystical term Blok often used to denote the musical chords—or tenor—of his era, the "art" of modern athletics had unexpectedly assumed a foremost position.

Between 1910 and 1912 Blok avidly attended wrestling matches in the circuses of St. Petersburg.¹¹ And in response to what he saw there, he subsequently developed ideas about the "art" of wrestling that he expanded upon in the February 1911 letter to his mother. Blok writes:

I have very many observations (my own) about the art of wrestling, about the qualities of certain artists (who here, as in any art form, are very few in number, for there are many more craftsmen), about the abilities in this art of various nationalities (significantly lacking in talent, naturally, are the Russians and Italians—and this despite the great wealth of external

data! This is like the decline of art up to the Itinerants and up to contemporary Italian painting). I have seen only one [wrestler] who possesses true genius, the Dutchman van Riel. He, far more than Viacheslav Ivanov, inspires me as I work on [*Retribution*].¹²

Disparaging the skills of Russian and Italian wrestlers, Blok instinctively linked the era's athleticism to art, be it by commenting on these athletes' abilities in the wrestling ring or by comparing their handiwork to second-rate Russian and Italian art of the era. In his lofty praise of the Dutchman Marinus van Riel—alluded to as well in the *Retribution* foreword for embodying "a most perfect musical instrument of rare beauty"—Blok underscored the inspiration he derived from the wrestler, particularly in comparison to the Symbolist poetry of Viacheslav Ivanov, whose lofty, abstruse verse Blok rejected at this time (and who would, in fact, voice stinging criticism of *Retribution*).¹³ Furthermore, Blok accentuated the interrelationship between athletics and artistry by recognizing at the conclusion of his letter a need to broaden the scope of his art through a direct interplay with everyday reality, which wrestling and gymnastics facilitated: "By the way, a true work of art in our time (and in any time, most likely) can arise only when 1) one maintains a direct (not bookish) relationship with the world and 2) one's own art relates to the other arts (for me personally, to music, painting, architecture, and *gymnastics*)."¹⁴ Through the "art" of gymnastics, Blok sought to move away from any "bookish" relationship with the world he might have had, as he repudiated his Symbolist past in as emphatic—and strong—a voice as he could.

As if emulating Chernyshevsky's fictional "New Man," Rakhmetov, Blok envisioned transforming both himself and his worldview through athletics. Whether this constituted a repudiation of the previous decade's Symbolist "life-creation" (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) or was simply an explicitly physical manifestation of his earlier, more stylized attempts to turn life into art remains to be seen. It was probably a bit of both. What is certain, however, is that Blok saw wrestling and its physical orientation as grounds for a "New Man" to arise within himself. In a 1913 letter to the poet S. A. Bogomolov, for instance, Blok offered the following words of idealistic encouragement:

The struggle transpiring in you is so very striking: the struggle of *the old*, the inorganic, the vain, the narrow, and the decadent with *the new*, with the healthy and manly, which has finally sensed that the world is immeasurably bigger and more beautiful than each of us. What cheers me the most is that, seemingly, *the latter triumphs*.

Severe self-criticism can only be for the good. Self-criticism of only a half-measure can lead to despair. Judge yourself, despise yourself, do not be afraid of this. You yourself will see how from this criticism is born a new man.¹⁵

Through a “healthy,” muscular approach to life and through candid self-criticism, Blok explained, would come that “new man” able to create and better gauge “beautiful” physical reality.

Modern athletics, it is clear, compelled a “new” Blok to engage in an overtly physical way with the broader world. Implicit in the poet’s letters and other writings is a merging of athleticism and artistry that culminated in *Retribution*, through which he poignantly (albeit somewhat unevenly) fused his own family history and notions of fate with an expansive treatment of history and Russia’s political tribulations and destiny. Blok worked on his semi-autobiographical *Retribution* from 1910 to 1921, a long phase that began with physical fitness and ended with his increasing concern about his own physical and mental health. As he emphasized in his 1919 foreword, the initial development of *Retribution* reflected his newfound interest in the body.

I imagined the plan [of *Retribution*] in the form of concentric circles, which became tighter and tighter, and the smallest circle, having come together, began again to live its own independent life, to burst open and pull apart the surrounding environment and, in its turn, to act upon the periphery. Such was the life of the sketch I happened to draw—I only now try to convey this consciously in words; back then all this existed primarily in a musical and muscular sense; and I speak not in vain of a muscular consciousness, since at that time all movement and development of the *poema* was closely linked for me to the development of the muscular system. Through systematic manual labor, arm muscles—so-called biceps—first develop, and then, gradually, a subtler, more refined, and rarer network of muscles in the chest and on the back under one’s shoulder blades. This sort of rhythmical and gradual growth of muscles was to constitute the rhythm of the entire poem. Its core idea—and theme—is connected to this.¹⁶

Like an athlete’s body gaining muscular strength through manual labor and weightlifting, the *poema* and its circular form—or at least the circular form that Blok envisioned for *Retribution*—became an expression of the muscular growth the poet sought out for himself in 1911. Jenifer Presto may be correct when she notes that in the 1919 foreword to *Retribution*, Blok “repeatedly undercuts his

own masculinity and sense of potency through his acknowledgment of the terrifying effect of history on people and, by extension, on the writer," yet when formulating his long poem he nevertheless perceived the broad social and personal promise of athletics as a means to help him counteract the historical, artistic, and personal strains weighing upon him at the time.¹⁷

A wrestling-inspired muscularity arises almost immediately in the actual text of Blok's epic-like *poema*. Consisting of a short prologue, followed by a long first chapter and two shorter, unfinished chapters, *Retribution* revolves around the relationship of a father and son (based on the poet's father and the poet himself), as well as the eventual death of the father, who is estranged from his son when he dies a lonely, broken man in Warsaw in 1909. Blok's introspection about his father's place in history and his own, as well as implicit revenge for the father's transgressions committed against his immediate family and a broader evocation of historical retribution, constitute the main thrust of the *poema*. Germane questions concerning Russia, Poland, war, and revolution accordingly emerge.

Although no explicit references to wrestling can be found in the prologue and three chapters of *Retribution*, the theme of human physicality, emphasized so forcefully by Blok in the *poema's* foreword, permeates a variety of the work's components, particularly its short verse prologue.¹⁸ Specifying "certain problems of art," as F. D. Reeve puts it, this prologue raises the question of whether art can compellingly reflect the everyday reality of the poet and society.¹⁹ Or to extrapolate, is poetry able to capture the drama of quotidian life, such as that overt physicality and strenuous competition witnessed by Blok in the circus wrestling ring? For Blok, a new corporeal ethos indeed arises in art out of the familial ashes of the past, as he suggests in this prologue.

Сыны отражены в отцах
Коротенький обрывок рода—
Два-три звена, — и уж ясны
Заветы темной старины:
Созрела новая порода, —
Уголь превращается в алмаз.²⁰

[Sons are reflected in their fathers
A small scrap of the stock—
Two or three links, and what's already clear
Is the legacy of dark antiquity:
A new breed has matured, —
Coal turns into diamond.]

Out of the hereditary “coal” comes a “diamond,” as a new, more physical human “breed” (*poroda*) emerges from the “dark” past of previous generations while new forms of art similarly emerge.

Listening metaphorically to the “music” of his time, Blok sought in *Retribution* to capture in verse the era’s rhythms and diverse harmonies. “I believe,” Blok wrote in his foreword, “that the iamb was the simplest expression of the rhythm of that era when the world, preparing for unprecedented events, so intensely and systematically developed its physical, political, and military muscles.”²¹ Preserving much of the lyricism of his shorter, earlier works and written almost exclusively in a Pushkinesque iambic tetrameter, *Retribution* constituted an attempt by Blok to convey through his poetry the “muscular” rhythm of the times and what he retrospectively perceived as Russia’s headlong lurch toward World War I and the Revolution. Underscoring the potent force of the iamb, Blok declared the following at the end of his verse prologue to *Retribution*:

Так бей, не зная отдохновенья,
Пусть жила жизни глубока:
Алмаз горит издалика —
Дроби, мой гневный ямб, камень!²²

[So strike away, not knowing repose,
Though the vein of life is deep:
Diamond burns from afar —
Smash stone, my wrathful iamb!]

From an acknowledgment of contemporary life’s deep “vein” to the poet’s “wrathful iamb,” a vibrant, muscular energy and robust rhythmical meter emphatically convey the poem’s forceful tone and presentiment of war, revolution, and historical retribution.

Blok fluctuates between ecstatic, corporeal thrills and nihilistic despair in much of *Retribution*. In chapter 1, for instance, the poet juxtaposes the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, writing of the “harsh” nineteenth century and the even darker, “stray” century that would follow. Yet amid this gloom, Blok discovers a sense of hope that will prove both personal and political.

... И отвращение от жизни,
И к ней безумная любовь,
И страсть и ненависть к
отчизне ...

И черная, земная кровь
 Сулит нам, раздувая вены,
 Все разрушая рубежи,
 Неслыханные перемены,
 Невиданные мятежи . . .²³

[. . . And an aversion to life,
 And an insane love for it,
 And passion and hatred toward
 one's fatherland . . .
 And black, earthly blood
 Promises us, swelling its veins,
 Destroying all borders,
 Unprecedented changes,
 Unknown revolts . . .]

During the stage of his career that witnessed “unprecedented changes” and “unknown revolts,” Blok, as critics have noted, repeatedly swung between an “insane love” for life—bolstered, undoubtedly, by his passion for wrestling and physical fitness—and a despondent “aversion” to life.²⁴ Blok displayed a similar fluctuation in sentiments toward Russia amid the promise of revolutionary change and a presentiment of violent upheaval. As this and other *Retribution* passages attest, Blok had exposed an artistic, personal link between the power, blood, and passion pulsating through Russian history, politics, wrestling, and the promise of a transformed, more physically powerful self.

In 1919, when writing his foreword to *Retribution* and already aware that he would likely never complete this long autobiographical poem, Blok penned an explosive essay that he titled “The Collapse of Humanism” (“Krushenie gumanizma”). Exuding a Nietzschean spirit (and anticipating Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*), “The Collapse of Humanism” not only bemoans the state of Western civilization after World War I and, closer to home, the Russian Revolution but also predicts that a new person—“man the actor” (*chelovek-artist*, in the original Russian)—would soon emerge in world culture. This new person, Blok suggests, once having attained some measure of physical harmony, could respond to the era’s new tenor. “The loss of equilibrium, bodily or spiritual,” Blok argued, necessitates “an ordered body and an ordered spirit, for it is only with the whole body and the whole spirit kneaded indissolubly together that one can hear the music of the universe.”²⁵ At the end of this essay, moreover, Blok points to a transformation of humanity in part inspired, it appears, by physical culture.

Man is an animal; man is a plant, a flower; in him is extreme cruelty that seems not human but animalistic; there is also a primitive tenderness that likewise seems not human but plant-like. All of this constitutes temporary disguises, masks, gleams of endless disguises. These gleams signify that a transformation of the species is transpiring; all of man is in motion, he has woken up from the age-long sleep of civilization. Spirit, soul, and body have been caught up in the whirling movement; in the whirlwind of spiritual, political and social revolutions that contain cosmic correspondences, a new natural selection takes place, a new man is being formed; this man is a humane animal, a social animal, a moral animal that is being transformed into an actor, to speak Wagner's language; man, the humane animal, the social animal, the moral animal, is being transformed into an *actor*, speaking in the language of Wagner.

As social, ethical, and cultural norms fall by the wayside, there comes a new, evolved man who can creatively respond to a society transformed by all the change. Blok's "Collapse of Humanism" concludes by stating that this "man the actor" (Blok uses the Russian word *artist*, which implies, à la Wagner, artistry and performance) will fill the cultural void created by war and revolution: "He [man the actor] and he alone will be capable of greedily living and acting in the newly revealed epoch of whirlwinds and storms into which mankind has irresistibly rushed."²⁶ Although not solely athletic, of course, such a view of culture reflects Blok's artistic turn toward the physical in the early 1910s and his retrospective focus on wrestling in 1919 while it also presages the embrace of sports that soon occurred in early Soviet society. The new person championed by Blok in "The Collapse of Humanism" would indeed evolve into the "New Man" athlete.

In both wrestling and physical fitness, Blok had found a potent distillation of the new century's life-affirming, revolutionary impulse and a viable model for subsequent Russian poetry. Other younger poets, such as those in the Acmeist school, likewise turned to the broad sports movement spreading at the time throughout Russia, in part as a means to counteract the well-established metaphysical tenets of Symbolist poetry and as a means for responding to the rapid changes occurring in Russian society. Blok would never fully renounce Symbolism, yet his attitude toward the movement and his own Symbolist beginnings fluctuated throughout the latter years of his life. Wrestling and physical fitness ultimately came to constitute a tangible component of the era's "music" that Blok so famously heard and refused to ignore. It would, however, be left to others to integrate the specifics of sports into Russian poetry and to implement a more thorough integration of athletics and art.

Bryusov's Divine Game

Valery Bryusov's stature in early twentieth-century Russian poetry cannot be overstated. Although Bryusov's verse occupies only a secondary, transitional spot in this chapter's overview of Symbolist and Acmeist verse devoted to sports, Bryusov himself played a central role in both the rise of Symbolism at the turn into the twentieth century and the subsequent swing from Symbolism to Acmeism that transpired in Russian poetry in the early 1910s. A founding father of Russian Symbolism, Bryusov in the ensuing years facilitated the gradual dissolution of that poetic movement and the subsequent rise of Acmeism. "No man," Joan Delaney Grossman argues, "did more to bring about that change of atmosphere in Russian letters which determined the direction of coming decades."²⁷

As part of the decadent wing of Russian Symbolism, Bryusov wrote "demonic-erotic" poetry in the late 1890s and early 1900s, often shocking the sensibilities of cultured Russian society. Beginning with his semi-scandalous single-line poem "O, cover your pale legs!" ("O zakroi svoi blednye nogi!") from 1895 and continuing throughout the subsequent decade with decadent work probing issues relating to sex (e.g., necrophilia), religion, and the city, Bryusov helped shape poetic convention by introducing new, often scandalous themes into Russian verse. But even as he was producing his most decadent Symbolist verse, Bryusov also had an eye for some of his era's more vigorous, everyday activities. Consider, for instance, Bryusov's 1902 poem "At the Races" ("Na skachkakh"), at the start of which he exclaims:

Люблю согласное стремленье
К столбу летящих лошадей,
Их равномерное храпенье
И трепет вытянутых шей.

Когда вначале свежи силы,
Под шум о землю бьющих ног
Люблю задержанной кобылы
Уверенный упругий скак. . . .²⁸

[I love the harmonious striving
To the post of the flying horses,
Their uniform snorting
And the quivering of their craning necks.

When at first their strength is fresh,
 Under the din of hooves beating the earth,
 I love the harnessed mare's
 Assured, resilient canter. . . .]

"At the Races," which appeared in Bryusov's 1903 collection *Urbi et Orbi*, celebrates the impressive physical abilities of racing horses while simultaneously elevating the poet's rapturous fascination with a sporting event.²⁹ Although not an integral part of the modern athletic movement, horse racing contributed significantly to the era's sporting ethos. In a work such as Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1877), to cite one obvious example, we can see—through Vronsky and his ill-fated horse Frou-Frou—the large role horse racing was already playing in late nineteenth-century Russian society owing to its public appeal and emphasis on robust competitive action. In "At the Races," it follows, Bryusov conveyed his admiration for horse racing by accentuating the sounds and vivid visual details of the contest. And linking himself, the poet, to not only the horse's "harmonious striving" (*soglasnoe stremlenie*) but also the triumphant jockey at the conclusion of the poem, Bryusov finds inspiration in the victor's thirst for the glory existing at the very heart of the competition.

Когда счастливец на прямую
 Выходит, всех опередив,
 Я с ним победу торжествую,
 Его понятен мне порыв!

Быть первым, вольно одиноким!
 И видеть, что близка мета,
 И слышать отзвуком далеким
 Удары ног и щелк хлыста!

[When the lucky one enters
 The homestretch, having left all behind,
 I celebrate the victory with him,
 His burst makes sense to me!

To be first, by choice alone!
 And to see that the finish line is close,
 And to hear through a distant echo
 The stomping of hooves and cracking of the whip!]

The poet rejoices in the horse and jockey's success, as he vicariously feels the victor's triumphant "burst" onto the homestretch. Much as Mandel'shtam would do a decade later in his sports poems, Bryusov equates the thrill of the action to his own creative bliss. And mirroring the horse and jockey near the finish line, the poet comes to the end of his poem, his own finish line. Reveling in the event's sensorial minutiae and underlying competitive spirit, Bryusov found inspiration in all the exquisite facets of the race.

Sports more modern than horse racing, in particular soccer, would soon catch the attention of Bryusov, especially once he began to break away from his fellow Symbolists, a break that spurred the comparable, albeit less emphatic, break made by Blok in the early 1910s.³⁰ By 1910, the so-called crisis of Symbolism had resulted in growing resistance to the theurgical "forest of correspondences" that characterized so much Symbolist verse, as a range of poets saw the need for a new poetic orientation that could accommodate everyday activities such as sports. Thus Bryusov sided in 1910 with those whom he himself called the "Clarists" (Mikhail Kuzmin, Nikolai Gumilev, Anna Akhmatova, etc.) at the expense of the mystics, a group that included, most notably, Andrey Bely, Vyacheslav Ivanov, and initially Blok.³¹ Out of such "clarity" would come new poetry well suited to the athletic era.

For Bryusov, ancient Scandinavian myth provides the unexpected grounds for athletic competition and a compelling blend of primitive rite and modern sporting culture. By 1913, Bryusov had distanced himself from his Symbolist past, publicly disavowing the theurgical flights of fancy found in the verse of Ivanov, Bely, and other Russian Symbolist poets, yet that did not prevent him from endowing the era's athletic games with mythological import and grandeur. In his 1913 poem "At the Round Stone" ("U kruglogo kamnia"), which appeared in the collection *The Seven Colors of the Rainbow* (*Sem' tsvetov radugi*, 1916), Bryusov seizes upon everyday sports and in vogue sports terminology to create a unique athletic scene: against a backdrop of Finnish topography, Bryusov envisions vigorous games of soccer, albeit ones that the ancient deities of Finnish mythology played so very long ago.³² The poem, in its entirety, is as follows:

Белея, ночь приникла к яхте,
 Легла на сосны пеленой . . .
 Отава, Пейва, Укко, Ахти,
 Не ваши ль тени предо мной?

Есть след ноги на камне старом,
 Что рядом спит над гладью вод.

Туони! ты лихим ударом
Его отбросил от ворот!

Бывало, в грозные хавтаймы,
Неся гранитные шары,
Сюда, на тихий берег Саймы,
Вы все сходились для игры.

Где ныне косо частоколом
Вдали обведены поля,
Под вашим божеским футболом
Дрожала древняя земля.

И где теперь суровый скипер
Фарватер ищет между скал,
Когда-то Юмала-голкипер
Лицо от пота омывал.

Былые матчи позабыты,
И вы—лишь тени в белой мгле,—
Но тяжкие мячи—граниты
Лежат в воде и на земле.³³

[Whitening, night clung to the boat,
It settled on the pines like a shroud . . .
Otava, Paiva, Ukko Akhti,
Are not your shadows before me?

There is a trace of a foot on the old stone,
That nearby sleeps over the waters' smooth surface.
Tuoni! you with a frantic kick
Launched it from the goal!

As it was, in ominous halftimes,
Carrying granite balls
Here, onto the quiet short of Saimaa,
You all would gather for the game.

Where at the present obliquely like a palisade
In the distance the fields are encircled,

Under your divine soccer
Trembled the ancient land.

And where now does the stern skipper
Search for a channel between the rocks,
Once Jumala the goalkeeper
Washed the sweat from his face.

Former matches have been forgotten,
And you are only shadows in the white haze,—
But the heavy soccer balls of granite
Lie in the water and on land.]

In the first two stanzas of “At the Round Table,” the athletic context can barely be discerned, as Bryusov commences with an early morning boat ride and a long list of Finnish mythological figures. (Otava is a bear in Finnish mythology, Paiva is the sun, Ukko is the god of the sky, Ahti is a mythical hero, and Tuoni—in the second stanza—is the Finnish god of the underworld.) Only in hindsight do these figures come to comprise an ancient soccer team’s roster. The scene hardly seems suitable for sports, let alone soccer.

At the end of the second stanza of “At the Round Table,” however, mention of a “kick” (*udar*) and the “goal” (*vorota*, which at first seems to denote a “gate”), hint at something far more modern than the Finnish gods’ “shadows” looming over the tranquil nature scene. And the anachronisms ensue in the third and fourth stanzas with mention of “halftimes” (*khavtaimy*) and “divine soccer” (*bozheskii futbol*). As Alsu Akmal’dinova, Oleg Lekmanov, and Mikhail Sverdlov suggest in their recent study of Russian and Soviet poetry devoted to soccer, Bryusov holds the honor of being the first Russian poet to rhyme the foreign borrowings of “khavtaimy,” “futbolom” and also “golkipier,” which appears in the penultimate stanza in the guise of Jumala, the Finnish god of thunder.³⁴ Of particular note, in fact, is the clever rhyming Bryusov creates in the third stanza between *khavtaimy* and *Saimy*, or Saimaa, a Finnish lake that Bryusov devoted an entire cycle of poems to in 1906.³⁵ For “At the Round Table,” Bryusov has returned to this Finnish setting, envisioning amid all the large stones and smooth water bygone soccer games of the gods, whose athletic exploits have ostensibly helped shape the landscape. In the poem’s final stanza, Bryusov indirectly emulates the playful Finnish gods himself through his wordplay: just as the Finnish gods have formed the natural landscape with their game, Bryusov insinuates that he carries out something comparable within the modern landscape of Russian poetry. Here he introduces new athletic terms into his verse,

for instance the Russian words for “matches” (*matchi*), which might be confused with the Russian word for “masts” (*machty*) due to the poem’s nautical theme, and “soccer balls” (*miachi*), thus providing an unprecedented tableau of nature, poetry, and sports.

Through Bryusov’s creative wordplay in “At the Round Table,” soccer had entered the Russian poetic lexicon, providing an exciting new theme, new vocabulary, and new ethos of ludic iconoclasm. For just as modern athletics had gone some way toward liberating the human body, sports such as soccer now signaled a newfound freedom and flexibility in Russian verse, which Bryusov navigated amid the unfamiliar topography of “At the Round Table.” And it was this sports theme, vocabulary, ethos, and lexical flexibility that the Acmeist Mandel’shtam eagerly explored at the very same time.

Scaling the Physical Heights: Mandel’shtam, Acmeism, and Athletics

When Acmeism arose in the early 1910s as a distinct poetic movement, it was Nikolay Gumilev, one of its leaders, who most emphatically seized upon the persona of the “man of action” and notions of manly heroism that accompanied the rise of modern sports at the start of the twentieth century. Gumilev’s “penchant for adventure,” as Harold Segel puts it, resulted in poetry that, in contrast to Symbolist verse, came across as “more down-to-earth, more in contact with ‘reality,’” as evidenced by Gumilev’s verse devoted to African adventure and war, among other “manly” themes.³⁶ Gumilev, however, seems to have resisted the sports craze, for almost no trace of athletics can be found in his poetry. Ironically, it would be left to Gumilev’s more intellectual and less “manly” Acmeist counterpart Osip Mandel’shtam to embrace everyday sports and their physical essence, in part as a means of distancing Acmeist verse from the reigning metaphysical tenets of Symbolism but also as a means of recalibrating Russian poetry via an infusion of vigorous play.

“We do not wish to distract ourselves with a stroll through the ‘forest of symbols,’ because we have a denser, more virgin forest—divine physiology, the infinite complexity of our dark organism,” declared Mandel’shtam in his 1913 essay “The Morning of Acmeism” (“Utro akmeizma”).³⁷ Rejecting the “forest of symbols” found in Symbolist poetry, be it Baudelaire’s mid-nineteenth-century verse or the ethereal lyrics of Russian Symbolists such as Viacheslav Ivanov, Bryusov, and Blok, Mandel’shtam and his fellow Acmeists found inspiration in the physiological, in the body and all its earthly yet wondrous potential. And to accentuate “the divine physiology” of the human organism, Mandel’shtam turned his creative eye to sports. In June 1913, the poet published

in the St. Petersburg magazine *For 7 Days* (*Za 7 dnei*) an initial version of “Tennis,” followed in January 1914 by “Soccer” (“Futbol”), or what has retrospectively—and somewhat confusingly—been called “Second Soccer” (“Vtoroi futbol”), which appeared in the St. Petersburg magazine *The Buddle* (*Zlatotsvet*).³⁸ And then in June 1914, a revised version of “Tennis” appeared in the periodical *The New Satyricon* (*Novyi satirikon*), while on its heels came “Sports” (“Sport”) and another “Soccer,” which were both published in *The New Satyricon* in August 1914. What follows here is a discussion of Mandel’shtam’s focus on modern athletics along with close analysis of his four sports poems, one of which—the later version of “Tennis”—would appear in the second (and subsequent) editions of *Stone* (*Kamen*), Mandel’shtam’s first collection of verse.³⁹ The four poems, I contend, not only reflect Mandel’shtam’s Acmeist break from Symbolism but also accentuate the playful, creative ethos that sports brought to Russian poetry and, more broadly, Russian artistic culture.⁴⁰

Unlike Gumilev, Mandel’shtam did not fashion himself as a man of action, and he was hardly an avid athlete. He did, however, attend St. Petersburg’s Tennishev School, where soccer was popular (as another Tennishev graduate, Vladimir Nabokov, would later recall).⁴¹ The youngest student in his Tennishev class and one of the smallest, Mandel’shtam, from all accounts, remained on the sidelines yet adopted an observant attitude toward all the unprecedented, seemingly foreign athletic play at the school.⁴² A description of soccer at Tennishev in Mandel’shtam’s autobiographical *The Noise of Time* (*Shum vremeni*, 1923) emphasizes the perspective of an intrigued yet wary spectator: “On Zagorodny Prospekt, in the courtyard of a huge apartment house, one side of which was a blank wall that could be seen from a great distance and which bore an advertisement for Shustov cognac, about thirty boys dressed in shorts, wool socks, and English blouses played soccer to the accompaniment of horrendous shouting. They all looked as if they had been transported to England or Switzerland and there fitted out in a way that was not Russian or that of a Gymnasium student, but somehow rather Cambridge in style.”⁴³ Despite this slightly dismissive recollection of soccer and all its “horrendous” sounds and sights, sports appealed to Mandel’shtam’s inquisitive eye and creative appreciation for everyday life in St. Petersburg. And as he and other Acmeists moved away from the lofty abstruseness of Symbolist poetry, he delighted in the youthful athletic activity on display in the Russian capital at the time.

Emerging as a young poet when Symbolism was on the wane and sports were on the rise, Mandel’shtam (born in 1891) seized upon the ordinary, ludic essence of modern sports and their increasing prominence in contemporary Russian culture. The Symbolists may have broadened the thematics of Russian poetry through issues of urban life and a revival of classicism, yet they generally

maintained a seriousness that allowed for little of the delight, humor, or whimsy that Acmeism's new generation of poets—Gumilev, Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova, and others—discovered, as they championed a lyrical, often lighthearted presentation of modest objects and details from their immediate world. To quote Mandel'shtam's "Morning of Acmeism" manifesto again, a celebration of an object's existence was paramount for the movement: "Love the existence of a thing more than the thing itself and your own existence more than yourself; that is Acmeism's highest commandment."⁴⁴ Rejecting the weighty abstractions of Symbolism, Mandel'shtam insisted that "a rose be called a rose," for he never wanted to deprive an object of its most essential, which is to say everyday meaning.⁴⁵

In Mandel'shtam's collection *Stone*, one encounters head-on the Acmeist fascination with ordinary facets of quotidian culture, be it current events (e.g., the *Titanic*), popular attractions (silent cinema), or proliferating pastimes (sports). In *Stone*, poems such as "The Cinema" ("Kinematograf," 1913), "The American Lady" ("Amerikanka," 1913), and "'Ice Cream!' Sun. Sponge cake . . ." ("Morozhenno! Solntse. Vozdushnyi biskvit . . .," 1914), Mandel'shtam depicts the everyday with understated humor. Mandel'shtam's humor, Clarence Brown notes, "is self-deprecatory—the humor of maturity and of artistic awareness," and humorous verse in *Stone* complements the collection's more serious, celebratory poems, which "could hardly be read for themselves alone were it not for the relief they gain from certain poems near them, poems in which a fatuous Englishman at his tennis and an urchin buying an ice cream from a street vendor are celebrated with equal and exquisite pomp."⁴⁶ The four sports poems, it follows, underscore the lighthearted manner in which Mandel'shtam initiated a new relationship between the artist and the surrounding world, a stance that was surely meant to temper Symbolism's overriding solemnity while complementing the serious aims of the young poet. Indeed, "Tennis" and Mandel'shtam's other sports poems reveal, amid the lighthearted play, a number of core aesthetic principles fundamental to his early verse.

Some of the more canonical, "serious" poems of *Stone*, most notably "Notre Dame" (1912), intersect with Mandel'shtam's sports poems in telling ways. Despite a focus on ancient ecclesiastical architecture, Mandel'shtam's "Notre Dame" places explicit emphasis on the human body while pointing to parallels the poet found between the physical and the artistic. The poem's first stanza, a comparison of the Paris church's architecture to man's (Adam's) muscles, introduces a personification of the celebrated structure: "Each nerve stretched taut along the light cross-vaulting, / Each muscle flexing, like Adam when he first woke . . ." (Kak nekogda Adam, rasplastyvaia nervy, / Igraet myshtsami krestovyi legkii svod . . .).⁴⁷ Such fascination with the church's "body"—and

Adam's—can surely be seen as presaging the poet's predilection for athletics. And in an even earlier *Stone* poem such as "A body is given to me—what am I to do with it . . ." ("Dano mne telo—chto mne delat' s nim . . .," 1908), Mandel'shtam celebrated the material essence of the human body while also emphasizing his own physical place in this world: "Tell me who it is I must thank for giving / The quiet joy of breathing and of living?" (*Za radost' tikhuu dyshat' i zhit' / Kogo, skazhite, mne blagodarit'*).⁴⁸ As this early poem, "Notre Dame," and the four sports poems all suggest, Mandel'shtam diverged from Symbolism by pointing to concrete, physical detail and by accentuating the joyous significance of the body in the immediate world.

In celebrating modern sports, Mandel'shtam established significant distance between himself and Russia's Symbolists, be they Ivanov, Bryusov, or even Blok. In fact, a playful rally of sorts with Blok arises at the very beginning of "Tennis," in which Mandel'shtam alludes to one of Blok's most famous poems, "The Unknown Lady" ("Neznakomka," 1906). Both "The Unknown Lady" and "Tennis" transpire in the dusty St. Petersburg suburbs, as the first line of Mandel'shtam's poem—"Sred' aliapovatykh dach . . ." (Amid tawdry dachas . . .)—echoes early lines from Blok's poem: "Vdali, nad pyl'iu pereulochnoi, / Nad skukoi zagorodnykh dach . . ." (In the distance, above the backstreet dust, / Above the boredom of suburban dachas . . .). A veiled parody or even mild polemic with Blok emerges in "Tennis," the first stanza of which is as follows:

Средь аляповатых дач,
Где шатается шарманка,
Сам собой летает мяч—
Как волшебная приманка.⁴⁹

[Amid tawdry dachas,
Where there sways a street organ,
On its own flies the ball—
Like a magical enticement.]⁵⁰

Whereas Blok's poetic persona wallows in wine and finds himself mesmerized by a prostitute (the "unknown lady") amid dusty, drab dachas on the outskirts of St. Petersburg, Mandel'shtam's athletic protagonist will opt for water (in the poem's concluding stanza) while falling under the spell of the "magical" ball and his female opponent. The ethereal atmosphere of Blok's Symbolist verse has given way to the elegant precision and athleticism of a tennis match. Moreover, the alliteration of "shataetsia sharmanka" (the street organ sways) in the

first stanza emphasizes the urban motif of the street organ (*hurdy-gurdy*), which figured prominently in Blok's verse.⁵¹ The sounds of this street organ, a musical instrument then seen as expressing both the sadness and gaiety of urban life, become enveloped in the middle consonant "sh" of "*vol'shebnaia*" (magical), a modifier Mandel'shtam uses to describe the tennis ball. The magic emanates not from some lofty Symbolist lament but from a crisp volley on the tennis court.

As he does in several of his sports poems, Mandel'shtam accentuates the contemporary Russian setting of "Tennis" while simultaneously alluding to both England, birthplace of modern sports, and antiquity, birthplace of ancient sports. Hence, an eclectic picture emerges out of the *dachas*, tennis whites, Greek mythology, and athletic competition, as "Tennis" divides into three parts: a brief introduction, a main plot, and a conclusion of two stanzas. Having established the suburban sports setting in the first stanza, Mandel'shtam juxtaposes the tawdry *dachas* with the tennis ball and tennis whites, emblems of athletic elegance and purity alluded to in the second stanza. Not surprisingly, given the English roots of lawn tennis and the Anglophilia that reigned in St. Petersburg prior to 1917, "Tennis" includes numerous references to the British athletic tradition.⁵² Mandel'shtam accordingly places a young Englishman at the center of his athletic scene.

Кто, смиривший грубый пыл,
Облеченный в снег альпийский,
С резвой девушкой вступил
В поединок олимпийский?

Слишком дряхлы струны лир:
Золотой ракеты струны
Укрепил и бросил в мир
Англичанин вечно юный!

Он творит игры обряд,
Так легко вооруженный,
Как аттический солдат,
В своего врага влюбленный!

[Who, having subdued his rude passion,
Clothed in alpine snow,
With a playful young woman entered into
An Olympic duel?

The lyre strings are too worn:
 The strings of the golden racquet
 Have been strengthened and tossed into the world
 By an eternally young Englishman!

He creates the rite of the game,
 So lightly armed,
 Like an ancient Greek soldier,
 In love with his enemy!]

It is a youthful Englishman, of course, who will keep in check his “rude passion” to challenge the young woman to an athletic duel. The passion (*pyl'*) here contrasts nicely with the cold alpine snow and tennis whites (and amid the suburban dachas, the *pyl'* [dust] of Blok’s “Unknown Lady” has become Mandel’shtam’s subdued *pyl'* [“passion”]). Meanwhile, the rhetorical nature of the poem’s second stanza adds tension to the match, as if momentum builds from stanza to stanza. The metrics (trochaic tetrameter) alone in “Tennis” evoke images of a tennis ball bouncing from one side of the net to the other; the reader can feel the rhythm of the game.

These three central stanzas of “Tennis,” I would add, facilitate Mandel’shtam’s urge to establish a playful, half-in-jest metaphor of tennis as a springboard for artistic creativity, as the strings of the tennis racquet (*rakety struny*) have replaced the strings of Greek lyres (*struny lir*). While undoubtedly a rebuke of Symbolism’s solemnity, this likening of sports to art points to an underlying determination on Mandel’shtam’s part to perceive athletics through an aesthetic prism. Observing the British propensity for tradition and ceremony, Mandel’shtam endows his young poet-athlete with the ability to create his own ritual through tennis (“He creates the rite of the game” [On tvorit igry obriad]). Lofty in tone and style, the verb *tvorit'* (to create) implies a serious creative process. As will be the case in Mandel’shtam’s other sports poems as well, athletic activity has been fashioned, somewhat humorously, into an inspired, hallowed endeavor reminiscent of sports in ancient Greece.

A modern athletic game such as tennis not only facilitated Mandel’shtam’s break from Symbolism but also allowed him to link his fascination with antiquity to the modern day. In the fourth stanza of “Tennis,” Mandel’shtam merges his emphasis on creativity with allusions to warfare, ancient Greece, and Attica: “Like an ancient Greek soldier, / In love with his enemy . . .” (Kak atticheskii soldat, / V svoego vraga vliublennyi! . . .). Mandel’shtam is most likely alluding here to Theseus, the preeminent Attic hero of Greek mythology, who fell in love with the Amazon queen Antiope (Melanippe), although the lines could also be

a veiled reference to the Greek hero Achilles and his love for the Amazon queen Penthesilea, who was Achilles's stated enemy—and victim—in the Trojan War.⁵³ Regardless of the allusion, the hero's contest with his beloved Amazonian opponent marks the climax of the poem, as well as the crucial points of the tennis match.

In "Tennis," however, human physiology and physicality ultimately take precedence over antiquity. In the final two stanzas of the poem, Mandel'shtam shifts his focus back to the somewhat garish springtime setting of the suburban dwellings. The Hellenic details have dropped out and the dilapidated remains of nature penetrate the modern yet stultifying setting.

Май. Грозовых туч клочки.
Неживая зелень чахнет.
Все моторы и гудки, —
И сирень бензином пахнет.

Ключевую воду пьет
Из ковша спортсмен веселый;
И опять война идет,
И мелькает локоть голый!

[May. Wisps of thunderclouds.
The lifeless greenery withers.
All the motors and horns, —
And the lilacs reek of gasoline.

Drinking spring water
From the ladle is the happy sportsman;
And again the battle proceeds,
And a bare elbow flashes!]

The glum atmosphere of the penultimate stanza contrasts with the humorous details so prevalent elsewhere in "Tennis." Whereas all other stanzas in the poem are composed of one sentence each, the fifth stanza consists of four succinct statements, and the first word in this stanza startles the reader with its abruptness, whereby a sense of stasis pervades the verse, especially given the lack of verbs in the first two lines. The stanza's only motion comes out of the verb *chakhnet* ("it withers" — "Ne zhivaia zelen' chakhnet"), which itself implies a dwindling of energy. And the "wisps" of ominous clouds, accompanying the dearth of athletic action (this is the only stanza that has no mention of tennis), do not bode well, as they threaten the continuation of the tennis match. But in the

final stanza, the tennis—or mock-epic “war” (*voina*)—resumes, as Mandel’shtam ends his poem by reviving the poem (and the players) with water and by providing a semi-erotic glimpse of the “bare elbow” (*lokot’ golyi*) afforded by the athletic action. Much like the tennis featured in the 1913 ballet *Jeux*, a Ballets Russes production of a Claude Debussy orchestral work with choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky and designs by Leon Bakst, the tennis action contains an erotic tone that complements the underlying fusion of athletics and art.⁵⁴

Mandel’shtam’s playful emphasis on the mythical, the poetic, and the athletic/aesthetic interrelationship between antiquity and contemporaneous Russian culture runs throughout all four of his sports poems. In “Soccer,” the second of those poems to be discussed here, Mandel’shtam engagingly merges modern athletics with myth. Given the Hellenic roots of Western sports, we might expect the poet to bring in Greek mythology, but his attention to myth and legend focuses mainly on the ancient tale of Judith from the Old Testament. With her beauty and cunning, Judith gained entrance to the Assyrian army camp, where she beheaded the general Holofernes, thus helping her people, the seemingly outmatched Jews, defeat a far more powerful force. This biblical story, above all, signifies a victory of God over powerful forces of evil, which Mandel’shtam, with mock seriousness, transposes onto the athletic field. The mythic basis of “Soccer,” in fact, stems from the Hermitage’s early sixteenth-century painting *Judith, Trampling Holofernes’s Chopped-Off Head with Her Foot* by Giorgione, a work of art Mandel’shtam would refer to fourteen years later in “The Egyptian Mark” (“Egipetskaia marka,” 1927). In “Soccer,” Mandel’shtam adopts elements from the Giorgione painting of Judith’s tale, correlating them with a modern-day sporting event.

Once again, Mandel’shtam playfully mixes athletics and art in his sports poem. Although the courageous female figure in the poem’s underlying plot is not disclosed until the final stanza, the flimsy line between sports and the motif of the Giorgione painting fluctuates throughout “Soccer.” Given the poem’s title, one assumes that an athletic event transpires, but in hindsight Mandel’shtam’s choice of words conveys overtones of feigned gravity. In the first two stanzas of the poem, for instance, the principal Judith myth is teasingly obscured.

Телохранитель был отравлен.
В неравной битве изнемог,
Обезображен, обесславлен,
Футбола толстокожий бог.

И с легкостью тяжеловеса
Удары отбивал боксер:

О, беззащитная завеса,
Неохраняемый шатер!⁵⁵

[The bodyguard was poisoned.
In the uneven battle exhausted,
Disfigured, defamed,
The thick-skinned god of soccer.

And with the lightness of a heavyweight
The boxer repelled the blows:
O, defenseless curtain,
Unguarded tent!]

The poisoning in the first line of the poem seems a bit too ominous for an innocent game of soccer, yet it flows nicely into the second line, as the middle syllable “rav” of *otravlen* (poisoned) is echoed in the “rav” of the second line’s *neravnyi* (unfair). The “bodyguard” (*telokhranitel*), meanwhile, refers to the guard of the biblical tale, as the reader only later realizes, but initially Mandel’shtam uses the Russian word “*telokhranitel*” as a term for defenseman. The leather soccer ball and the player merge, as the adjective *tolstokozhii* (thick-skinned) modifies “the god of soccer,” who has been disfigured, vilified, and drained of his power in this lopsided battle. Elevating the soccer game into a scene of exaggerated import (à la Bryusov), Mandel’shtam obscures the athlete’s identity through a swirl of images that blend athletics and battle. And the oxymoron of the second stanza’s first line—“with the lightness of a heavyweight” (*legkost’iu tiazhelovesa*)—only complicates the scenario. But in the last two lines of this second stanza, details of the guard (*telokhranitel*) from the poem’s beginning resurface, with an implied setting of the soccer field. The goal remains unguarded in the heated contest, as the modifiers *bezashchitnaia* (defenseless) and *neokhraniamyi* (unguarded) endow *zavesa* (curtain) and *shater* (tent) with metaphorical import. Mock seriousness thus obscures the biblical setting that will emerge at the poem’s conclusion.

Mandel’shtam’s lively merging of myth, art, and athletics continues in the concluding two stanzas (stanzas three and four) of “Soccer.” Here Mandel’shtam accentuates the mass spectacle of the game while also revealing the poem’s historical basis as he at last provides an explication of his chief metaphor.

Должно быть, так толпа сгрудилась,
Когда, мучительно жива,

Не допив кубка, покатила
К ногам тупая голова.

Неизъяснимо лицемерно
Не так ли кончиком ноги
Над теплым трупом Олоферна
Юдифь глумилась . . .

[Thus, as the crowd came together,
When, poignantly alive,
Not having drunk down the goblet, rolled
A blunt head up to their feet.

Inexplicably hypocritical
Was it not with the tip of the foot
That at Holofernes's warm body
Judith mocked.]

Have the spectators, captivated by the soccer ball, gathered to view a sporting event or have they rushed to see Holofernes's decapitated head come rolling along? This all seems reminiscent of some ancient athletic rite in which a head is used as soccer ball.⁵⁶ And in the final stanza, a soccer player seemingly kicks the ball with the small tip of his foot, or is it Judith lording over Holofernes's decapitated head? Building on the irony established earlier in the poem, Mandel'shtam portrays his athlete in mock-heroic proportions. Furthermore, the last line of the poem trails off, breaking the stanza's rhyming pattern. Iambic tetrameter has been shortened to iambic dimeter, thus symbolizing the decapitation and "shortening" of the general's body. In Mandel'shtam's unexpected final stanza, myth, sports, and art have all merged to create a vivid pseudo-athletic scene.

Admiring yet lightly mocking all the sports that proliferated at the time in Russia, Mandel'shtam brought an artist's eye to the era's athletic games. The poet, according to his famous contemporary and fellow Acmeist Anna Akhmatova, often sat in his rented room on Vasilevsky Island in St. Petersburg and watched children playing soccer on a nearby field.⁵⁷ Such observations open the third of Mandel'shtam's sports poems, "Second Soccer."

Рассеян утренник тяжелый,
На босу ногу день пришел;

А на дворе военной школы
Играют мальчики в футбол.

Чуть-чуть неловки, мешковаты —
Как подобает в их лета, —
Кто мяч толкает угловатый,
Кто охраняет ворота . . .⁵⁸

[The heavy morning dissipated,
The day arrived barefoot;
And in the yard of the military school
Children play soccer.

A bit awkward, clumsy —
As is expected at their age, —
Some dribble the angular ball,
Some defend the goal . . .]

With a tender mix of admiration and wistfulness, Mandel'shtam evokes a cold fall morning in the capital. While in "Tennis" the poet focused on an exposed elbow, in "Second Soccer" he points to bare feet that metonymically signify the early-morning athletic ritual for young students at a military school. Yet rather than mock the lack of grace among the athletes (as he will subsequently do in "Sports"), Mandel'shtam appears to delight in the young boys' awkwardness and the physical sense of freedom found through athletic pursuits. Displaying a clumsiness common for their age, the athletic tenderfoots lumber through the game. Aided by Mandel'shtam's verse, the boys and their soccer match merge into an organic whole, since even the ball with its own imperfect shape (*uglovaty*: angular, awkward) is flawed.

In replicating the sports play through aesthetic play, as he does in all four of his sports poems, Mandel'shtam subtly invokes Russia's national poet, Aleksandr Pushkin, in "Second Soccer." A friendly game seems to transpire between Mandel'shtam and his much-revered predecessor. Observing the young schoolchildren's athletic pursuits in stanzas three and four of "Second Soccer," for instance, Mandel'shtam echoes a passage from the first chapter of Pushkin's novel-in-verse *Eugene Onegin* (*Evgenii Onegin*): "Uvy, na raznye zabavy / Ia mnogo zhizni pogubil! . . ." (Alas, on various amusements / I squandered much of life! . . . , XXX:I-2).⁵⁹ Just as Pushkin's narrator wistfully remarks on his youthful years spent at high-society balls, the narrative voice of "Second Soccer"

eulogizes these boys' years spent studying and playing soccer, albeit from a detached, spectatorial perspective.

Любовь, охотничьи попойки—
 Все в будущем, а нынче—скорбь
 И вскакивать на жесткой койке,
 Чуть свет, под барабанов дробь!

Увы: ни музыки, ни славы!
 Так от зари и до зари,
 В силках науки и забавы,
 Томятся дети-дикари.

[Love, boozy hunting parties—
 All is in the future, but today—sadness
 And jumping onto a hard bunk,
 A trace of light and a drum roll rings out!

Alas, neither music nor glory!
 Thus from dawn to dusk,
 In the snares of science and amusement,
 The wild children languish.]

Pushkin's doleful reminiscences of the upper-class social life in early nineteenth-century Russia have become Mandel'shtam's modest and slightly melancholic ode to childhood as he sees it on the soccer field of a military school. And while Pushkin's reminiscences lead him to wax poetic on female feet in the ensuing stanzas of *Eugene Onegin*, Mandel'shtam has already drawn the reader's attention in his first stanza to bare feet. Although the amusements (*zabavy*) of Pushkin and Mandel'shtam diverge, both poets celebrate adolescence with a similar appreciation for youthful spirit.

Mandel'shtam's approach to sports and the rowdy soccer playing of the "wild children" (*deti-dikari*) may be high-spirited and buoyant, yet it preserves some room for seriousness. Hence, the wistful tones of "Second Soccer" reach their peak in the poem's final stanza, as the athletic arena appears to merge with the battlefield. Having described the soccer game as well as the Spartan conditions of life for the boys in the military school, Mandel'shtam concludes his poem with a variety of details that have materialized out of the autumn day and soccer match. The mist and light rain contribute to an evocative haziness.

Осенней путаницы сито.
 Деревья мокрые в золе.
 Мундир обрызган. Грудь открыта.
 Околыш красный на земле.

[The light rain of the autumn muddle.
 The trees are wet in ashes.
 A coat is spattered. A chest is exposed.
 A red cap band on the ground.]

Similar in structure to the penultimate stanza of “Tennis,” these final four lines appear as five sentences, a list of quick impressions that seemingly breaks up the flow of the soccer game. Yet whereas in “Tennis” Mandel’shtam linked the game to spring and the prerequisite tennis whites, here in “Second Soccer” the game transpires under the downcast atmosphere of fall and its solemn colors. The autumn *putanitsa* (muddle, confusion) reflects the physical bedlam that has arisen among the boys. Expanding his attention to the haptic and small physical details, such as the bare foot in the first stanza of the poem as well as the elbow in “Tennis,” Mandel’shtam mentions a bare chest and its exposure to the cold. Simultaneously, the theme of sports as a stand-in for war arises—hardly a surprise, given that the soccer-playing youth attend a military school. While the soccer game emerges as a rite of passage, the final images of the game point to war and echo the allusions to armies and Greek warriors found in the other sports poems. The glimpse of the exposed chest and the spattered military coat suggest the possibility of a grim future for the rowdy boys. Hence the border between sports and war wavers.

Whereas solemn tones predominate at the end of “Second Soccer,” a playful frivolity pervades “Sports,” Mandel’shtam’s fourth and final poem devoted to athletics and a work that provides a compendium of both the era’s popular sports and many of the themes and issues resonating throughout all of Mandel’shtam’s sports-oriented verse. Yet rather than dwell on the bellicose nature of athletics or the ominous future of young athletes at a military school, Mandel’shtam has opted to celebrate in “Sports” the mass phenomenon of modern athletics. He begins with an allusion to Pushkin and a light mocking of imported British attitudes—such as snobbishness and valor—toward modern athletics.

Румяный шкипер бросил мяч тяжелый,
 И черни он понравился вполне.
 Потомки толстокожего футбола—
 Крокет на льду и поло на коне.

Средь юношей теперь—по старине
 Цветет прыжок и выпад дискобола,
 Когда сойдутся, в легком полотне,
 Оксфорд и Кэмбридж—
 две прибрежных школы.

[The ruddy skipper threw the heavy ball,
 And the mob quite liked him.
 The offspring of thick-skinned soccer—
 Croquet on ice and polo on horseback.

Among youth today—as in the old days
 Prospers the jump and discus thrower's lunge,
 When meeting up, in light linen,
 Oxford and Cambridge—
 two riverside schools.]

The modifier *rumianyi* (ruddy) immediately establishes a parallel between Mandel'shtam's skipper, or team captain, and the “ruddy critic” (“*Rumianyi kritik moi, nasmeshnik tolstopuzyi*” [My ruddy critic, fat-bellied mocker]) immortalized by Pushkin in 1830, as Mandel'shtam continues to highlight his own unique fusing of sports and verse. The “ruddy” complexion of the skipper, moreover, suits the physical parameters of athletics and the healthy aura surrounding sports. And mention of *chern'* (mob) in the next line likewise evokes a well-known Pushkin theme (see Pushkin's 1828 poem “The Poet and the Crowd” [“*Poet i tolpa*”]), which Mandel'shtam appropriates for contemporary Russian sports while also alluding to—and perhaps lampooning—a Pushkin-inspired article from 1904 by the Symbolist Viacheslav Ivanov titled “The Poet and the Mob” (“*Poet i chern'*”). Just as Pushkin and Ivanov envisioned the individual poet struggling against the crowd, Mandel'shtam, again in a semi-humorous, hyperbolic manner, portrays the lone athlete performing before—and distinguishing himself from—his admiring audience. And by including the derogatory *chern'* in this first stanza of “Sports,” Mandel'shtam lightheartedly mocks the mass appeal of organized athletics.

In the first two stanzas of “Sports,” Mandel'shtam's observations merge details of the English and Russian sporting scenes. Referring to the “offspring” (*potomki*) of soccer, Mandel'shtam suggests that sports evolve from the coarse (soccer) into the cultivated (polo and “croquet on ice” [*kroket na l'du*], which denotes either hockey or curling), as the poet takes aim at an upper-class, English repugnance toward working-class sports. In the second stanza, however, athleticism appears to blossom (*tsvetet*), as it did in ancient Greece (*po starine*), thus

reflecting the growth of a classically minded sports movement in both England and Russia. Moreover, the sartorial details in line three exemplify Mandel'shtam's tendency to focus on details such as the clothes (light linen) of the game, whereby the athletes become lightly clad warriors engaged in battle. And continuing his allusions to antiquity, Mandel'shtam indirectly equates Oxford and Cambridge, two obvious symbols of English sports, with Athens and Sparta, the athletic centers of ancient Greece.

By playfully linking sports and art in his poems, Mandel'shtam undermines the solemnity of both endeavors, thus deflating the grandeur of athletics and the loftiness of art. In the final two stanzas of "Sports," as if on cue, the mock athlete-creator moves to the fore:

Но только тот действительно спортсмен,
Кто разорвал печальной жизни плен:
Он знает край, где дышит радость, пенясь . . .

И детского крокета молотки,
И северные наши городки,
И дар богов—великолепный теннис!

[But only he who is truly a sportsman,
Has torn apart the prison of sad life:
He knows the land where joy breathes, frothing . . .

And the mallets of children's croquet
And our northern *gorodki*,
And the gift of gods—magnificent tennis!]

The captive state (*plen*) of life mentioned here alludes to a central tenet of Russian Symbolism, but now it is the athlete, not the poet, who overcomes the confines of our tragic world. Hence, Mandel'shtam humorously endows the athlete with creative powers, for a blissful state is achieved through liberating athletic action. Moreover, the final line of the poem—"I dar bogov—velikolepnyi tennis!" (And the gift of gods—magnificent tennis!)—indicates a further merging of poetry and sports, as the game of tennis is described in a haze of semi-serious sublimity. Focusing on cultural particulars, such as English croquet or the old Russian folk sport of *gorodki* (a version of skittles that translates as "little cities"), while equating the tennis racquet with the poet's lyre (as he did in "Tennis"), Mandel'shtam balances his excitement as an observer of sports with a desire to both elevate modern athletics to the level of art and to

deflate its importance. In part as a response to Symbolism, the sports theme provides Mandel'shtam with an ideal means to expand the parameters of modern Russian verse.

Throughout the four sports poems, a playful back and forth with the Symbolists, most notably Vyacheslav Ivanov, transpires, as Mandel'shtam's attention to Greek motifs—and his allusion to Ivanov's "The Poet and the Mob"—points a spotlight on Symbolism's most neoclassical (and theurgic) poet. The sonnet structure (fourteen lines written in iambic pentameter) of "Sports," for instance, not only distinguishes it from the great majority of Mandel'shtam's other verse but also suggests an element of parody, given how this serious, elegant form of poetry is used to describe the rough practices of athletes.⁶⁰ Ivanov and his fellow Symbolist Bryusov had written major cycles of sonnets but never about such an unabashedly physical topic. Moreover, the Symbolists, especially Ivanov, had championed a neoclassicism that highlighted myth and a number of Greek motifs. Mandel'shtam imaginatively capitalizes on the ancient origins of athleticism and the manner in which contemporary Russian poets, himself included, engaged with Greek themes. Thus sports, I would argue, allowed Mandel'shtam—as well as Blok and Bryusov, once they began to waver in their commitment to Symbolism—to forge a new way forward for modern Russian poetry.

All four of the Mandel'shtam sports poems accentuate the poet's desire to imbue athletics with irony and with vivid metaphors of poetic creativity, whereby he succeeded in establishing himself as a poet of a new, active era. By deviating from the Symbolists and seizing upon something as modern yet iconoclastic as sports, Mandel'shtam undermined the poetic practices and ethereal ethos that proved so pervasive during his artistic maturation. Sports would disappear for the most part in Mandel'shtam's subsequent works, but these early poems allowed him to develop a wide range of motifs and formulae, such as Hellenism and a preoccupation with contemporary society, which would prevail throughout his career.⁶¹ The four sports poems, it should also be noted, came about at a key moment in Mandel'shtam's transformation into a major poet and can thus be seen as contributing to this transformation. With his tendency to focus on small, physical details and his lighthearted attitude toward modern-day Russia, Mandel'shtam established in "Tennis," "Soccer," "Second Soccer," and "Sports" themes that would prove essential to not only *Stone* but also his later poetry—and subsequent Russian art devoted to sports.

Artists more iconoclastic and revolutionary than Blok, Bryusov, and Mandel'shtam, such as those in Russia's so-called avant-garde, would soon seize upon modern-day athletes as symbols of upheaval and as avatars of dramatic change in Russian society. They would be the new "men-actors," to cite

Blok's "The Collapse of Humanism" again. Hence, the artistic fixation with wrestling and other athletic pastimes (soccer, most notably) only intensified in Cubo-Futurist poetry and painting in the years leading up to the 1917 Revolution and in Soviet Left art in the subsequent postrevolutionary period. But for those initial prerevolutionary years in Russia, the athlete offered the modern poet an enticing, unparalleled example of playful exhilaration, liberated action, elegance, and even bliss.

3

Revolutionary Goals

Modern Sports in Russian and Early Soviet Avant-Garde Art

The Hamburg score is an extremely important concept.
All the wrestlers when they wrestle, cheat and fall on their
shoulders when ordered to by the impresario.
Once a year in a Hamburg nightclub all the wrestlers gather.
They wrestle with the doors closed and the windows covered.
It is a long, ugly, difficult fight.
Here the true class of the wrestlers is established so that there
be no cheating.
The Hamburg score is essential in literature.
According to the Hamburg score: Serafimov and Verasaev
are nowhere to be found.
They didn't even make it to the city.
In Hamburg, Bulgakov is on the mat.
Babel is a lightweight
Gorky is a doubt (often not in shape).
Khlebnikov was the champion.

Viktor Shklovsky, *The Hamburg Score* (*Gamburgskii schet*), 1928

In Russian and later early Soviet artistic circles, what often ruled the day was a competitive drive and physical bravado intrinsically linked to modern sports and modern notions of physical fitness. “A person of the future,” Vladimir

Mayakovsky declared in 1914, “must be strong, manly, and bold so as to be a master, not a slave, of life.”¹ Such was the masculine, athletic spirit underlying the pre-1917 era, when an enthusiastic, “bold” approach to everyday life proved advantageous, particularly in preparation for the war, revolution, and social transformation that many Russians, artists included, saw looming over the horizon. Strength and manliness, straight out of the circus wrestling ring, offered the Futurist Mayakovsky and other Left, avant-garde artists “of the future” a useful theme—and a useful ethos—for shaping Russia’s prerevolutionary artistic discourse. Cultivating a “manly,” wrestler-like persona that was in equal measure circus performer and revolutionary provocateur, Mayakovsky stated in “Futurians (The Birth of the Futurians),” his manifesto-like piece published in December 1914 in the newspaper *Nov’ (Virgin Soil)*, that “the human basis of Russia has changed” and “powerful people of the future have been born.”² The poet and his fellow “futurians” (*budetliane*) were just those “powerful” new people of the era destined to replace the weak, sickly people of the past: “Take note: under the gray coat of the average man instead of a puny body, dissipated and spent, ripen the powerful muscles of a Hercules!”³ Aspiring toward Herculean-type muscularity, Mayakovsky rebelled against convention while glorifying the “New Man”: “And now, fighting with the constraints of the past, with the dull power of outdated authorities,—I reverentially tip my cap before the new man who has commenced today.”⁴ Such revolutionary sentiments bolstered what would be a fruitful merging of athletics and avant-garde art.

Led by Mayakovsky, the Russian Futurists trumpeted their famous “slap in the face of public taste” and belligerently vowed to throw Russia’s literary tradition “from the ship of modernity.”⁵ The era’s athleticism, as if in conjunction with these revolutionary sentiments, gave Left artists a useful way to break with the stagnant, conventional past and race, almost literally, into the future. Whether taking the form of Neoprimitivist images of burly wrestlers, self-portraits of bare-chested, weightlifting artists, or the creative staging of strongmen and sportsmen discovering a new world, Futurist and Cubo-Futurist art in Russia would launch a conspicuous merger of art and athletics. And it would help establish the aesthetic basis for the early Soviet avant-garde celebration of sports and physical culture that ensued in the 1920s. For it was, I contend, the imaginative embrace of modern athletics by Russian Left artists in the early 1910s that set the stage for the comprehensive postrevolutionary integration of art and sports.

In the years leading up to 1917, an impressive roster of avant-garde artists—Natalya Goncharova, Ilya Mashkov, and Kazimir Malevich, among other painters—along with poets such as Mayakovsky and Vasily Kamensky—seized upon the aesthetic possibilities of athletic competition and physical movement

as they elevated the role of the “sportsman” to an almost mystical plane by championing the “new” athletic individual. In telling fashion, the modern-day athlete in the Cubo-Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* helps bring about a new revolutionary order. Although the 1917 Revolution would profoundly inform the Russian avant-garde’s engagement with athletics, art produced in the early 1920s by Vera Ermolaeva, El Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and others suggests significant continuity with prerevolutionary art as well as a vigorous continuum of athleticism readily apparent in the era’s most innovative artistic experimentation. Sports, I will argue here, elicited in Left art a playful dynamism, excitement, and highly practical means for engaging large audiences, whereby early Soviet artists, particularly those linked to the Constructivist movement, tapped into the era’s athletic ethos and evolving notions of sports spectatorship as a basis for their groundbreaking art. A very active interplay between artists, athletes, and audiences ensued, as the avant-garde Left increasingly exploited the transformative nature of modern athletics, particularly the promise embedded in sports of a new person, a new spectator, a new society, and a new way of life.

“The Race Has Begun”

The modern spirit of wrestling—coupled with the primitive, rugged nature of the sport itself—ideally suited the era’s Left artists, many of whom strove to combine Russia’s primitive past with a resolutely futuristic orientation toward art. Working under the broad avant-garde rubric of what became known as Neoprimitivist and Cubo-Futurist art, Natalya Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, David Burlyuk, and others found that the nonmimetic flatness and figural distortion so conspicuous in the Russian *lubok* (broadsheet), icon, and other folk art could significantly enhance their radical aesthetic and iconoclastic treatment of a popular modern activity such as athletics. Whereas Cubo-Futurism fused Cubism’s fragmented forms and multiple perspectives on a single static object with the dynamic, modern aesthetic of Futurism, Neoprimitivism turned backward toward Russia’s past native art to develop an explicitly crude synthesis of past and present. As Aleksandr Shevchenko, one of the leaders of the Neoprimitivist “school,” put it, “Such is our school—taking its genesis from the primitive but developing within contemporaneity.”⁶ Meanwhile, Goncharova likewise cited a Neoprimitivist receptivity toward the modern world when stating her artistic aims in 1913: “To apprehend the world around us in all its brilliance and diversity and to bear in mind both its inner and outer content. To fear in painting neither literature, nor illustration, nor any other bugbears of contemporaneity; certain modern artists wish to create a painterly interest

absent in their work by rejecting [such things]. [One ought] to endeavor, on the contrary, to express them vividly and positively by painterly means.”⁷ Instead of avoiding “bugbears of contemporaneity,” which implicitly included modern athletics, Neoprimitivists such as Goncharova sought to “express” the “brilliance and diversity” of the era by drawing upon well-established painterly techniques of old as a way of capturing the “inner and outer content” of modernity. And as Goncharova’s Neoprimitivist work underscores, the inner primitive force of wrestling and outer modern content of sports closely accommodated the aesthetic aims of Russia’s Neoprimitivists and their desire to “express contemporaneity—its living beauty—better and more vividly,” as she also put it in this artistic declaration.⁸ Wrestling therefore emerged as an ideal subject for the Neoprimitivists’ aesthetic platform, given the sport’s primal essence but modern veneer.

A fusion of the primitive and modern accordingly prevails in Goncharova’s 1908–9 painting *Wrestlers* (*Bortsy*, plate 1). Casting a spotlight on a sport that Goncharova celebrated in several nearly identical paintings from 1909 of the same name, *Wrestlers* conveys the rough, brutal nature of athletic combat as well as its imposing appeal.⁹ Here Goncharova revels in the unvarnished physicality of the athletic action as she provides a slightly elevated perspective on the two colossal competitors, who aggressively lean into one another while locked in a combative embrace. The wrestler on the left wears a red mask (circus wrestlers at the time often competed in hoods or masks, à la Breshko-Breshkovsky), whereby the color of the athlete’s head and upper-body sports attire allow him to blend in with the reddish ground (presumably that combination of sand and sawdust used at the time for circus wrestling in Russia) on which he wrestles, while the white and green brushstrokes used to depict his opponent lend the painting even more of a crude, semi-mimetic aura. There is nothing delicate or refined in the painting, as the massive bodies of the two competitors dominate the space of the canvas. Goncharova’s crude, Neoprimitivist brush strokes, coarse forms, and garish colors offer a highly effective aesthetic for communicating the impressive yet frightening power of these two strongmen and their primal yet fashionable sport. Exhibited in 1913 alongside other sports-related paintings by Goncharova such as *Rowers* (*Grebtzy*) and *Soccer* (*Futbol*), and complementing the Neoprimitivist vision of modern motion found in her well-known *Cyclist* (*Velosipedist*, 1913), *Wrestlers* delivers an alluring synthesis of primitive form and modern life so evident in both early turn-of-the-century wrestling and avant-garde painting.¹⁰

The primal, physical nature of modern-day wrestling and weightlifting provided a similar boost to Neoprimitivist work by Goncharova’s lifelong partner

and fellow painter, Mikhail Larionov. In Larionov's 1910 *Portrait of Vladimir Burlyuk* (*Portret Vladimira Burliuka*), the physically imposing artist Vladimir Burlyuk grasps a barbell in his lowered left hand.¹¹ Sporting only a long open-neck shirt that helps highlight an impressive muscular physique, Burlyuk flaunts his bare, bulging thighs. Sometimes referred to as *Portrait of an Athlete* (*Portret atleta*), Larionov's painting features a crude, colorful Fauvist-inspired background, before which the muscular Burlyuk, depicted in suitably rough strokes, appears more primitive strongman than avant-garde painter. Through its content and form Larionov's painting, like Goncharova's *Wrestlers*, captures the modern yet also coarse physical essence of weightlifting (*tiazhelaia atletika*) and modern athletics. Vladimir Burlyuk (brother of the Cubo-Futurist David Burlyuk) was an avid advocate of physical fitness, as were other painters at the time—for instance, Ivan Myasoedov, Ilya Mashkov (who after the revolution hung a sign in his studio that declared, "In my studio there is room only for the healthy and strong"), Petr Konchalovsky, and Vladimir Tatlin (an enthusiastic boxer who would be featured bare-chested in Larionov's 1913 *Portrait of Tatlin* [*Portret V. E. Tatlina*]).¹² As Larionov and other Left painters in Russia looked to the past but also to the future, athletics—whether in real life or in the creative sphere—offered a convenient conduit through which they could demonstrate their evolving avant-garde aesthetics as well as their revolutionary ambitions and own physical force. They were ready to grapple with convention.

The Neoprimitivists, in addition to promoting both wrestling and body-building, tapped into the theatrical side of modern athleticism and its emphasis on the human body through a series of "face-painting" stunts and statements. In the 1913 manifesto "Why We Paint Ourselves" ("Pochemu my raskrashivaemsia: Manifest futuristov"), Larionov and his fellow face painter/Neoprimitivist Ilya Zdanevich boldly—and with competitive bravado—announced, "With the first goal scored we are the victors."¹³ It was at this time that the face-painters—Larionov, Zdanevich, Goncharova, David Burlyuk, and other Cubo-Futurists—strutted about Moscow with Futurist designs on their bodies, trumpeting victory over the "menials of the earth" who steadfastly defended the "goalposts" of tradition, as Larionov and Zdanevich put it. Switching gears (and sports), the two "face painters" added, "The race has begun and the track awaits the runners."¹⁴ Here the pseudo-athletes Larionov and Zdanevich accentuated their intention of energetically bringing their body art to the people: "We, however, join contemplation with action and fling ourselves into the crowd."¹⁵ A triumphal assertion of their desire to take on established convention, the face painters' sports metaphors and active, corporeal (i.e., facial) engagement with their urban audience underscore the centrality of athleticism to

the Russian avant-garde's agenda. Larionov and Zdanevich's audacious, competitive claim to athletic prowess may have been made in jest, but the attention they paid to the spectacle of sports and to the athletic body suggests that a new dynamic between athlete and spectator was emerging in Left aesthetics. And as the face painters made scandalously clear, the body—be it through face painting or sports—offered an expedient canvas for creative expression and also expedient grounds for linking art and athletics.

Muscle size and strength also provided the conceptual and creative impulse behind Mashkov's oft-cited painting *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Konchalovsky* (*Avtoportret i portret Konchalovskogo*, plate 2). First exhibited in December 1910 at the *Jack of Diamonds* (*Bubnovyi valet*) show in Moscow, where other avant-garde artists such as Goncharova, Larionov, Lentulov, and David Burlyuk displayed their work, Mashkov's canvas captures in unprecedented fashion the revolutionary potential of modern sports and, more specifically, the modern-day strongman. Another clear manifestation of the avant-garde's growing fascination with the athletic body, this somewhat startling painting depicts the painter and his Jack of Diamonds colleague Petr Konchalovsky as proud bodybuilders displaying their oversized musculature before a gaudy backdrop of bourgeois artistic culture. Arguably homoerotic in spirit and appropriately large (208 × 270 cm.), the painting accentuates the era's increasingly prevalent amalgamation of athletics and art. The two artists, preening before spectators in nothing but bodybuilder shorts, have assumed poised athletic personae, whereby Mashkov sits on the left with a violin cradled in his bulky arms and a somewhat phallic bow in his right hand while next to him Konchalovsky sits holding a sheet of music between his massive legs. The two men, moreover, are surrounded by elements of traditional art: on the left is a piano (on which stands a sheet of music with a bullfighting illustration), in the background are two still lifes with flowers (which were originally going to be portraits of the two painters' wives), and on a background shelf is a row of books ranging from the Bible to volumes on art and Cezanne.¹⁶ In both a metaphorical and physical manner, Mashkov and Konchalovsky have crowded out these surrounding remnants of conventional artistic culture. As John Malmstad notes, Mashkov shocked many with *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Konchalovsky*, "so radically did it depart from the compositional convention of the self-portrait and the image that convention projected of the artist as serious and respectable."¹⁷ No other painting at the time conveys so boldly the prominent status of weightlifting and wrestling as well as the notion that physical fitness represented a powerful means to overturn the staid status quo. Mashkov and Konchalovsky were hardly the effete artists of yesteryear. Through their rebellious preening and impressive physiques, the two strongmen painters appear as artistic avatars of a new athletic world.

Victory over Yesterday

Russian Left artists bent on breaking with artistic tradition—and, in time, political tradition—seized on athletics as both symbol and substance of a new order. The popular circus strongman/wrestler, as I have already noted, had evolved from athletic performer into revolutionary proxy for the Russian avant-garde. This is made particularly evident in the famous Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* (*Pobeda nad solntsem*) by Mikhail Matyushin, Aleksey Kruchenykh, and Velimir Khlebnikov, staged alongside Mayakovsky's *Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Tragedy* (*Vladimir Maiakovskii. Tragediia*) in December 1913 at St. Petersburg's Luna Park Theater (which at one time had been the theater of Vera Komissarzhevskaya, mentioned by Blok in his *Retribution* foreword). According to K. Tomashovsky, who acted in both the *Victory over the Sun* and *Vladimir Mayakovsky* productions in 1913 and subsequently wrote about the experience, a good deal of the inspiration for the performance at the Luna Park Theater had come from the Greco-Roman wrestling matches previously officiated there by "Uncle Vanya" Lebedev in an outdoor arena: "Here they held Greco-Roman wrestling tournaments with the well-known 'Uncle Vanya' in charge. . . . 'Uncle Vanya' in his own inimitable way would proclaim 'Parade, *allé*.' Farces and Greco-Roman wrestling were good box-office attractions, and soon, inspired by their success, the farce group moved into the indoor theater."¹⁸ In accordance with the venue, a circus-like and farcical environment featuring strongmen and athletes would prevail throughout *Victory over the Sun*.

It is easy to overlook the athletics of *Victory over the Sun*, given the art historical ramifications of the production and its groundbreaking designs, but sports indeed proved central to the opera's libretto and iconoclastic spirit. The semi-logical plot of *Victory over the Sun* consists, at its core, of two "futurian strongmen" (*budetlianskii silachi*) leading a violent conquest of the sun, all in a defiant attempt to establish an ideal world of fantastical, cosmic dimensions. Boasting groundbreaking, abstract stage and costume designs by Kazimir Malevich and an atonal score by the composer and painter Matyushin, the chaotic opera celebrated the revolutionary, anarchical action of these strongmen, an aviator, and a raucous chorus of athletes. As the artistic radicalism of *Victory over the Sun* accentuated, the era's *tiazhelaia atletika* contributed not only to the opera's unprecedented language and art but also to the implicit rise of a new world. The whole production, be it the libretto, the music, or the costume designs, championed a revolution that was resolutely athletic in its orientation.

Malevich's stage designs and costumes for *Victory over the Sun* melded a new, powerful modernist aesthetic with the physical power of wrestlers, weightlifters, and other athletes. If *Victory*, as Anthony Parton argues, "expressed its

revolutionary message through an equally revolutionary stagecraft that opposed point for point the theater of the bourgeoisie and by implication bourgeois culture as a whole,” then surely the robust costumes for the sportsmen and strongmen were essential for this overturning of conventional culture.¹⁹ Anticipating Malevich’s subsequent Suprematist work that would come two years later, these stage designs featured semi-abstract geometrical shapes alongside a very conspicuous section of an airplane.²⁰ Malevich’s costume designs for the production, meanwhile, presented the athletic protagonists as enormous, powerful automatons (fig. 3). According to Kruchenykh, the armor-like costumes devised by Malevich restricted the movement of actors, allowing them only to move their arms upward in a mechanical fashion that suggested a proto-Constructivist merging of muscular man and modern machine.²¹ And Matiushin, elaborating on the “joyful feeling of strength” the opera afforded its audience, remarked that “the scenery and Future [Strong] Man appeared so powerfully and threateningly in a way never seen anywhere before.”²² The athletic and revolutionary character of the *Victory* production thus pervaded virtually all of the opera’s multiple components.

Like the staging and music, the language and plot of *Victory over the Sun* accordingly underscored the revolutionary dawn of a new, more athletic reality, albeit one somewhat dystopian at its sunless core. In Khlebnikov’s Prologue, a “Futurian” (*Budetlianin*) declares through neologistic language that “the strong-one will replace the punyone” (*Sileben zamenit khileben*), while Kruchenykh’s first “act” (*deimo*) opens with the two futurian strongmen tearing down the stage curtain, almost a literal breaking of the fourth wall that underlined the inherent spectacle of the production and its aggressive, rebellious intent.²³ Synthesizing the ultramasculine ethos of wrestling with the misogyny that characterized so much of Italian Futurism at the time, the strongmen declare their intention of using their “cannon-like bodies” (*pushechnye tela*) to lock “fat female beauties” away in a house (*Tolstykh krasavits / My zaperli v dom*).²⁴ The second strongman, meanwhile, boasts that they will similarly lock the sun away in “a concrete house” (*betonnyi dom*). A circus-like farce ensues, as a Roman Nero-Caligula figure, along with an airplane-flying traveler, a “bully” (*zabiaka*), and “an ill-intentioned one” (*a zlonamerennyi*, who at one point shows off some fancy soccer moves), play out the chaotic, semi-logical action. In the second scene (*kartina*) of the first act, singing athletes (*sportsmeny*) join the strongmen in their metaphysical—and very violent—rebellion (mention is even made of Port Arthur, the Chinese harbor that Russia and Japan fought over in 1904, leading indirectly to revolutionary events a year later in Russia).²⁵ By the end of the fourth act, the sun—less a heat-providing star and more a symbol of order and convention—has been

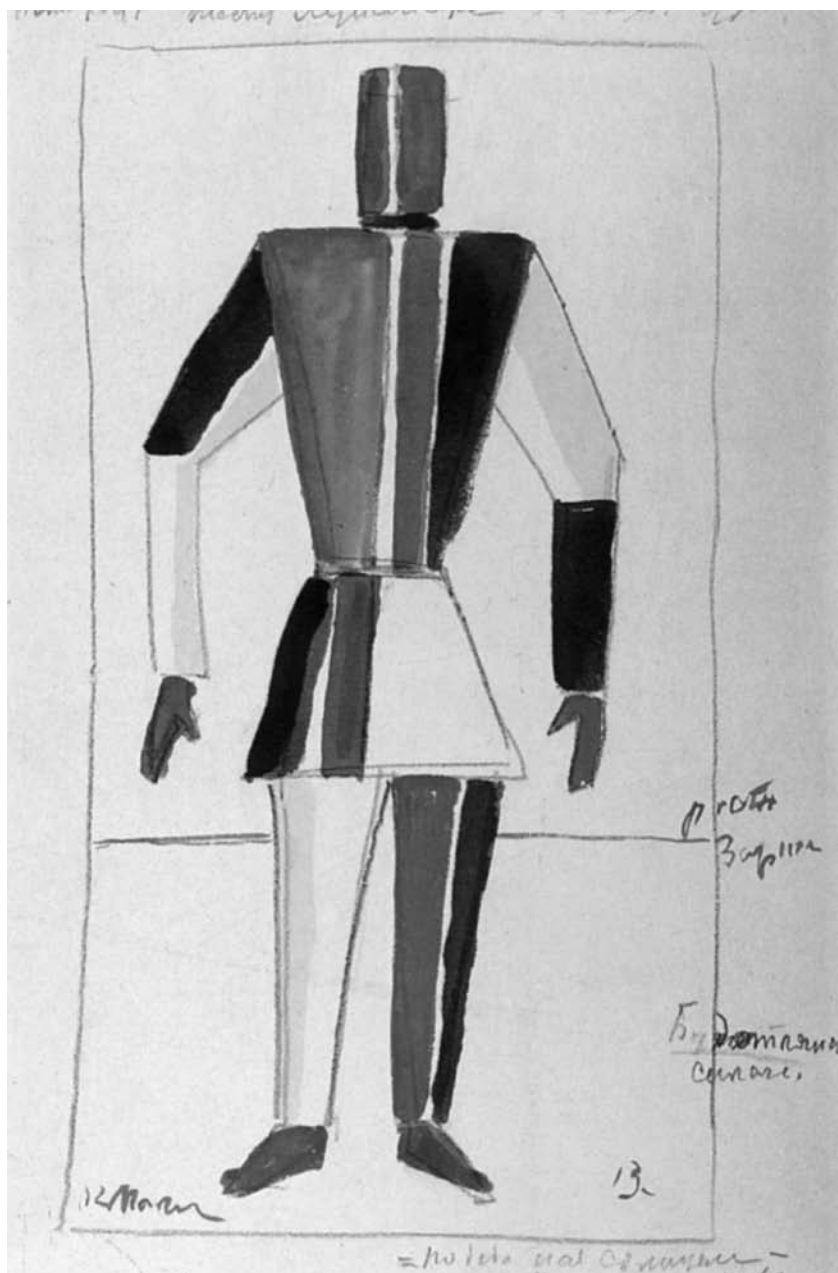


Figure 3. Kazimir Malevich, *Futurist Strongman*. Costume design for the opera *Victory over the Sun* after A. Kruchenykh, 1913. Found in the collection of the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. Photograph by HIP / Art Resource, NY.

captured: “We are free, the sun is smashed, hail darkness!” (My vol’nye / Razbitoe solntse . . . / Zdravstvuet t’ma!), the sportsmen sing.²⁶

In the second act of *Victory*, “New Ones” (*Novye*), who in Malevich’s costume designs closely resemble the futurian strongmen, have come to inhabit a transformed world—a “tenth country” (*Desiatyi stran*)—and they claim to have “shot the past” (*my vystrelili vproshloe*). Representatives of this past world appear but only as “cowards” (*truslyye*) and a bourgeois “Fat Man” (*tolstiak*), who complains that “his head is two steps behind [his] body” (*golova na 2 shaga szadi*).²⁷ They are no match for the “New Ones” or for the strongmen, athletes, and traveling aviator. By the end of the Cubo-Futurists’ short opera, a plane has crashed, as the aviator (a close semi-athletic cousin to the strongmen and sportsmen) walks away alive and the strongmen sing a variation on their opening refrain, declaring “all’s well that / begins well / and does not have an end / the world will perish but we have no / end” (*vse khorosho, chto / khorosho nachinaetsia / i ne imeet kontsa / mir pogibnet a nam net / kontsa*).²⁸ The athletic insurrection continues apace while the show goes on and on (much like an endless wrestling match, one might add, as such matches were apt to do before the implementation of modern rules in 1914).

As the futuristic—and misogynistic—components of *Victory over the Sun* suggest, Russian Cubo-Futurism owes some of its aesthetic and ideological basis to the Italian Futurist movement, which merits attention here. Not surprisingly, the physical dynamism of athletics had appealed to the Italian Futurists, who in championing a cult of speed through various artistic media saw sports as one of several ways humans could themselves exemplify the new fast-moving world of automobiles, planes, and modern communication. In the Italian Futurists’ first manifesto from 1909, the poet and Futurist leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti exclaimed, “Up to now literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer’s stride, the mortal leap, the punch and the slap.”²⁹ An alternative to the slow, immobile past, modern athletics—be it the “racer’s stride,” the daring “leap,” or the “punch” of a boxer (and as Marinetti put it elsewhere, “the passion, art, and idealism of Sport”)—offered action-filled material that exalted the physical over the intellectual.³⁰ In addition, the Futurists embraced the heroic, record-making side of competitive sports as they aestheticized the human impulse to run the fastest, throw the longest, and outcompete one’s athletic opponent.

Athletic spectacle with its displays of physical prowess—often speed—prompted Italian Futurists such as Umberto Boccioni to seek out new pictorial means for conveying modern dynamism. Referring to the work of Carlos Carrà, another Italian Futurist who produced paintings and drawings of cyclists, boxers,

and swimmers, and anticipating his own *Dynamism of a Cyclist* (*Dinamismo di un ciclista*, 1913), Boccioni remarked in a 1911 lecture:

When we paint, say, a man riding a bicycle at high speed we will strive to reproduce the instinct of dash that determines the act itself, not the racer's physical appearance in action. It does not bother us that the racer's head might impinge on the profile of the wheel or his body becomes elongated, lost behind him in infinite vibrations as an apparent optical error, because it is the sensation of the race, not the racer, that we aim to render. In short, our Futurist hyper-sensibility guides us, endowing us already with the sixth sense that science struggles in vain to catalogue and define.³¹

For Boccioni and Carrà, rendering on canvas the “sensation” of the fast-paced race, not simply the appearance of the racer, became a chief concern. The “hypersensibility” of Futurist art, they believed, enabled it to go beyond science when probing the “infinite vibrations” of intense athletic action and its distortive effects on visual reality. The Futurists, we can therefore see, discovered in modern sports an appealing manifestation of the era's dynamism and a compelling impetus for dismissing mimetic reality in art.

Although athletic themes are absent from Boccioni's early Futurist canvases, by 1913 his sculpture and painting revealed a keen appreciation for athletic movement. Consider, for instance, Boccioni's 1913 sculpture *Speeding Muscles* (*Muscoli in velocità*), a semi-abstract depiction of a muscular figure racing ahead at a fast, forceful pace. The sinewy body of this large sculpted figure assumes a trajectory of rapid motion, as the sweeping, aerodynamic forms and the upper torso's distinctly forward slant suggest power, speed, and headlong propulsion while the wider bottom half of the sculpture indicates a lengthy, rapid gait. *Speeding Muscles*, which today exists only in photographs, provides vivid “forms of force,” an equivalent to the “lines of force” many Futurist painters used on their canvases to depict speed.³² The sculpture, I would add, exemplifies Boccioni's stated notion of “plastic dynamism” by capturing the interplay between absolute and relative forms of motion. (“Plastic dynamism,” Boccioni wrote, “is the simultaneous action of the motion characteristic of an object [its absolute motion], mixed with the transformation which the object undergoes in relation to its mobile and immobile environment [its relative motion].”)³³ The muscular figure of *Speeding Muscles* conveys a visual “transformation” of human physiognomy in relation to the environment through which it implicitly speeds.³⁴

While Boccioni never identified the subject matter of *Speeding Muscles* as specifically athletic, he made direct reference to sports in several paintings from

1913, most notably *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* (*Dinamismo di un footballer*, 1913). Depicting a soccer ball–like whirl of athletic action, *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* proves virtually abstract, as the human body and athletic force have fused into a colorful, centripetal spiral of physical matter in the center of the canvas. The whirling athletic figure, or at least faint parts (a hand, a leg, etc.) of this athlete, merges with the surrounding environment, whereby the rigorous movement of the soccer player renders his form (and the actual soccer ball) almost unrecognizable. Like the sculpted figure of *Speeding Muscles*, Boccioni's soccer player exudes high velocity and force, thereby embodying the artist's concept of transformative "plastic dynamism" for all to behold. By replicating as well as enhancing the experience of the sports spectator, Boccioni provides his own audience with a unique perspective on the swift athletic action. Having declared in 1912 along with several other Futurists that, "in order to make the spectator live in the center of the picture, as we express it in our manifesto, the picture must be the synthesis of *what one remembers* and of *what one sees*," Boccioni situates the viewer of *Dynamism of a Soccer Player* very much within the athletic scene.³⁵ It is a semi-abstract synthesis of impressions one might glean from watching a soccer player move ever so quickly and ever so forcefully across the playing field.

Following Boccioni's lead and expanding the sports theme that was so central to *Victory over the Sun*, Malevich would himself turn to soccer in the early stages of his nonobjective Suprematist phase, in which he depicted geometrical masses of various shapes and colors against a white background. Soccer-inspired Suprematist work by Malevich, in fact, reinforces the contention of scholars that the stage designs for *Victory over the Sun* gave rise to the painter's nonobjective Suprematist paintings, which appeared in 1915.³⁶ Indeed, at the end of the first scene in *Victory*, the mention of a "new soccer ball" (*novyi miach*) by an "Ill-Intentioned One"—and his exhibition of a "soccer player's move" (*priem futbolista*)—serves as an athletic forerunner of sorts to Malevich's 1915 *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player, Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (*Suprematizm: zhivopisnyi realizm futbolista. Krasochnye massy v chetvertom izmerenii*, fig. 4), which challenged traditional representations of athletics, let alone the mimetic world, by reducing the soccer player and soccer ball to nonobjective forms.³⁷ Malevich's *Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player* not only harkens back to *Victory* through the theme of soccer but also elevates the dynamism of athletic action onto an abstract, metaphysical plane.

Whereas in 1913 it was wrestling and the circus strongman that served the iconoclastic, revolutionary aims of *Victory over the Sun* and Cubo-Futurism in general, by 1915 the streamlined speed of soccer was providing potent material for Suprematism, as the harmonious display of abstracted forms found in

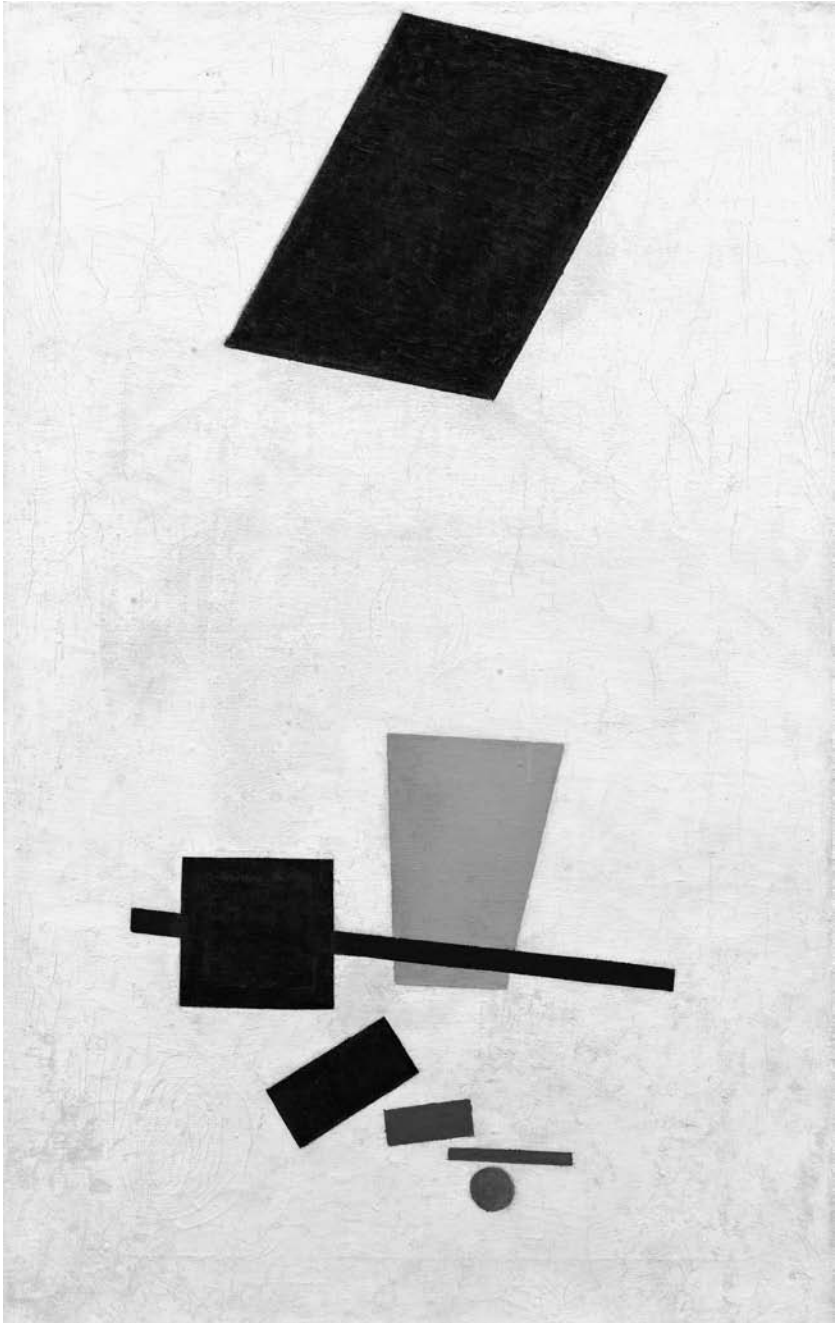


Figure 4. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Football Player—Color Masses in the 4th Dimension*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 71 × 44.5 cm. Art Institute of Chicago. Photograph by HIP / Art Resource, NY.

Malevich's *Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player* suggests. Suprematist paintings and their forms, Malevich argued in 1915, are "based not on the interrelation of form and color, and not on an aesthetic basis of beauty in composition, *but on the basis of weight, speed, and direction of movement*." One can thus see how a sport like soccer would suit this painter's aesthetic inclinations.³⁸ Soccer—and soccer players—epitomized the "weight, speed, and direction of movement" that Malevich elevated onto a higher, abstract level implied through his reference to the metaphysical fourth dimension in the painting's full title.³⁹ Like his *Airplane Flying (Suprematism) (Polet aeroplana [Suprematizm])*, produced the same year, *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player* transformed a modern manifestation of weight, speed, and headlong movement into something otherworldly and aesthetically revolutionary.

Displayed alongside Malevich's renowned *Black Square (Chernyi kvadrat, 1915)* at *0.10: Last Futurist Exhibition* in St. Petersburg in December 1915 (and, as it has been noted, on the same upper tier of the exhibition as *Black Square*), *Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player* features a small green circle at the bottom of the vertically aligned canvas, while above it other colored geometrical forms—including several red rectangles, a black square, and an angled parallelogram—float against a white background.⁴⁰ Extrapolating from the brief mention of soccer in *Victory over the Sun*, Andrey Nakov contends that the painting depicts a soccer pass and "the ball's upward flight," but the title of the painting suggests that although the bottom green circle may represent the soccer ball, the other geometrical shapes convey the process of quick athletic movement dissipating into nonrepresentational form.⁴¹ With the ball ostensibly at his feet, the fast-moving *futbolist* has dissolved into a harmonious arrangement of geometrical shapes. Suprematist painting, Jean-Claude Marcadé argues, "is *painting in philosophical action*," and thus one might perceive *Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player* as athletic action transposed onto a philosophical, metaphysical plane.⁴² In *Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player*, Malevich had soared to aesthetic-athletic heights not achieved since his ingenuities in the operatic farce of *Victory over the Sun*.

The irreverent mélange of athletics, strongmen, and buoyant, futuristic aviation that had emerged out of *Victory over the Sun* continued in the work of other Cubo-Futurists as well. The poet Vasily Kamensky, for instance, took a keen interest in both aviation and physical fitness during the 1910s, when he not only flew airplanes avidly but also served on the jury at wrestling matches and was befriended by the writer-aviator-wrestling enthusiast Kuprin as well as the era's most famous airplane-flying wrestler, Ivan Zaikin. In 1916, Kamensky would write a short poem in Zaikin's honor, exclaiming, "O you, Ivan Zaikin / Champion of the world and aviator / Today I devote my lyre to you / Indestructible gladiator" (O ty Ivan Zaikin mira / I chempion i aviator — / Tebe

segodnia moia lira / Nesokrushimyi gladiator).⁴³ Championing the modern persona of the athletic iconoclast, Kamensky found a very expedient archetype in Zaikin, who fraternized with the poet and Kuprin in Tbilisi (Tiflis), Georgia, in 1916.⁴⁴ As an unabashed proponent of the era's *zhiznetvorchestvo* (life-creation), Kamensky fashioned himself as Futurist poet and daring aviator, often appearing at Futurist performances to lecture on "Airplanes and Futurist Poetry," and thus his brief foray into the world of wrestling can be seen as a continuation of this "life-creation" impulse.

Kamensky's aviator-strongman persona comes further into focus in David Burlyuk's painting *Portrait of the Futurist and Singer-Warrior Vasily Kamensky* (*Portret pesneboitsa futurista Vasiliia Kamenskogo*, 1916, plate 3). Not to be confused with *Portrait of Poet-Futurist Vasily Kamensky* (*Portret poeta-futurista Vasiliia Kamenskogo*), which Burlyuk painted a year later, *Portrait of the Futurist and Singer-Warrior Vasily Kamensky* reveals the poet-aviator as heroic muscleman. In this colorful painting, a shirtless Kamensky (looking somewhat Cyclops-like with both his eyes on one side of his face) shows off his impressive physique while a nude woman, seemingly his muse, hovers above. Burlyuk, however, has scrambled the painting's vertical and horizontal lines, for the bare-chested Kamensky stands vertically yet also appears to lie—or float—horizontally above a village and train depicted sideways along the vertical right edge of the canvas. Thus the painting synthesizes the modern spirit of both aviation and body building, two activities at the heart of Kamensky's stylized persona in 1916.

Vladimir Gol'tssmidt, Kamensky's close friend and fellow Futurist, took the cult of athletics, aviation, and athletic "life-creation" even further. A "Futurist of life" (*futurist zhizni*) and a "superior athlete" (*prevoskhodnyi atlet*), in Kamensky's estimation, Gol'tssmidt not only lifted weights and wrestled but also promoted *tiazhelaia atletika* through his poetry, Futurist lectures, and public performances.⁴⁵ Gol'tssmidt gained particular notoriety for occasionally smashing a board over his head at Futurist events.⁴⁶ He also delivered lectures such as "The Spiritual and Physical Development of Contemporary Man" ("Dukhovnoe i fizicheskoe razvitie sovremennogo cheloveka," 1913) and "On the Joy of Life" ("O radosti zhizni," 1919), combining a propensity for hygiene and muscle strength with *zhiznetvorchestvo* and a distinct joy for living, or *joie de vivre* (what is known in Russian as *zhizneradostnost'*). As Gol'tssmidt boasted in one short poem from 1919:

Я рыцарь прежних дней
Поэт, художник, авиатор,
Впрягаю жизненных коней
Я телом гладиатор.⁴⁷

[I am a knight of former days
 A poet, artist, aviator,
 I harness life's horses
 I have the body of a gladiator.]

Sharing some of the Cubo-Futurists' Neoprimitivist impulses, Gol'tshmidt championed a fusion of "former days" and a future of airplanes and athletics, as he sang about harnessing life through his gladiatorial body and joyful approach to everyday existence.⁴⁸

In the years leading up to 1917, the Cubo-Futurists flexed their revolutionary muscles in ways that not only propelled them to the forefront of Russian art in their day but also reflected broad social trends in Russia. Their revolutionary and muscular creativity stamped their identity. According to Kamensky, Kuprin—a writer not generally associated with Russia's Left artists—singled out the strongman essence of the Cubo-Futurists as the key to the revolutionary potential of their art. "Kuprin," Kamensky writes in his memoir *Life with Mayakovsky*, "related to us in quite a friendly way and called us 'heavyweight athletes' of Russia's new literature, assuring everyone that we would become 'champions of the world,' and he therefore drank with pleasure to our blossoming, to our knightly fight with our opponents, who were many in number."⁴⁹ As suggested by Kuprin (via Kamensky), the Cubo-Futurists enthusiastically took up the mantle of Russia's artistic "heavyweights," trumpeting an aggressive iconoclasm that, it could be argued, prefigured the revolutionary events of 1917 in Russia. Tapping into the fervent energy emanating from both the era's cult of athletics and the tumultuousness of the times, these "champions of the world" advocated overthrowing the status quo, and in doing so contributed in their own unique way to the societal upheaval that would transform Russian society.

Postrevolutionary Wrestling

The sport of wrestling would have impressive staying power in Left art. Although the popularity of professional wrestling had dropped precipitously in Russia after 1913 due to mounting corruption (i.e., match-fixing) in the sport and the much more urgent fights of World War I and the 1917 Russian Revolution, the stature of the era's wrestlers continued to hold sway over avant-garde artists.⁵⁰ Even after the momentous events of 1917, the sport and its larger-than-life practitioners maintained a telling prominence in the drawings and paintings of Left artists and in the radical writings of the Cubo-Futurist poets. As a series of drawings by Aleksandr Rodchenko and a short agitprop play by Vladimir Mayakovsky attest, the revolutionary significance of the era's wrestlers and

their persistent blend of massiveness, theatricality, and modern might succeeded in catapulting the sport into the post-1917 artistic discourse. For in spite of its sudden drop from fashion, wrestling—and its once celebrated participants—played into the Russian avant-garde's evolving aesthetic goals, particularly the increasing need to appeal to a broad public in the name of the Revolution and a new Soviet merging of the mechanical and the physical.

Rodchenko, who would go on to make his name in the 1920s as a Constructivist and then as a photographer, created between 1918 and 1919 a handful of drawings and watercolors devoted to wrestling, followed in 1919–20 by a series of drawings celebrating wrestling champions from around the world. Titled *Greco-Roman Wrestling* (*Frantsuzskaia bor'ba*) and mostly composed of watercolor or pen and ink drawings on pastel paper, this wrestling series illustrates a significant evolution in avant-garde depictions of circus strongmen. Rodchenko claimed on several occasions that the circus had provided him with a major source of inspiration from childhood onward, and the wrestling drawings of *Greco-Roman Wrestling* indeed convey the artist's unadulterated awe before the victorious strongmen of his day.⁵¹ Moreover, these wrestling works mark an important transition in Rodchenko's work from the prerevolutionary aesthetics of Neoprimitivism and Suprematist abstraction toward the Constructivist merging of man and machine, which would prevail in the 1920s.

Traces of Goncharova's crude, earthy wrestlers and the geometrical, armor-like forms of Malevich's strongmen in *Victory over the Sun* can all be seen in Rodchenko's depictions of the wrestling champions. An initial Rodchenko *Wrestler* (gouache on paper, 1918) features blurred forms, crude lines and color, and an elicitation of raw human strength reminiscent of Goncharova's primitivist *Wrestlers*. Rodchenko's subsequent *Greco-Roman Wrestling* drawings, however, reflect what was the artist's close allegiance with Malevich at the time, presenting streamlined shapes reminiscent of Malevich's costume designs for the futurian strongmen of *Victory*. Yet whereas Malevich's semi-abstract athletes represented a faintly dystopian, misogynistic future, Rodchenko's wrestlers—anticipating in form the fusion of humans and machines that proved so central to Constructivism in the 1920s—signal an optimistic (and international) spirit of revolution. After 1917 Rodchenko embraced the aims of the Bolshevik Revolution, working between 1918 and 1922 as the head of the department of museums in the section for the fine arts (Izo) of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). Thus, his *Greco-Roman Wrestling* series can be seen as offering implicit support for the revolutionary “fight” (*bor'ba*, also the Russian word for “wrestling”) and its dramatic move onto the international stage, in particular through the stated national identities of the respective wrestling champions featured in the series.

Rodchenko's wrestlers, in conjunction with their proto-Constructivist essence, reflect, it seems clear, the Russian avant-garde's return to figurative art after its sustained phase of nonobjectivity. Unlike, say, Malevich's strongman designs for *Victory*, which had emphasized the semi-abstract athletic figure while ushering in nonobjective Suprematism, Rodchenko's *Greco-Roman Wrestling* series underscores a move in the opposite direction, away from abstraction back toward the human form, albeit with a conspicuous display of mechanization. In fact, these wrestling champions herald the delicate balance between abstract design and figurative form that would prevail in much of Rodchenko's Productivist work in the 1920s. As a teacher at the VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie), the famous early Soviet art school, Rodchenko reoriented the focus of his students from nonfigurative painting to graphic design, and among the stances he promoted in the classroom was construction as a contemporary worldview: "It is time for art to organizationally fuse with life. A constructed life is the art of the future. Life, conscious and organized, able to see and construct, is contemporary art."⁵² And Rodchenko's wrestling series, I would contend, accompanied just such a transition on the artist's part from abstraction into figurative, "conscious" reality and the fusion of art into life. Take, for instance, the artist's proto-Constructivist *The Champions of England and France* (*Chempiony Anglii i Frantsii*, plate 4) from 1919. Locked in an athletic embrace, the two semi-abstract figures in Rodchenko's drawing appear to dance about the wrestling ring, as the interplay between geometrical forms and a spectrum of nonmimetic colors replicates the overflowing energy at the core of competitive wrestling. Quite similar in appearance to a series of dancing figures Rodchenko's fellow Left painter and wife, Varvara Stepanova, would produce in 1920 (e.g., *Five Figures* [*Piat' figur*]), *The Champions of England and France* celebrates the artistry inherent in its subject matter. By appropriating the dynamism, strength, and imposing size of the era's wrestling champions, Rodchenko portrays the sport as a colorful, international show of exhilarating action, whereby the two competing athletes appear as powerful machines, mechanical avatars of a new era and precursors to the Soviet New Man.

The theatrical nature of circus wrestling is on full display throughout Rodchenko's *Greco-Roman Wrestling* series, as the athletic figures appear, much like Malevich's *Victory* strongmen, to be auditioning for the revolutionary stage. In *The Champion of Soviet Russia* (*Champion RSFSR*, 1919), the wrestler strikes an impressive, intimidating pose as he stands upright but looks downward, his massive arms dangling before him. Depicted in black, white, and red, with the red evidently serving as his national color, this Soviet-Russian champion may be a mechanized, faceless figure—for the wrestler's body, after all, is more important than his face—yet his pose nevertheless resembles that found in the

prerevolutionary era's many published photographs of wrestlers. Crisp lines, streamlined shapes, and delicate shading enable Rodchenko to convey the muscular yet also mechanical might of the national champion as well as his theatrical appeal. Concurrent with his *Greco-Roman Wrestling* series, Rodchenko also produced costume designs for Aleksey Gan's unpublished play *We* (*My*, 1919), design work with marked similarities to these wrestling drawings.⁵³ And in accordance with John Milner's description of Rodchenko's wrestlers as "puppet-like," the wrestler in *The Champion of Soviet Russia* does in fact take on the appearance of a marionette hanging from strings on stage.⁵⁴

Another striking figure from Rodchenko's wrestling champion series is the somewhat ominous yet awe-inspiring *The Champion of Germany*, "*The Red Mask*" (*Chempion Germanii*, "*Krasnaia maska*," 1919, plate 5). While not as dynamic in appearance as the other wrestlers in this series, *The Champion of Germany* seems to hearken back to the "standing-walking" position known as *contrapposto*, which famously originated in the ancient Greek sculpture by Polykleitos, *Doryphoros* ("The Spear-Carrier," also known as the *Canon*). Yet it could also be argued that the machine-like form of this and other athletic figures in Rodchenko's Greco-Roman wrestling series corresponds just as closely to the anthropomorphic form of Vladimir Tatlin's famous tower design from 1919–20 for *The Monument to the III International* (*Pamiatnik III Internatsionalu*), which Tatlin loosely modeled on a striding human being.⁵⁵ By 1919, in fact, Rodchenko had shifted his artistic allegiances away from Malevich to Tatlin, as he moved even further from pure abstraction toward the utilitarian designs of Constructivism.

Other drawings from Rodchenko's wrestling series include *The Black Mask Dutch Champion* (*Chempion "Chernaia maska"* [*Gollandiia*], 1918), which features an ominous, machine-like strongman sporting the masked disguise popular in prerevolutionary circus wrestling; *The Champion of India* (*Chempion Indii*, 1919), in which geometrical forms comprise the sinewy muscles of the wrestler; and *The Champion of Canada* (*Chempion Kanady*, 1919). In the last of these, the machine-like figure, rather than striking a wrestling pose, lifts barbells; in proto-Constructivist fashion, the head and body of this Canadian competitor resemble the round weights of the barbell. Or consider the more overtly dynamic figure found in Rodchenko's *The Champion of Japan* (*Chempion Iaponii*, 1919). This drawing features an athletic figure leaning to his right as if about to spring an attack. Consisting of semi-mimetic body parts and nonmimetic colors that appear far more robotic than human, the work boasts an array of geometrically shaped muscles along with an industrial sheen of red and green. Like virtually all the wrestlers in Rodchenko's series, *The Champion of Japan* comes across as a mechanized figure of the future, an athlete suited to the new postrevolutionary era and the spirit of social construction so pronounced in Soviet society throughout much of the

1920s. The transformation of the prerevolutionary wrestler into the mechanized “New Man” of the early Soviet era had begun in earnest.

Rodchenko, who would go on to work with a wide variety of Russia’s avant-garde artists in the 1920s, evidently imparted to Mayakovsky, a close friend and collaborator, his aesthetic and ideological appreciation for international wrestling champions.⁵⁶ Mayakovsky’s circus play *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* (*Chempionat vseimnoi klassovoi bor’by*), written in 1920 and staged that same year at the Second State Circus in Moscow, highlights the multinational spirit of wrestling, albeit within a semi-serious political framework highlighting the ideological orientation—and respective leader—of each wrestler’s country, along with indirect references to the Russian Civil War, which transpired at the time.⁵⁷ Overlapping in a number of ways with Rodchenko’s wrestling series, *Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* carries the semi-farcical and aesthetically subversive style of Mayakovsky’s prerevolutionary Cubo-Futurism into the post-1917 era. Through its historical context and political scope, Mayakovsky’s short circus play places a very fitting exclamation point on prerevolutionary Russia’s enthrallment with wrestling while simultaneously presaging, albeit in parodic form, the politicization of sports that would occur in Soviet Russia during the 1920s.

A parody of Russia’s popular wrestling tournaments and the staged spectacle that circus wrestling had become, *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* begins with a long, ideologically tinged introduction, followed by politicians-cum-wrestlers wrangling over a crown, a huge gold coin, and a bag of profits from the recently concluded “imperialist carnage.” In addition to establishing an overt political framework for sports, the play also served as a vehicle for the famous circus acrobat and clown Vitaly Lazarenko, who was to play himself performing, in overt meta-theatrical fashion, the role of “Uncle Referee” (a direct reference to “Uncle Vanya” Lebedev).⁵⁸ The Uncle Vanya Lebedev-inspired referee attempts to control the international and class struggle for dominance, but biting, wriggling, and other underhanded moves initially win the day. In Mayakovsky’s sketch the other listed “participants,” many of them world leaders, are the following wrestling champions: The Revolution (“the World Champion”), David Lloyd George (“Entente Champion”), Woodrow Wilson (“American Champion”), Alexandre Millerand (“French Champion”), Joseph Pilsudski (“Polish Champion”), White Army General Baron Petr Wrangel (“Crimean Champion”), the everyday man Sidorov (“Our Champion Profiteer”), and a Menshevik (“Almost Champion”). Meta-theatrical at its core, Mayakovsky’s short play begins with Uncle Referee declaring, “Hear ye, hear ye. / Come in people. / Listen people. / All of you who are eager, look: / Lazarenko, in the role of Uncle Vanya, / can pin any wrestler — / of course, only if he’s sofa bound” (A vot, / a vot, narod, podkhodi, / slushai, narod. / Smotrite

vse, kto padki, — / Lazarenko v roli diadi Vani / liubogo bortsia polozhit na lopatki, / konechno, ezheli on na divane).⁵⁹ Evoking the world of prerevolutionary wrestling yet providing a contemporary perspective on the mock-athletic action, Mayakovsky's short verse play shares some of the farcical spirit of earlier wrestling parodies by Lentulov, Stanislavsky, and others, but it also takes to a logical conclusion the protorevolutionary character of circus wrestlers in pre-1917 Russian culture. The wrestler, having earlier foreshadowed revolution in various cultural respects, now actually became the revolution.

Throughout *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* (the title of which is a line from Mayakovsky's 1919 long poem *150,000,000*), the wrestling champions assume traits of their namesakes and respective countries. Take, for instance, the U.S. Champion: "Wilson — / He is / the American Champion. / Disregard his scragginess. / His power is frightful. / Expansion is his chief force" (Vil'son — / on — / Ameriki chempion. / Vy ne smotrite, chto Vil'son toshch. / Strashnaia u Vil'sona moshch'. / Glavnaia ego sila v tom, / chto ochen' uzh dalek).⁶⁰ As for Millerand: "Unexpectedly a fighter emerges from a Frenchman. / Yes, his paunch is spilling over already" (Borets nichego b vyshel iz frantsuza, / da ochen' uzh ego perekachivaet puzo).⁶¹ Offering a mock championship that creatively reflects the oversized spectacle of the sport while also exploring post-World War I politics and current events in Soviet Russia's Civil War, *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle* predicts the triumph of the Socialist Revolution over its weaker, Western counterparts.

At the very resounding yet open-ended conclusion of *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle*, the world champion Revolution makes *her* ("revolution" [*revoliutsiia*] in Russian is a feminine noun) grand appearance as champion of the world, scaring away the majority of all her opponents. Only Entente (Lloyd George) will stay and fight; Revolution gets Entente in a headlock, but a stalemate is declared ("It is difficult to finish off Entente" [*Dozhat' Antata trudno*], Mayakovsky's stage directions explain).⁶² The Referee then calls for a ten-minute intermission in the match, but Entente doubts that he can keep fighting: "Break for ten minutes? / Hardly. / I think they broke me not for ten minutes / but for a lifetime" (Pereryv na desiat' minut? / Edva li. / Ia dumaiu, menia ne na desiat' minut, / a uzh na vsiu zhizn' prervali).⁶³ Entente is carried out in a wheelbarrow but the Referee agitates for Revolution's supporters to "go home / and tomorrow go to the front as volunteers" (pust' idut po domam, / a zavtra na front dobrovol'tsami).⁶⁴ Using the wrestling match to provoke and inspire audiences in Soviet Russia, Mayakovsky ends his short play at intermission, with more wrestling—and Civil War—expected to ensue.

Reminiscent of the Cubo-Futurists' *Victory over the Sun*, which emphasized that there could be no end to the revolutionary wrangling, Mayakovsky's play calls for continued competition (and fighting) in the ideological arena. The

wrestling may be more metaphorical than athletic here, but the spectacle of the prerevolutionary sport clearly figures as an essential part of this agit-play's iconoclastic bombast. And although wrestling had, of course, already suffered a drop in both its popularity and relevance just prior to 1917, the aggressive, competitive ethos of the sport and the superhuman aura of its practitioners would nevertheless have reverberations in the convenient alliance of Soviet ideology with modern athletics in much of the Left Constructivist art produced throughout the 1920s.⁶⁵ Providing an expedient bridge between the pre- and post-1917 eras, wrestling continued to serve early Soviet artists as an aggressive means of overturning convention and appealing to an ever wider audience.

Victory Revisited

In the early 1920s, even as interest in wrestling petered out and avant-garde art grew more responsive to the goals of the new nation, Left artists revived the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, only now with the 1917 Revolution clearly in the rearview mirror. In early February 1920, just as Malevich was about to form UNOVIS (Supporters of New Art [Utverditeli novogo iskusstva]) in Vitebsk, where he had moved in October 1919, he and his followers at the Vitebsk People's Art School organized a restaging of *Victory over the Sun* (along with *A Suprematist Ballet* [*Suprematicheskii balet*], produced by Nina Kogan). This production, Tatyana Goriacheva notes, reflected a desire on Malevich's somewhat didactic part "to demonstrate the relevance of Futurist principles, the accordance of avant-garde form to revolutionary ideological content," and to establish a pedagogical platform in line with Suprematism in Vitebsk.⁶⁶ The athletic thrust of the opera, it soon became clear, could still inspire.

Performed without Matyushin's music due to a lack of resources, the new production of *Victory* featured decorations and costumes designed primarily by Vera Ermolaeva, who had taken charge of the Vitebsk Art School in January 1920 after the departure of Marc Chagall, whom Malevich had both overshadowed and outmaneuvered at the school.⁶⁷ A handful of Ermolaeva's costume designs for the production have remained to this day—for instance, *The Multicolored Eye* (*Pestryi glaz*, paper, line engraving, gouache, 1920), a fantastical figure with a fish-like head and a sturdy human body. Preserving some Suprematist elements, this and other figures featured in the restaged opera lent the production—and its emphasis on sports—a mechanical, proto-Constructivist quality, as the actors onstage became something akin to athletic machines.⁶⁸ Ermolaeva—who would go on in 1930 to produce a series of *Sportsmen* (*Sportsmeny*) similar in appearance to Malevich's own colorful yet static series from that period under the same name (1928–32)—used manikin figures on a localized color background

for her *Victory* costume designs while the stage designs, all line engravings, offered an array of intertwined geometrical planes complementing the opera's chaotic, often alogical action.⁶⁹ The stage designs also presaged the coming Constructivist era by using an array of materials that included canvas, gauze, cardboard, and wire.⁷⁰ And, having worked in 1919 in a local theater near Vitebsk, Ermolaeva staged a version of *Victory* that, as Antonina Marochkina emphasizes in her discussion of Ermolaeva's *Victory* work, "strove toward active involvement of the viewer in the process of that which was occurring on stage."⁷¹ While not as overtly participatory as the agit-ending of Mayakovsky's circus-wrestling play, this Vitebsk production of the Futurist opera nevertheless reflected what was then an increasing tendency among Soviet avant-garde artists to boost the engagement of audiences with the era's art, an urge that drew upon the sudden rise in sports spectatorship at the time and an urge bolstered by Left art's increasingly athletic-oriented aesthetics.

Malevich, in collaboration with Ermolaeva, designed one costume for the restaged opera: the costume for the opera's central Futurian Strongman (Budetlianskii silach). Boasting a black rhombus for a head, this strongman's costume has a little less bulk and more discernible limbs than that of the original 1913 costume design, whereby the latter black rhombus section suggests an anthropomorphized Suprematist form. Aleksandra Shatskikh, who compares Malevich's 1913 *Futurian Strongman* and the 1920 version from Vitebsk, contends that the proto-futuristic original strongman has been replaced by a figure implicitly derived from the "grown child" Malevich envisioned for the original *Black Square* in his 1915 Suprematist manifesto while also presaging "Malevich's post-Suprematist heroes of the 1928–32 period," a productive phase at the end of Malevich's career that would include his well-known *Sportsmen* painting.⁷² A decade, of course, would pass between the Vitebsk *Victory* production and the appearance of Malevich's and Ermolaeva's later *Sportsmen*, during which time athletics would garner even greater ideological and social significance in early Soviet art. Reflected in works such as Malevich's 1920 *Futurian Strongman*, a fluid amalgamation of groundbreaking Left art and athletic ideals initially flourished in the new Soviet state.

Malevich may have contributed a significant futurian strongman design to the 1920 restaging of *Victory over the Sun* in Vitebsk, but his artistic vision of the future athlete would soon be overshadowed—or outmuscled, as the case may be—by El Lissitzky's subsequent designs for the same opera. Lissitzky had been only tangentially involved in the Vitebsk production, but he created his own designs—figurines for the opera's cast of characters—in 1920–21 while in Moscow. First produced as watercolor and gouache drawings with india ink and graphite and black pen, they were later published in Germany in 1923 as color

lithographs for a never actualized restaging of the opera. The German publication, *Figurines: The Three-Dimensional Design of the Electro-Mechanical Show "Victory over the Sun"* (*Figurinen, die plastische Gestaltung der elektro-mechanischen Schau "Sieg über die Sonne"*), features one composite image of *Show-Machinery* (*Schaumaschinerie*) along with nine images of figurines for the opera, among them *The New One* (*Neuer*), a *Futurian Strongman/Sentry* (*Posten*), *Sportsmen* (*Sportsmänner*), and an athletic *Traveler through the Ages* (*Globetrotter in der Zeit*). Whereas the pre-1917 *Victory over the Sun* gave rise to an abstract conception of the athlete, it now facilitated the corporeal manifestation of the "New" athlete in early Soviet culture.

In Lissitzky's cycle of *Victory over the Sun* figurine designs, images of athletes and athletic activity would, as with Malevich's before, be crucial to the creative vision for the opera. Most notable among Lissitzky's *Victory* figurines is, without a doubt, *The New One* (*Novyi*, plate 6), an image that signaled a fresh approach to the Futurist opera, its athletics, and post-1917 avant-garde aesthetics in general. This iconic design used an anthropomorphized arrangement of geometrical, architectonic forms suggesting a fast sprint forward, along with Suprematist-inspired shapes and sharp diagonal lines constituting the head, torso, and swinging limbs of the "New," machine-like individual. A red star, by 1921 a conspicuous symbol of communism and the Soviet Russian state, serves as one of the eyes. And the large red square in the middle suggests, of course, the powerful beating heart of the lively athlete. Derived from Lissitzky's earlier series of abstract Proun (Project for the Affirmation of the New) works, the lithograph of *The New One* gives the impression of a figure racing like a mechanized athlete into the three-dimensional depths of the image from left to right, and several triangles, angled toward the upper right, enhance the depiction of rapid physical progression into the radiant Soviet future. The emblematic figure of the new era, *The New One* implies, had to be athletic, fast, and efficient.

For this "electromechanical peepshow," as Lissitzky referred to his post-Vitebsk vision for *Victory over the Sun*, puppet-like figures, such as *The New One*, were to be mechanically rotated and shifted on stage to endow them with an explicit sense of modern, athletic-like dynamism or, in Lissitzky's words, "to offer the 'bodies in play' all the possibilities of movement."⁷³ In the German preface to his portfolio of *Victory* lithographs, Lissitzky also proposed the following reading of the opera's alogical plot: "The sun as a symbol of ancient universal energy will be torn down from the sky by modern man, who by dint of his technical mastery creates an independent source of energy."⁷⁴ Whether or not sports within the context of the opera contributed to this "independent source of energy" is difficult to say, but for Lissitzky modern athletics clearly belonged to the opera's celebration of a new way of life and "technical mastery" of the future.

In certain respects, Lissitzky's *Victory* figurines proved less human in appearance than earlier designs by Malevich and Ermolaeva, even as several of these figurine designs showed more overt athletic form than had the 1913 and 1920 *Victory* antecedents. The Suprematism/Proun basis for the designs led to significant emphasis on nonobjectivity, yet as Lissitzky explained in the German preface to the lithographs, "The text of the opera compelled me to preserve something of the anatomy of the human body in my puppets."⁷⁵ Human anatomy could not be wholly ignored, especially given the athletic essence of the opera's futurian strongmen and sportsmen. In addition to the sprinter-like *New Man*, Lissitzky's *Sportsmen* lithograph displays three anthropomorphic figures with tubular bodies of varying dimensions, along with distinct geometrical forms for their heads. These modern athletes also wear colored uniforms (horizontal red stripes on one, vertical yellow stripes on another, and a blue square on the third athletic figure) and carry what seem to be balls (soccer balls, one might surmise). In the design for the *Futurian Strongman*, however, athleticism and anthropomorphic detail virtually disappear. Featuring architectonic forms that appear more static and structure-like than athletic or anthropomorphic, with little or no suggestion of dynamic physical action, the figurine is constructed out of unmistakable Proun forms that only faintly hint at a body, given the presence of a small head-like hemisphere sitting atop a large central cube. It is quite telling that Lissitzky renamed his *Futurian Strongman* design *Posten*—or *Sentry*—in the German edition of the figurines, thus removing the already outdated circus wrestling from his 1923 vision for the opera. Other sports, however, would fill the void.

By contrast to the *Futurian Strongman*, athleticism pervades Lissitzky's *Traveler through the Ages* figurine. Its original Russian version (*Puteshestvennik po vsem vekam*, fig. 5) features the lower part of a human leg and an arched foot that appears to dribble a soccer ball, given the presence at the image's bottom of a black circle similar to the balls held by the athletic figures in the *Sportsmen* lithograph. Although Lissitzky would remove the leg and foot in the German lithograph version of the figurine, the image's athletic drive remains in the dynamic lean of the anthropomorphized nonobjective forms implying movement from left to right similar to that found in *The New One*. With a small hemispherical form for its head, a slanted beige rectangle as well as two large, elongated hemispheres positioned in a mirror-like way to indicate an upper torso and arms, and a red triangle for the lower torso and hips, this machine-like *Traveler* appears to glide along swiftly with the ball at his feet. And whereas Malevich's original 1913 costume design for *Traveler through the Ages* featured a static figure in wrestling mode well on his way toward Suprematist nonobjectivity, Lissitzky's semi-abstract figurine with its dynamic movement alludes not only to the brief yet

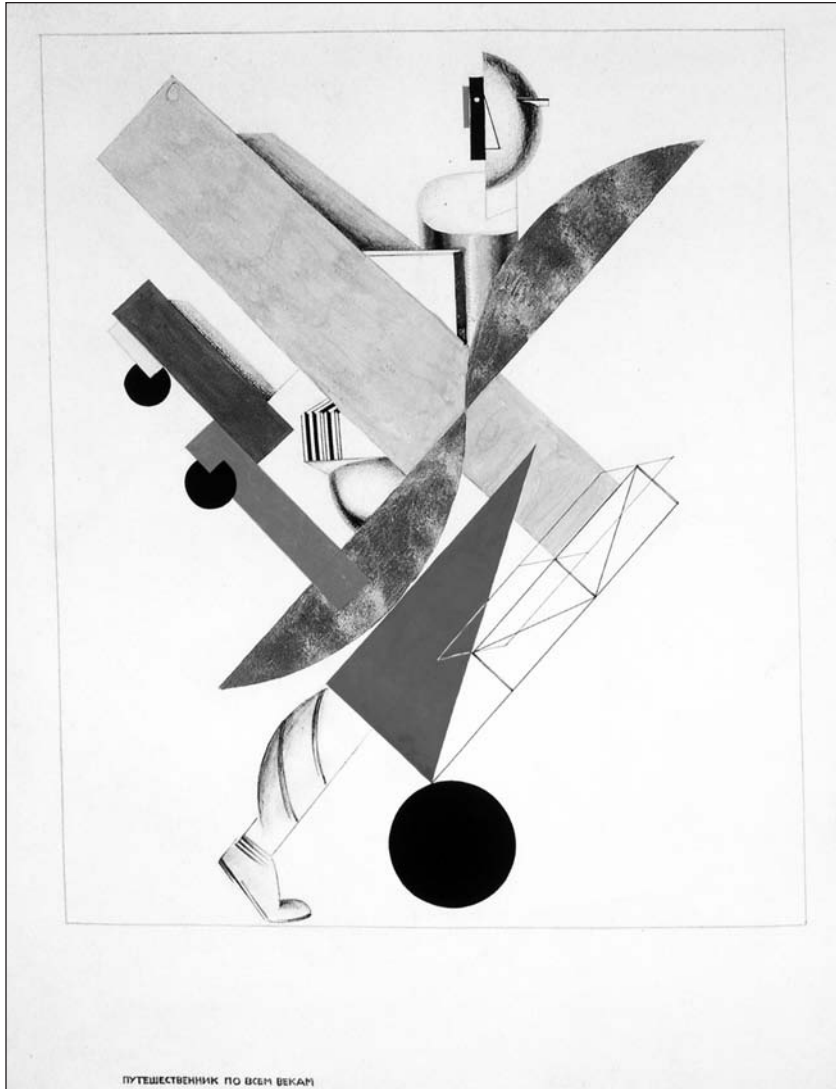


Figure 5. El Lissitzky, *Traveler through the Ages*, figurine from the portfolio *Victory over the Sun*, 1920–21. Color, lithograph, sheet, 49.4 × 37.9 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

notable mention of soccer in the opera's libretto and the ascendancy of soccer over wrestling that would occur in the 1920s but also to the merging of man and machine conspicuous in so much Left art of the 1920s, particularly in works associated with Soviet Constructivism. By accentuating modern sports in his *Victory over the Sun* lithographs, Lissitzky tapped into the mounting desire of avant-garde artists to engage with early Soviet life and what would become its idealized balance of work and play.

Sports for a New Everyday Life

Lef will agitate the masses with our art, fashioning an organized force within them.

Lef will confirm our theories with an active art, raising art to the highest professional standards.

Lef will fight for the aesthetic construction of life.

We do not simply claim a monopoly on revolutionary spirit in art. We will prove it in open competition.

We believe that through the correctness of our agitation, through the force of the things we are doing, we will demonstrate that *we are on the true path to the impending future.*

N. Aseyev, B. Arvatov, O. Brik, B., Kushner,

V. Mayakovsky, S. Tretyakov, N. Chuzhak,

"What Does Lef Fight For?" ("Za chto boresia Lef?," 1923),
in Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*

In the early 1920s, a competitive "fight" commenced in Soviet Russia "for the aesthetic construction of life," as leaders of the avant-garde group Lef—The Left Front of Art—put it so forcefully. Art, these and other early Soviet artists believed, would have a key role to play in shaping the development of the citizenry in the new state. And if art was to assume this prominent, constructive role in the lives of Soviet men and women, then it had to address all facets of modern life, especially those facets of early Soviet existence that could affect millions and were increasingly seen as essential to the well-being of the nation (e.g., its literacy, health, and sobriety). Sports accommodated such aims. In modern athletics, among other popular pursuits on the rise in the early 1920s, Left artists discovered an efficient means for grabbing the attention of the Soviet public and enlisting them in the new nation's cause. Soon to be addressed through film and photography as well, sports attracted a number of Left artists, especially those working in the early avant-garde theater. In Left design work intended for the broad public, the fluid integration of sports and art ensued, as sports provided an exciting, ludic basis for the early Soviet merging of art and life.

Throughout much of the 1920s, the Soviet citizenry's enthusiasm for athletics only grew as men and women both participated in and attended athletic events in ever increasing numbers. With the incorporation of *fizkul'tura* into the program of nascent military organizations such as Vseobuch (Vseobshchee voennoe obuchenie, or Universal Military Training), the embrace of sports by the Komsomol (Communist Youth League), and the formation in 1923 of the sports and fitness club Dynamo (under the initiative of Felix Dzerzhinsky, head of the state security apparatus) in cities and towns, sports were on the rise across the country and constituted a social phenomenon that artists could hardly ignore.⁷⁶ While a discernible militarization of early Soviet athletics occurred in early 1920s Soviet Russia under the auspices of Vseobuch and the Komsomol, a countervailing utopian impulse in sports was promoted by the hygienists and Proletkul't (during the 1920s, Riordan notes, "sport had less association with the military than at any other time in Soviet history").⁷⁷ The sports motif thus offered the early Soviet avant-garde a useful vehicle for garnering the attention of not just a narrow, highly educated sliver of the populace but rather an audience that was broad and diverse.

Just as many of the nation's most creative artists, in the words of RoseLee Goldberg, had seized upon "popular entertainment models" like circus stunts and modern dance techniques (e.g., eurythmics and eukinetics) to "appeal to large and not necessarily educated audiences," Left artists took advantage of the mounting popularity of modern athletics to accommodate and sway the masses.⁷⁸ As a communal activity, sports provided the early Soviet avant-garde an expedient means for achieving their ambitious aesthetic goals. In her survey of production art by the Constructivists, Goldberg emphasizes that such entertainment models were used to communicate "the new art as much as the new ideology to a wide public."⁷⁹ Along these ideological lines, artistic renderings of sports and physical activity helped promote new Soviet notions of leisure, fitness, and health, all part of what emerged as the so-called new everyday life (*noyi byt*) for the urban Soviet populace.⁸⁰

The fusion of art and sports in the 1920s reflected, I would emphasize, what had been the prerevolutionary trend of applying aesthetic principles to life, or *zhiznetvorchestvo*. Following the revolution, Left artists were poised to seize the opportunity to transform early Soviet life through their art. The poet and theorist Sergei Tretyakov, for example, argued the following in 1923 in the avant-garde publication *Lef*:

The revolution brought forth practical tasks: action on mass psychology, organization of the class will. The tournaments in the arena of aesthetics came to an end, it was necessary to deal with living life. Futurism put its

mind to the “applied” minor arts which are avoided with such disdain by all “the priests of pure, inspired art,” who are neither able nor willing to work “on order.” Working on the agit-*chastushka*, the newspaper feuilleton, the agit-play, and the march song, the Futurists’ calling was strengthened: art in life, toward its complete integration into life!⁸¹

Aesthetics, Tretyakov emphasized, no longer constituted an end in themselves. What Tretyakov saw as the Futurists’ prerevolutionary call for art to be integrated with life gained considerable momentum in the 1920s, as Left artists sought to apply their creative vision to the relatively blank slate of early Soviet life, which offered increasing time and space for athletic activities such as *fizkul’tura* and soccer. Through “everyday” material like newspaper sketches, posters, and clothing design that all promoted or facilitated the nation’s new lifestyle, the Productivist wing of Left art appealed to audiences now swept up by the physical thrills of sports.

The early Soviet avant-garde’s treatment of sports hinged in large part on design work produced for the Soviet theater, where numerous Left artists plied their trade in the early 1920s. From painters like Aleksandra Ekster, Lyubov’ Popova, and Varvara Stepanova, who served as set designers for avant-garde director Vsevolod Meyerhold, to the future filmmakers Sergey Eisenstein and Boris Barnet, who got their start in the theatrical studio of Nikolay Foregger, a diverse array of artists participated in Soviet Russia’s vibrant theater and worked to implement avant-garde innovations that could attract Soviet audiences.⁸² Many of these theatrical innovations came about through collaboration with Meyerhold, whose celebrated system of biomechanics entailed a series of rhythmic movements and swift, streamlined gestures used to make actors appear more athletic and machine-like. Drawing upon the American scientific management theory of Taylorism that promoted a fixed set of motions by workers in factories to increase industrial efficiency, Meyerhold trained his actors with biomechanical “études” derived from physical movements in sports (boxing, fencing, gymnastics), the circus, and military drills, among other strenuous activities of the day.⁸³ Thanks in large part to the athletic underpinnings of such exercises, Meyerhold’s biomechanics projected an unmistakable exuberance or, in the words of Owen Hatherley, a “joyous rationalization” that translated well to the early Soviet stage.⁸⁴ For Meyerhold’s 1922 production of Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin’s *The Death of Tarelkin* (*Smert’ Tarelkina*), the Constructivist Stepanova created elaborate sets, or “performing apparatuses,” and costumes that showcased the physical dynamism inherent to biomechanics.⁸⁵ This production presented Stepanova with an initial platform for integrating her costume designs with Soviet reality, albeit according to an aestheticized, theatrical vision.

As productions such as *The Death of Tarelkin* suggest, avant-garde artists now had at their disposal the conceptual framework and aesthetic tools to bring the nation's new athleticism and its joyful movement into Soviet life.⁸⁶

Expanding on the costumes and sets for *The Death of Tarelkin*, Stepanova would introduce a year later her Soviet sportswear (*sportodezhda*), thereby initiating the Constructivists' direct engagement with the broad Soviet public through athletic-inspired designs. Created at a time when the Soviet populace had begun to respond to official calls for greater public participation in sports, and when two vocal factions—the Hygienists and the Proletkul't (Proletarian Culture Movement)—were advocating for public involvement in physical activities such as gymnastic exercises and sports pageants, Stepanova's clothing designs exemplified Left artists' assertive movement toward mass audiences and a vision of Soviet society in which organized sports would proliferate.⁸⁷

Described by Mayakovsky as “frenetic” (*neistovaia*), Stepanova had trained as a dress designer before joining her husband, Rodchenko, at INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture), the early Soviet art institute founded by Vasily Kandinsky.⁸⁸ She would also teach in the Textile Department of VKhUTEMAS. Aiming to integrate avant-garde aesthetics with Soviet society's rapidly evolving “everyday” culture, Stepanova, along with other Constructivists such as Ekster, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Klutssis, Nadezhda Lamanova, and Natalya Kiseleva, approached clothing as one of a variety of functional items that they could design to help shape Soviet life. Stepanova, Ekster, and Lamanova, scholars have argued, highlighted rhythm, composition, and construction in their clothing designs so as to facilitate the physical (i.e., athletic) transformation of the ordinary human body into a streamlined, machine-like “new” form.⁸⁹ Discussing the “primary importance” of *sportodezhda* for the Constructivists, Tatyana Strizhenova suggests that such clothes played into “the romantic idea, typical of those years, about gymnastics serving as a means of attaining a healthy and aesthetic life.”⁹⁰ Stepanova's athletic outfits contributed to the Constructivists' active—and admittedly “romantic”—involvement in the Soviet state's revolutionary social project. For as Vladimir Paperny, whom I have cited earlier in this study, notes, the “standardized clothing” designed by the Constructivists epitomized the egalitarian, collective nature of early Soviet culture (and a facet of early Soviet culture that would be replaced by the more hierarchical, individualistic strains of Stalinism).⁹¹ Sports uniforms, it follows, proved ideal for such a collective project.

Stepanova, who also designed workers' clothes (*prozodezhda*) and “special” clothes (*spetsodezhda*) for professionals, moved modern sports ever closer to art through her sports attire, even as she emphasized “maximum practicality and simplicity and easy wearability,” as she put it in a piece on her *prozodezhda* and

sportodezhda that appeared in a 1923 issue of *Lef*.⁹² And in accordance with the nation's "new everyday life," Stepanova fashioned clothes that could be worn on athletic fields, in gyms, on the water, and so on and that exemplified the avant-garde's push for "art into life."⁹³ By producing original outfits for, most notably, soccer players, basketball players, and gymnasts, Stepanova highlighted athletes' "freedom of movement" while she also stressed the value of colors and patterns that could differentiate one team from another and help audiences "distinguish the participants from a great distance."⁹⁴ Although not directly responsible for the striped soccer shirt—the *futbolka*—that would become a ubiquitous Soviet fashion statement in the late 1920s, Stepanova used stripes and stars, along with angled cuts for the sleeves and shorts, in her eye-catching designs (fig. 6). Take, for instance, her "Men's Sports Costume" (*Proekt*

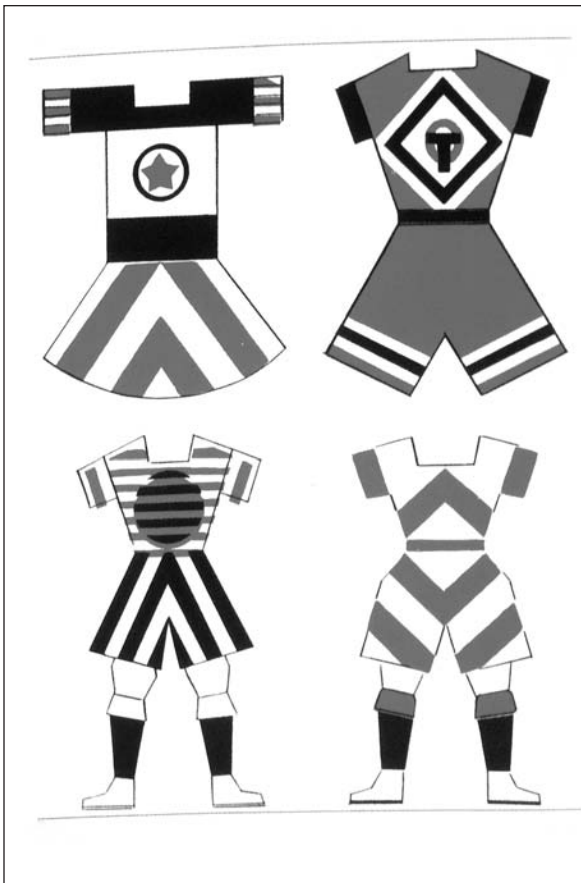


Figure 6. Varvara Stepanova, *Sports Costumes*, 1923. Gouache and india ink on paper. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.

muzhskogo sportivnogo kostiuma, 1923) for soccer players that consists of a top with yellow or fuchsia horizontal stripes (over a large black circle on the front), short pants with diagonal black stripes, and knee-high black socks with a yellow or fuchsia stripe over white at the top. Adhering to the ideal of gender equality—or a futuristic form of androgyny, as Christina Kiaer sees it—that the Soviet state championed at the time, Stepanova also produced “Women’s Sports Clothes” (*Proekt zhenskoi sportivnoi odezhdy*, 1923), such as a shirt and skirt combination that included a top with red stripes on its short sleeves, a red star within a black circle on the front, and two red, diagonal stripes zigzagging around the white skirt.⁹⁵ The sleek forms of the *sportodezhda* both facilitated and showcased athletic activity, and in 1924 Stepanova would arrange for actors/models to wear her athletic uniforms on stage in agitational (i.e., propagandistic) performances at Moscow’s Academy of Communist Education.⁹⁶

Broadly speaking, Stepanova’s *sportodezhda* typified the urge among Left artists at the time to shift away from painting toward modes of creativity that better reflected the early Soviet era’s idealistic spirit. In celebrated work on cultural semiotics, Yuri Lotman has argued that within the semiotic sphere of a given period’s culture, genres on the periphery of well-established art often gain significant traction while those genres in the center “lose dynamism,” thus becoming “inflexible and incapable of further development.”⁹⁷ As a result, Lotman contends, “the peripheral genres in art are more revolutionary than those in the center of culture; they enjoy greater prestige and are perceived by contemporaries to be real art.”⁹⁸ In such a light, throughout the early 1920s, those peripheral genres—such as clothing design, photo-montage, photo-collage, assemblage, poster design, and cinema—that effectively drew on modern athletics in Soviet Russia were adopted by a wide range of artists and soon assumed the mantle of “real art” in the revolutionary Soviet culture of the 1920s. Art situated on the periphery, moreover, suited the physical, dynamic, egalitarian spirit of sports far better than the well-established, culturally elevated genre of painting did, thus lending itself quite well to Russia’s “new way of life.” “New,” popular forms of art, such as cinema, photomontage, and photography, would soon emerge as a further manifestation of Soviet Russia’s athletic and revolutionary ideals.

An Eye for Athletics

Silent Cinema and Early Soviet Sports

Jazz, movies, and sports,” the sociologist and art critic Wolfgang Rothe has written, “constitute the trio that determined popular [Western] culture until 1933.”¹ Although jazz did not initially have the impact in Russia that it did in the West, movies and sports would make their mark—often together—on Russian and early Soviet culture.² For one thing, early twentieth-century Russian athletics and Russia’s nascent film industry emerged virtually in tandem. The late arrival of sports in prerevolutionary Russia vis-à-vis the West meant that the parallels already existing between cinema and modern athletics (the invention of cinema predated the first modern Olympic Games by a year) only intensified in Russian and early Soviet culture during the 1910s and 1920s. The sudden rise in the popularity of modern athletics in late Imperial Russia coincided with a comparable burst of popularity for Russian silent cinema. By 1913, in fact, a nascent motion picture industry had materialized in the country, just when organized athletics likewise began to assume a conspicuous place in everyday life in Russia. Both of these cultural phenomena, moreover, contributed to the pre-World War I zeitgeist of fast-paced modernity, which predominated in Russia’s urban centers, as cinema probed the action inherent to sports by replicating human motion on screen. And although little in the way of sports can be found in popular prerevolutionary Russian cinema (save a movie or two devoted to circus wrestling), everything would soon change.

Throughout much of the 1920s, modern athletics provided filmmakers with not only ample material but also fertile ground for innovation, as both cinema and sports thrived within a nascent Soviet society that discerned great social and propagandistic value in these two popular pastimes. And along with the

cultural relevancy came rapid advances, for just as the Soviet sports movement evolved by leaps and bounds in the 1920s, silent Soviet cinema quickly moved to the forefront of world cinema through its emphasis on montage and revolutionary imagery. Hence, an important interdependency developed between groundbreaking Soviet cinema and the flourishing movement of Soviet athletics and *fizkul'tura*. "Cinema is an athlete / Cinema is a sower of ideas," Mayakovsky exclaimed in a 1922 poem, and in multiple ways early Soviet cinema did in fact flex its aesthetic and ideological muscles.³ Through newsreels, popular fictional films, and groundbreaking nonfiction film that aggressively sowed socialist ideas and social ideals, Soviet cinema amplified the era's athleticism, whereupon modern Soviet sports seemingly returned the favor, informing filmmaking practices in the country well into the 1920s. Together, both sports and cinema would arise as preeminent, closely intertwined conduits for the new nation's socialist project.

Early Soviet Newsreels

As Soviet Russia recovered from the shock of the 1917 Revolution and the subsequent Civil War that ravaged the country, both sports and cinema were quick to emerge out of the proverbial rubble. We have seen how public participation in *fizkul'tura* and a wide range of athletic activities soon became an essential part of the burgeoning Soviet state's push for a "new way of life," which early Soviet filmmakers, like their Left counterparts, enthusiastically promoted. Hence, the nascent ties between film and sports only intensified at the time. For just as athletics helped the Bolsheviks create order out of the chaos of the immediate post-1917 period, particularly through mass gymnastics and sports parades, cinema helped guide the Soviet populace toward the lofty goals of the new socialist government. Following the Civil War era, short agitational films, or *agitki*, as they were known in Russian, addressed and endorsed in a brief, inexpensive way topical issues ranging from politics and industry to health and education. At the same time, sports and *fizkul'tura* materialized as two related themes meriting inclusion in newsreels and in other short instructional films. Agitation, Georgy Plekhanov had argued in the previous century, is a call to action that expands on the persuasion of propaganda, and thus it is easy to see how cinematic agitation suited the country's early push for athletics and the ambitious mass movement of Soviet *fizkul'tura*.⁴ In one-reel films devoted to morning exercises and activities like jumping and running and in newsreels with a broader, factual scope that highlighted the nation's embrace of athletics, sports became a theme ripe for cinematic exposure.⁵

Among the filmmakers producing newsreels in the late 1910s and early 1920s, the most prominent and visionary was undoubtedly Dziga Vertov (Denis Kaufman). Vertov, who worked on one of the Bolsheviks' famous agit-trains during the country's postrevolutionary Civil War, seized upon the newsreel medium to explore a wide range of germane social issues, including the institutionalization of Soviet sports. Footage of organized athletics appears as early as 1918 in Vertov's *Kino-Weekly* (*Kino-nedel'ia*) newsreels, the ninth installment of which probes the post-1917 rise of club sports in Petrograd through scenes of citizens participating in *fizkul'tura*, soccer, and track and field.⁶ Early Vertov newsreels, Joshua Malitsky has observed, "articulate the *sensible impact* of becoming part of a collective and participating in the effort to newly shape political, economic, social, and cultural life," a new mode of living that tellingly included sports.⁷ And as a number of the twenty-three installments of Vertov's subsequent *Kino-Pravda* (*Kino-Truth*, 1922–25) suggests, both athletes and spectators would prove important parts of a Soviet populace collectively engaging in the active, healthy life of the new nation.

Kino-Pravda, scholars concur, represented a significant step forward in Vertov's filmmaking, and, whether or not it was a coincidence, his turn toward athletics and *fizkul'tura* coincided with the rapid evolution of his cinematic artistry in the early 1920s.⁸ As Vertov himself noted, "Step by step, deep-rooted methods of shooting and editing are changing in favor of the revelation of pure movement, the celebration of movement on the screen."⁹ And much of this movement would in fact be athletic. Although the editing remains rather unremarkable in early installments of *Kino-Pravda*, Vertov's shot selection, augmented by the camera work of his brother Mikhail Kaufman, increasingly impresses over successive installments, several of which address Soviet sports. The cinematic newsreel, Vertov and others quickly realized, suited the fast, vigorous pace of athletics and physical fitness activities. Discussing the tenth installment of Vertov's *Kino-Pravda*, in particular two segments that featured tennis (matches between a Petrograd team and a Moscow team) and track and field events—javelin throw, pole vault, high jump, hurdles, and long-distance races—at a Union of Youth athletic festival, the Constructivist Aleksey Gan wrote, "Our Revolution is so rich in the movements of the masses, the swiftness with which events arise, their development and disappearance, that only a machine, an apparatus, can capture and record what is happening."¹⁰ It was only cinema, Gan emphasizes here, that could keep pace with modern activities such as athletics and the social momentum that physical activity bolstered. As Gan's comments indicate—and as Lenin's famous alleged assertion that cinema is "the most important of the arts" suggests—cinema was perceived at the time as the artistic

medium best able to capture the “factual” development of the new socialist nation and its impressive progress in the realm of *fizkul’tura*.¹¹

In his commentary on Vertov’s filming of this international festival of the Union of Youth in the tenth installment of *Kino-Pravda*, Gan suggested that the filmmaker had dispensed with “conventional film aesthetics” to replicate the new visual thrills inherent in sports. “The newsreel,” Gan wrote in his review of *Kino-Pravda No. 10*, “ceases to be illustrative material reflecting this or that place in our many-sided contemporary life, and becomes contemporary life as such, outside of territory, time, or individual significance.”¹² As Gan implies, Vertov’s innovative brand of cinema constituted “contemporary life as such” by not simply showing a modern activity such as sports (i.e., letting the camera record the event) but by formally adapting to it through individual shots and editing, which is precisely what occurs in the *Kino-Pravda No. 10* footage of rapid tosses of the javelin, high jumping, and pole vaulting, attempts at which are roughly broken down into very quick images in the newsreel. Gan, in fact, would go on to elaborate about this very same tenth installment of *Kino-Pravda* in his booklet *Long Live the Demonstration of Everyday Life!* (*Da zdrastvuet demonstratsiia byta!*).

The tenth *Kino-Pravda* is a bolder and more sudden turn from newsreel to the fixation of daily life [*byt*]. It is comprised no longer out of individual, chance themes but rather constructed upon various instances of today’s flux, for everything is filmed at a rapid pace and supplied with inscriptions of the present day. It also maintains interest through the technical qualities of individual sections. For instance, the track and field footage is cinematically comprised out of multiple pieces. There is lengthy footage shown without one intertitle. But all of these substantively different technical devices do not destroy the general development of *Kino-Pravda* as a work dedicated to the present day.¹³

According to Gan, Vertov’s technical advances and pronounced shift away from intertitles went hand in hand with his investigation of everyday Soviet life, whereby the cinematic innovation complemented the abundant athleticism on display in *Kino-Pravda No. 10*. Vertov would take his innovations considerably further in subsequent films, but in this tenth installment of *Kino-Pravda* (one of the first installments, incidentally, for which the Constructivist Rodchenko designed intertitles), he succeeded in merging athletics and cinema in a way that appealed to Constructivists such as Gan.¹⁴ Even though Gan and Vertov would soon part ways regarding the direction and aesthetic scope of early Soviet avant-garde cinema, both men clearly saw athletics as facilitating Soviet cinema’s integral involvement in the rapid evolution of Soviet life.

In the thirteenth *Kino-Pravda*, Vertov continued to probe Soviet athletics, using relatively straightforward editing to illuminate the novel spectacle of *fizkul'tura* in the new nation. Devoted to the fifth anniversary of the October Revolution, this installment of *Kino-Pravda* begins with found footage of Red Square parades, followed by a quick shift to the skies through aerial footage of the Soviet urban landscape. Vertov then moves on to an overview of events from the previous five years, beginning with 1918 and Civil War scenes before showing Soviet citizens chopping wood, honoring Civil War victims, and enduring hardships during the famine of 1921. For 1922, however, Vertov heralds a new social and political landscape by including present-day footage, as he first shows Soviet signs, stars, and posters on public display before jumping to Soviet *fizkul'tura* and what emerges as a celebration of the nation's new emphasis on discipline and strength. With an admiring look at young Soviet citizens developing their physical strength, Vertov highlights the physical materialization of a "New Man" in Soviet culture. Although at the time Vertov envisioned this New Man as more mechanical than athletic (as he declared in 1922, "*The new man*, free of unwieldiness and clumsiness, will have the light, precise movements of machines, and he will be the gratifying subject of our films"), sports and human physicality nonetheless contributed to his lofty vision for humankind.¹⁵ "I am kino-eye," Vertov boasted in 1923. "I create a man more perfect than Adam."¹⁶ This pronouncement, certainly ambitious for a filmmaker, was understandable given the lofty social ideals of modern athletics in those days and of Constructivism, the avant-garde art movement to which Vertov was loosely aligned.

For Vertov, cinema expedited the salutary objectives of early Soviet athletics. This *Kino-Pravda* No. 13 sports sequence, approximately a minute and a half long, begins with a creatively designed intertitle announcing a "Directive for Training" (*Kurs na trenazh*), followed by a brief shot of a theatrical performance in which a Spartacus-like figure—bare-chested, in shorts and boasting a shield on which the Russian word *TRUD* (labor) is printed—places his foot on the chest of his fallen opponent.¹⁷ Next comes a shot of soldiers lining up and aiming their rifles straight ahead, from which Vertov cuts to a lengthy medium shot of a young male gymnast practicing on parallel bars as fellow athletes look on. This gymnastics footage, it should be noted, has been recycled: it comes from the earlier 1918 *Kino-Weekly* No. 9 sports installment and is integrated into the contemporaneous footage. After more gymnastics—a brief shot of a young boy leaping over a pommel horse—Vertov switches his attention from the individual to the collective and shots of mass calisthenics. An establishing long shot of male students exercising together on a field reinforces Vertov's emphasis on the collective nature of Soviet *fizkul'tura*. This shot gives way to a medium shot

of shirtless men aggressively swinging their arms in unison, dropping to their knees, and raising their left legs, succeeded by a cut to a brief medium shot of young women in skirts and white shirts engaging in balletic moves on a field. Vertov's relatively quick cuts (each shot here is on average eight seconds long) follow from the sharp, precise physical movement on display, and in this cutting one can discern the seeds of Vertov's theory of intervals, which would constitute the basis of his editing. "*Intervals* (the transitions from one movement to another)," wrote Vertov in 1922, "are the material, the elements of the art of movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they (the intervals) which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution."¹⁸ The cuts from one shot to the next accompany the sharp athletic movement of the *fizkul'turniki* in this *Kino-Pravda* footage. And with militaristic uniformity and purpose underlying these shots of *fizkul'tura*, Vertov stresses the kinetic, theatrical spectacle and the inherent pleasure of both participating in and beholding such athletic activity. Before moving on in this thirteenth installment of *Kino-Pravda* to brief footage of Lenin and then machinery (a subsequent intertitle reads *Kurs na mashiny*), Vertov ends his "Directive for Training" with several shots of girls juggling balls and dancing, followed by two shots of boys jumping off a grassy embankment and swimming about in the water below. The athletic training was to be rigorous in Soviet Russia but also enjoyable for participants and spectators alike.

Vertov's eye for athletics continued to expand as he established himself as one of Soviet Russia's most innovative filmmakers. Toward the end of the fifteenth installment of *Kino-Pravda*, newsreel devoted to events from the winter of 1923, Vertov includes a seventy-five-second "Health" (Zdorov'e) sequence, which focuses on some of the strides made by the Soviet state in the competitive winter sports of skiing and hockey. For the initial skiing sequence, Vertov uses four shots of a cross-country ski race, showing the start before cutting to an early phase of the race, during which the camera, keeping pace with the skiers, moves backward as the competitors glide forward (with a playful display in the background of spectators roughhousing in the snow). The smooth camera movement in this eight-second shot complements the skiers' fluid motion over the snow. Subsequent shots show a later phase of the race, when the skiers pass by a stationary camera.

Then Vertov turns his attention in *Kino-Pravda No. 15* to a hockey game in some twenty brief shots spanning approximately forty-five seconds. Yet whereas Vertov captures the excitement and dynamism of the initial ski race through that sequence's four shots, the hockey game with its seemingly chaotic, collective nonlinear movement presents more of a challenge. Hence, instead of attempting to convey a play-by-play of all the action, Vertov features the goaltender, beginning with medium shots of him and continuing with shots of the game



Figure 7. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Pravda* No. 15, 1923.

taken from approximately his relatively stationary perspective. The game's speed and excitement—but not the competitive back-and-forth, given the brevity of the sequence—come through in Vertov's rapid succession of images, which loosely replicate the goaltender's participatory but also somewhat spectatorial perspective (fig. 7). Discussing in 1923 the ability of the camera to transform the traditional perspective of a spectator, Vertov underscored the propensity of the *Kinoks* (as members of Vertov's filmmaking collective called themselves) for “shooting a boxing match, not from the point of view of a spectator present, but shooting the successive movements (the blows) of the contenders.”¹⁹ In a similar way, the goalkeeper provides something of a model for Vertov's viewers, whom the filmmaker hoped would energetically engage with the action before them. And I would add that the emphasis on goalkeeping also provides a thematic bridge to what immediately follows: a twenty-eight-second “Liveliness” (*Bodrost'*) section devoted to the calisthenics of sailors, defenders of the nation whom Vertov shows filing off a vessel and then practicing en masse their *fizkul'tura* on a large snowy public square. Implicit in the footage of both the hockey and the skiing, however, is the question of how best to film athletic competition. For Vertov, the excitement of sports took precedence over competition, and although he would never ignore the competitive side of modern athletics by

just showing sports parades and *fizkul'tura*, it was the athletic event itself—and cinema's ability to record this event—rather than the competitive result that mattered most in Vertov's film work.

In his early films as well as the later ones, Vertov encouraged the active involvement of the Soviet populace in modern athletics, whether through participation in the era's sports or through spectatorship, as he sought out avant-garde techniques to engage in visual ways with this nationwide athletic activity. For sports and a host of other new societal practices, Vertov aimed to enlist his audience in the fervent social activity of the new Soviet state. Regarding his 1926 film *A Sixth of the World* (*Shhestaia chast' mira*), for instance, Vertov remarked: "This film has, strictly speaking, no 'viewers' within the borders of the USSR, since all the working people of the USSR (130–140 million of them) are not viewers but participants in this film. The very concept of this film and its whole construction are now resolving in practice the most difficult theoretical question of the eradication of the boundary between viewers and spectacle."²⁰ In other words, Vertov sought ways for his camera to make spectators vicarious participants in the action on screen (much like spectators at live sporting events). Hence, he promoted interest in modern sports by enhancing the Soviet public's active (i.e., engaged) perception of athletics. A case in point would be Vertov's 1924 *Kino-Eye* (*Kino-glaz*), the filmmaker's first attempt at something longer than a short newsreel and a cinematic work, or *issue* (*vypushk*), as it was called, consisting of several reports on daily life in the new Soviet nation (Vertov's plan for producing five more *Kino-Eye* issues never materialized). Midway through *Kino-Eye*, a brief yet revealing diving "lesson" occurs.

Vertov begins his *Kino-Eye* diving lesson by first showing, with the help of an iris shot, a young Soviet pioneer observing other boys as they plunge clumsily into water. After several shots of ungainly diving, the intertitle "Kino-eye shows how to dive properly" signals that Vertov will focus on not only skillful athletic acts but also the skillful filming of this athleticism. The filmmaker accordingly turns his attention to several well-trained athletes, all of whom carry out a series of impressive dives into water far below the diving platform and the camera. Vertov and his cameraman brother Kaufman do not just record this athletic action; rather, they link the athleticism to their own filmmaking by inserting into each diving sequence reverse-motion photography, the filmic equivalent of an elaborate backflip. So just as divers are shown leaping from an elevated platform in a masterful, self-assured way, Vertov uses his confident directorial eye and cinematographic tricks (used elsewhere in the film as well) to embellish the diving. Beginning with a long shot of an elevated diving platform from which a first diver jumps gracefully down into the water below (fig. 8), Vertov shifts, with hardly any indication of a cut or break in the footage, to the diver



Figure 8. Dziga Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 1924.

emerging up out of the water and floating—as if by magic—back onto the diving platform. Then a second diver carries out a complicated forward flip from the same distant platform and lands in the water before resurfacing and floating back(ward) onto the diving platform. Low-angle footage of a third diver relies on a slight camera pan to capture the trajectory of the jump before Vertov cuts to a close-up of another diver's powerful legs and buttocks as she lands back on the diving platform, thus allowing the filmmaker to pinpoint through reverse motion and slight slow motion the muscular mechanics underpinning the dive. As in *Kino-Pravda*, Vertov merges athletics and film aesthetics here through trick camera work and a deft use of camera angles and cuts, which accentuate the athleticism and lend a certain rhythm to both the film and the dives. *Kino-Eye* revels in not only the diving but also the ability of cinema to enhance the athletic spectacle for the viewer.

The newsreel medium, it should be noted, enticed other early Soviet filmmakers to engage with early Soviet athletics as well. For instance, Esfir Shub, an admirer of Vertov whose filmmaking style hinged on the editing of old archival newsreel footage, would produce a feature-length documentary film, *The Great Way* (*Velikii put'*, 1927), that culminated with a celebration of Soviet

fizkul'tura. This film was one of several Shub made based on found footage of the revolution and newsreel documenting the rehabilitation of the country throughout the 1920s. Toward the end of *The Great Way*, created in honor of the tenth anniversary of the 1917 Revolution, the filmmaker provides footage from 1924 of “Young Leninists” (Molodye lenintsy) who, as two separate intertitles explain, are “strong” (*sil'nye*) and “lively” (*bodrye*). These representatives of a strong and lively populace will implicitly lead from the military front on the “Great Way” toward a model socialist society. “We will build a new world” (My novyi mir postroim!), another intertitle states almost immediately after Shub’s *fizkul'tura* scenes. Shub, in fact, goes with an initial shot of young women engaging in mass calisthenics, a scene of order and discipline that leads to a second shot of young men performing similar athletic drills in front of an outdoor audience followed by another shot of shirtless young men marching ahead as rows of young women proceed close behind. More marching ensues in subsequent shots, wherein a slightly elevated camera angle shows row upon row of young Soviet citizens participating in Soviet *fizkul'tura*. Shub does not rely on the camera tricks and playful editing characteristic of Vertov’s work, but she has produced here a vivid documentary recording of the early Soviet era’s athletic esprit de corps and a reminder that cinema and athletics were to go hand in hand when it came to establishing a new Soviet society. By concluding *The Great Way* with these athletic scenes, Shub presents the order and discipline of athletics as the epitome of national unity and recovery.²¹ And she demonstrates that *fizkul'tura* and competitive athletics—along with cinema—could indeed unite the country, as subsequent work by Vertov and Kaufman and also popular Soviet cinema of the day would attest.

Popular Soviet Cinema

While Soviet nonfiction film documented the development of Soviet sports in ever more creative ways, the nation’s popular feature-length fictional films likewise began to draw upon modern athletics to great effect. The Leninist film-proportion, advocated by Lenin in 1922, stated that an explicit proportion, or balance, had to be established between entertainment and educational movies in Soviet Russia, and thus a series of entertainment films soon appeared, furthering the cinematic promotion of sports that had begun in the era’s newsreels.²² As with the nonfiction filmmaking of the early Soviet era, a number of fictional Soviet films—from Lev Kuleshov’s seminal *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (*Neobychnnye prikliucheniia Mistera Vesta v strane bol'shevikov*, 1924) to less significant yet nevertheless revealing fare such as Sergey Komarov’s *The Doll with Millions* (*Kukla s millionami*, 1928)—incorporated athletics into

both the content and form of the filmed material. Soviet cinema's "sportisation," as François Albera has put it, resulted in actors carrying out elaborate, physical stunts and flaunting their athleticism, while the popular *fizkul'tura* of the early Soviet era and other athletic activities increasingly figured in the ample action on screen.²³ If Soviet citizens were to engage in competitive athletics and *fizkul'tura*, as the country's young government intended, then popular fiction films represented an expedient means to promote sports among the masses and to replicate the excitement of athletic events on screen.

The "sportisation" of popular cinema in Soviet Russia stemmed in part from Western films, particularly those made in Hollywood, that elevated modern sports as a prevalent theme. Thanks to implementation of the Soviets' New Economic Policy (NEP) and its market-friendly policies in the 1920s, Western cinema enjoyed significant exposure in Soviet Russia throughout the 1920s, and the Soviet public responded enthusiastically to the action-packed and often sports-centric Hollywood fare.²⁴ Foremost among America's silent filmmakers and actors who introduced modern athletics onto the big screen were Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd, two of the silent movie era's most famous comedy stars and film figures who enjoyed great popularity in Soviet Russia.²⁵ For Keaton, sports offered a useful vehicle for displaying his impressive array of physical gags and acrobatics. Although his helter-skelter on-screen persona lacked the "manliness" so often associated with modern athletes, through sports Keaton could surprise—and amuse—his audience with his athletic agility and speed. Virtually every Keaton film showcased athletic stunts (he directed the majority of the silent movies in which he appeared), and competitive sports provided the thematic crux of the action-filled comedy in several of his more popular films, most notably *Battling Butler* (1926) and *College* (1927). In *Battling Butler*, which features extensive boxing, the kinetic, frantic movement of the neophyte boxer Butler (Keaton) as well as the filming techniques used for the boxing scenes underscore important spectatorial affinities between cinema and sports: by showing the square boxing ring within the film frame and through frequent shifts of the camera in and out of the ropes, *Battling Butler* likens the boxing stage to a movie screen.²⁶ And in *College*, Keaton tapped into the sports craze prevailing at the time on college campuses across the United States, as his weak, naive character tries his hand at a range of collegiate sports (before settling on coxswain for the crew team).²⁷

Harold Lloyd, although not as well known today as Keaton, proved equally adept at probing and parodying that collegiate sports craze. Very popular in the 1920s but now often overlooked in discussions of silent comedy, Lloyd repeatedly played the ambitious, optimistic all-American kid with horned-rimmed glasses, willing to do anything to get ahead. Unlike Keaton, Lloyd left the

directing credits to others, yet he always had a large say in the making of his films. An active athlete almost his entire life and adept at an array of sports, despite a deformed hand (the result of a photo shoot with a live bomb that went explosively wrong), Lloyd took on the theme of sports in two feature films, *The Freshman* (directed by Fred C. Newmeyer and Sam Taylor in 1925) and *Speedy* (directed by Ted Wilde in 1927). In the first of these films, Lloyd tries to make Taft College's football team and must suffer one humiliating mauling after another at practice before he eventually becomes the hero of the day in the film's climactic football game. The athletic focus in *Speedy*, on the other hand, is on spectatorship, as Lloyd's title character avidly roots for the New York Yankees (the film was shot primarily in New York City). Here the renowned Babe Ruth makes a striking cameo, sitting in the back of a racing taxi that Lloyd's character—Speedy—steers wildly through the city. At the pinnacle of his own career (and a big fan of Lloyd's work), Ruth memorably makes his mark on the film with his cameo appearance and through real-life footage of him performing on the field and belting a home run. The film captures the joys and excitement of watching sports—and watching movies about sports. Scenes of a packed Yankee stadium reveal crowds comparable to the large crowds Lloyd also enjoyed at this time, as Lloyd establishes loose parallels between sports fans and moviegoers. Against the backdrop of the fast-paced city, the speed of sports, the speed of movies, and the Speedy taxi driver of this film all intersect in a comic yet exciting spectator experience.²⁸

The Harold Lloyd character and look—clean-cut with glasses—made it onto Soviet screens not only via NEP-era imports but also through the Lloyd-inspired hero of Kuleshov's *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*. Boasting a pair of glasses and a naive outlook straight out of Lloyd's popular work, the eponymous Mr. West embodied an amalgamation of American cinematic techniques and Soviet ideals at the heart of early Soviet cinema's aesthetic receptivity toward athletics. Although Kuleshov did not document modern athletics in the bold, idealistic manner that Vertov did in his newsreels and later experimental films, he did explicitly draw upon athletics and athleticism in *Mr. West* and elsewhere (e.g., in *Death Ray* [*Luch smerti*, 1925] and the adaptation of a Jack London story, *By the Law* [*По закону*, 1926], both of which contain ample fisticuffs). The dramatic rhythm and pacing of Kuleshov's film required explicit physical preparation from his actors, whom he trained like athletes. For Kuleshov, the actor's "body language" was to be developed by practicing a series of "études," many of which derived from modern athletics. "Wrestling and fighting," Kuleshov wrote, "are very helpful in learning the technique of the étude—best of all when actors who are familiar with acrobatics, boxing, and gymnastics perform the études. Sport and the practice of physical

discipline are vital for each film actor to learn and to try to be familiar with.”²⁹ Known for his “Americanism” (*amerikanshchina*), Kuleshov brought an athletic vitality and appreciation for the human body into Soviet cinema.

Kuleshov, furthermore, hoped to adapt the rhythm of his actors’ athletic movements to the medium’s growing reliance on frequent cuts and the creative juxtaposition of shots. According to Kuleshov, the *naturshchik*, or model, as he and others called the movie actor, “is a man with a prominent appearance and well-trained body, capable of performing in front of the camera any kind of physical movement or facial expression of inner emotions, always faithfully following the director’s suggestions.”³⁰ Expanding on Meyerholdian biomechanics and the modern era’s athletic spirit, Kuleshov saw the actor’s body facilitating both his filmmaking and film editing.³¹ Kuleshov’s montage, Mikhail Yampolsky explains, thus became “the expression of the new conception of man and derived literally from the human body, as a record of its movement, as the mechanical representation of its natural rhythm, as the embodiment of the concept of the body analytically dismembered.”³² This new concept—and appreciation—of the human body, advanced by the film camera as well as by new methods of montage and athletic forms of performance, enabled the era’s filmmaking and its athletic orientation to expand upon the evolutionary ideals and aesthetic goals of the early Soviet period.

In *Mr. West*, the modern athletic spirit manifests itself most notably in physical stunts carried out by the American cowboy Jeddy (Mr. West’s right-hand man), played by the “well-trained” future filmmaker Boris Barnet, who had in fact worked earlier as a professional boxer. Jumping and fighting his way through Moscow, Jeddy ushers in a new physicality in Soviet cinema. One might point in particular to one of the more action-packed sequences of *Mr. West*, in which cowboy Jeddy, fleeing the police by scurrying across a loose wire strung between two Moscow buildings, falls through a window below and into a library. Having tumbled into a bookcase and then into what looks to be a reading room, the ever athletic Jeddy both literally and metaphorically crashes into traditional culture, landing beside an ancient Greek urn displayed on a pedestal in front of another bookcase, where two male readers first eye him with wariness before rolling up their sleeves in preparation for a fight. “No outsiders here” (*Vkhod postoronnim vospreshchaetsia*), reads the intertitle. Cutting quickly between Jeddy, the two combative readers (one of them played by the ubiquitous silent-era actor Vladimir Fogel), an American woman—Elly—who just happens to be in town, and a man with a library ladder, Kuleshov stages a tense yet farcical fight that takes on attributes of an athletic event (fig. 9). Enhancing the spectatorial perspective on Jeddy’s combative encounter with the two Russian readers, Kuleshov cuts to the man with the ladder setting up a make-shift



Figure 9. Lev Kuleshov, *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*, 1924.

bleacher beside the boxing-like showdown and swinging his arm in unison with the fighters as he watches from on high. In the scuffle, though, Jeddy knocks over the ladder, causing the engaged spectator to clatter into the urn and knock it over onto the floor. Now a participant in the fight, this spectator-turned-athlete begins tossing books at Jeddy, who responds by throwing the broken urn at him while flipping his other two adversaries up and over his head after they jump on him. And then it is Elly's turn to get involved, as she too goes from spectator to participant by leaping on Jeddy's back before being flipped in the process. It all ends in smiles, however, when Elly and Jeddy recognize one another and warmly shake hands. In the broken urn and thrown books, meanwhile, we can see how sports and the action of cinema constituted a daunting new adversary for well-established art.

Whereas the athleticism celebrated throughout Kuleshov's *Mr. West* exuded a chaotic irreverence, subsequent Soviet comedies of the silent era would on occasion portray athletics and *fizkul'tura* as a positive force for order. Take, for instance, Boris Barnet's own *Girl with the Hatbox* (*Devushka s korobochkoi*, 1926). A lighthearted comedy, it has the heroine, Natasha, devise a fictitious marriage with the homeless yet resolute Ilya so that he can stay in her rented Moscow



Figure 10. Boris Barnet, *Girl with the Hatbox*, 1926.

apartment while she spends her nights with her grandfather outside of Moscow.³³ Natasha maintains a somewhat skeptical opinion of Ilya, but one of the first hints in the film of Ilya's resolve and upstanding character is the vigorous athletic exercises he engages in after moving into Natasha's apartment. Barnet shows Ilya waking up in the morning, and—in a lengthy straight-on medium shot—repeatedly lifting books that serve as make-shift weights (fig. 10). As in Kuleshov's *Mr. West*, culture in a traditional sense, represented by the books, becomes subordinate to modern athletic culture. To provide a sharp contrast to Ilya's discipline and physical prowess, Barnet cuts to the landlord, a morally suspect—and unhealthy—member of the Moscow bourgeoisie, who wakes up with cigarette butts at his feet, peeps through the keyhole at Ilya, and mimics his new tenant's exercises. Ilya, meanwhile, shadowboxes so vigorously that he falls down on the floor; yet up he rises, ready for a shower and ready to fight for his future. Barnet, who would return several decades later to the sports motif with his 1957 film *The Wrestler and the Clown* (*Borets i kloun*, 1957), used modern athleticism in his cinematic work in a way that reflected his own training as a boxer and his physical orientation as a filmmaker. As Bernard Eisenschitz has noted, Barnet's films “are athletic, not only in their direction but in the very

body of the narrative. People run, hurl themselves against the elements or the enemy.”³⁴ Himself an embodiment of the New Man, Barnet brought athletic ideals to a broad swath of the Soviet public through his cinematic work.

A somewhat negative, even skeptical rendering of the era’s emphasis on athletics and *fizkul’tura*, however, can be found in Abram Room’s *Bed and Sofa* (*Tret’ia meshchanskaia*, 1927), an early Soviet comedy with biting social satire aimed at life in 1920s Moscow. In Room’s celebrated film, the irresponsible, callow Kolya treats his wife poorly and lounges about both at home and at work (he is an engineer working on renovations of the Bolshoi Theater), yet he nevertheless aspires to “New Man” status when lifting weights and performing physical exercises in the morning. Room begins his exercise sequence with closeup shots of Kolya’s hands and arms moving up and down as he lifts weights, and here the film cuts correspond to the rapid movement of the arms. After shifting to the legs and Kolya’s movement in and out of a squatting position, Room eventually pans up the body to show a shirtless Kolya, who rubs his own chest with an air of self-satisfaction. Kolya, however, hardly measures up to the era’s ideals of a strong New Man, for he treats his wife poorly, is cuckolded by his close friend, and eventually loses his wife. Yet as the early scenes of *Bed and Sofa* reveal, Soviet dramatic films of the 1920s creatively highlighted—and satirically probed—the physical fitness trends and implicit idealism so prevalent at the time.

The athleticism is more earnest, however, in *The Doll with Millions*, a film that suffers due to its unabashedly frivolous plot yet nevertheless provides a very telling look at everyday life in Soviet Russia in the late 1920s. The director, Sergey Komarov, who got his start as an actor in the Kuleshov collective (and appeared in both *Mr. West* and *By the Law*), hardly distinguishes himself here as a filmmaker (his only other film of note would be *The Kiss of Mary Pickford* [*Potselui Mari Pikford*, 1927]). But one of the art directors on *The Doll with Millions* just happened to be the Constructivist Rodchenko, who throughout his professional career took an active, artistic interest in both sports and cinema, as is quite evident in his design work for this film. The narrative here revolves around the will of a rich, old Parisian widow who upon dying bequeaths her fortune to a niece living in the Soviet Union. This niece, however, will receive the fortune only if she marries, and thus two of the late widow’s nephews race off to Moscow to find the young heiress and win her hand. All that the two nephews know of her is that she is a certain Marya Ivanova who has a birthmark on her shoulder and in her possession a doll containing her birthright documents. The two foreign, money-grubbing suitors, played for laughs by Igor’ Ilyinsky (the Soviet Chaplin of his era) and Fogel, engage in various shenanigans as they try to out-compete one another to find and win the hand of Marya. Their search for her



Figure 11. Sergey Komarov, *The Doll with Millions*, 1928.

tellingly culminates at a swim meet at the Dynamo Stadium in Moscow. Komarov begins this swimming sequence with stop-motion cinematography to show the quick appearance of water buckets featuring Cyrillic letters that spell out “*Dinamo*.” Then he follows with several poolside shots as well as shots taken from high up in the stands amid a large crowd to highlight the excitement of the athletic event. Komarov intercuts these shots with a scene inside the Moscow stadium (a *mise-en-scène* featuring elaborate interior design work that clearly bears Rodchenko’s signature), where one of the persistent French suitors looks at the shoulder of every female swimmer who passes. Lo and behold, the Frenchman spots a birthmark and, according to the accompanying intertitle, hears the surname “Ivanova” shouted out.

The athletic Marya Ivanova, not surprisingly, proves to be no willing participant in the get-rich matrimonial plans, for she resists the advances of both foreign suitors. To lure these two suitors away from her apartment, where they loiter outside the door and noisily await their prey, Marya sets out on an evasive run through Moscow. Few cinematic chase sequences emphasize the importance of athletics so blatantly—Marya even wears a striped athletic shirt, a popular design evocative of the sports clothing designed by Stepanova, Rodchenko’s wife, in the early 1920s. The vigorous, virtuous Marya runs ahead (fig. 11) while

the two out-of-shape foreigners struggle to keep up. She clammers over a fence that the two male pursuers lack the dexterity to clear quickly, and then Marya tricks her suitors into climbing onto the roof of a wooden house, where they find themselves stranded after she removes the ladder. An attractive representative of the model, healthy society idealized at the time in Soviet Russia, Marya boasts superior fitness and a sharp mind, qualities that, along with an ethos of honest egalitarianism (she has no need for the inheritance), provide the central thrust—and artistic design—of *Doll with Millions*. Although the film would lack the creative cinematic vision of concurrent Soviet avant-garde filmmaking, its heroine assumes the role of the modern Soviet athlete, a fictionalized manifestation of all those new sportsmen—and sportswomen—featured so prominently in experimental Soviet cinema of the late 1920s.

Sports in the Cinematic City

“Nearly all contemporary major sports,” Steven Riess emphasizes in his discussion of late nineteenth-century athletics and the urban environment in the United States, “evolved, or were invented, in the city. The city was the place where sport became rationalized, specialized, organized, commercialized, and professionalized.”³⁵ Modern athletics, despite their reliance on the natural (i.e., physical) abilities of the athlete and the innate strength, agility, and speed of the human body, undeniably arose as an urban (and suburban) pastime. Across Europe and the United States at the start of the twentieth century, industrial workers, the wealthy urban elite, and the city-bound middle class all increasingly took part in the modern sports movement. Whether enthusiastic participants in athletic games in city parks or avid fans filling sports stadiums, the urban populace provided the main impetus behind the rapid rise in the popularity of sports, much as they boosted the popularity of cinema. It therefore comes as no surprise that in the late 1920s avant-garde cinema exalting the city and its implicit ideals also exalted sports. For the filming of the modern city demanded more than just a cursory nod to the ubiquitous presence of modern sports. In a handful of experimental Soviet films from the late 1920s—all of them directed by either Dziga Vertov or his brother Mikhail Kaufman—sports constituted a key ingredient of the modern urban landscape and provided filmmakers an effective means for portraying Soviet citizens at play while superimposing on them the collective ideals of the era.

Throughout the 1920s, as my discussion of early Soviet newsreels and popular film has indicated, Soviet cinema quickly became associated with the emergence of the “New” Soviet athlete and a new, active engagement with athletics among the nation’s urban populace. This was especially the case for

avant-garde filmmakers such as Vertov and Kaufman, who saw sports as an essential facet of urban life in the new Soviet state. In 1922 Vertov had declared that his filmmaking offered essential training for “new people,” and he elaborated on this vision of a new urban, industrialized populace by boasting that the machine-like New Man would be “the gratifying subject of our films.”³⁶ For Vertov, experimental nonfiction filmmaking had the potential to help shape a more powerful human—the “man more perfect than Adam,” as he put it in 1922—who could take on attributes of the machine, particularly the motion and speed of machinery, but who could also showcase an athletic physique. So as Vertov narrowed the distinction between humans and machines within the urban environment, he simultaneously highlighted the more natural, organic rhythms of everyday life, joining, as Annette Michelson puts it in her discussion of Vertov’s work, “the human life cycle with the cycles of work and leisure of a city from dawn to dusk” to create “a seamless organic continuum,” which of course included sports and physical fitness.³⁷

Examining the interplay between the organic and the mechanistic in Vertov’s idealized vision of the new Soviet state, Malcolm Turvey has argued that Vertov “sees the task of revealing to his Soviet viewers that they are indispensable parts of a larger organic whole as a way of making them want to participate in the building of the new Soviet society.”³⁸ Not just mechanized parts of a machine, Vertov’s new humans—and viewers—were to exist within “a larger organic whole” that, apropos the prominence of sports in Vertov’s *The Man with the Movie Camera* (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*) and other work by the filmmaker and his brother, entailed rigorous physical training as well as exuberant, physical play. More broadly, Vertov and Kaufman called for active involvement in the Soviet socialist project. Hence, Turvey perceives not only the mechanistic and organic going hand in hand for the filmmaker but also Vertov’s viewers overcoming “the division between art and life by engaging in creative labor” to become active participants in the “great work of art that is the Marxist utopia.”³⁹ Through physical activity such as athletics, which appealed to participants and viewers alike, the Soviet populace could collectively progress toward an ideal urban society.

For both Vertov and Kaufman, sports contributed to the new nation’s ongoing urban revitalization. Consider, for instance, Vertov’s 1926 *Stride, Soviet!* (*Shagai Sovet!*), a film documenting the efforts of the Moscow city government to expedite the reemergence of Soviet society after Russia’s destructive, postrevolutionary Civil War period. In *Stride, Soviet!*, sports contribute to—and also reflect—the social progress made in the mid-1920s. For just as the new nation was gaining strength and learning how to stride forward, at least metaphorically, Soviet citizens—and Soviet filmmakers like Vertov—were doing much

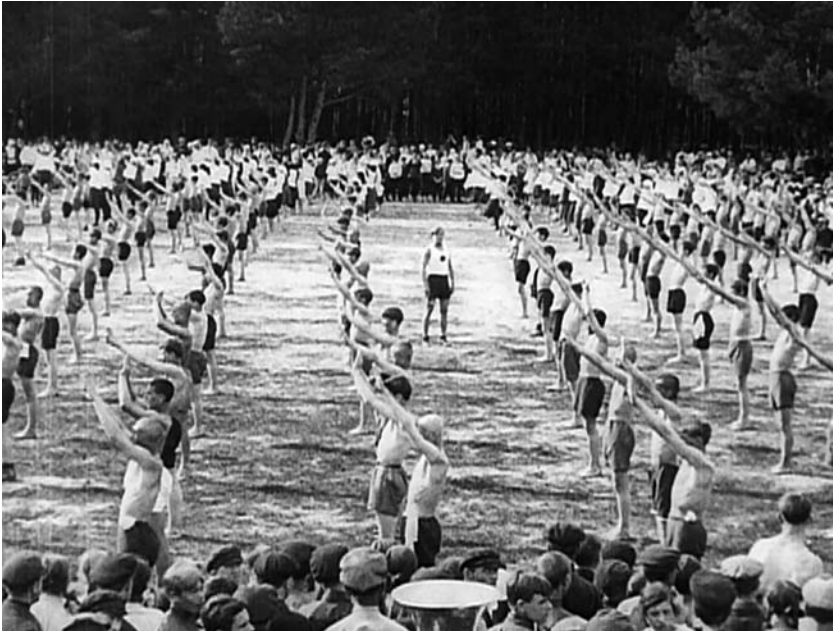


Figure 12. Dziga Vertov, *Stride, Soviet!*, 1926.

the same. *Stride, Soviet!* celebrates urban and industrial renewal in Moscow under the leadership of the Moscow Soviet government. Here the filmmaker's Marxist vision of social harmony moves to the fore in the film, particularly during several brief sports sequences that underscore the idealism at the heart of Vertov's filmmaking.

Toward the conclusion of *Stride, Soviet!*, Vertov introduces both *fizkul'tura* and sports (*Sovet vydvigaet fizkul'turu*, reads the intertitle) as a powerful antidote to outmoded decadent ways of the past, conveyed by Vertov through footage of dancing, smoking, and drinking. In the brief yet notable sequence that follows, young adults engage in calisthenics on a large field (fig. 12) while subsequent shots feature schoolchildren practicing physical exercises in school. A vivid illustration of social unity, this *fizkul'tura* scene brightly illuminates the crucial place intended for modern athletics in the new nation's new way of life. Discussing the juxtaposition of old and new—and the juxtaposition of drunkenness and athletics—in *Stride, Soviet!*, the film critic Aleksandr Fevralsky (a contemporary of Vertov) remarked, "It is clear how the struggle between these two principles will end: the Soviet is striding confidently and leading Moscow to the socialist future."⁴⁰ As Fevralsky suggests, even as Vertov dwelled on certain

failings of the present, he included footage of sports in present-day Moscow to point his film—and Soviet society—toward a healthy, athletic Marxist future.

Emphasizing the development of the Soviet populace out of its decadent prerevolutionary past toward a lofty socialist ideal, *Stride, Soviet!* promotes a merging of the organic and mechanical, particularly through several brief sports sequences. For just as the Soviet populace emulates the machine through its athletic activity, Vertov's mechanized camera will appear to emulate the physical play of the populace. Vertov accordingly cuts from his propagandistic scenes of *fizkul'tura* to a series of shots showing several young skiers as they glide rapidly down a snowy, not-so-steep slope and over a small jump. As with the diving scenes in *Kino-Eye*, Vertov then reverses the footage to show one of the skiers zoom backward up the snowy slope. Although the shots and editing comprising this sequence are relatively conventional, the final trick reverse shot epitomizes Vertov's tendency to link the mechanized medium of cinema and the organic rhythms of sports, whereby the mechanical camera itself seems to want to get in on the fun and to develop its own athletic muscles and prowess. Moreover, Vertov's viewers experience a rush of formalist defamiliarization while watching the skiing in reverse, as the filmmaker compels his audience to adjust to the modern thrills of not only winter sports such as skiing but also the reverse motion and other cinematic tricks. And the editing, always significant in Vertov's work, takes us from skiing to a short segment on reading. For Vertov, sports and literacy proved equally important in the new Soviet society: the ambitions of the nation's literacy campaign matched the ambitions underlying the nation's advocacy of *fizkul'tura* and sports.

As *Stride, Soviet!* suggests, the Kinoks saw the rapidly developing urban environment as a fundamental, metonymic space for realizing the radiant Soviet future, and they would explore the evolving Soviet city—and its sports—in subsequent experimental work that incorporated elements of the so-called city symphony. A genre in experimental silent cinema of the 1920s that probed the daily rhythms of modern urban life, the cinematic city symphony typically documented the passage of morning to night in the modern city. It thus proved well suited to an investigation of contemporary athletics. For just as organized sports provided streamlined order and rules to the often-overwhelming hustle and bustle of urban life, the city symphony transformed the dynamism and cacophony of the urban landscape into a cohesive cinematic aesthetic.

This brings us to one of the era's most famous city symphonies, Walter Ruttmann's 1927 *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*), a nonnarrative film documenting a day in the life of the German capital that merits some mention here. In *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, two brief sequences highlight the urban sports craze at the time. The first of Ruttmann's sports

sequences occurs in the fourth of the film's five "acts," as physical activity and athletic spectacle offer enticing forms of entertainment after the workday has ended and Berliners exit their offices and factories. An avant-garde German filmmaker who sought to provide an unbiased view of contemporary life, Ruttmann at first fluctuates between scenes of athletic Germans rowing, sailing, and swimming, wherein the camera mingles with these amateur athletes (in one lengthy traveling shot, for instance, the camera, situated on the bow of a boat, moves briskly across the water past other boats). After an approximately forty-second montage sequence of aquatic sports, however, Ruttmann makes a notable shift to sports spectatorship, as he assumes a somewhat detached, voyeuristic perspective on athletic competition, be it go-karting, auto racing, cycling, tennis, footraces, or even dog racing. For Ruttmann, the modern sports movement entailed both appreciation and participation, which his film presented as integral, motion-filled components of modern life's rapid "symphony."

Ruttmann's twofold perspective on athletic play would continue in *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* through a second sports scene from the film's fifth and final act showcasing the array of evening-time entertainment options available to Berliners. In this later sports sequence, Ruttmann reveals city dwellers not only skiing and skating but also attending velodrome cycling races and raucous boxing matches (both presumably in the then-popular Berlin Sportpalast). Crosscutting between shots of the crowded velodrome and the boxing arena, Ruttmann presents these evening sports in a metaphorical way, for the rapid race of cyclists around the velodrome track appears to replicate the hectic pace of modern life in 1927 Berlin, just as scenes of a knockout in the boxing ring point to what Ruttmann saw as the brutal, unforgiving vicissitudes of everyday existence in German society. Sports prepare—or perhaps anaesthetize—audiences for these hard, everyday aspects of life. Ruttmann's viewers thus become sports consumers, as the German filmmaker presents athletic competition in an appealing, visually compelling manner that suggests that the modern landscape of fast action could be harnessed through organized sports.⁴¹ In contrast to the avant-garde city symphonies produced in the Soviet Union, *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* presents organized athletics as a respite of sorts from the cruel, virtually dystopian essence of modern urban life. And instead of athletic divers, a favorite sports motif for Vertov and Kaufman, Ruttmann shows a suicidal woman leaping off a bridge into water below in one of the most memorable, albeit controversial scenes from *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*.

Unlike Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, Soviet city symphonies presented sports as augmenting the social ideals on the ascendancy—or at least envisioned—in the Soviet Union. The 1927 city symphony *Moscow (Moskva)*, a film made by Kaufman and his fellow Kinok Ilya Kopalin just prior to the

release of *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City*, underlines not only the prominent role sports would play in the passing of a summer day in the Soviet capital but also the relevance of such activity to the ambitious goals of the socialist state. In a middle section of the film devoted to “Moscow Relaxing” (*Moskva na otdykh*), Kaufman and Kopalin include relatively lengthy footage (approximately five minutes) devoted to athletic activities and Soviet *fizkul'tura*. Coming immediately after footage of the Moscow Zoo (with the intertitle “Zoopark”), the sports in *Moscow* offer Muscovites a chance to escape from the metaphorical cage of their daily jobs and to gain a sense of freedom by going outside the city (“Beyond the city” [*Za gorod*], as several intertitles read) to march in a *fizkul'tura* parade, ride bikes, spend the day at an amusement park, or engage in other leisure-time activities. Incorporating geographical specificity into their city symphony, Kaufman and Kopalin delineate the locations—the Moscow suburbs, the Moscow River, the city’s sports stadiums—where athletic events transpire and crowds congregate to either participate in or watch the action. This specificity of place lends the ensuing sports scenes a factual authenticity that reinforces the way both nonfiction cinema and sports helped define everyday Soviet life in the 1920s.

After brief scenes of marching and several lengthy traveling shots of Soviet citizens cycling through city parks, Kaufman and Kopalin move to the hippodrome, where they juxtapose a brief shot of a horse sculpture (static art of the past) with cinematic imagery of horse racing (dynamic art of the present): an establishing shot of the stands, an aerial shot of the track, and then several slow motion tracking shots of a racehorse pulling a rider and carriage down a race-track (the tracking camera keeps pace with the quickly trotting horse). Such shots provide an exciting, unfamiliar look at the competitive action. And after several more shots of the Moscow hippodrome, Kaufman and Kopalin shift to Moscow’s Sokolniki Park, where the fun found on a carousel and large amusement swing is likewise presented in a fresh, new way, as the camera travels round and round on the carousel with the background a blur prior to the filmmakers momentarily freezing their image of a girl at the top of her arc on the swing.

Following the amusement park carousel and swing, Kaufman and Kopalin cut to several shots of target practice taken by Soviet citizens at a rifle range (a sporting activity that through its reliance on sight reinforces the visual links between sports and cinema), before switching to a lengthy water sports sequence, which first shows citizens marching along a Moscow River pier to compete at swimming, diving, and rowing. Kaufman includes here several of the very same diving shots—and accompanying reverse footage—that he shot for Vertov’s *Kino-Eye*, but he and Kopalin add new footage of other divers who, along

with the rowers and swimmers soon to be shown, contribute to the film's emphasis on the Soviet urban populace's new active relationship to the water (an appreciation for aquatic sports evoked a year later in the Soviet comedy *The Doll with Millions*). And after these sports scenes on the Moscow River come shots of a seaplane taking off from the water followed by shots taken from this airplane as it rises high above the water and glides past the riverside landscape (Kaufman would repeatedly return to aviation throughout his relatively short career as a filmmaker).⁴² Along with the earlier intertitles specifying the areas of Moscow where the athletic events transpire, the aerial footage provides viewers with a broad geographical sense of Moscow's modern landscape while also establishing unfamiliar perspectives on the water. Remarking on *Moscow* at the time, Lev Kuleshov praised the defamiliarization underlying the film's urban footage: "The shots taken from above and below achieve amazing effects, and give us a new sense of landscape material. It is especially valuable that the new points of view that Kaufman uses are not used in order to show his originality, from a desire to show everything in an unusual way, but really are the best and clearest way to show contemporary Moscow."⁴³ Kaufman and Kopalin succeed in establishing a modern, factual perspective on contemporary life that draws extensively upon the athleticism—and formalism—of the era, whether through reverse footage of divers, shots of rowers on the water, or footage taken from a seaplane. As Kuleshov suggests, Kaufman and Kopalin may present a highly original approach to the Moscow landscape, yet just as important is that through film they had discovered an efficient means to probe and celebrate the urban, athletic lifestyle on the rise in the new Soviet state.

To conclude their celebration of modern athletics, Kaufman and Kopalin move from the water to footage of several Moscow sports stadiums (*Na sportivnykh stadionakh*), where *fizkul'tura* parades and collective exercising take place. Low-angle shots of the legs belonging to young people marching in a parade provide a dynamic new perspective on the *fizkul'tura*, while a long shot of a field where rows of young Soviet athletes practice calisthenics in unison points to the unified, egalitarian spirit of Kaufman and Kopalin's film. Somewhat later in the film, in fact, young Soviet citizens will be shown practicing gymnastics at a workers' club, a sequence that intersperses athletics with shots of a reading room and of a workers' orchestra performing, thus establishing a sharp ideological contrast to preceding scenes of bourgeois Muscovites enjoying the city nightlife via abundant alcohol and dancing. The message is obvious and unabashedly propagandistic, for sports—and cinema—contribute to a new society and a new order that favors strength and health over the dissolute diversions of the capitalist past.⁴⁴ It is not surprising that *Moscow* concludes with low-angle shots of the hyperboloid structure of Moscow's Shukhov Radio Tower

(*Radio-stantsiia Bol'shoi Komintern*, states the intertitle), a structure so symbolic of the lofty Soviet ideals of the 1920s.⁴⁵

Sports subsequently bolstered the harmonious vision of urban life found in Vertov's 1929 masterpiece, *The Man with the Movie Camera*. Presenting the passing of a day in a fusion of three Soviet cities—Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa—and a new well-organized Soviet society on the move, Vertov captured the collective ambitions of the early Soviet era in scenes of industrialization, transportation, workers' clubs, cinema itself, and, it follows, sports. Once the workday has ended in this sixty-eight-minute-long film, Vertov focuses on the various recreational activities of Soviet citizens and, in particular, the way they congregate to participate in and observe sports, which provide the filmmaker with a very effective means to highlight both the human body and Soviet contemporaneity's progression toward what might be seen as physical and societal harmony. Whereas other parts of the film show a Soviet populace happy at work, the extensive sports section, which comes in the fifth reel of the film and lasts just over ten minutes (almost a sixth of the film!), displays a Soviet populace happily at play and enthusiastically engaged in the modern phenomenon of organized athletics.

Vertov's lengthy sports section begins roughly two-thirds of the way into *The Man with the Movie Camera*. After briefly observing sunbathing bodies on an Odessa beach, Vertov moves on to athletic bodies in action and more exemplary of the dynamic, new Soviet state. Materializing through a dissolve, a group of citizens practices their swimming strokes on a wide, empty pier that resembles a movie screen (emulating their instructor, they move their arms as they would in water). Creating a web of associations between athletics, filmmaking, and magic, Vertov cuts to a street-side magic show, where an Asian magician takes form beside his magic kit (again thanks to a dissolve, one of the many cinematic magic tricks up Vertov's own sleeve), followed by a very brief shot of two swimmers appearing in water, trick shots of a circus carousel tent, and then a quick display of stop-motion cinematography (the illusion of lifelike motion created through frame-by-frame editing), which allows for a magical stacking of sticks used for the old Russian game of *gorodki*, an antiquated sport suddenly made modern by the cinematic medium. Already implicit in this stop-motion trickery and the multiple dissolves is the playful, active participation of the camera—and the athletic cameraman (Kaufman)—in the on-screen action, which will continue apace in the sport scenes that follow.

Despite all the trickery, Vertov presents Soviet sports in a relatively matter-of-fact manner. After the brief scene of *gorodki*, Vertov cuts to shots of a large wall newspaper in preparation. Titled "Filmmaker" ("Filmar" in Ukrainian since the paper is evidently on display at the Odessa Film Studio), it also shows

a young man posting leaflets on current issues meriting the attention of Soviet filmmakers. In the middle of this wall poster is an illustration of a rifle-bearing man and two women standing before a target, which Vertov cuts to in a brief close-up before returning to the wall newspaper. As if prompted to zero in on modern athletics, Vertov shows a section of the wall newspaper stating: “Cult-Questionnaire: The 20th century. A century of records. Records in the air. Records on the ground. Records wherever possible. A certain land department set the record for the writing of questionnaires.” New achievements (i.e., records), as this closeup shot indicates, were becoming a key facet of modern Soviet life with obvious athletic relevance, yet in what ensues Vertov opts to show a side of Soviet athletics less concerned with records and such. Following the subsequent arrangement of other topics on the wall newspaper, Vertov cuts to a figure putting a note into a suggestion (i.e., “correspondence”) box for the wall newspaper, followed by another look at the newspaper (presumably what was proposed via the suggestion box) that is slightly obscured by cropping but features a photograph of two soccer players and a statement that begins: “About sports. Sports are a good thing. So our youth . . .” Rather than championing elite, record-setting athletes, Vertov will explore sports that a large swath of the Soviet populace can enjoy and benefit from, whether through active participation or spectatorship.

The thematic and ideological scope of Vertov’s excursion to the athletic playing fields deserves our further attention. Although the famous German film critic and Vertov contemporary Siegfried Kracauer quipped that the sports scenes in *The Man with the Movie Camera* “could be shortened” (and accused Vertov of “pedagogical over-zealousness”), the athletic play in the film illustrates the importance of modern sports for Vertov and his cameraman brother—and for Soviet society at large.⁴⁶ Featuring both male and female athletes, Vertov’s sports scenes effectively underscore the broad popularity of modern athletics at the time. Vertov, for one thing, begins his sports section with a woman, not a man, thus accentuating the appeal of sports to both genders (and offering some indication that the new Soviet “Man” could be of either sex). Moreover, Vertov shows that the Soviets in the 1920s did not limit themselves to just sports parades, which are tellingly absent in the film, or a narrow range of sports. The film’s initial sports sequence (approximately three minutes long) includes not only track and field (discus, high jumping, pole vaulting, hammer throw, hurdling, and javelin) but also volleyball, harness racing, horse racing, diving, and swimming, while the final sports sequence (approximately five minutes long) includes gymnastics, weightlifting, shot put, stationary cycling, javelin, basketball, soccer, long jump, and motorcycle racing, in which the cameraman himself participates. And in between these two lengthy sports scenes comes an interlude

at the beach, where Soviet citizens, including the cameraman, bathe while robust working-class women smear mud on their naked bodies. This is followed by some diving, indoor ballet practice, a magic show for children, and weight-loss exercises that reveal Soviet citizens striving toward the streamlined athletic body found in the earlier and later sports sections.

For Vertov, modern athletics required attentive, collective involvement from both sports spectators and film spectators. Interspersed amid the sports events of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, especially the initial track and field and equestrian scenes, are shots of spectators actively engaging with the athletic events. In the first sports sequence, Vertov fluctuates with rhythmic regularity between shots of athletes and shots of absorbed spectators, who appear to revel in the physical acts performed before them. Whether these spectators actually attend the sports events in question remains to be seen, given the spatial and temporal flexibility afforded by Kaufman's roving camera, the disparate footage, and the creative use of montage by Vertov's editor (and wife) Elizaveta Svilova, yet the spectators—some of them men, some of them women, some of them working class, some of them visibly well-to-do—all appear to delight in the athleticism on display and in the sheer beauty of not only the athletics but also the human body. Here Vertov unites the Soviet populace through an appreciation of everyday athleticism as sports allow him to break down class distinctions by involving everyone in the simple visceral thrills of athletic action. Kracauer remarks on a "primitive existential passion" pulsating through Vertov's sports spectators; the unified, admiring spirit of the Soviet crowd is indeed palpable.⁴⁷ A certain eroticism, so evident in other parts of *The Man with the Movie Camera* (and in the beach scenes and in the scenes with women exercising on the weight-loss devices), also figures in this fluctuation between the spectators and the fit, attractive athletes, but Vertov's main emphasis is on a collective engagement with modern sports, whether through spectatorship or participation.

Straddling the line between enthusiastic observation and engaged participation, the filmmaker and his ever-active cameraman together enhance the athletic spectacle. Rather than merely recording the athletic action, Vertov and Kaufman reveal the ability of the camera to probe the era's sports and, ultimately, to amplify the ambitious, collective thrust of Soviet athletics. In the initial track and field footage, for instance, Vertov's first shot (fig. 13)—a slow-motion image of a woman rotating about before tossing a discus—contrasts sharply with the rapid pace of images that prevails throughout so much of the film, yet this female athlete's slow, circular action reveals a streamlined physical movement that, although not record-breaking in any sense, rivals the fluidity and efficiency of the machines featured elsewhere in *The Man with the Movie*



Figure 13. Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*, 1929.



Figure 14. Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*.



Figure 15. Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*.

Camera. Slow-motion shots of all the track and field athletes and their events follow (and all the while spectators are shown at a normal speed, as if to underscore the human eye's inferiority to the camera eye). Vertov will go so far as to freeze certain images for several brief moments, for instance when three hurdlers leap over barriers on the track, while images of galloping horses likewise come to a temporary standstill. Instead of emphasizing the athletic contest (the hurdlers and horses sometimes move from left to right and sometimes right to left, whereby the race is rendered irrelevant), Vertov highlights the beauty and physical harmony of the athletes—and animals—made evident by the camera. So often, in fact, the camera defamiliarizes the athletic action, much as it did in *Stride, Soviet!* and *Moscow*, allowing the film spectator to take in these new, unfamiliar images of physical play and exertion. Split-screen shots teasingly sever the head of a weightlifter and rearrange his body as he lifts up a barbell on a pier, while in a later sequence Vertov disorients the viewer with reverse footage of a long-jumping athlete. Or consider the handheld camera shots of women playing basketball (fig. 14) and men playing soccer: a dizzying stream of images prevails, even as slow-motion shots of the ball moving through the air, a player leaping up to head the ball, or a goalkeeper catching the ball (fig. 15) provide sporadic respite from the intense visual action. In the soccer footage, a distinct rhythm materializes between the quick shots and the movement within the shots, as if the athletes and camera are participating in some

elaborate artistic performance—a dance, Vlada Petrić has argued—that only the camera can properly capture.⁴⁸ Overtly aestheticizing athletics, Vertov blurs the distinction between sports spectator and filmgoer in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, as the cinematic medium pushes the athletic action toward an artistic—and societal—ideal.

In insightful discussion of what certain scholars have seen as Vertov's affinity with Walt Whitman, Ben Singer has noted the idealistic vision of human society at the heart of both artists' work, in particular Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* and Whitman's 1855 poem "Song of Myself."⁴⁹ For just as the nineteenth-century American poet evoked a "synthesis" of democratic society in "Song of Myself" that, according to Singer, hinged on "a panoply of instances of work and play," the early Soviet filmmaker "constructs an integral utopian community of universal inter-relationship among citizens."⁵⁰ In other words, Vertov echoes Whitman when he shows Soviet citizens interacting cohesively while both at work and at play. Although Singer does not directly refer to the sports scenes in *The Man with the Movie Camera*, it is clear that modern athletics and their implicit suggestion of physical and social harmony unite Vertov and the American poet, especially when taking into consideration the Whitman poem "I sing the body electric," which appeared in a later edition of *Leaves of Grass* and featured an energetic paean—in free verse—to athleticism ("The swimmer naked in the swimming-bath, seen as he swims through the transparent green-shine, or lies with his face up and rolls silently to and fro in the heave of the water").⁵¹ Betraying a modern appreciation of the human body and its intimation of perfection ("The natural, perfect, varied attitudes, the bent head, the curv'd neck and the counting"), Whitman effectively tapped into the same idealistic conception of a physically active, cohesive society that compelled Vertov to devote such a lengthy segment of his film to modern athletics. Like Whitman, Vertov's cameraman—and the filmmaker himself—will "swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen, and pause, listen, count."⁵² Inspired in part by Whitman's verse, Vertov and his brother/cameraman Kaufman applaud the unifying impulse of Soviet athletics.

Amid all the athletic action of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, the cameraman himself—Kaufman—ultimately emerges as the preeminent, ever-versatile artist-athlete in the film. Sporadically featured on screen or else out of view behind the camera but still ever-present, he embodies a creative synthesis of involved spectator, active participant, and athletic moviemaker. Included in the film's sports sequences are footage of Kaufman washing his fit, athletic body on the beach (fig. 16) and, later, shots of him racing around a track on a motorcycle with his camera in tow, while other sports action implicitly captured by



Figure 16. Dziga Vertov, *The Man with the Movie Camera*.

Kaufman has the off-screen cameraman jostling with Soviet women hard at play on the basketball court and then sprinting up a field alongside soccer players as he films the action. Hence, Kaufman proves himself to be a cinematic manifestation of the Russian-Soviet artistic “New Man,” for he utilizes his physical prowess and creative eye in innovative, revolutionary ways that both contribute to and foster a new healthy, athletic society. Building upon the pre-1917 heroic muscleman persona that his avant-garde forerunners had assumed, Kaufman both embodies and intensifies the aesthetic commitment of early Soviet artists to the athletic aspirations of Soviet society.

Given the very active involvement of Kaufman in the sports scenes of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, it comes as little surprise that Vertov’s cameraman brother would expand on the motif of sports in his own 1929 silent film, *In Spring* (*Vesnoi*). A sixty-one-minute avant-garde “film poem” (as early critics called it) that has never received its proper due, Kaufman’s *In Spring* celebrates the arrival of spring for a blossoming Soviet society on the move and increasingly active. Quite tellingly, the film culminates in a lengthy sports sequence devoted to soccer, Soviet *fizkul’tura*, cycling, and a handful of other sports.⁵³ As Kaufman

would accentuate at the resounding conclusion of *In Spring*, organized sports offered broad mass appeal, healthy communality, and a celebratory upsurge of athletic fervor.

Filmed in and around Kiev, *In Spring* presents a lyrical, often revelatory look at life in the Soviet Union. Kaufman, who served as both director and cameraman of his film, shot *In Spring* in the same year that *The Man with the Movie Camera* was released and soon after a personal (and aesthetic) falling-out with his brother.⁵⁴ Utilizing the same sort of everyday imagery and propagandistic elements as Vertov's *The Man with the Movie Camera* but in a more straightforward, less experimental way, Kaufman begins his film with shots of snow and ice in the waning winter and of a Soviet populace itching to move outdoors.⁵⁵ Other Soviet films of the era (e.g., Vsevolod Pudovkin's *Mother* [*Mat'*, 1926]) had used the image of melting spring snow and the breaking up of ice on rivers as a metaphor for revolutionary change, with the flow of springtime water symbolizing the elemental force of social progress; at the start of *In Spring* Kaufman exploits this metaphorical passage of seasons to full effect. The rushing water and rapid ice flow signal that Revolution has brought profound change to a resurgent society eager to embrace the discipline, joy, and collective harmony integral to early Soviet athletics. Elements of the prerevolutionary, antiquated past remain, but the power and momentum of contemporary life prove inexorable within Kaufman's revolutionary vision of the new era. And sports will be essential to this vision.

From the outset, a lyrical playfulness permeates *In Spring*, as Kaufman betrays his own childlike delight with games and such throughout the film. After the opening shots of winter and then shots of the early spring mud and floods receding into the background, Kaufman turns his attention to children playing in a courtyard. A boy with a long stick hits a short stick in a playful activity somewhat resembling the old Russian game of *gorodki*, and a high-angle shot captures children engaged in a game resembling hopscotch on asphalt, followed by multiple shots of several boys and girls playing croquet and of men kicking a ball about in a circle. Throughout these lighthearted scenes of early spring games, Kaufman inserts shots of adolescent spectators (and a puppy that chases after the ball) having a good time, thus underscoring the pleasure, be it physical or visual, derived from both playing and watching these games, much as he will do at the end of the film within his long sports sequence. Yet whereas in *The Man with the Movie Camera* Vertov accentuates the ability of cinema to probe athletics and the athletic body far beyond what the human eye can do, Kaufman emphasizes both the communal and competitive aspects of sports and their appeal to the spectator, a communality that he likewise envisions for cinema. Humans, Kaufman shows, congregate around competitive games

and their appealing back and forth, just as they tacitly do when attending the cinema.

For all the playful images found throughout *In Spring*, Kaufman establishes athletic competition as a metonymic model for the healthy, idealistic striving of Soviet society. Whereas Vertov rendered sports in *The Man with the Movie Camera* as an egalitarian form of leisure reflective of the 1920s hygienist movement, Kaufman stresses the competitive thrust of the era, be it of an industrial or athletic sort. Midway through *In Spring*, for instance, Kaufman focuses in on a newspaper with the banner title “The Bulletin of the Socialist Competition,” and below the top heading appears the phrase “Let’s raise the banner of socialist competition even higher” (as was true of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, no intertitles are used in the film, but within shots certain phrases on posters and newspapers can be read). Hence, a competitive, quasi-athletic ethos permeates Kaufman’s industrial vision of rebirth and renewal. What ensues are shots of Soviet workers, both men and women, attempting to outdo one another through their labor, clearly a reflection of Stalin’s first “Five Year Plan” but also of the era’s competitive athletic fervor. The industrial activities featured midway through *In Spring* thus anticipate the athletic contests that will come at the end of the film. Likewise, the idealized industrial world under construction—“We will build the palace of the worker,” states a large sign above a construction site—foreshadows with its utopian aspiration the vast Soviet sports stadiums to come.

When organized sports arrive in Kaufman’s *In Spring*, they cap the blossoming of the season through a communal event involving large crowds gathered for athletic excitement and gratification. Contrasting this event with the country’s religious past upended by the 1917 Revolution, Kaufman presages the sports with a lengthy sequence devoted to Easter celebrations. Here he focuses on rituals associated with the religious holiday (eggs, cake, etc.), along with a lackluster orthodox funeral service in a cemetery, where the camera, shown concealed behind cemetery bushes, captures a boy yawning as a priest swings his censer (thurible). Subsequent stop-motion animation even shows a spinning loaf of kulich (Easter bread with the letters Kh. and V.—for “Christ has risen” [*Khristos voskres*]—written in frosting on it). And excessive drinking accompanies the religious festivities. The message—that religion is the opiate of the masses—is obvious (Vertov had made a similar, albeit less direct point in *The Man with the Movie Camera* and would again in his *Enthusiasm* [*Entuziazm*, 1931]). Kaufman then moves on to sports, which as an exciting, healthy form of social communion supplants the stale religious pomp and lazy inebriation.

Kaufman’s main sports sequence, an unabashed celebration of Soviet athletics, begins with a sudden cut to a parade of cyclists, who march forward

holding their bicycles, followed by a shot of young female *fizkul'turniki* likewise marching along together. Next, a split-screen shot allows for a camera to pan across an urban landscape in the upper half of the frame while in the lower half of the frame a stadium teems with people, providing a transition to several minutes of a soccer match that transpires in just such a stadium before a large crowd. Kaufman's striking long shots of the players taken from the stands enhance the drama of the stadium match (fig. 17), and shots of the ball coming straight at the camera add further dramatic intensity. Amid the footage of soccer players in action, Kaufman edits in numerous shots of the enthusiastic crowd, and even after proceeding on to other sports, he returns to these same spectator shots (he repeatedly shows two excited young women, whom he freezes at one point). So whereas Vertov carefully weaves footage of onlookers into the sports sequence of *The Man with the Movie Camera* to accentuate issues of vision and semi-erotic admiration for the human body, Kaufman uses his shots of spectators to convey the tangible excitement of the crowd and their collective delight in the competition transpiring on the field.

Kaufman's subsequent shots of sports show *fizkul'tura* exercises done en masse, cycling races, volleyball, basketball, motorcycle racing, diving (as in *Kino-Eye* and *Moscow*, a diver suddenly floats up and out of the water), gymnastics, pole vault, and a series of "trick" performances. Cyclists move in circles on their bikes, a soccer player creatively dribbles the ball (which Kaufman juxtaposes with shots of a haggard, drunken man stumbling about in a city square and fighting with others), and an athlete rides backward on a bicycle while playing the accordion to provide music for some intoxicated peasant dancers. The juxtaposition of such contrasting behavior has obvious ideological import, as do the earlier shots of religious activities and drinking. Ultimately, *In Spring* presents an inspired vision of modern athletics and the Soviet state, as the film communicates Kaufman's belief that cinema could serve both of these modern institutions, helping to unite the Soviet populace in salutary, animating communal engagement.

In the lengthy climactic sports section of *In Spring*, Kaufman employs a cinematic style intended, above all, to draw his audience into the athletic competition. Whether brief footage of the soccer ball flying toward the camera, action shots of the goalkeeper diving for the ball (fig. 18), or bird's-eye views of basketball players shot from directly above the hoop, Kaufman's filmmaking viscerally engages viewers in the athletic activity. Discussing his views on montage and "film language" in the 1931 article "Film Analysis" ("Kinoanaliz"), Kaufman pointed to the soccer footage of *In Spring* as an instance of what made his filmmaking "comprehensible to a broad audience."⁵⁶ According to Kaufman, it was the *In Spring* soccer match that exemplified his practice of expanding on a "primary analysis" of "raw" film footage through careful editing to



Figure 17. Mikhail Kaufman, *In Spring*, 1929.



Figure 18. Mikhail Kaufman, *In Spring*.

produce a “secondary analysis” and, finally, a “dynamic” synthesis of engaging, comprehensible material.⁵⁷ Kaufman describes breaking down the footage of the goalkeeper into his defensive stance, his subsequent lunge for the ball and his grabbing of this ball. Likewise, Kaufman expounds on his process of dissecting footage of an outfield player running to the ball, kicking it and then running along “by inertia,” all of which is woven together through montage.⁵⁸ Kaufman will go even further with his discussion of footage of the large crowd attending the soccer match, for, as he explains, secondary analysis reveals brief snippets of footage that with their highly saturated content allow him as filmmaker to go well beyond the primary analysis: “In each of the sequences in this group we find a series of elements that are different in their functional role. Some of them relate to a response to a goal being scored, others react to an unsuccessful shot, a third group express unease, a fourth tense expectation, and so on.”⁵⁹ Kaufman is able to probe these reactions to the soccer match and combine them with the on-field soccer footage to achieve a powerful synthesis of athletic action and audience reaction: “In the montage version of the football [soccer] match for the film *In Spring*, I continue the analysis of these scraps, and find the culminating frame, which characterizes this or that reaction to the maximum degree. By freezing this frame I get maximally dynamic stasis.”⁶⁰ Through his analytical montage, Kaufman could find and freeze a moment of heightened involvement in the athletic event, a moment that via the *sports* spectator presented all the intensity and drama of sports to the *film* spectator.

As Kaufman implied in “Film Analysis,” cinema could bolster an audience’s appreciation and understanding of modern athletics. Conversely, through a careful culling of athletic footage, Kaufman aimed to enhance the cinematic experience with the underlying dynamism and excitement of sports and via the inherent ability of athletic events to involve and engross the viewer. Given the link between sports spectator and film spectator at the end of *In Spring*, Kaufman’s initial juxtaposition of religion and athletics in the film hardly seems a mere didactic point, for the dramatic rituals of the church have been replaced by an idealized vision of urban Soviet society flourishing through the athletic spectacle and, implicitly, the film spectacle. A fitting end to Kaufman’s film and, more broadly, to 1920s silent Soviet cinema that probed the phenomenon of modern athletics, the sports section of *In Spring* offers up the Soviet sport spectator as a new model for the cinemagoer and the spectacle of sports as a new model for film. The engaging accessibility championed by Kaufman reflects in part, one might assume, the pressure Soviet filmmakers began facing from authorities in 1928 to make movies “intelligible to the millions,” but it nevertheless dovetailed with Kaufman’s passion for sports, his own athleticism, and his desire to grab the viewer through competition, athletic harmony, and a

comprehensible communal impulse.⁶¹ Such an exalted fusion of sports and avant-garde aesthetics would in fact soon prove to be one of the few ways that Soviets artists in a closely related medium—photography—could continue to experiment under Stalin in the 1930s, as the athletic ideals of the era had to contend with the precipitous rise of Socialist Realism.

5

Framing the Future

Sports in Early Soviet Photomontage and Photography

Through the fixation of facts that are socially oriented but not staged we propagandize and show the fight for socialist culture.

from “The Program of the October Association’s Photo-section”

(“Programma fotosektsii ob”edineniia ‘Oktiabr’,” 1930,

in **P. I. Novitskii**, *Izofront*, 149)

As I have argued, cinema and sports proved highly compatible at the start of the twentieth century, given that both entailed unprecedented motion while appealing to active, enthused audiences. The still photograph, however, would have even greater success than cinema when it came to depicting salient acts of athleticism. For whereas cinema conveyed the inherent kinetics of sports better than the photograph possibly could, still photography offered artists the ability to capture dramatic moments of athletic action and hold them fast.¹ Technological innovation—new lenses and the emergence of small, compact precision cameras—would make the vivid documentation of sports all the more possible. A soccer player leaping into the air, a boxer landing a triumphant blow or leaning down over a fallen opponent, a tennis player hitting a volley on the run—these have been just a few of the athletic moments made so memorable through the still photograph.

Amid the rising popularity of sports, Soviet photographers and photojournalists soon discovered the potential of still photography to seize and celebrate athletics, despite the challenges of doing it well. Indeed, by the beginning of the 1930s, sports had become a prevalent, powerful motif for the era's emerging artists and professionals. As a *Soviet Photo* (*Sovetskoe foto*) review of a 1929 exhibition at ODSK (Society of Friends of Soviet Cinema) in Moscow stated, "In general, sporting themes are the hardest for a photographer. Nevertheless, they are the themes zealously favored by members of the different factions here."² For early Soviet photographers, especially those exhibiting at ODSK, the very difficulty of capturing a moment of fast-moving action proved both stimulating and, to varying degrees, liberating. It required a new kind of skill, at once artistic and realistic. And it suited sports. The "fixation of fact," as members of the avant-garde group Lef and others labeled their central artistic objective, could capture through single images the vitality and "newness" of modern sports if not the inherent physical movement.³ Even in the mid-1930s, as the avant-garde emphasis on facts began to waver under pressure from a Stalinist state increasingly bent on regulating artistic depictions of everyday life, sports continued to offer Left artists a convenient, compelling means of maintaining a factual link to Soviet reality.

Irrespective of the mounting pressure imposed by the Soviet government, the question of how best to depict athletic action nevertheless loomed for early Soviet photographers. In the 1920s and 1930s, Soviet photo-collage, photo-montage, and then photography flourished as artistic platforms for the exploration of Soviet athletics. Through the photographic medium, avant-garde artists were able to sustain and even broaden their revolutionary aesthetic-athletic project. Magazine covers, posters, and photographs not only idealized sports but also prompted ordinary Soviet citizens to participate in the *fizkul'tura* movement and to engage with sports in an enlightened, ever-active manner.

Like the collaboration of cinema and sports, that of still photography and sports had its roots in the nineteenth century and the emerging field of physical education in Europe. Some mention, therefore, should be made of the famous experiments of French physiologist Etienne-Jules Marey, who in the 1870s created the photographic means ("chronophotographie," time photography) to document stages of a quick motion, be it that of a racing athlete or a galloping horse. Similar to the motion photography that Eadweard Muybridge and Thomas Eakins were producing at the same time in the United States, Marey's work aided in the probing of athletic, physiological movement—and was a precursor of cinema. In the early 1880s, Marey teamed up with French inventor (and gymnast) Georges Demeny to found the Station Physiologique in Paris,

where they used chronophotography to research the most efficient ways of running, jumping, and throwing, among other athletic actions.⁴ Although less artistic in appearance than Muybridge's motion photographs, Marey's chronophotography proved instrumental in fueling the interest in sports across Europe and in demonstrating to artists that the new mediums of photography and, somewhat later, cinema could span the divide between athletics and art.

The ability of the camera to communicate the joy, excitement, and beauty of sports, I might also add, was nowhere more apparent at that time than in the photographs of Jacques Henri Lartigue. As a young French amateur photographer—and athlete—Lartigue used high-speed photography to document his wide-eyed, youthful fascination with modern sports and the popularity these sports enjoyed among the French upper-middle-class populace in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although not widely appreciated until the 1960s, Lartigue's photographs show champions, relatives, and even himself enthusiastically engaged in a broad range of athletic games. These photographs feature tennis, cycling, golf, diving, track and field, skiing, skating, hockey, and even more lighthearted diversions like dodgeball and chair-jumping (as well as other modern, semi-athletic pursuits like flying airplanes and driving automobiles). With the wide outdoors as a backdrop, Lartigue playfully conveyed the appeal that sports had for many in France at the turn into the twentieth century. Discussing Lartigue's deft use of the camera and high-speed photography, Anne-Marie Garat notes, "At a time when sport was freeing the body, this fabulous apparatus for recording moving sights offered liberation from the constraints and artificiality of the long pose, restoring naturalness to images of life."⁵ Lartigue's images of athletes, whom he so often caught midway through a jump or dash in an instance of athletic grace, allow us to revel in the athletic moment and appreciate the sheer beauty of the human body and its liberated form of physicality.

Following the advances in scientific and amateur photography in Western Europe, Russian sports photography would evolve in close conjunction with the broad sports movement. Although prerevolutionary Russian sports photography consisted primarily of professional wrestler portraits and scenes of Tsar Nicholas II's family playing tennis or ice skating, post-1917 photography developed in ways that facilitated Soviet *fizkul'tura* and its idealistic thrust.⁶ The early Soviet avant-garde, particularly the so-called Productivist wing of the Constructivist movement, would use still photography to reproduce the dynamism of modern sports through a careful arrangement of multiple photographs and through single images taken from oblique angles and other unfamiliar perspectives to evoke both athletic beauty and the new era's athletic ideals. First with photomontage for magazine covers and posters and then with single

photographs in magazines and at exhibitions, Soviet avant-garde artists—Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Gustav Klutis, and others like Eleazar Langman, Leonid Smirnov, and Boris Ignatovich—documented the new nation's sports movement, framing a new Soviet life, a New Human, and a new Soviet world of fitness and athletic freedom. Aided by advances in photographic technology and the mobility and convenience that came with the introduction of the Leica camera in the late 1920s, Soviet artists found they could depict athletes and athletic events in innovative ways commensurate with the broad, lofty ambitions of the Soviet *fizkul'tura* movement. Sports photography would ultimately become one of the few means by which Left art could maintain its innovative, artistic spirit as Stalin narrowed the playing field, so to speak, for Soviet artists and Soviet sports. Sports photography provided a measure of artistic autonomy even amid a rising need for compromise, as avant-garde photography and Stalinist athletics coexisted in precarious fashion.

Early Soviet Photo-Collage and Photomontage

Through the photograph and photomontage, those Russian avant-garde artists who came of age in the prerevolutionary era adapted overnight to the everyday aesthetics of 1920s Soviet art and the new nation's aspirations. Although preserving elements of the abstraction so central to Left art prior to the Revolution, these artists used photo-collage and photomontage to serve both the utilitarianism of the era and its future-oriented ideology. An elaborate arrangement of preprocessed photographic works and photo-fragments, photomontage offered a useful format for engaging the Soviet public with not only Soviet art and Soviet sports but also the ambitious objectives of the new nation. The ideals of modern athletics, in particular, were to be well served by the conceptually dynamic arrangement of images in photomontage, which accommodated through this dynamism long-standing aesthetic aims of the avant-garde as well as the creative emphasis on both facts and ideological agitation that permeated early Soviet Left art. In his 1931 essay "The Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitation Art" ("Fotomontazh kak novyi vid agitatsionnogo iskusstva"), Gustav Klutis noted, "The photomontage is organized on the principle of maximum contrast between the unexpectedness of composition and differences in scale. The photo fixates a frozen, static MOMENT. The photomontage shows the dynamic of life, developing the thematic of a given subject."⁷ As Left artists sought to shift away from their earlier emphasis on abstraction to participate in the Soviet state's promotion of pressing social issues such as literacy, sobriety, and physical fitness, photomontage facilitated not only creative, "dynamic"

agitation on behalf of Soviet sports but also a new, active relationship between the Soviet public and art.

Complementing and to a certain extent presaging the early Soviet innovations in film editing, photomontage proved a useful tool in the hands of the Russian Constructivists, who by the early 1920s were shifting to so-called Productivism, which elevated the applied arts vis-à-vis everyday life and revolutionary design. And with Productivism came a move away from nonobjective art toward factual, photograph-based art and its direct link to Soviet contemporaneity. Bringing avant-garde aesthetics into the public sphere, Left artists made use of easily reproducible magazine covers and posters to showcase their wide-ranging photomontage work, which often featured Soviet sports. In a variety of avant-garde publications, most notably *Kino-Photo* (*Kino-fot*), *Lef*, and, somewhat later, *New Lef* (*Novyi Lef*), *30 Days* (*30 dnei*), *Soviet Cinema* (*Sovetskoe kino*), *Let's Produce* (*Daesh'*), and, in the 1930s during the height of Stalinism, *The USSR in Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*), photomontage by Klutsis, Rodchenko, and others thrust the Left's athletic orientation into the public eye and into everyday life. Created through photo-collage (an assemblage of pieces of photographs, often in combination with other graphic material) and photomontage (a composite of several photographs), these numerous magazine covers and posters produced by the early Soviet avant-garde provided a format through which early Soviet artists could go some ways toward visually replicating the energy and excitement of modern sports. Productivist photomontage, in particular, succeeded in approximating through conceptual and visual means the action so abundantly on display in the athletic arena. Evolving out of photo-collage, photomontage became one of Left artists' preferred genres, at least initially, whereby they took advantage of technological innovations to generate creative designs and composite photographs showcasing the Soviet athlete in action.

To explore the close ties between avant-garde photomontage, sports, and the revolutionary idealism that prevailed in Soviet Russia, we might first look at the creative work produced at roughly the same time in Germany, where photomontage initially emerged as an expedient artistic means for probing the modern phenomenon of sports. Throughout the 1920s, Germany teemed with both artistic and athletic activity (as Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* would attest); here modern art thrived, with a wide range of artists enjoying the short-lived freedom of post-World War I Weimar Germany, while at the same time public participation grew in competitive athletic activities, such as soccer and track and field, as well as through "healthy" diversions such as physical education, gymnastics, and a popular nudist movement. German sports spectatorship also rose quickly, due in particular to professional boxing's sudden popularity throughout the West. In Germany, culture and sports went virtually

hand in hand, as evidenced by a number of exhibitions devoted primarily to athletics—for instance, the 1926 International Exposition of Hygiene, Social Welfare, and Physical Exercises in Düsseldorf (a six-month exhibition known as GeSoLei that promoted physical health and hygiene and featured a sports-art exhibit, *Art and Sport, Art and Physical Exercise*) and the 1927 52nd Exhibition of the Berlin Secession, where a number of prominent artists exhibited their sports-oriented work.⁸ In conjunction with the widespread cultural emphasis on sports, artists associated with the Bauhaus school in Weimar (and then Dessau) and others influenced by the Dadaist movement experimented with photography and the emerging technique of photomontage to explore the modern spirit and social objectives of everyday athletics. Thus it was in Germany where the intersection of sports and art reached an apex of sorts, as Bauhaus artists like László Moholy-Nagy and Oskar Schlemmer thrust athletics to the forefront in their work, and other German painters, such as Willi Baumeister and the Dadaists George Grosz, John Heartfield, and Hannah Höch, all elevated sports as an explicit motif in their highly innovative pieces.⁹ Seizing upon an activity that integrated notions of dynamism, health, and lofty goals for humankind, these German artists revealed that the beauty and ubiquity of sports could indeed inspire bold artistic experimentation.

A famous 1927 photograph exists of two Bauhaus students leaping high up into the air and colliding during a game of soccer, with a modern Bauhaus building (in Dessau) in the background. Taken by T. Lux Feininger (son of the painter—and cycling enthusiast—Lyonel Feininger), this photograph hints at the multifaceted culture of athletics that arose at the Bauhaus in the 1920s. Early on, Walter Gropius, the school's founder, instituted weekly athletic activities for students, thus allowing modern sports to emerge as an essential component of the school's educational ideals, both in theory and in practice. For Gropius, the new world was to be one where artists actively engaged with physical reality, be it in the urban environment or on the soccer field. Adhering to this overtly physical, idealistic vision, the artist-educator Johannes Itten introduced gymnastics exercises into his Bauhaus courses in 1919, while Moholy-Nagy continued these gymnastic practices when he took over from Itten in 1923.¹⁰ Bridging art and life in a manner analogous to what was occurring at the time in Soviet Russia, the Bauhaus emphasized an “organic” education, in which human physicality was to be intricately connected to intellectual and artistic pursuits. In his 1928 treatise *The New Vision* (originally titled *Von Material zu Architektur*), Moholy-Nagy discussed the importance of “the whole man” for the future: “A specialized education becomes meaningful only if an integrated man is developed in terms of his biological functions, so that he will achieve a natural balance of intellectual and emotional power.”¹¹ Drawing upon pedagogical

principles that called for an explicit equilibrium between intellectual and biological (i.e., physical) pursuits, Bauhaus artists not only played soccer but also engaged with the athletic world through their art. And it was a lesson that Soviet artists such as Lissitzky and Rodchenko would soon take to heart.¹²

Envisioning an organic merging of man and machine that proved close in spirit to the aesthetic philosophy of the Russian Constructivists, Moholy-Nagy believed that sports and their implicit liberation of human energy would facilitate a healthy, invigorating synthesis of art and modern technology. Moholy-Nagy, who worked closely with Lissitzky and was well acquainted with Russian and Soviet avant-garde art thanks to a 1922 Berlin exhibit of Russian painting, drew significantly upon Russian Constructivism and, in particular, early efforts at photomontage by such Russian artists as Klutis and Rodchenko. Like his colleagues to the East, Moholy-Nagy tied his photomontages, which he labeled *Fotoplastiken*, to contemporary social themes and issues such as sports, militarism, and gender.¹³ According to Julie Saul, more than half of the photomontages produced by Moholy-Nagy at the Bauhaus included images of athletes (runners, swimmers, divers, boxers, etc.), as the dynamic interplay between static photographs in these works went a long way toward evoking the inherent dynamism of athletics and visual sensations associated with sports spectatorship.¹⁴

Although a critique of Weimar Germany's cult of sports can sporadically be found in Moholy-Nagy's *Fotoplastiken*, the modern athlete more often than not emerges in his Bauhaus work as a powerful, unencumbered representative of a new future and a new physical freedom. Under a photograph of hurdlers included in a later edition of *The New Vision*, Moholy-Nagy would state, "Instead of covering himself up, closing himself in, the man of today lets himself out. Everything strives for light and air, for free expansion."¹⁵ Playing off the German term for track and field, *Leichtathletik*, which literally means "light athletics" (just as the Russian term for track and field does), Moholy-Nagy saw lightness and physical freedom as essential qualities of this and other sports activity. A wide array of associations linked to sports and gender, for instance, prevails in Moholy-Nagy's *Dream of a Girls' Boarding School* (*Traum des Mädchenpensionats*, 1925), which features in the central background of this *Fotoplastik* a photograph of schoolgirls standing in a rigid "H" formation.¹⁶ Below these girls and in a slightly larger scale leap four hurdlers, and below these hurdlers are two female gymnasts frozen in a striking athletic pose. Wearing flowery leotards (seemingly from the circus), these two nimble gymnasts have grabbed their bent left legs with their right arms, thus showcasing an athletic flexibility at odds with the rigid "H" formation of the schoolgirls. Moholy-Nagy, however, may be offering a slight critique of these athletes' own training practices, for a

small photograph of a German shepherd can be found just above the female gymnasts, thus linking the training of athletes—who have to perform in synch with one another—to the training of dogs. On the other hand, the discipline of the dog may be a positive feature of the gymnasts' athleticism. Allowing for a range of interpretation that anticipated the photomontage work of the Dadaists Grosz and Höch, Moholy-Nagy's *Fotoplastik* and its dynamic arrangement of images portrays modern sports in a creative, playful manner. As with the majority of Moholy-Nagy's *Fotoplastiken*, significant blank space exists throughout this montage of sports photographs, allowing for the dissolution of perspective and a range of free associations and interpretations. Hence, the hermeneutic freedom of the *Fotoplastik* matches the physical freedom Moholy-Nagy derived from modern athletics.

Lissitzky, who spent considerable time in Germany after 1917, provides a useful bridge between German and early Soviet photomontage practices. Developing upon his work devoted to *Victory over the Sun*, which he began in Vitebsk and completed in Germany, Lissitzky began to probe the vigorous athletic activity on the rise in both Germany and Soviet Russia at the time, whereby he followed the lead of his friends at the Bauhaus by turning to photo-collage and photomontage to highlight modern sports. Consider, for instance, several photo-collage pieces produced by Lissitzky in 1921–22 to accompany Ilya Ehrenburg's *6 Tales with Easy Endings* (*6 povestei o legkikh kontsakh*, 1921–22), a Russian prose work for which Lissitzky contributed a cover design along with seven illustrations.¹⁷ In one of these illustrations (held by the State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, fig. 19), Lissitzky has taken a found photograph of a soccer player and inserted it into architectonic space quite reminiscent of his Proun work. As Matthew Drutt notes, in Lissitzky's photo-collage for *6 Tales*, "the human body weaves in and around geometric elements . . . making a two-dimensional environment feel three-dimensional."¹⁸ The soccer player appears to run through the architectonic design of Lissitzky's photo-collage maquette, as he lends the image—and Ehrenburg's book—a sense of dynamism and contemporaneity unique to modern sports. With his back turned, Lissitzky's large soccer player runs across a field over which the artist has placed a black rectangle. A black circle suggestive of a soccer ball among an array of floating nonobjective geometrical forms in the upper portion of the illustration adds to the provocative mix of abstraction and athletics. It is as if an athlete has suddenly materialized out of the nonobjectivity rendered some eight years earlier in Malevich's *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player*. Lissitzky's soccer player may find himself removed from his familiar surroundings, yet this athlete and the illustration as a whole offer a synthesis of Proun abstraction and physical reality. Reference to athletic action, above all, enables Lissitzky to establish a physical,

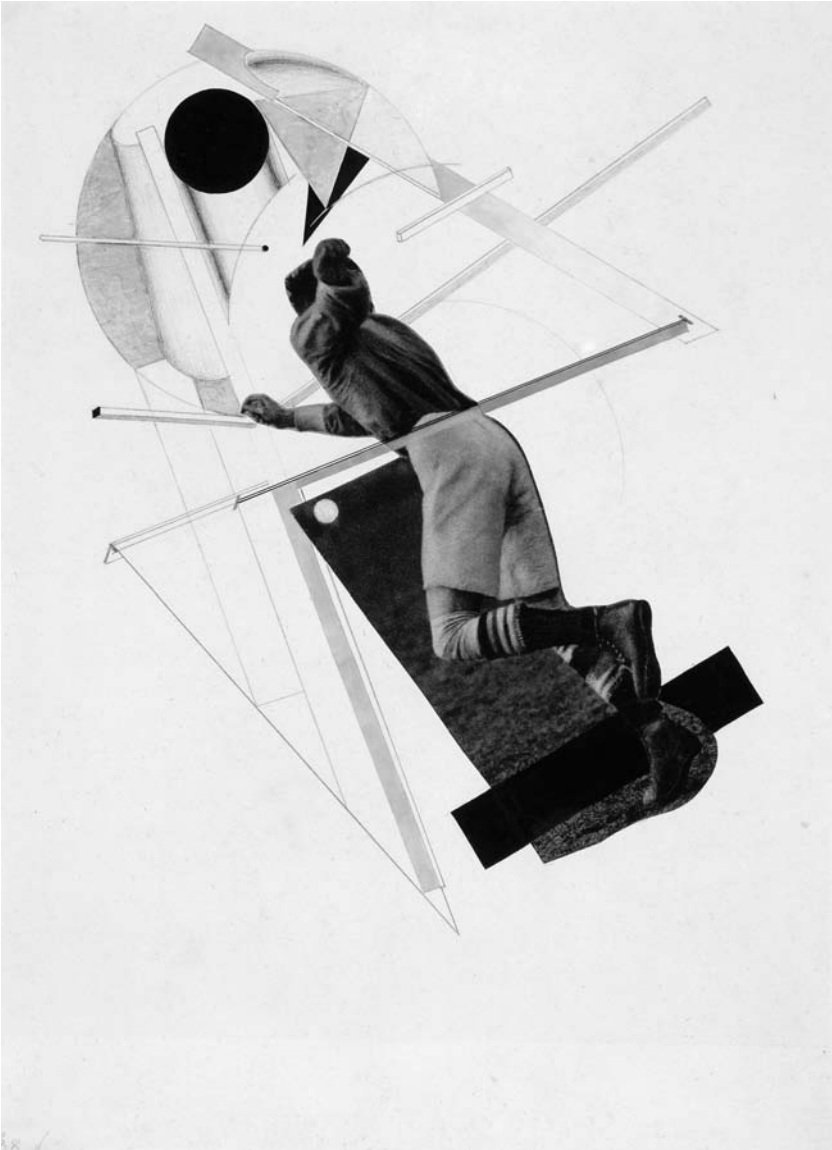


Figure 19. El Lissitzky, *Soccer Player*, illustration for Ilya Ehrenburg, *6 Tales with Easy Endings*, 1922. Graphite, gouache, india ink, varnish, collage on cardboard, 33 × 24.3 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

human presence within the revolutionary space of nonobjective avant-garde art. And in another *6 Tales* illustration titled *Black Sphere*, the photograph of what seems to be a diving figure, perhaps a gymnast, floats amid several geometrical forms and above the illustration's eponymous black sphere, likewise suggesting the athlete's physical materialization out of the nonobjective world.

Taking into consideration Lissitzky's *6 Tales* illustrations and the concurrent designs he produced for the restaging of *Victory over the Sun*, it seems clear that by the early 1920s, athletics afforded artists such as Lissitzky useful means for lending their nonobjective art social and ideological relevance without a complete abandonment of nonobjectivity. Declaring in the first issue of the trilingual Berlin journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* from 1922 that "*Objet* will take the part of constructive art whose task is not to adorn life but to organize it," coeditors Lissitzky and Ehrenburg celebrated the ability of their art to shape society.¹⁹ And toward the conclusion of this same 1922 essay ("The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End" ["Blokada Rossii konchaetsia"]), Lissitzky and Ehrenburg called for the following topics to be addressed by artists working toward such an organization of life: "industrial products, new inventions, the language of everyday speech and the language of newspapers, *the gestures of sport*, etc.—in short, everything that is suitable as material for the conscious creative artist of our times."²⁰ For Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, the rapid evolution of contemporary life, particularly in Soviet Russia, necessitated the integration of art, society, and material culture as a way of engaging the Soviet populace in the ongoing transformation of the Soviet state. And sports, given their growing popularity at the time, provided a pragmatic way to enlist the public in this socio-artistic endeavor.

What remains open to debate, however, is the extent to which Lissitzky's aesthetic vision for Soviet sports harbored explicit propagandistic tendencies. Although hardly apolitical, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg distanced themselves from the ideological factions of the day by stating in their opening essay for *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, "*Objet* stands apart from all political parties, since it is concerned with problems of art and not of politics."²¹ Despite such avowed removal from politics, at least as things stood in 1922, some have seen Lissitzky as all too willing to accommodate the ideals and expectations of the new Soviet state. Both K. Michael Hays and Mike O'Mahony, for instance, home in on the propagandistic underpinnings of Lissitzky's work, arguing that the soccer player illustration for *6 Tales*, among other photo-collage and photomontage pieces by the artist, incorporated iconography endorsed by the new Soviet state. Through its promotion of the "New Man," Hays and O'Mahony both suggest, Lissitzky's work proved overtly political and was, as Hays contends in his comparison of subsequent photomontage pieces by Lissitzky with those by

the German Dadaists, “affirmative and conciliatory, going too long a way toward reconfirming the dominant values of its audience with compensatory representations.”²² Still, the ideological significance of the *6 Tales* soccer player, although undoubtedly present in the work, ultimately serves less the state and more the artist’s desire to address, in the words of Benjamin Buchloh, “a crisis of audience relationships” through “new modes of simultaneous collective reception.”²³ Photomontage and photo-collage by Lissitzky, Buchloh suggests, could replicate the collective viewing experience of the mass audience, a spectatorial engagement so essential to modern athletics. And that Lissitzky turned his attention to “audience relationships”—often through the sports motif—did not necessarily mean that he was serving the new Communist state and producing propaganda.

The dynamic interplay between the athlete and the abstract Proun setting in *6 Tales* suggests that Lissitzky, drawing upon the immediacy and active involvement inherent in sports spectatorship, envisioned collective observation of athletic action as an effective model for Soviet audiences to engage with avant-garde art. Reminiscent of the sports-related *Fotoplastiken* by Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky’s photo-collage and photomontage work replicated the activity of both the new athlete and the modern sports spectator for his audience, which was to move—at least visually—through the Proun space. The spectator would participate, as Peter Nisbet underscores in his discussion of Lissitzky’s Prouns, with affirmation of “the utopian hopes for a thoroughgoing revolution in our understanding of material, space, and creative activity.”²⁴ Physical materiality, modern space, and action of an explicitly creative nature were to be accessed readily through artistic renderings of sports, via the athlete and the spectator’s perception of this athlete. Lissitzky’s emphasis, I would therefore contend, was on a revolutionary understanding of sports more in line with the Soviet avant-garde’s modernist principles than with any state-sponsored propagandistic agenda.

Continuing his revolutionary treatment of athletics and the large role they occupied in “new” Soviet life, Lissitzky would use photomontage in the mid-1920s as a means of amplifying the interplay between art, sports, and everyday culture. After his time in Germany and the publication of his photo-collage illustrations for *6 Tales with Easy Endings*, Lissitzky returned in 1925 to Moscow and to a Soviet society that had wholeheartedly embraced *fizkul’tura* along with an array of competitive sports.²⁵ In Moscow, Lissitzky produced a handful of notable sports-related images, most significantly photomontage and photo-collage depictions of hurdlers and soccer players intended for display as large fresco-like works in a proposed International Red Stadium (Mezhdunarodnyi Krasnyi stadion) in Moscow’s southwest Lenin Hills along the Moscow River. Conceived in 1920 by N. I. Podvoisky, a passionate supporter of physical culture

in the Soviet government, the International Red Stadium project arose as a modern, Soviet variation on the ancient Greek sports complex and was to involve many of Soviet Russia's leading architects and artists. According to Irina Kokkinaki, the International Red Stadium represented a vision of Soviet sports stadiums as "not only centers of workers' health through engagement with sports, but also hubs of culture and development of the masses' creative activity."²⁶ Initial plans for the project even had the era's leading avant-garde dramatist, Meyerhold, helping shape the theatrical presentation of athletics at the stadium, and a film was commissioned to help celebrate the stadium complex itself.²⁷ VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie), the leading Soviet state art and technical school at the time, oversaw much of the International Red Stadium project under the guidance of professor of architecture Nikolay Ladovsky. And it was through the architecture student group ASNOVA (Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektorov) at VKhUTEMAS, where Lissitzky taught in 1926, that Lissitzky himself became involved in the project.²⁸ In addition to designing a "yacht club" for this large sports complex, Lissitzky produced his photo-based images of hurdlers and soccer players that scholars surmise would have hung at a sports club for the complex conceived by Mikhail Korzhev, a student at VKhUTEMAS who envisioned there a space similar in its architectonic essence to that of Lissitzky's Proun designs.²⁹ Labeled "photo-frescos" (*fotofreski*), Lissitzky's *Record* (*Rekord*) and *Soccer Player* (*Futbolist*) underscored the artist's belief that sports could enhance the active relationship between audience and art, which would surely have been the case had the ambitious plans for the International Red Stadium and Korzhev's sports club gone ahead.³⁰

Lissitzky's photomontage *Record* (plate 7) features in the foreground a male competitor in a simple singlet and shorts leaping over a hurdle on a track with a quintessential modern scene—urban, nighttime New York City and the bright lights of Broadway—in the background.³¹ Using sandwich printing that combined various negatives in a darkroom to produce a single image, Lissitzky created the effect of the runner's body and legs merging with the city, uniting the modern cityscape with the modern man. In an in-depth discussion of Lissitzky's *Record* and related photomontage pieces by Lissitzky, Maria Gough suggests that this hurdler assumes an amphibian-like form, with his outstretched arms balancing him as he seemingly floats over the barrier.³² We could, however, also see the hurdler as akin to Lissitzky's own machine-like *New One* from his 1920–21 *Victory over the Sun* cycle: the hurdler moves from right to left rather than the *Victory* figurine's left to right, but a sense of fast, headlong movement links the two Lissitzky works whereby the 1926 athlete, record-breaking according to the title of the photomontage, indeed appears as the era's "New One."

In a closely related photo-collage piece titled *Runner in the City*, which included the same image of the athlete and cityscape, and in another version of *Record (Runner)* featuring two hurdlers (the one described above and another who likewise fades into the urban landscape as he glides over a barrier), Lissitzky sliced his prints into narrow vertical strips and then mounted these strips on paper at intervals of roughly one thirty-second of an inch, thus noticeably elongating the athletic action. He used a similar technique in *Soccer Player* with its dynamic scene of a man leaping above several others to head the ball. Here Lissitzky sliced his prints horizontally and then remounted them at intervals to lengthen—and intensify—the vertical jump of the athlete and the movement of those in the background. The lined effect produced by the slicing in these photo-collage pieces enhances the sense of quick athletic movement, as the individual frame-like segments appear to move past us. The sliced action also creates a flickering cinematic effect that, as Margarita Tupitsyn has argued, evokes the striped, moveable walls found in Lissitzky's *Abstract Cabinet (Kabinett der Abstrakten)* 1928 installation in Hannover, Germany, where the artist, perhaps not coincidentally, displayed a lithograph of his *New One* figurine.³³ Thus it is easy to see how athletics overlapped with Lissitzky's stated aim for projects like his *Abstract Cabinet*: "With every movement of the spectator in the room the impression of the walls changes—what was white becomes black and vice versa. Thus an optical dynamic is generated as a consequence of the human stride. This makes the spectator active."³⁴ As with his installation works, Lissitzky used sports imagery and the merging of athletic motion and spectatorship to make his audience all the more active and involved in his revolutionary project.

Lissitzky's photo-collaged athletes, however, remain open to interpretation. Gough, for instance, emphasizes the agitational element in *Record / Runner in the City*, arguing that through "his figure of production who overcomes all obstacles on the path to Soviet reconstruction," Lissitzky exhorts Soviet workers to achieve their own production *record*.³⁵ Yet such a reading detracts from the aesthetic-athletic underpinnings of the photofresco and distorts the comprehensive integration of athletics and art that Lissitzky strove for throughout the 1920s. Gough's suggestion that Lissitzky equates athletics with labor unnecessarily diminishes the role that Lissitzky and others, including Soviet officials, initially envisioned for athletics in Soviet society. After all, as a Party document from July 1925 stated, "Physical culture must be an inseparable part of overall political and cultural upbringing and education, and of public health."³⁶ Not just a call to work or a training regimen for workers and soldiers (as would increasingly become the case under Stalin in the 1930s), sports in the 1920s were to be a cultural activity valued for its ability to elevate the Soviet populace and

contribute to a harmonious citizenry. Even in 1930, when Lissitzky became more overtly compliant to new demands of the Soviet state, the artist would remark in an essay on sports stadium designs, “The integration of spiritual and physical training links sports facilities closely with the sports club. The new society wants a vigorous generation, whose vigor corresponds to the inherent optimism and joy of life.”³⁷ For Lissitzky, spiritual, artistic training went hand in hand with physical training, as he helped instill in the new generation of Soviet citizens an athletic, optimistic approach to modern life.

Lissitzky’s photomontage sports pieces, not surprisingly, corresponded with other Left work that used photomontage to probe the idealism of early Soviet athletics and the dynamism of the athletic spectacle. Over the course of the 1920s, for example, sports-oriented photomontage emerged as a central theme in the work of the Latvian-born Klutsis, whose unbridled enthusiasm for Soviet athletics underpinned the leading role he would play in Constructivist photomontage design.³⁸ In the 1922 photomontage *Sports* (*Sport*, fig. 20), Klutsis adapted a semi-abstract aesthetic to complement his overt agitational goals, superimposing a collage of disparate athletic images over Cyrillic letters spelling out the word “Sport.” The twirling gymnast in the upper-right corner, along with the bull’s-eye target in the center and another gymnast in the lower left, creates a kinetic impression of circular, rhythmic movement, thus enabling Klutsis to accentuate the physical, dynamic essence of his poster’s subject matter. Discussing Klutsis’s *Sports*, O’Mahony contends that the photomontage presents athletics “as an equivalent to labor,” whereby the “circular motions of the gymnasts unquestionably allude to the movement of wheels in a machine.”³⁹ Perhaps this is so, but the machine appears more aeronautic than industrial, as Klutsis’s gymnasts twirl through the air like an airplane’s propeller. Klutsis’s *Sports* photomontage captures the raw excitement of modern activities—such as aviation and sports—that complemented daily labor and proved engaging, healthy forms of leisure, not necessarily industrial work.

Modern athletics and the social implications of such engaging physical activity would increasingly figure in Klutsis’s work. He emphasized, for instance, both athletics and the ideals of the communist state in photomontage work produced with Sergey Sen’kin for the publication of Ilya Lin’s *Children and Lenin* (*Deti i Lenin*), a propagandistic tract that appeared in 1924 following Lenin’s death. In the final photomontage illustration of *Children and Lenin*, Klutsis and Sen’kin included photographs of young children engaged in athletic activity. One Soviet youth speed skates, a young girl performs calisthenics, and three small children run down a track, the lanes of which extend from a large image of Lenin’s face in the upper right corner to a smaller image of his visage in the bottom left. And below the photomontage is the following excerpt from Lin’s

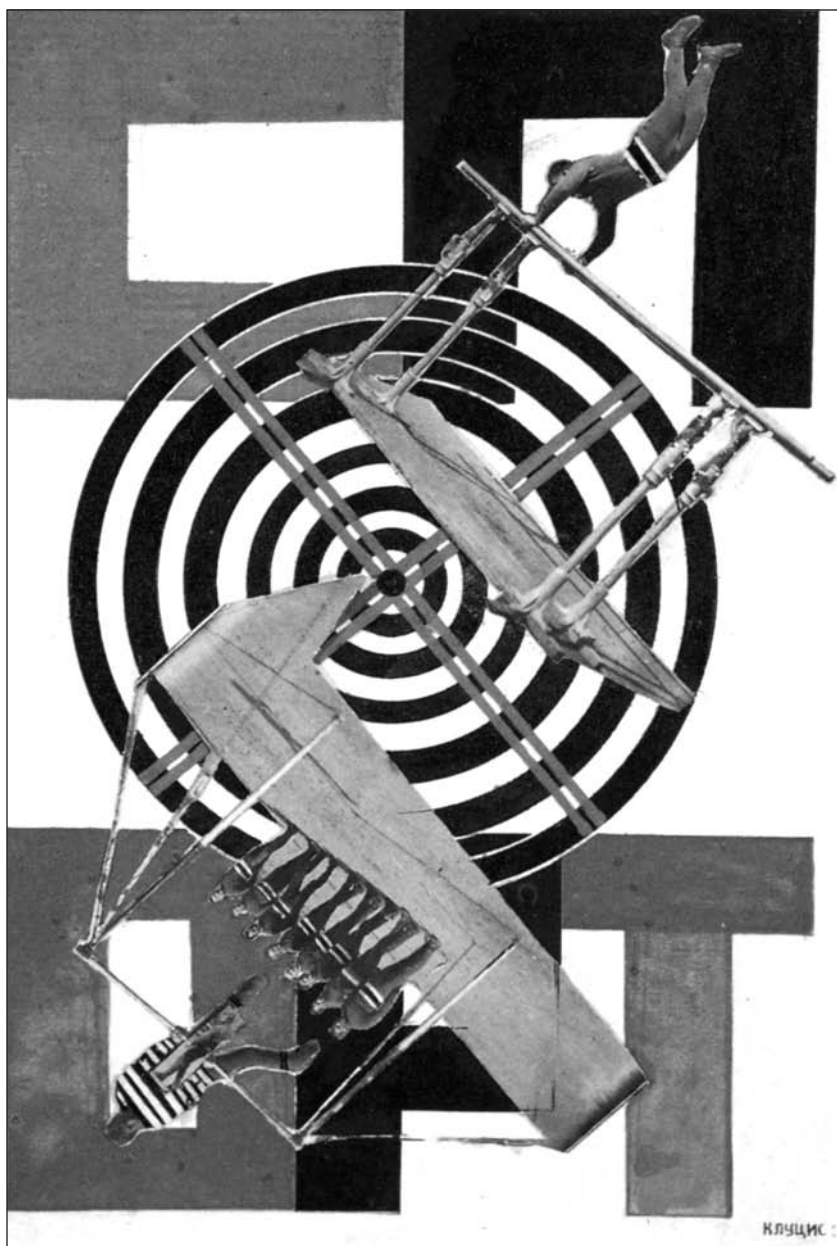


Figure 20. Gustav Klutsis, *Sports*, 1922, photomontage. © 2019 Estate of Gustav Klutsis / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

text: “Lively, strong, on the road of science and knowledge, running faster toward Il’ich’s principles, toward communism” (Bodrye, sil’nye, po puti nauki i znaniia, skorei, begom k zavetom Il’icha—k Kommunistam). Symbolizing the country’s Marxist ideals, the images of Lenin provide the point of destination—a finish line of sorts—for the young athletes and for those avant-garde artists who envisioned their art facilitating the country’s headlong rush toward communism and what appeared to be a radiant future.

Klutsis—who would argue in his 1931 piece on agitational photomontage that “new tasks,” such as the designing of “socialist cities, commune-houses, parks of culture and recreation . . . [and] mass spectacles,” demanded “new types and new forms of art”—brought to fruition his photomontage treatment of modern sports and the modern-day sports spectacle with a series of collage-like postcards promoting the 1928 Moscow First Workers’ Spartakiad athletic games.⁴⁰ Using photomontage to convey the energy and excitement of both athletic competition and large sporting events, Klutsis designed nine promotional postcards for these outdoor Spartakiad events, the Communist Party’s answer to the Olympic Games.⁴¹ One of these athletic designs would also appear on the cover of the magazine *Spartakiada RSI*.⁴² Based on photographs Klutsis took of a Red Square sports parade in 1924 and on photographs of athletes Klutsis found in archives, the Spartakiad photomontage series features an impressive array of sports (swimming, soccer, riflery, track and field, cycling, tennis, and equestrian events, etc.). Conveying the artist’s resolute belief that photomontage “simultaneously organizes a number of formal elements . . . to achieve maximum power of expression,” most of the postcards feature a large image of an athlete—often a woman—looming over smaller-scale images of other athletes, along with the roman letters RSI (Red Sports International), the word “Spartakiada” (in some postcards Klutsis uses Cyrillic lettering and in others roman lettering), and images of Lenin that accentuate the communist ideology and idealism underlying Soviet sports.⁴³ In his postcards Klutsis presents the large-scale athlete as an exemplar of the era’s “New Person,” a larger-than-life figure that, as O’Mahony sees it, borrows from the Russian icon (as did a good deal of Russian and Soviet avant-garde art throughout the 1910s and 1920s).⁴⁴ Veneration of both the athlete and Lenin is elicited by the photomontage in Klutsis’s Spartakiad postcards, be it the large-scale image of a soccer player kicking a ball over smaller players competing before a crowd of spectators or a female discus thrower winding up while a medium-scale image of Lenin figures prominently on the left and images of marching *fizkul’turniki* appear below. Athletes, one can assume, were expected to aspire to the semi-mythical ideals embodied by the new nation’s late founder (“Lenin,” Richard Stites sardonically notes in his discussion of early Soviet utopianism, “appears in

hagiography so often as a skier, hiker, swimmer, and chess player that one wonders how he found time to make a revolution").⁴⁵ As in the Klutsis and Sen'kin photomontage for Lin's *Children and Lenin*, the Spartakiad athletes race toward the new world initiated by Lenin.

The variety of Klutsis's Spartakiad postcards and their integration of formal elements and athletic events point to an important commonality of photomontage with the medium of cinema. As Klutsis remarked in 1931, "The only other art to which the photomontage can be compared is cinema, which combines a multitude of frames into an integrated work."⁴⁶ Several of the Spartakiad postcards suggest that Klutsis drew explicitly upon cinema, its engaging display of physical action, and its mass appeal. In one of the postcards devoted to track and field, for instance, Klutsis replicates the upward trajectory of a javelin through a vertical line of three javelin throwers who become progressively larger, thus creating the visual and virtually cinematic impression of a javelin being lofted up and out of the image (similar, in a way, to Vertov's *Kino-Pravda No. 10* javelin-throwing footage). Morphing into a visual approximation of their sport, these javelin throwers appear alongside images of a reviewing stand at Moscow's Red Square and Lenin's Mausoleum, as Klutsis emphasizes both the allure and the political resonance of the athletic spectacle. And in arguably the most dynamic of the Spartakiad photomontage series, a descending row of progressively diminishing female divers unfolds amid the image's more geometrical shapes, diagonal lettering, and carefully positioned rowers, water polo players, and sailboat, among other aquatic imagery (plate 8). The succession of divers, like the javelin throwers in the track and field postcard, evoke the cinema and its multitude of frames to create the impression of rapid, headlong movement. Linking sports spectatorship to movie-going and the era's film footage, Klutsis's Spartakiad postcards reinforce the notion that early Soviet photography and photomontage had appropriated cinema's physical dynamism while exploring the visual means by which both cinema and athletics appealed to the masses.

The very same could be said for the era's movie posters. Virtually no actual photographs adorned the ubiquitous advertisements produced for Soviet films in the 1920s, yet the movie poster format nevertheless offered an appealing mélange of photomontage techniques for the promotion of contemporary cinema and, more specifically, contemporary cinema featuring sports. Advertising cinematic work produced by the nation's burgeoning silent film industry as well as Western films made accessible to the Soviet populace through NEP policy at the time, these posters, much like Klutsis's sports posters produced at the time and Soviet cinema itself, provided a public platform for the era's athletics and for avant-garde aesthetics. Although sports constituted just one of the

many film motifs creatively explored through these early Soviet movie posters, artists with Constructivist roots—most notably Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg—deployed photomontage techniques to enhance the ties so many artists saw existing between athletics and film aesthetics.

The Stenberg brothers (or “2Stenberg2,” as they signed all their work) got their start, as did other Constructivists, in early Soviet theater, working in 1922 on the Meyerhold production of Fernand Crommelynck’s *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and then in Aleksandr Tairov’s Moscow Chamber Theater. But movie poster design is where they made their mark, drawing upon Soviet avant-garde photomontage practices, although, as already noted, their posters contained almost no actual photography. Because technology in the 1920s precluded the duplication of photographs or film stills for large movie posters, the Stenbergs used lithographic means to reproduce their illustrations. Much like Klutsis’s postcard-sized Spartakiad works, these illustrations combined visual elements to evoke the impression of motion so essential to cinema. Exploiting an attractive array of illustrative material, the Stenbergs sought to capture the spirit of a given film rather than specific narrative moments on screen. And whereas only a subset of the approximately three hundred movie posters that the Stenberg brothers produced address sports directly, the designs themselves nevertheless exude a compositional dynamism and inclination toward the ludic that complemented the era’s athleticism. “Evident in all of the Stenbergs’ posters,” Christopher Mount argues, “are a sense of playfulness and an openness to experimentation. Often humorous, sexy, and psychologically complex, they display a confident autonomy from the dictates of commissioning studios and what would soon become a totalitarian regime.”⁴⁷ Before strict censorship arrived in the 1930s, the Stenberg brothers drew viewers into cinema’s visual excitement and lively, sensual exposition of romance, suspense, and, in a number of conspicuous instances, the athletic potential of the human body.

An impressive assortment of sports feature on the Stenbergs’ posters. Boxing, such a prominent focus of motion pictures from the very beginning, found its way onto Stenberg posters for a number of Western films. For instance, their poster for *The Pounded Cutlet* (*Bitaiia kotleta*), a 1921 film short featuring the now-forgotten comic Snub Pollard and originally titled *At the Ringside*, shows two able-bodied boxers fighting, one of them flipped upside down and elevated as if hanging from the ceiling, thus illustrating the disorienting nature of a boxing punch and match.⁴⁸ Other sports featured in the Stenbergs’ movie posters include soccer (for the German picture *Eleven Devils* [*Odinnadtsat’ chertei*/*Die elf Teufel*, 1927]), baseball (for the American film *The Battling Orioles* [*Voinstvennye skvortsy*, 1924]), figure skating (*The White Stadium* [*Belyi stadion*/*Das weiße Stadion*,

1928]), and cycling (for the early Soviet comedy *Sportivnaia likhoradka* [*Sporting Fever*, 1927]). The Stenbergs' posters celebrate the diversity of modern sports and their appealing playfulness.

The Stenbergs, most importantly for our purposes, produced a poster for Mikhail Kaufman's 1929 *In Spring* that complemented this film's avant-garde sports scenes and underlying athletic spirit. Featuring a leaping female athlete who dominates the upper half of the poster, the Stenbergs' design (plate 9) exudes a forward-looking idealism and energy reflective of the era and the film itself. The female figure's athletic form proves unmistakable and visually engaging, yet her sport is less clear, given that she appears to be all at once diving, leaping over a hurdle, and gamboling in a way that evokes Soviet *fizkul'tura*. No figure in Kaufman's film corresponds with this female athlete in the Stenbergs' poster, yet her dynamic form, its superimposition over Lissitzky-inspired slanted black stripes, and its interplay with other objects in the poster—a small movie camera on the left and a bird's-eye view of a machine-like human figure at the bottom—ingeniously communicates the athletic dynamism inherent to Kaufman's film, the title of which is doubled in red and white font to further accentuate the impression of intense, playful movement in both the poster and the film.

Movie-like movement similarly permeates seminal photomontage work by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who would go on to use photography to explore early Soviet sports in unprecedented ways. Like the Stenberg brothers, Rodchenko produced a number of photomontage-inspired film posters in the 1920s, most notably for two of Vertov's films (*Kino-Eye* and *A Sixth of the World*), yet his avid appreciation of sports and the application of photomontage to sports would initially emerge in works such as his cover design for the miscellany *Summer* (*Leto*, plate 10), published by the Soviet publishing house (and journal) *Young Guard* (*Molodaia gvardiia*) in 1924. In the middle of this photomontage design, Rodchenko placed a circular photograph of action from a soccer match, in which two opposing players vie for the ball while several other players are poised for action in the background. A kindred sense of action comes through the design's surrounding typography. The word *leto* has been printed above and slightly over the photo, with the first and last letter larger—and extended lower—than the middle two letters and each letter divided into red and black sections to create a dynamic triangle effect. The word *sport*, moreover, appears below the photograph in the form of a barbell, with the “S” and “T” inserted into round black ends and “por” displayed in the middle, as if constituting the horizontal bar. Rodchenko also incorporates into his graphics a list of other summer outdoor activities (“walks, excursions, nature observation, club” [*progulki, ekskursii, nabliudenie prirody, klub*]). One of many Rodchenko photomontage works from

the early 1920s, this *Summer* cover exemplifies the close link between Soviet avant-garde design and athletics at the center of the nation's "new everyday life."

It would be still photography, however, that Rodchenko increasingly used to explore the Soviet state's new athletic way of life in the 1930s. Other sports-oriented photomontage by the artist would include his Dadaesque *Political Soccer* (*Politicheskii futbol*, 1930), which featured newspaper photographs of London police clashing with proletarian soccer fans, but most of his subsequent sports work reflected the discernible shift in avant-garde art from photomontage to photography at the end of the 1920s. It was through the photographic image that Rodchenko and a number of other Soviet artists most effectively captured the aesthetic and ethos of 1930s Soviet athletics. The remainder of this chapter will therefore explore early Soviet photography, its enthusiastic embrace of athletics, and its tenuous bond with state ideology.

Soviet Sports Photography

By the 1930s, Stalinist sports—much like Stalinist culture—had shifted away from the norms of the 1920s, as competition, elite athletics, and record setting began to take precedence over mass participation and the social ideals so emblematic of the Hygienist and Proletkul't movements. As Robert Edelman writes: "Once the [Soviet] sports system was fully established by the mid-'thirties, the idea of competition took on international implications. It was possible to demonstrate the nation's preparedness by setting records that surpassed those of athletes in the bourgeois world. Yet this task could not be performed by the masses or even by physically fit soldiers. It required the creation of a highly trained sports elite."⁴⁹ The drive to achieve Soviet superiority in the athletic arena even trumped the industrial and militaristic goals increasingly promoted through the nation's sports movement. Yet some egalitarian idealism remained in the era's athletics and art, particularly the photography of the 1930s that preserved the Left's semi-messianic belief that their art would transform society. The corporeal freedom of sports still afforded artists a sense of autonomy, albeit of a temporary, precarious sort, as Left photographers celebrated the ubiquity and joy of athletic events in 1930s Soviet culture while transferring the heavy expectations of their fleeting ideals onto the muscular shoulders of the era's athletes. Across the new cultural landscape of the late 1920s and 1930s, sports photography enabled a number of photographers—most of them former Left artists associated with the October (Oktiabr') Association—to experiment with the photographic image yet simultaneously adhere to the Soviet government's increasingly stringent parameters for Stalinist art. Rodchenko, Eleazar

Langman, Leonid Smirnov, Boris Ignatovich, Ol'ga Ignatovich, Georgy Zel'ma, and Max Penson were just some of the photographers who celebrated Soviet athletics through unusual visual perspectives, innovative angles, and a wide-eyed appreciation for the increasing number of athletic events and *fizkul'tura* exhibitions organized under Stalin. Representing a last gasp for the avant-garde but also a dwindling of their original principles in the face of Stalinism, Soviet sports photographers in the 1930s would underscore the ideological pliability of athletics, as experimentalism and idealism temporarily resisted authoritarianism.

Despite the prevalence of Soviet sports in 1920s photomontage works, movie posters, and avant-garde film, early Soviet photographers initially refrained from elevating athletics as a prominent theme. Distant shots of parading athletes or *fizkul'turniki* in action on a distant square appear to be the only instances of sports-related photography by Left artists during the mid-1920s. A relatively conventional photographer such as Arkady Shaikhet—more mainstream photojournalist (most notably for the journal *Ogonek* [Little Flame]) than avant-garde photographer—may have already shot high-angle images of athletes marching in formation in preparation for *fizkul'tura* drills (*Physical Training*, 1927) and of soldiers skiing in formation directly below the elevated photographer (*Red Army Marching in the Snow*, 1927–28), yet these photographic images were taken at a pronounced distance from their subjects and hardly reveled in the physical capabilities of the human body or presented new perspectives on modern athletics and its dynamism. By the early 1930s, however, Soviet sports photography would become pervasive, its creativity eye-catching.

In turning to sports, Soviet photographers dispensed with the previous decade's propensity for detached, high-angled photographs taken from and of buildings. The human body, this new work demonstrated, would emerge as an essential building block of 1930s Soviet culture, even from the experimental perspective of Left photography (as the October Association stated in 1928, "We recognize and will build proletarian realism that expresses the will of the active revolutionary class; a dynamic realism that reveals life in movement and in action").⁵⁰ In place of architecturally oriented formal shots came new street-level photographic points of view that situated the photographer amid the athletes. Bird's-eye views of *fizkul'tura* parades remained, but the most significant innovation came about through those photographic perspectives that delved into competitive athletic events while celebrating the body of the "New" Soviet athlete and notions of physical harmony embedded in this athletic body. Soviet viewers, accordingly, found themselves thrust into the physical action, now able to behold in visual proximity the athleticism and, implicitly, the lofty aspirations of Soviet sports.

Photographers such as Langman, Smirnov, and Rodchenko applied formalist principles, particularly notions of defamiliarization, to their sports photographs, as they sought out new perspectives on athletics that could go beyond convention and what the human eye ordinarily sees. In 1928, on the pages of *Novyi lef* in the form of an oft-cited letter to poet and critic Boris Kushner, Rodchenko wrote: "In order to teach man to see from all viewpoints, it is necessary to photograph ordinary, well-known objects from completely unexpected viewpoints and in unexpected positions, and photograph new objects from various viewpoints, thereby giving a full impression of the object."⁵¹ Rejecting the "navel" perspective ordinarily used for photographs, Rodchenko advocated for oblique angles and unorthodox views in photography, which is precisely what can be found in his numerous sports photographs taken throughout the 1930s. "We must revolutionize our visual thinking," Rodchenko exclaimed at the end of his *Novyi lef* piece, suggesting that the eye, much like the human body, could be transformed through avant-garde art. Official criticism of avant-garde sports photography and its "formalism" inevitably arose, but the new Soviet athlete for a time offered photographers a subject that gave them the freedom and flexibility to experiment at length.

At the same time, the burst of sports photography in the Soviet Union had as much to do with advances in photographic technology as it did with the aesthetic leeway afforded by athletics. The introduction of the Leica camera, most significantly, provided Soviet photographers a slew of innovative, unexplored photographic perspectives to use in depicting the era's athletes and *fizkul'tura* parades. Invented in Germany in 1924, the Leica was a small, lightweight camera that photographers could wield with ease to get striking images. As the historian of the Leica, Hans-Michael Koetzle, writes:

As an emphatically small, discreet, cleverly devised, efficiently functioning, and high-performing system camera the Leica revolutionized photographic practice and, with it, instigated an innovative visual cosmos. With the Leica, taking photographs became more dynamic—and it did so in a twofold regard: not only did the constantly ready-to-use Leica permit, or better, provoke a look at a very fast-paced world, rather it became itself part of the motion, part of a relentlessness and restlessness being generated by the new, ever-faster means of transport. It was no coincidence that the contemporary press described the Leica as the "ideal sports-plane camera."⁵²

Like the era's filmmakers (e.g., Kaufman), Leica-wielding photographers could become dynamic, pseudo-athletic participants in the active scenes they shot,

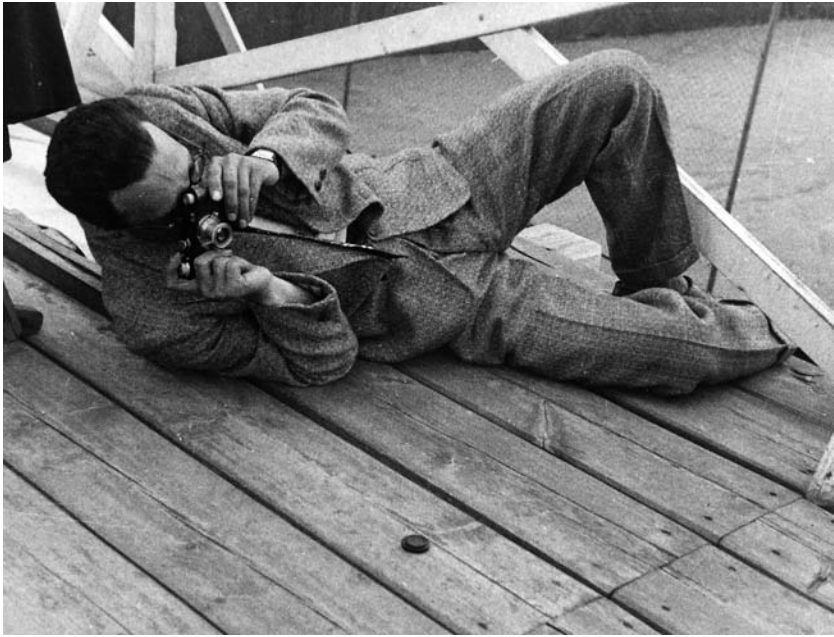


Figure 21. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Georgy Petrusov Photographing at the Dynamo Swimming Complex*, 1929. Photograph. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, New York.

making use of fast shutter speeds (with short exposure) as well as 35 mm film, new printing techniques, and, by 1930, changeable lenses.

A vivid example of the Leica's applicability to sports is evident in Rodchenko's 1929 photograph *Georgy Petrusov Photographing at the Dynamo Swimming Complex* (fig. 21), which features a nimble, supine Petrusov in the act of photographing with a Leica out-of-frame athletes in the water below at the famous Dynamo swimming facility in Moscow (featured in the 1928 film *Doll with Millions*). In Rodchenko's rendering of Petrusov—who like Rodchenko would go on to produce photographs for the 1930s journal *USSR in Construction*—the photographer appears almost as athletic as his implicit subject matter, despite the dapper suit that he wears. The Leica enabled Soviet artists like Petrusov—and Rodchenko—an unprecedented opportunity to engage with the athletic event without the detachment found in photography of previous decades and with a new zeal befitting the era.⁵³ “Of all the equipment, only the Leica works efficiently,” Rodchenko wrote his wife, Stepanova, in 1930.⁵⁴

Thanks to the Leica and to the increasing Soviet emphasis on both competitive sports and *fizkul'tura* parades, sports photography would play a central

role in the history and development of early Soviet photography through the 1930s. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, discussing the 1930s Soviet photography that celebrated modern athletics, asserts that one-third of “the most spectacular and original images” from Soviet photography of the 1930s depicted scenes of sports and physical culture. Lavrentiev, in accordance with all these photographs, delineates five “trends” within sports-related photography produced during the period: (1) photographs of sports as everyday photojournalism, (2) photographs of climactic moments in competitive sports events, (3) photographs of Stalinist sports parades, (4) photographs of young athletic Soviet citizens practicing sports during their leisure time, and (5) photographs that presented sports as militaristic and part of the effort to defend the Soviet Motherland.⁵⁵ Each trend included lasting, aesthetically valuable images, and thus I will discuss work from all five, which together demonstrated the broad scope of sports photography in Soviet culture as well as its tenuous relationship with Soviet ideology.

At the center of the shift to sports photography within Soviet avant-garde and photojournalist circles was the October Association, which formed in 1928. Maintaining the ethos of the Productivist-Constructivist aesthetic that Left artists championed throughout much of the 1920s, this association numbered among its members not only photographers but also architects, media designers, filmmakers, and critics, all of whom aimed to shape the sociocultural development of the Soviet state.⁵⁶ By 1930 a photography section of the October Association had formed, and it included many of the photographers who were turning to sports: Rodchenko, Langman, Boris Ignatovich, Vladimir Gruntal', Ollga Ignatovich, and Smirnov. These October photographers, as they stated in their initial declaration, aimed to address Stalin's recently implemented Five-Year Plan through photojournalism for newspapers and magazines.⁵⁷ And although photojournalism devoted to Soviet industry and the Five-Year Plan dominated the first October Association photograph exhibition, which took place in Gorky Park in 1930, by May 1931, when the second October Association photograph exhibition took place at the House of Publishing, photojournalism devoted to Soviet sports had begun to overshadow the Five-Year Plan imagery, sometimes in the very same photographs.

One of the October Association's most striking images of Soviet athletics and its central place in Soviet society, even the workplace, was Eleazar Langman's 1930 *Radio Gymnastics* (*Gimnastika po radio*, fig. 22). Part of a series of photographs that Langman devoted to the Dynamo factory in Moscow, *Radio Gymnastics* features two workers engaged in gymnastic exercises, their upper torsos barely squeezing into the narrow, framed space of the photograph. Standing beside each other, they have their extended right arms halfway raised in front



Figure 22. Eleazar Langman, *Radio Gymnastics*, 1930. Photograph.

of them and their extended left arms halfway raised behind them. Other workers also appear to exercise, seemingly *ad infinitum*, in the background of the image. Complicating the image—in a nod to the semi-abstract aesthetic of photomontage—is a large radio speaker that protrudes from one corner, occupying a good third of the entire image and obscuring part of the first exercising worker's head. Criticized in the Soviet press for its unusual arrangement of forms, Langman's photograph presents spatial confusion and, arguably, visual cacophony, even as it celebrates the order and discipline of *fizkul'tura* in the workplace and in Soviet society.⁵⁸ In *Radio Gymnastics*, Langman (who had earlier served as an architectural assistant on design work for Moscow's Dynamo Stadium, and whose uncle, Arkady Langman, had been one of the chief architects on the Dynamo project, which was completed in 1928) succeeds in conveying not only the close link between humans, machines, and technology but also the spectacle of the athletic human body and modern photography's ability to present it in unconventional, arresting fashion. Although Langman's photographic aesthetics would begin to waver in the mid-1930s (writing about Langman in 1936, Rodchenko remarked, "He rejects formalism today, but no one really believes him, although they are absolutely convinced of his abilities"), in the formalistic arrangement of bodies and object in *Radio Gymnastics*—and in other complex photographs such as *Skating Rink* (1935)—Langman demonstrated the adaptability of the formalist aesthetic to the era's athletics.⁵⁹

In the less abstract but equally arresting photograph *Jump into Water* (*Prizhok v vodu*, 1931, fig. 23), Langman highlights a female diver in midair over water with legs tucked in and head stretched backward as she executes her athletic dive (an inward somersault in the tuck position). Shot from above, Langman's *Jump into Water* boasts a careful arrangement of athlete and pool, with two diving boards protruding out diagonally into the water. On one of these diving boards lies a man with a movie camera, who evidently shoots the female diver at the same time, albeit from the opposite perspective of what we see. Baring the device, Langman draws attention to the artistry and athleticism behind Soviet sports photojournalism while also equating the intricacy of the dive with the intricacy of the photo shoot. The cameraman lying on the diving board exudes an athletic-like flexibility as does Langman himself in capturing this image on film, for both photographer and filmmaker attempt to capture a precious moment of human flight. A certain perspectival flatness and formal disorientation also emerge in *Jump into Water*, for it becomes difficult to gauge how high the diver is over the water and whether she has leaped up from the diving board below or is descending from the higher diving board. Another version of this photograph would be displayed at the *Exhibition of the October Photo Section* at the Press House in Moscow in May 1931, contributing to the official case against

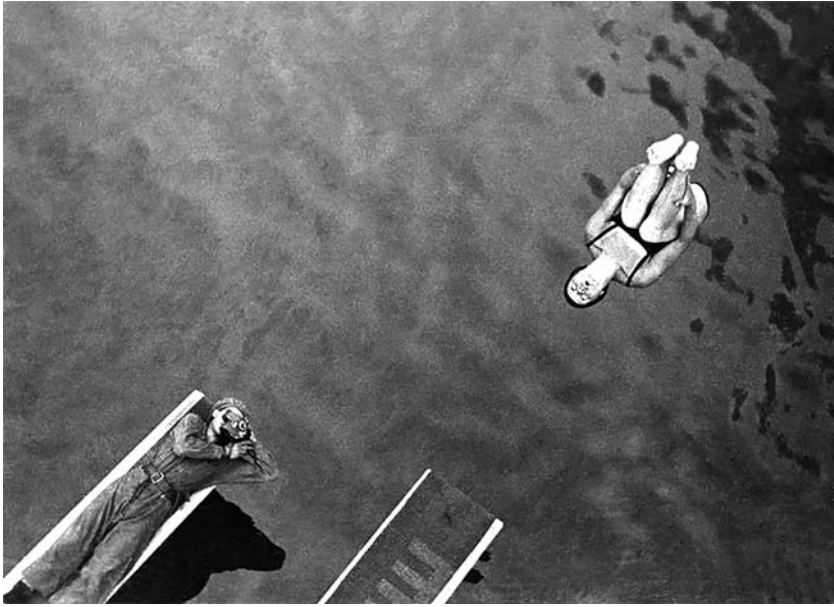


Figure 23. Eleazar Langman, *Jump into Water*, 1931. Photograph.

the October Association that their photographs “erred” on the side of excessive formalism.

Also featured at the October Association’s 1931 photography exhibition was Leonid Smirnov’s 1931 *Tennis* (fig. 24), yet another early Soviet sports photograph in which a formal arrangement of pictorial elements predominates. Shot at a sharp, disorienting angle, the photograph features a net in its upper-left corner while a lone racquet-wielding tennis player—casting a shadow that spreads across the court into the center of the photograph—appears in the bottom-right corner of the photograph at an angle similar to that at which the image itself was taken. With his right arm and racquet extended outward, the tennis player (sporting, somewhat inappropriately, long pants) stretches to volley an out-of-frame ball. The sharp angles and unconventional perspective of the photograph suggest that Smirnov, much like Langman with *Jump into Water*, was intent on revealing his own athleticism by capturing this unconventional, semi-abstract image of a tennis player. In such a manner, sports allowed October photographers to adhere to state-sanctioned themes but to do so in ways that elevated their stature as modern artists. Such an approach, however, soon elicited official opprobrium.

Smirnov’s *Tennis*, interestingly enough, would be reproduced (along with several photographs by Langman, including *Radio Gymnastics*) in the inaugural,

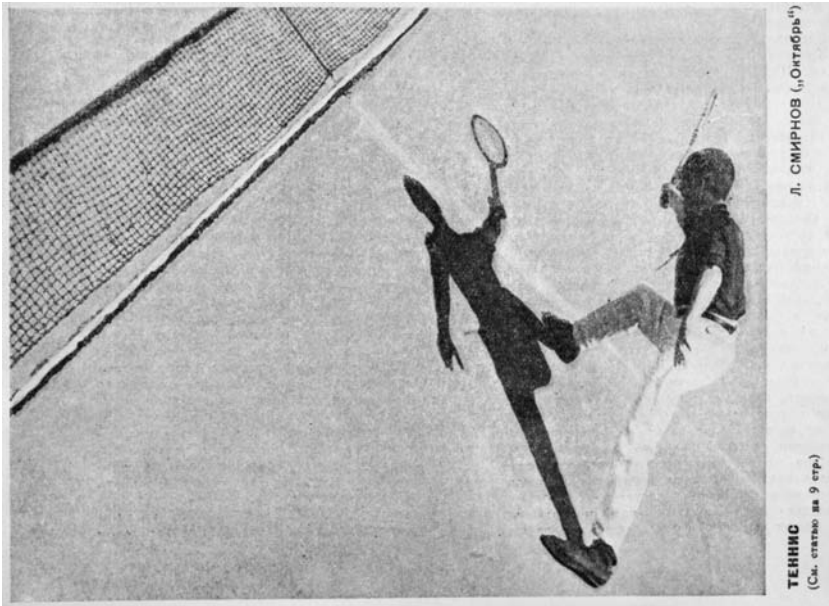


Figure 24. Leonid Smirnov, *Tennis*, 1931. Photograph from *Proletarian Photo magazine*. Scan by John Blazejewski / Princeton University. Courtesy of Marquand Library of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University.

September 1931 issue of the Soviet journal *Proletarian Photo* (*Proletarskoe foto*). Featuring a slightly disorienting side caption (as the image here from the journal shows), the photograph served as supporting evidence for the new journal's featured polemical article, "Soviet Photojournalism Today" ("Segodniashnii den' sovetskogo fotoreportazha"), which took to task the October Association for its formalism and insufficiently agitational approach to photography. Written by the conservative critic Leonid Mezhericher, who was soon to become head of the official agency Soiuzfoto, this *Proletarian Photo* article presented what would become the official line against Left photography at the time. Mezhericher writes:

Our comrades from "October" wonderfully wield the technical side of photography, but questions of composition, texture, perspective, angle, disproportionate foreground and background, etc. have begun to play such a dominant role for them. As a result, we have a series of works from which one gets the inverse impression of that which was conceived: L. Smirnov's falling *Tennis*; people skiing up a mountain rather than skiing down it in Griuntal's *Park KO*; the teakettle that dominates Langman's *Young Commune*

'Dynamo' [*Molodezhnaia kommuna 'Dinamo,'* 1930]; his almost incomprehensible image *Radio Gymnastics* . . . All of this testifies to drastic formalist deviation amid a lack of political intuition.⁶⁰

Drawing attention to the abundance of sports photographs at the October Association's 1931 exhibition (earlier in the article he quips, "Socialist competition is reflected in one photograph by [P.] Petrokas [*Pioneers*]. To compensate, you have your choice of as much sports as you'd like"), Mezhericher bemoaned the formalism at play in sports photography such as Smirnov's *Tennis* and other comparable work that obscured the proletarian, political content desired by the publishers of *Proletarian Photo* and, it would increasingly become clear, the authorities.⁶¹

In this same *Proletarian Photo* article, Mezhericher goes on to single out Rodchenko as a "skilled and stubborn 'left' artist" who was adversely influencing the October Association with his mix of the positive ("the destruction of impressionistic painterly-mimetic canons . . . in search of a genuinely photographic language") and a "large dose" of the negative (his "penetration of the Moholy-Nagy-esque canons, formalism of the 'left' in place of formalism of the 'right,' negation of a narrative and thus a negation of photojournalism at its essence").⁶² Stung by such criticism of his resolutely formalistic images, in particular his 1930 *Pioneer with a Horn*, and subsequently expelled from the October Association in 1931 in an attempted purge of formalism, Rodchenko increasingly resorted to sports and to taking up the formal—but not ideological—difficulties posed by quick, intense athletic activity.⁶³ In an essay published in 1936 in the magazine *Soviet Photography*, Rodchenko retrospectively described his artistic activity in the early 1930s: "I immersed myself in photojournalism, sports photography being the most difficult, in order to cure myself of the easel approach, aesthetics, and abstraction."⁶⁴ This is not to say, however, that Rodchenko turned to sports in an opportunistic or accidental way, given that so much of his work throughout his career dealt with that subject (e.g., his early wrestling series). But in sports photography Rodchenko discovered one of the last remaining thematic spheres where formalism and what remained of Left art's ideals could coexist, albeit precariously, in the 1930s.

Although Rodchenko hovered around the motif of *fizkul'tura* and sports in the late 1920s with his *Georgy Petrusov Photographing at the Dynamo Swimming Complex* and in some of his more canonical photographs of marching *fizkul'turniki* taken from the elevated perspective of an apartment balcony (e.g., *Assembling for a Demonstration*, 1928), it was not until the early 1930s that he took on Soviet athletics as a full-fledged theme in his photography. In a cycle of photographs taken in 1932 on the roof of a student dormitory in Moscow's Lefortovo district,

a new area of the city at the time, Rodchenko uses a close low-angle perspective of young men and women exercising in unison, most notably in a series of photographs titled *Morning Exercises* (*Utrenniaia zariadka*), featuring young athletes who, often with their backs to the camera, twist their upper torsos or raise their legs in unison.⁶⁵ The sharp, low angle of these photographs provides Rodchenko with a stirring look at the clear Moscow sky, which is used as a backdrop to the athleticism and its metonymic articulation of a positive, healthy lifestyle. The angle and extended backdrop suggest a bright Soviet future for the young athletic men and women, whose horizon indeed appeared boundless.

Subsequent sports photographs by Rodchenko would reflect in various measure the idealistic strivings of Soviet *fizkul'tura* and athletics. In a series of diving photographs, for instance, Rodchenko captures the arc of some impressive dives at Moscow's Dynamo swimming complex. These are moments of human flight in which the athletic subjects appear almost superhuman as they soar through the sky. In *A Jump into Water* (*Pryzhok v vodu*, 1934, plate 11), a diver, tucking in as he executes his routine, appears in the upper-right portion of the photograph as if having launched himself upward into the sky. Noting the variations on *A Jump into Water*, one of which Rodchenko displayed at the Exhibition of Works by the Masters of Soviet Photo Art (*Vystavka rabot masterov soetskogo fotoiskusstva*) that was held in 1935 in the center of Moscow (at the cooperative *Vsekhudozhnik*, an early national organization of Soviet artists), Tupitsyn notes that in the version of this photograph not chosen for display, the artist emphasized the elegant form and "utopian aspiration"—what I would call a modern form of *arete*—of the photographed athlete by removing clouds from the upper part of the photograph and repositioning the diver, whereby Rodchenko "established a distinct upward direction, completely ignoring the reality of the body descending downward, toward the swimming pool."⁶⁶ The diver with his backside to the viewer flies through the air in impressive fashion, as if defying gravity and everyday constraints on human achievement. It would be a slightly less inspiring and less formalistic version of this photograph, however, that Rodchenko chose for the Exhibition of Works by the Masters of Soviet Photo Art, as the authorities' appetite for formalism and the avant-garde's aesthetic-athletic vision rapidly dwindled.

A second diving photograph likewise displayed by Rodchenko at the Exhibition of Works by the Masters of Soviet Photo Art, *The Diver Astafiev* (*Pryzhok rekordsmena SSSR g. Astaf'eva*, 1934–35, also referred to as a second *Jump into Water*, fig. 25), appears to pick up where Vertov and Kaufman stopped with the diving scenes from *Kino-Eye* and *Moscow*, as Rodchenko focuses on the muscular "New Man" body of the diving athlete Astafiev, who floats over the water (presumably Moscow's Dynamo swimming complex) in streamlined grace.

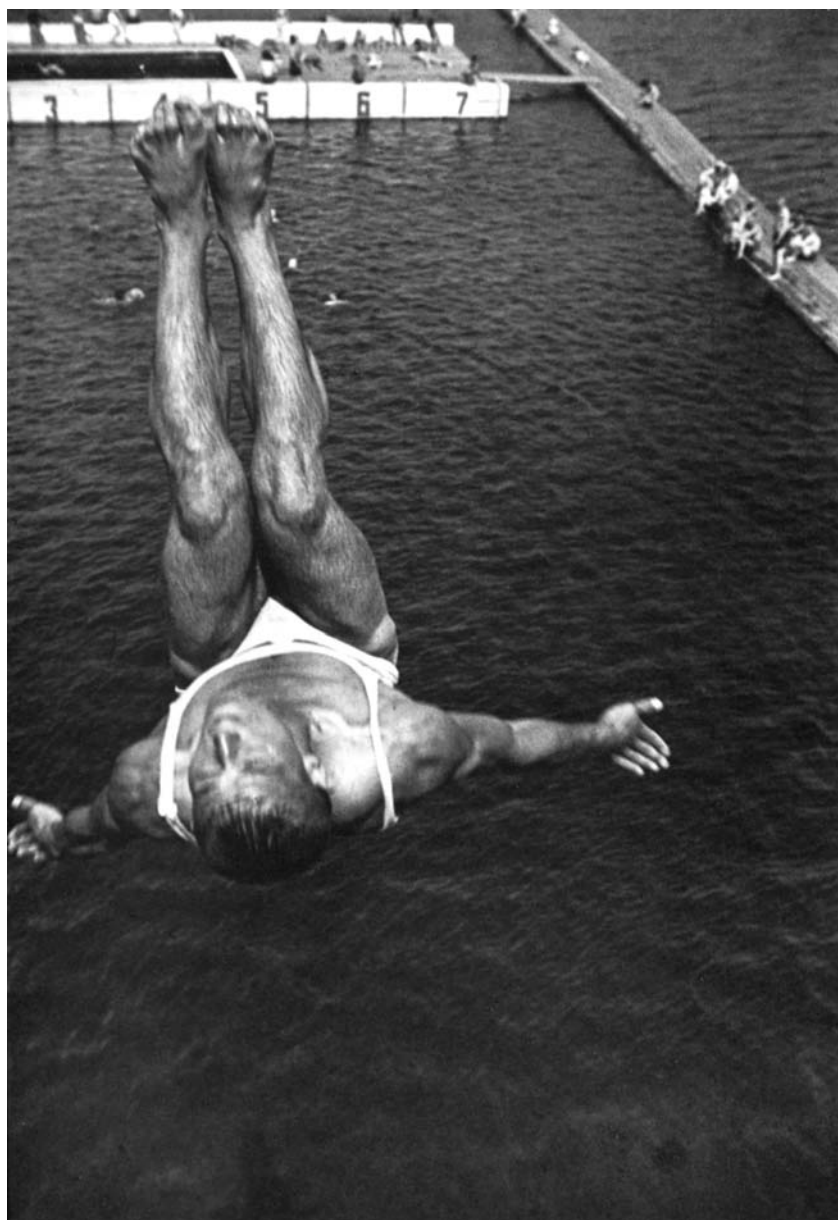


Figure 25. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *The Diver Astafiev*, 1934–35. Photograph. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, New York.

Embodying lofty ambition and aerial prowess, this diver exemplifies the idealistic impulse of Rodchenko's sports photography as well as the sports movement in general in the Soviet Union—yet Rodchenko faced criticism for revealing on this diving athlete's legs "excessive hair," which ostensibly undermined the heroic aura of the Soviet athlete.⁶⁷ Irrespective of any trepidation officials might have had about tainting the prestige of the Stalinist-era athlete, Rodchenko celebrates the muscularity of the Soviet diver as his impressive physique corresponds with—or at least bolsters—the ambitious idealism embedded in the image of flight over the Dynamo water. And *Diver* (1932), yet another aquatic sports photograph displayed by Rodchenko at that 1935 exhibition, dwells less than Rodchenko's other diving photographs on the powerful human physique of the diving athlete, but it, too, shows an ambitious leap similarly indicative of the Soviet nation's aspirations toward a socialist ideal.

A similar idealism prevails in Georgy Zel'ma's photographs of ski jumpers from the early 1930s. Taken from the ground directly below an airborne skier, such photographs capture the athlete's flight on skis and passing silhouette. The ski jumper soars through the air, as if an airplane or bird, as the photograph's composition directs the viewer's gaze upward and implicitly forward. And there is also Zel'ma's 1932 *Gymnasts* (*Gimnasty*), in which five shirtless, upside-down gymnasts photographed at a slightly low angle balance themselves with their arms on parallel bars, their legs sticking straight up into the sky and their strained musculature on view. Zel'ma's five gymnasts showcase all the power and flawlessness of the Soviet new person and embody the Soviet urge for collective cooperation, albeit a collectivity that did not yet infringe on personal—and artistic—identity.

Integral to the ideological aspirations of Soviet sports was the participation of women, an early form of gender equality conspicuously reflected in 1930s sports photography. In addition to the female diver in Langman's *Jump into Water* and the *fizkul'turnitsa* exercising alongside young men in Rodchenko's *Morning Exercises*, sportswomen take center stage in Rodchenko's *Female Swimmer* (*Plovchikha*, 1934) and *The Race* (*Beg*, 1936). Both taken at the Dynamo Stadium in Moscow, these two photographs show solitary female athletes in the heat of competition (with their fellow competitors remaining outside the frame). In *The Race*, a lone woman runs on a track, with the slightly high angle and diagonal tilt of the photograph corresponding to the lines crossing the track and the slightly forward lean of the runner herself, while in *Female Swimmer* the athletic woman takes strenuous strokes in choppy water; only part of her face is visible as she opens her mouth wide for air. She is a modern-day Venus, a powerful new woman not exactly emerging out of the water but making her way through it with determination. And mention must be made of Rodchenko's famous

Make Way for the Woman (*Dorogu zhenshchine*, 1934), which depicts a line of young female athletes marching between two rows of stationary young male *fizkul'turniki*. The women walk toward the camera and implicitly into the future, and although the photograph, like a number of Rodchenko photographs of women marching in Red Square sports parades, lacks the athletic dynamism and suggestion of graceful movement found in so many other sports scenes by Rodchenko, a sense of optimism (and subtle eroticism, given that the young men watch the young women as they march by) arises in the image.

Ol'ga Ignatovich, one of the relatively few Soviet women working as a photojournalist in the 1930s, captures a gender-specific form of athletic *arete* in several of the photographs she devoted to sports.⁶⁸ In *Start!* (1930s, fig. 26), Ignatovich has shot the beginning of a race on a track, where two female competitors explode out of their starting positions. Shown from behind, the two women lean forward as they head down the straightaway of the cinder track with its well-delineated lanes, the backsides and powerful leg muscles of these two Soviet women there for all to admire, hardly your typical image of the female body. Similar in certain respects to Rodchenko's *Make Way for the Women*, yet taken from a much different perspective, *Start!* articulates the forward momentum and ambition of female athletes in Soviet society. Even the aesthetically and politically conservative *USSR in Construction*, which published in 1934 an issue devoted entirely to Soviet athletics, would trumpet the progress made by women in Soviet sports, as evidenced by the issue's foreword, which boasted: "The well-organized Soviet physical culture movement has in its ranks six million people, two million of whom are women."⁶⁹ Despite the inherent conservatism of Stalinist society, female participation in sports had reached an apex of sorts, at least according to the authorities.⁷⁰

While sports photography predominated in the 1930s, several of the more prominent Soviet photographers of the era at first avoided the topic and only came to it later, once it had become well established within what emerged as the Socialist Realist canon. Ol'ga Ignatovich's brother, Boris Ignatovich, one of the October Association's leading photographers and head of its photography division following Rodchenko's departure in 1931, came to the sports theme rather slowly. At the start of the 1930s, when Ignatovich cultivated a distinctly formalist aesthetic in his work (his *Reelection Day* [*V dni perevyborov*, 1931], for instance, would be one of the October Association photographs singled out in 1931 by Mezhericher for its formalism), only a few of his images addressed the sports theme directly, and shots of rapid athletic action are largely absent from his work. As Anri Vartanov notes, Ignatovich "rarely turned his attention to quickly flowing events: his element was more often those various pauses within extended phenomena or, at least, those aspects of life characterized by a



Figure 26. Ol'ga Ignatovich, *Start!*, 1930s. Private collection. Photograph by Scala / Art Resource, NY. Courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery, New York.

peaceful, completely predictable flow of action.”⁷¹ Even Ignatovich’s *The Sports Club “Dynamo-Kuban”* (*Sportivnyi klub “Dinamo-Kuban,”* 1931), one of his few sports-related photographs from the early 1930s, offers a sharply angled look at a static row of closely shorn male athletes in Dynamo uniforms. Ignatovich’s photographs, in fact, did not feature at the 1935 Exhibition of Works by the Masters of Soviet Photo Art, and one might speculate that this was not only due to his formalist style but also because, unlike his colleagues, he generally resisted the sports photography that photographers such as Rodchenko used in the mid-1930s to maintain some semblance of experimentation in their work amid Stalinist restraints.⁷²

By the second half of the 1930s, however, the formalist elements had virtually disappeared from Ignatovich’s photographs, replaced by a directness and even romanticism indicative of the Socialist Realist aesthetic that became so ubiquitous by the late 1930s. Permeating all areas of Soviet art in the 1930s and established as the nation’s official artistic doctrine at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, the doctrine of Socialist Realism demanded representation of present-day reality as an approximation of the



Figure 27. Boris Ignatovich, *Youth*, 1937. Photograph. Spencer Museum of Art, University of Kansas, Gift of David Tate Peters, 2004.0203.19. © 2019 Estate of Boris Ignatovich / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

idealized future that the Bolsheviks had aimed for throughout the 1920s. And, as in art of the 1920s, sports had a significant role to play in Socialist Realist art and its formulation of reality, as happy, healthy athletes embodied the state of social—and physical—perfection ostensibly achieved by the Soviet citizenry under Stalin. In *Youth* (*Molodost'*, 1937, fig. 27), Ignatovich's move away from his signature formalism toward Socialist Realism is hard to miss. The photograph—also referred to as *At the Water Station* (*Na vodnoi stantsii*)—features a shirtless young man and a smiling bathing-suit clad woman standing together before the camera in a warm, cheerful light with a modern structure in the upper background.⁷³ We see the man's muscular upper torso yet only the head and shoulders of the woman. The fit, athletic couple come across as the epitome of Soviet vigor and physical contentedness.

Other sports photographs in the second half of the 1930s similarly reflected the move toward Socialist Realism through both stylistic and thematic means. Instead of highlighting the flight of divers, Rodchenko now focused on the likes of pole vaulters (e.g., his 1937 photograph *Pole Vault* [*Pryzhok s shestom*]), as he highlighted from a relatively high angle the clearing of the elevated bar by an airborne athlete. The bar, it seems clear, symbolizes the lofty goals of the nation. And unlike Ol'ga Ignatovich's *Start!* and its emphasis on the start of a race,

one now encountered sport photographs in which victory and success moved to the fore. For instance, Max Penson's *Spartakiad in Uzbekistan: Finish of Race* (*Spartakiada Uzbekistana: Finish*, 1935) shows a leaning runner breaking the finish line tape at the end of a sprint.⁷⁴ What is increasingly accentuated is the victorious endpoint, for, as Paperny puts it in his discussion of Stalinist culture's depiction of the future as eternity, "the present turned out to be not the first moment in history, but rather the last."⁷⁵

By the mid-1930s in the Soviet Union, emphasis in photography had conspicuously moved—akin to many other cultural changes under Stalin—from mass participation in *fizkul'tura* and various forms of competitive athletic activity to elite athletes breaking records and glorifying the state. Indicative of the Stalinist attitude toward sports was the brief statement accompanying a Rodchenko photograph of a diver in the December 1935 issue of the journal *USSR in Construction*: "Komsomol-alpinists are scaling unattainable summits while records in jumping are being set by athletes, divers, aviators, stratospherists, and parachutists, fearless youth oblivious to dizziness."⁷⁶ New heights and new records would have to be achieved by the nation's athletes. Thus sports photography became less about inspiring the Soviet populace toward the goals of communism and more about athletes exemplifying the greatness of the Stalinist state. The previous decade's revolutionary ideals and egalitarianism had given way to monolithic triumphalism.

Along with the emphasis on records set and races won, sports under Stalin began to be increasingly construed as preparation for labor and war, as evidenced by the rise of the organization GTO, a Soviet-era acronym for Prepared for Labor and Defense (*Gotov k trudu i oborone*), a powerful sports body formed in 1931.⁷⁷ Promoted at sports parades and in the pages of journals such as *USSR in Construction*, this organization encouraged Soviet youth to participate in sports as a means of becoming efficient workers and fit defenders of the nation in the case of war. The most famous GTO image comes, of course, from the camera of Rodchenko, who, in a straightforward, postformalist manner, depicted a Red Square GTO parade, in which a young woman assumes the form of a runner within a much-larger-than-life mock-up of the GTO badge members would wear (*The GTO Pin* [*Znachok GTO*], fig. 28). In this 1936 image, young athletic men transport the badge and the woman inside it. The young woman appears to run, yet she is in fact frozen in place and thus emerges, I would argue, as a vivid emblem of the growing stasis (and mounting aversion toward formalism) that would pervade Soviet photography under Stalin after 1935.

The question nevertheless remains as to whether the sports photographs produced between the late 1920s and mid-1930s by Rodchenko and the others



Figure 28. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *The GTO Pin*, 1936. Photograph. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, New York.

represented a creative direction for Soviet art. Or were these photographs the work of artists who had sacrificed their principles for the sake of the state and for a government that demanded adherence to a set of propagandistic themes, one of which was sports and *fizkul'tura*? Critics such as Buchloh have attributed Rodchenko's move from photomontage to photography, and particularly his 1930s photographs for Stalin's White Sea Canal project featured in *USSR in Construction*, as evidence of his "enthusiastic and sincere" support of the Soviet regime.⁷⁸ For his part, John Bowlt argues that, "whether intended or not," Rodchenko's photographic images of sports parades from the mid-1930s ultimately adhered to Socialist Realist ideals.⁷⁹ Yet as Bowlt also adds, Rodchenko proved "one of the many artists commanded to smile while his artistic and material life became more and more intolerable."⁸⁰ The transition in Rodchenko's photography from athletes in action to the forced optimism and rigidity of sports parades indeed reflected the increasing pressure he was under at the time.

Sports, despite their immediate pertinence to the propagandistic designs of the state, allowed for a range of avant-garde techniques to prevail well into the Stalinist era, even after so much of the Left's experimental orientation had been declared antirevolutionary. That Rodchenko was roundly criticized for his formalist techniques and expelled in 1931 from the October group suggests that his subsequent photographing of athletic scenes won him time and enabled him to maintain, at least at first, much of his artistic vision. Sports provided Left photographers an expedient means for bolstering their groundbreaking visions with social and propagandistic relevance, yet the uniformity of the sports parade and the Stalinist fixation on records would ultimately overwhelm the innovative angles and invigorated creative impulses of these early Soviet artists. The October Association had fought for athletic socialist culture, as their initial declaration implied, but it was a fight—or race—that they and other avant-garde artists would not win.

Higher and Faster

Art in the Era of Stalinist Sports

As Stalinist ideology gained momentum in the Soviet Union, the tenor of the country's athletics changed along with the artistic treatment of athletics. The rigid columns of the Soviet sports parade, which had emerged over the course of the 1920s before becoming a ubiquitous athletic-cum-aesthetic component of Stalinist sports, offered a striking metonymic symbol of the official demands made on *fizkul'tura* and, consequently, on artistic presentations of Soviet sports.¹ Whether portraits of healthy, happy *sportsmeny*, statues of robust athletes, or films of *fizkul'turniki* marching in unison on Red Square, Soviet art with an athletic orientation began to exude a triumphal, authoritative quality in line with the evolving doctrine of Socialist Realism and the requirement that art, as articulated by Andrey Zhdanov at the First Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, reflect "reality in its revolutionary development."² *Fizkul'tura* and sports, in addition to boosting the well-being of the populace and augmenting everyday reality under Stalin, were to be increasingly perceived as a convenient state-sponsored means for producing efficient workers and fit soldiers (via GTO). Throughout the late 1920s and the 1930s, as the implementation of Stalin's Five-Year plans and collectivization consumed Soviet life, a tightening of those aesthetic parameters that were being applied to Soviet athletics followed. And although avant-garde photography preserved remnants of Left aesthetics well into the 1930s, official tolerance of modernist art (i.e., formalism, nonobjectivity, etc.) diminished significantly, while Soviet athletics presented less opportunity for artistic experimentation. The social utility and mass uniformity of Stalinist sports rendered artistic nuance and innovation that much rarer. Yet along with the strict aesthetic demands of the Stalinist state and the resulting dearth

of groundbreaking artistic creativity, the promotion of athletics under Stalin brought ever more sports-related art.

Athletic ideals had bolstered the staying power of sports and *fizkul'tura* as prominent motifs in early Soviet Left art, and this continued over the course of the ensuing decades in Socialist Realist art. But whereas post-1917 athletics had yielded a form of harmonized collectivity in line with the heady aims of the early Soviet state, sports now provided Stalin's regime with an irresistible vehicle for advancing its heroic ethos and wildly ambitious aims. If Stalinism represented, in the words of Richard Stites, "an anti-utopian Utopia—a fantasy state, wrapped in myth and embellished by the cult of a god-like leader," then athletics were poised to serve the fantasy, in alliance with Socialist Realist art.³ No longer just part of an early Soviet preoccupation with hygiene and collective goals for the future, sports under Stalin concentrated on massive displays, physically ideal athletes, and impressive competitive achievements, all of which supplied fodder for Socialist Realist art.⁴ The July/August issue of the Soviet journal *USSR in Construction* in 1934, devoted entirely to sports, *fizkul'tura*, and the GTO movement, indicates the extent of the government's control over artistic renderings of sports, given the journal's elaborate display of photographs and the inclusion in it of work by a number of well-respected photojournalists (e.g., Shaikhet, Penson, and Zel'ma).⁵ Sports continued to offer a convenient stage for the New Men and Women of the Soviet era, but whereas the "New" athletes of the early and mid-1920s set an attainable, collective ideal when it came to transforming the populace, Socialist Realism's "fantasy of extravagant virility," as Toby Clark has put it, exalted the athletic specimens of the day as icons of superhuman achievement in accord with Stalinist utopianism.⁶

When it came to sports and Socialist Realism, the requisite ideological move toward Stalinist exaggeration posed a predicament for many Soviet artists. Although the so-called avant-garde before and immediately after the revolution had envisioned their art giving rise to a new society in which sports would be open to all, they soon realized in the late 1920s that Stalinist ideology would now be dictating the parameters of Soviet art, including the representation of athletics. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin (from his conclusion to "The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction"), while the creative treatment of sports was politicized in the 1920s by the avant-garde and others, in the 1930s sports facilitated the aestheticization of Stalinist ideology in Socialist Realist renderings of Soviet athletics.⁷ Filmmakers, photographers, writers, and painters could not help but sense this important transition in Soviet art, ideology, and sports, to which many responded with wariness but, in many cases, acquiescence.

Two of these prominent Soviet artists, Yuri Olesha and Aleksandr Deyneka, are the subject of this chapter. Both were born in 1899, and both came of age in

an era when sports had begun to pervade everyday life in prerevolutionary Russia. The work of both men would be replete with explicit references to sports. Yet both the writer Olesha and the painter Deyneka reached maturity as artists at a point when Soviet culture had begun to move away from the unfettered excitement of the 1920s toward the more prescribed parameters of Stalinism and Socialist Realism, when sports shifted from idealistic enterprise to strict state-run system. So it was that both Olesha and Deyneka, in fact, grappled in their respective works in the 1920s with burgeoning Stalinist dogma and then with the profound impact such ideology had on Soviet art, society, and sports. Both Olesha and Deyneka would present modern sports as a manifestation of the revolutionary aspirations essential to the Soviet state but also as a manifestation of a new era in which aesthetic liberties and creative idealism had far less room to flourish.

Olesha's Athletic Origins

Like other artists of his generation, Yury Olesha drew upon the modern era's athletic ethos for inspiration. As he would emphasize in both his fictional work and his nonfictional reminiscences, the creative play of the writer could often overlap with the creative play of the athlete. Yet the increasing emphasis in Soviet culture on the social utility of sports would limit such creativity. Olesha, in fact, would eventually home in on a new vision of sports unique to Soviet culture, one that veered away from creative freedom for the sake of efficiency, cohesion, and the ideological aims of a new era. In the novel *Envy* (*Zavist'*, 1927), in particular, Olesha would illuminate the passage of sports from individualistic endeavor to the prescribed enterprise of the Stalinist age, with consequences for both athletes and artists. There, when a playful, creative athlete—an artist of sorts—is overshadowed and outcompeted by the favored New Man of Soviet athletic culture, the central protagonist (in certain respects a stand-in for Olesha himself) comes to exemplify the notion that on the new athletic and cultural playing field under Stalin, Soviet artists would have little or no room to maneuver. A new heroic model would now be the order of the day.

The young Olesha relished the maiden forms of modern sports in the burgeoning urban culture of early twentieth-century Russia. Growing up in Odessa, he witnessed the rise of modern sports as an institution and also enjoyed encounters with some of the athletic stars of the day. Olesha would record many of his experiences in *No Day without a Line* (*Ni dnia bez strochki*, 1965), a memoir composed of journal entries reworked at the end of his long career. Here, for instance, he explains at length how the famous wrestler V. A. Pytlyasinsky, an extremely influential figure in the initial development of athletics

throughout Russia (and whom we met at the beginning of this study), made a lasting pedagogical impression on him as a young writer. Olesha artfully recounts:

Gymnastics was taught at the gymnasium by the wrestler Pytlyasinsky. He was an ex-world champion, an old war horse, or rather bull, although he wasn't a bull either, but a whale perched on its tail. No, he wasn't a whale either. He was simply an old wrestler dressed not in tights on a half-naked body as in the arena, but in a cheap three-piece suit, and the fact that he was a wrestler was evident from the inhuman breadth of his shoulders, his bulging calves, and his small head.

We were connoisseurs of the circus, and we anticipated Pytlyasinsky's arrival as something sensational.

"Pytlyasinsky!"

He appeared in front of our line, coming out of a small recess in the wall surrounding the courtyard. He entered the courtyard as he would have come into the arena, with his customary springy athletic gait. He was extraordinary, strange, alluring, with a simple face like that of a soldier or a Polish peasant but with a wrestler's cheekbones and little mustache, though sailors could have those cheekbones and mustaches too.⁸

Seeking out the right animal metaphor—and animal—to describe the “in-human” wrestler, Olesha merges impressions of a young, sturdy wrestler performing in the circus with memories of the aging Pytlyasinsky arriving to teach gymnastics at the school. Despite his age and conventional clothes, the “alluring” old wrestler fascinates the then young Olesha, who in retrospect perceives Pytlyasinsky as a vivid embodiment of early Russian athletics. Explaining that these were “the last years before the birth of sport in its contemporary form,” Olesha revels in this bygone phase of sports in the 1910s as he goes on to recall that the school felt compelled to “try out” gymnastics instruction, despite a relative lack of knowledge about such athletic exercises. “Pytlyasinsky,” Olesha remarks, “didn't know how [gymnastics] was done either, and he came out to us with a baffled expression on his face. Yet here he turned a new page in my life, one so remarkable that in leafing through that book I stop on it time and again: Pytlyasinsky began teaching us how to jump.”⁹ Under Pytlyasinsky's guidance, Olesha would learn to jump, and he would also soon learn, as a writer, to perform his own proverbial jumps on the page. The acquisition of athletic and literary skills would go hand in hand for Olesha.

No Day without a Line, in addition to reading like a who's who of early Russian athletics, reaffirms the strong ties between modern sports and art. In addition

to the encounter with an aging Pytlyasinsky at school, Olesha briefly describes in *No Day without a Line* seeing as a youth the athletic stagecraft of Ivan Zaikin, the famous wrestler-aviator whom Kuprin and others put on a pedestal in the prerevolutionary era. Zaikin, like Pytlyasinsky, would leave a strong impression on the young Olesha, who often frequented the Odessa circus to watch Russian wrestlers showcase their impressive physical, hyperbolized prowess before enraptured crowds. Although Olesha came to understand that wrestling at that time was more performance than athletic competition — “Today wrestling is a sport, but then it was merely a spectacle, something done in the circus” — he nonetheless cherished his vivid impressions.¹⁰ In a nostalgic tone pervading much of his prose and nonfiction, Olesha recalls one match he witnessed where Zaikin, introduced prior to the match as the “Volga Warrior,” claimed he had been unfairly defeated by a foreign adversary, which prompted the self-proclaimed warrior to react in dramatic fashion: “As I see him now, Ivan Zaikin is striding around the arena, wiping away his tears and placing his palms on the two halves of his buttocks.”¹¹ Although the outcome of the match and the resulting tears may have been prearranged, Olesha renders Zaikin’s performance in dramatic terms that underscore the very artistry of the athleticism, as the writer retrospectively participates in the theatrical bravado and budding athleticism of the day in his own ironic, playful way.¹²

Yet it was soccer, even more than wrestling, that inspired both the young Olesha and the older Olesha in retrospect. He devotes a significant portion of *No Day without a Line* to reminiscences of his childhood days when he both played and watched soccer in Odessa. In addition to claiming that he “saw the dawn of football [soccer]” and describing his own brief success on the soccer field (“I never learned to swim or skate, but I was a decent football player and good at track and field . . . Why success in one sport and failure in another? Faintheartedness, when you come down to it”), Olesha fondly delves into the impressive play of Grisha Bogemsky, an early soccer star of the prerevolutionary era who attended school in Odessa.¹³ Equating his own art with Bogemsky’s soccer playing (and linking it to his own return to writing late in life, following Stalin’s death), Olesha smoothly shifts from the act of writing to action on the soccer field.

These notes of mine at least have the benefit of teaching me mastery of the sentence. And in fact they are training me to write, something I once was very far from being able to do. To sit down at a desk and take a pen in my hand would have been very difficult, oh, almost impossible — like passing from a wakeful state into the world of dreams without ever falling asleep.

I don’t want to complain about anything.

I only want to recall Grisha Bogemsky posing in his Sporting Club uniform for the photographer Perepelitsyn before the beginning of a match. . . . The most astonishing thing—and this always astonishes me whenever I see pictures of Bogemsky or think about him—was that he wasn't dark or hard-looking, but on the contrary rather pudgy, with a rosy complexion and rings of dirty blond hair on his forehead and deep-set, barely visible eyes. Sometimes the two circles of a pince-nez even gleamed in front of those eyes. And just think, that person with the unathletic appearance was a remarkable athlete. Even apart from the fact that he was a hundred-meter sprint champion and champion high jumper and pole vaulter, he achieved legendary feats on the football field.¹⁴

Bogemsky, who via the old photograph is as unimpressive in appearance as the German soccer star (Getzke) of *Envy* will be, takes on attributes of the writer, particularly through the mention of his pince-nez marks. Nevertheless, he proves an athletic ideal who despite all appearances inspires with his speed and skill. And Olesha keeps pace with Bogemsky as he describes the soccer star in what Victor Peppard considers one of Olesha's most "rapturous" lyrical passages.¹⁵ Olesha writes:

Oh, that was one of the most thrilling sights of my childhood, which cheered along with everybody else, leaping to its feet and applauding. Bogemsky could dribble better than anyone. But it wasn't just that he was better than the rest: it was that this was the emergence of a true champion.

And it's strange, while Petya Perepelitsyn was aiming the little box of his camera at him, Bogemsky stood there just like some coach. . . . No that's wrong. Take a real look at him, dunce! Can you really not see the exceptional grace of his manner, his lightness, his "Just a second!" and off he runs with the whole field after him—the whole field, the public, flags, clouds, and life?¹⁶

Olesha implies that his writing can do more justice to the fast play of this "true champion" than the photography of the "dunce" Perepelitsyn. Olesha subsequently construes Bogemsky's unique style on the pitch in artistic, pictorial terms: "Bogemsky was, paradoxically, not a running forward, but a floating one. And really, if you look at the playing field as you would a picture and not at the movement itself, you'll see the running soccer players as figures with basically erect torsos; during the rapid movement of their legs, during that almost wheel-like movement, their torsos remain upright. But Bogemsky ran leaning forward."¹⁷ Just as the German soccer star in the soccer match of Olesha's *Envy*

will stand out from his teammates with his aggressive, often selfish play, Bogemsky races—or “leans”—forward in a manner that allows him to distinguish himself from the other players with his physical artistry and “Just a second!” presence. And as he will do in the extensive soccer scene of *Envy*, Olesha delves into the alluring dynamism of the game and the way something as seemingly straightforward as soccer could underpin both aesthetics and ideology.

Envy

A modernist work of prose fiction celebrated for its shifting perspectives and carnivalesque clash of old and new, Olesha’s *Envy* recounts the chaotic struggles of a dissolute young man, Nikolay Kavalerov, amid the rapidly evolving Soviet landscape of factories, airfields, and soccer stadiums. Soviet sports, proving crucial to the novel’s plot, serve to underscore the profound alienation Kavalerov experiences within the new social—and artistic—environment taking shape under Stalin in the late 1920s. Culminating in a well-attended soccer match between a Soviet team and their visiting German opponents, *Envy* points to a discernible change in creative approaches to sports in Stalinist Russia and to the rising prominence of the athletic New Man in Soviet art. Through sports and the elevation of the heroic athletic persona in *Envy*, Olesha signaled the coming demise of the avant-garde and the dawn of a new artistic era.

At the outset of this short 1927 novel, the narrator, Nikolay Kavalerov, finds himself in the Moscow apartment of the successful Soviet entrepreneur Andrey Babichev, who has generously taken in the down-and-out youth. Harkening back to the superfluous man of nineteenth-century Russian literature, Kavalerov appears in stark contrast to his host, who is not only financially successful as trade director of the Food Industry Trust and creator of the Two Bits cafeteria but who also exemplifies the robust physical health and enthusiastic exercise discipline of a New Man of the early Soviet era. Right off the bat in the novel, Kavalerov marvels at the simple harmony Babichev enjoys while in the lavatory: “Mornings, he sings in the lavatory. Imagine how pleased with life he is, how healthy.”¹⁸ Adhering to the hygienic ideals of the day, Babichev appears at joyful ease in the new Soviet environment as everyday morning rituals become cause for exuberance and contentment. Although hardly svelte (“He weighs around 220 pounds”), Babichev practices his daily calisthenics with zest in his spacious apartment, where Kavalerov watches him. “Usually he does his gymnastics not in his own bedroom,” Kavalerov remarks with some displeasure, “but in the room of undefined purpose that I occupy. It is roomier here, airier; there’s more light, more radiance.”¹⁹ Bright, airy, and exuding a utopian,

“radiant” quality, the room constitutes an ideal place for a modern activity such as calisthenics (i.e., *fizkul'tura*). The unathletic Kavalero, however, does not enjoy the physical harmony that Babichev does and thus feels a certain resentment toward his host. Having been offered a temporary home in Babichev's apartment, Kavalero nevertheless struggles to fit in and adapt to, among other things, the new athletic ways of Soviet *fizkul'tura* and sports. But it is not Babichev who most fully represents the era's athleticism in the novel. It is another character, the goalkeeper Volodya Makarov, who emerges as the athletic New Man and soon proves Kavalero's antithesis.

A significant portion of *Envy* revolves around Makarov, the successful Soviet New Man, and Kavalero's hostile attitude toward him. Like Kavalero, Makarov had at an earlier point been taken in by Babichev, who has high hopes for this paragon of athleticism, as Makarov wholly embodies the emerging Soviet ethos of health, happiness, and success, particularly through his exploits on the soccer field. Both Makarov and Kavalero, it should be said, vie for Babichev's attention as well as for the heart of Valya, Babichev's niece, whereby Kavalero must constantly contend with Makarov, whose success in the sports arena and, implicitly, in romance is juxtaposed to the central hero's conspicuous lack of purpose. And due to a mix-up of letters, one of which contains an indignant rant by Olesha's protagonist about his new benefactor, Kavalero finds himself expelled from Babichev's apartment, whereas Makarov solidifies his place in Babichev's home and, more broadly, Soviet society.

In Part Two of *Envy*, Kavalero—who in this second section of the novel is unceremoniously replaced as narrator by an anonymous third person—makes the acquaintance of Ivan Babichev, Andrey's wayward brother (and Valya's father), who boasts that he has invented “Ophelia,” a fantastical machine with which Kavalero and Ivan will plot a rebellion of sorts against the new Soviet era and its successful New Men. Early on in Part Two, Kavalero and Ivan Babichev come to an apartment building complex, where in a yard with “a piercingly green patch of grass” that is “surprisingly sweet and cool to the eye” a group of young Soviets engages in gymnastic exercises and high jumping.²⁰ Gazing through a hole in a stone wall, Kavalero beholds a striking display of athleticism.

A rope was stretched between two posts. The young man took off, body sideways, stretched parallel, almost gliding over the rope. He seemed to be rolling instead of jumping. Once he had rolled over, he threw his legs up and kicked, the way a swimmer propels himself. In the next split second, his upside-down, distorted face flashed by on its way down, and immediately

afterward, Kavalerov saw him standing up on the ground, which he had met with a sound like “haff”—either the expulsion of breath cut short or the bang of his heel against the grass.²¹

This youth, of course, is none other than Makarov. As if performing for Valya, who also practices there, Makarov moves effortlessly through his jumping routine and through the rarefied athletic air of the yard. The “almost naked” Makarov evokes applause from all the onlookers, having completed his jump, and “[walks] off to the side slightly favoring one foot, probably out of athletic jauntiness.”²² With a “whole gleaming grate of teeth” (*mashinka zubov*), Makarov resembles a well-functioning machine (in a Part One letter that Kavalerov attributes to his rival, Makarov writes to Andrey Babichev, “You won’t recognize me: I have become a human machine”), whereas Kavalerov is awkward and at odds with his environment (“Things don’t like me,” he memorably notes in Part One).²³ Here in the courtyard, Kavalerov is at a distinct remove from all the athletics, for he observes the high jumping from afar and with considerable envy. And Valya likewise proves out of reach for the outmatched, unathletic protagonist, who can only watch her as a frustrated voyeur. Valya, practicing alongside Makarov in the apartment yard, exposes her bare legs, which glisten with youth, athleticism, and latent sexuality; describing Valya’s athletic limbs, Olesha’s narrator remarks that “the purity and cleanliness of the body give an idea of how charming the owner of the legs will be as she matures into a woman and her attention becomes centered on her body.”²⁴ The alluring Valya and the athletic Makarov emphatically underscore Kavalerov’s alienation and inability to adapt to and succeed in a changing Soviet society, as the events of the novel’s climactic soccer match further reinforce.

The soccer match of *Envy*, which comes immediately after the high jumping, plays a crucial role in Olesha’s novel. Based loosely on a match that took place on May 21, 1927, between a select Moscow side and the German workers’ club “Saxony” (which the Moscow team defeated 4 to 1), the contest assumes heightened sociocultural significance within the novel’s broad Soviet context.²⁵ Twenty thousand spectators, the narrator explains at the beginning of chapter 8, “filled the stadium. They had come to see the long-awaited soccer match between Moscow’s own squad and a selected German team.”²⁶ One of these spectators is the ungainly Kavalerov, who makes his way into the stadium (having come with the half-baked intention of killing Andrey Babichev): “While looking for his seat, Kavalerov got entangled in other people’s knees.”²⁷ And as he sizes up his surroundings and searches for his place in the stands, he seems to be searching, at least in a metaphorical sense, for his place in contemporary Soviet society. Be that as it may, Kavalerov also realizes that Valya is in the

stands and strains to make eye contact with her. Allowing “his imagination to take over,” and with “optical illusions [mocking] him,” he thinks that he has caught her eye, even though she has her sights fixed on Makarov and what will be his fierce encounter with the German star, Getzke, on the soccer field.²⁸ Kavaleroev seems far more intent on watching Valya (and “a respectable old man in a cream-colored vest” who has fallen and lies prostrate on the stadium track) than the soccer, yet Olesha’s third-person narrator nevertheless turns to the visual spectacle of the soccer players and the match.²⁹

Olesha’s narrator presents that spectacle as a study in contrasts between two teams and two players—and ultimately the athletic/political ideologies they represent. Whereas he describes the German players in painterly, artistic terms (“vivid German jerseys shone through the pure air like colors of an oil painting against the green background”), he depicts the Soviets in less florid fashion (“The Soviet team trotted out in their red shirts and white shorts”).³⁰ And with the fanfare of a dramatic performance, the German star, Getzke, arrives to cries of acclaim (“‘Getzke! Getzke!’ Shouts came from the crowd thrilled at seeing a famous player and applauding him with zest”); Makarov, on the other hand, makes an unremarkable entrance but will soon stymie the opposition and, in particular, Getzke.³¹

Olesha elaborates on the clashing styles of the soccer match’s two central opponents: “As a player, Volodia was just about as different from Getzke as could be,” Olesha’s narrator remarks. Whereas Makarov epitomizes the professional *athlete* (*professional-sportsmen* in the original Russian), who is disciplined, focused, and “interested above all in the whole game, in victory for his side,” Getzke is the professional *player* (*professional igrok*) “there to display his individual art,” with flamboyance and creativity but also with his self-centered play.³² Getzke, Eliot Borenstein has argued, “functions as Kavaleroev’s ‘wandering id,’ fighting the battle against Volodya that Kavaleroev himself could never hope to join.”³³ And while Getzke, as the narrator notes, “could not be a truly great athlete” (Olesha uses the Russian word for “hack”—*khalturshchik*—to describe Getzke here) because he “despised his teammates as much as his opponents” and cared only about scoring for his own glory, Makarov attentively followed the play of his teammates and “terribly wanted to win” with them, although he “couldn’t help feeling he alone knew how to play against Getzke” since, as a goalie, he was to some degree on his own.³⁴ Irrespective of his ardent allegiance to his team, Makarov is presented as singularly capable of vanquishing the foreign opposition.

In a lengthy discussion of the *Envy* soccer match, Ronald LeBlanc views the competition as “a contest between two diametrically opposed and competing ideologies” reflected in the juxtaposition of Getzke’s—and, by extension,

Kavalerov's—urge for individual glory with Makarov's selfless team-oriented impulse.³⁵ LeBlanc might overstate how Getzke's play exhibits a "romantic, European notion of glory as individual achievement" and how "Makarov's individual heroics are tempered by his absolute loyalty and devotion to the larger social unit," but the contrast in players is unmistakable and crucial to the broader significance of the soccer match.³⁶ Yet despite being "wrapped up in every move [of] his teammates," as Olesha puts it, Makarov has the singular skill and disciplined will to thwart the individualistic artistry of the German forward.³⁷

Although Getzke does manage to score and does so with a fitting theatrical flourish as he knocks the ball into Makarov's goal using "a single movement of his head" that resembled "a gracious bow," it is Makarov who impresses the most with his athleticism.³⁸ In a detailed account of Makarov's superior goal-keeping, Olesha describes the performance in unabashedly hyperbolic terms. Makarov leaps in ways that prove "mathematically impossible" as he amazes opponents and spectators alike with his defense of the goal.

But Volodia would grab the ball, tearing it out of its line of flight, transgressing the laws of physics, for which the indignant elements tried to retaliate. Projected into the air with the ball, he would spin around on his own axis, exactly as if screwing himself into it. Then, having finally pulled it down, he would control it with his belly, his knees, his chin. Volodia would hurl his body on Getzke's low, bolt-like shots as one throws a wet rag on a flame to douse it. The speed of the intercepted ball sometimes tossed Volodya six feet or more to one side; he fell like a colored paper bomb. When the opposing forwards rushed him, the ball finished every time, at his fingertips, high above the melee.³⁹

Conveying a certain awe before Volodya's goalkeeping prowess and his superhuman ability to violate "the laws of physics" while snatching the ball out of the air, Olesha shows his readers the making of a new type of athlete. Makarov's "epic" play on the soccer field underscores a unique heroism afforded the Soviet goalkeeper and, more broadly, the Soviet New Man. By contrast, the foreigner Getzke often seems self-indulgent and wasteful in exhibiting his athleticism.

As a goalkeeper—a figure on the soccer field that appealed to Soviet artists as diverse as Deyneka, the sculptor Yosif Chaykov, Vertov, Kaufman, Semen Timoshenko (director of the popular 1936 film *Goalkeeper* [*Vratar'*]), as well as the émigré Nabokov—Makarov also reflects larger athletic and artistic trends that emerged in the Soviet Union during the late 1920s and early 1930s. He fights for his side yet stands out from the other players in his singular defensive role,

which he performs with impressive self-control, superior athleticism, and amazing, adroit ability, all of which he uses to stymie Getzke and, it seems, repel the Germans.⁴⁰ He thus anticipates the heroism that would permeate so much of Soviet art in the 1930s. Whereas the late 1920s were, as Katerina Clark says of early Stalinist culture, an idealistic age “of radical utopianism, of egalitarian extremism,” the 1930s called for more tough-minded and exalted personal heroics reflecting the exertions of Stalinist Russia: “[Stalinist] heroes had to undertake an epic struggle against enemies both within and without, and it was necessary to find titans as guarantees that the struggle itself was of epic proportions.”⁴¹ Makarov’s astonishing goalkeeping, I would thus argue, fit the emerging ideal of Stalinist culture and its extravagant, often exaggerated presentation of athleticism in art. Describing the inflated portrayal of Soviet athletes, aviators, Stakhanovites, and other Stalinist heroes in the 1930s following the more egalitarian 1920s, Clark notes, “After Soviet society had striven so hard during the Plan years to bring about a kingdom of the ordinary, it had now reset its goals and begun work toward creating a society of the *extraordinary*.”⁴² It is hard not to see Olesha’s rendering of Makarov and his goalkeeping feats as an athletic harbinger of the artistic embrace of the extraordinary under Stalin.

Although Olesha refrains from describing the soccer match’s second half and final result, he implies that, thanks to an impending wind advantage and Makarov’s brilliant defense, the Soviets will overcome the Germans’ one-goal lead. Even though the game remains incomplete, Makarov is hoisted up at halftime by the adoring, celebratory crowd (“Then a body appeared above the crowd, exposed, naked patches flashing: Volodia Makarov was being carried on hundreds of shoulders”), as if to salute, despite the one-goal deficit, the impending victory of the Soviets and their Stalinist ideology over the Germans.⁴³ And following the elliptical winding down of the athletic action in *Envy*’s chapter 9, it also becomes quite clear which young Soviet—Kavalerov or Makarov—will thrive in Stalinist society. Earlier in Part Two of the novel, Ivan Babichev had boasted of himself and Kavalerov that, because they were such creative individuals, “In us, the human race has reached its apex,” yet he also rues that their “epoch is coming to an end.”⁴⁴ A new epoch was indeed dawning, a Soviet epoch in which Makarov’s heroic and nationalistic brand of athleticism would prevail over not only the imaginative, individualistic play of Getzke, but also the imaginative musings of men of the past like Kavalerov. The man-machine Makarov would render obsolete the creative play of both his soccer rival, Getzke, and his everyday rival, Kavalerov. And in Stalinist culture, athletic heroism in the service of national eminence would increasingly hold sway over ludic creativity.

A Strict Young Man and “A Stadium in Odessa”

Olesha's attitude toward Stalinism and Stalinist sports would become even more ambivalent in two works he produced in the mid-1930s: the screenplay for the 1936 film *A Strict Youth* (*Strogi iumosh*) and the short sketch “The Stadium in Odessa” (“Stadion v Odesse,” 1936). Both underscore, in somewhat different ways, the tentative nature of Olesha's acquiescence to the new era's athletic ideology and his stylized affirmation of the New Man as well as that radiant Soviet future bolstered by sports. In both *A Strict Youth* and “The Stadium in Odessa,” Olesha appears willing to accommodate a Socialist Realist aesthetic code and the ideological ideals of Soviet sports, albeit in a creative, original manner that would cause him significant difficulties.

Written in 1934, Olesha's screenplay for *A Strict Youth*—classified, by the author, as a “play for the cinema” (*p'esa dlia kinematografa*)—offers a simple, straightforward presentation of the film's setting and action that corresponds closely with what was subsequently brought to the screen by Abram Room, director of *A Strict Youth* (and of popular silent fare from the 1920s such as *Bed and Sofa*). “*A Strict Youth*,” Irina Grashchenkova contends, “is as much Yury Olesha's film as it is Abram Room's.”⁴⁵ At their core, both the Olesha screenplay and the Room film dramatize a love triangle involving an esteemed surgeon, Dr. Yulyan Stepanov, his younger wife, Masha, and a youthful Komsomol engineer, the athletic New Man Grisha Fokin. As a guest at the well-to-do surgeon's dacha, Grisha falls in love with Masha, whose amorous interaction with him provokes Dr. Stepanov's suspicion and jealousy. When later visiting the GTO sports complex that Grisha himself founded (and where he trains), Dr. Stepanov and Masha learn of Grisha's love for Masha from Grisha's fellow athlete and forthright friend Diskobol (i.e., “Discus Thrower”), thus prompting the surgeon to disinvite Grisha to a dinner he and his wife had arranged at their dacha (this disinvitation comes to Grisha via the hanger-on Fedor Tsitronov, who lives with the Stepanovs). In the meantime, a female member of Grisha's Komsomol collective falls ill but is miraculously resurrected by Dr. Stepanov, an event that triggers a subsequent reconciliation between Grisha and the surgeon. Olesha and Room, however, leave it somewhat ambiguous as to whether the love that Grisha still harbors for Masha will persist and be reciprocated.

Even as the plot of *A Strict Youth* proves relatively straightforward, ideology and high-minded athletics play a large, complex role in both the screenplay and film. The figure of Grisha Fokin, who leads an active life as a model Soviet youth, embodies many of Olesha's athletic ideals. More fleshed out than *Envy's* Volodya Makarov but still a prototype, Grisha conveys through his action and



Figure 29. Abram Room, *A Strict Youth*, 1936.

words much of the exalted, ambitious spirit of Stalinist athletics.⁴⁶ At the GTO complex, young athletes there discuss how Grisha, having established the sports complex, has cultivated a set of moral and spiritual principles that includes honesty, generosity, humility, and even chastity (fig. 29). “These are bourgeois qualities,” remarks one young man. “No,” responds another, “these are human qualities. . . . The bourgeoisie distorted these concepts due to the power of money.”⁴⁷ Out of their healthy, athletic socialist lifestyle comes a celebration of elite athletics and a rejection of early Soviet egalitarianism and proletarian values for the sake of Stalin-era morals, which back in the 1920s would have been perceived as “bourgeois” and even outdated. In Room’s film, however, this GTO scene becomes a semi-fantastical, semi-parodic sequence, as Room lends a dream-like aura and distinct air of Greek antiquity to largely homosocial action: Grisha is initially shown racing in a horse-drawn chariot, while the shirtless Diskobol practices his discus throwing in the shadows of a nearly empty neo-classical stadium; Grisha then struts his muscular body before ancient Greek statues. Evoking the utopian yet far-from-egalitarian sphere of Plato’s *Republic* and the athletic ideals of ancient Greece, *A Strict Youth* points to a new athletic code under Stalin that would favor elite competition over mass participation in *fizkul’tura* and other sports.

Much of Olesha's screenplay and much of Room's film compensate for, and seemingly defend, the move under Stalin from athletic egalitarianism to a full-throated embrace of elite athletic competition, at the forefront of which was the New Man. Describing Grisha's muscular build and blue eyes, Olesha writes, "This is the beauty of the Red Army Soldier, the beauty of young people who on their chest wear the GTO badge. It arises from frequent contact with water, machines, and gymnastics equipment."⁴⁸ Approaching a fascist aesthetic and anticipating Nazi Germany's cinematic presentation of athletics in *Olympia: Festival of Nations and Festival of Beauty* (1938), Leni Riefenstahl's film of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, Olesha and Room depict Grisha and his fellow athletes through exalted, almost mythical imagery. And amid talk of rejecting the early Soviet notion of "leveling down" (*uravnilovka*), a concept that Stalin disdained, the following principle, attributed to Grisha Fokin, appears prominently in both the screenplay and the film: "The very notion of competition undermines the notion of equality. Equality is immobility, competition is movement. Compete with the best. This is the first rule."⁴⁹ The "best," it is explained, are those who invent machines, grapple with nature, and create music and thought, an elite group that includes both Dr. Stepanov and Grisha, who come to appreciate one another at the end, even if Grisha continues to take a romantic interest in Masha. Yet as Evgeny Dobrenko notes in his discussion of the screenplay and film, via their stylized characters and setting Olesha and Room had created a "de-realization" of Soviet life (e.g., through exaggerated scenes of homosocial athleticism and philosophizing) without providing "a replacement," as orthodox Socialist Realist art certainly would have provided.⁵⁰

The film, despite its attempt at ideological correctness, never saw the light of day. It was accused of resorting to "formalistic device and insipid stylization" that coincided too overtly with the rising fascist aesthetic in the West (while its homosocial content, it can be assumed, caused official consternation), and the film therefore was quickly shelved before its planned public release.⁵¹ As Beaujour puts it, "In the conditions that prevailed in 1936, even *A Strict Youth*, a reverent offering on the altar of the New Soviet Man, was judged, like the offering of Cain, unacceptable."⁵² Olesha and Room's creative acquiescence to Stalinist and Socialist Realist ideals ultimately proved in vain and detrimental to their careers, as both Olesha and Room found themselves silenced soon after the limited 1936 release of *A Strict Youth*, whereas other Soviet sports-related films, such as Semen Timoshenko's musical *Goalkeeper* (*Vratar'*, 1936) or Igor' Savchenko's comedy of morals *A Chance Meeting* (*Sluchainaiia vstrecha*, 1936), would find a much more receptive audience under Stalin.⁵³

Earlier in 1936, however, Olesha was still celebrating the bright future of Soviet sports, as his short sketch "The Stadium in Odessa" attests. Here the

monumental modern sports stadium designed for elite athletic competition portended a promising Soviet future bursting with prescribed notions of dynamic progress. New constructions such as the sports stadium, it stands to reason, offered a ritualized form of movement and a vivid symbol of social transformation. “After the revolution,” Olesha explains early on in his short sketch, “the city remained immobile for some time. Its beauty began to seem dead. But in the last years the outward appearance of the city has begun to acquire a newness coming from Soviet hands.”⁵⁴ Stadia and the athletics they offered would exemplify such cultural momentum.

In the first half of the sketch, Olesha describes the route he takes to reach the Odessa stadium, passing, as it were, from past to present—and future. Along this route he observes an array of Russian and Soviet cultural landmarks. One of the first streets, for instance, that Olesha’s narrator travels along is “Pushkin Street” (where the revered Russian poet once resided). Then come a series of other noteworthy cultural spots: a bridge “immortalized in [Eisenstein’s] film *The Battleship Potemkin*”; Lizogub Street, which, the narrator notes, takes the name of a hanged young man who became the subject of the Tolstoy story “Svetlogub”; “the newly constructed [Taras] Shevchenko Park of Culture and Recreation”; and a column of the International with a bas-relief of Karl Marx.⁵⁵ Through emblems of traditional Russian culture and Marxism, he arrives at the monument to Stalinist athletics and its awe-inspiring projection of the Soviet future.

Describing the Odessa stadium’s environs, Olesha dwells on the light-filled setting, reminiscent of the room in which Andrey Babichev practiced his calisthenics at the beginning of *Envy*: “Here the air has a completely special light. The sea. We’re almost at the sea. A glass of water brought into a room will make it cool and fresh. And that is so much water, the sea.”⁵⁶ And describing the “green soccer field” at the center of the stadium, Olesha emphasizes the ideal purity of the scene: “How clean and thick this green color is.”⁵⁷ The descriptive terms applied to the new sports arena hint at a rarified environment for sports under Stalin (and prove similar to accounts of the courtyard where Volodya and Valya practiced their jumping in *Envy* and of the GTO complex in the screenplay for *A Strict Youth*). Olesha, however, struggles somewhat to do justice to the “marvelous” stadium.

It’s impossible to imagine a more marvelous sight.

The knack of comparison proves powerless. What does it resemble? I don’t know, I’ve never seen it before. It’s a picture of the future.

No, it’s not that. It’s the border, the transition, the realized moment of transition of the present into the future.⁵⁸

Just as the soccer match in *Envy* comes to represent an important pivot point between a creative, egalitarian past and the country's heroic, socialist future, the stadium and its green grass give Olesha a form for his country's bold transition forward, whereby the stadium and, implicitly, its sports help realize the ephemeral, lofty aims that avant-garde artists had once had of transforming the present into the future.

At the end of his short sketch, Olesha conveys what the stadium means to him as an embodiment of the future. When gazing at the thirty-five thousand seats of the stadium, he effuses, "One could admire this view for hours. A feeling of epos is born in the consciousness. You tell yourself: it already is, exists, lasts. A government exists, a country of Socialism, our native land, its style, its beauty, its daily occurrence, its magnificent realities."⁵⁹ Marveling at the stadium and its metonymic symbolization of a Soviet state that had been rebuilt and was ready to compete, Olesha recognizes that the country's lofty socialist dreams, so closely tied to sports under Stalin, had materialized before his eyes. "Dreams have become reality," he proclaims. "This stadium so resembles a dream—and besides that is so realistic."⁶⁰ The stadium and all it represents enable the country's social and athletic dreams to become an actuality, as Olesha comes close to conveying the ethos of Socialist Realism via sports. In a 1936 interview, in fact, Olesha remarked on the relation of art to such lofty dreams: "Man's powerlessness before certain phenomena of nature and life is a subject for transformation by the power of art into splendid images. It is for this that art exists. It is the bridge between man's dream of perfection and the imperfection of his nature."⁶¹ For Olesha, the stadium was that bridge, combining monumental art and athletics to realize "man's dream of perfection" and to overcome the imperfection that Olesha acknowledged but Socialist Realism would render as a vestige of the past.

Aleksandr Deyneka

"I love new landscapes containing the green rectangle of a soccer field, black and red running tracks, the semi-circle structure and stateliness of our stadium facades," wrote Aleksandr Deyneka in a short 1946 piece titled "Art and Sports" ("Iskusstvo i sport") that appeared in the popular Soviet journal *Ogonek* (Little flame).⁶² The celebrated Soviet painter, expounding on both the aesthetic appeal of modern sports and the impressive aura of his country's athletic infrastructure, further exclaimed, "I love the bloom of football jerseys, strict in their classical simplicity and contemporary in their movement."⁶³ Deyneka, much like his compatriot Olesha, had found in sports an enthralling mix of not only the classical and the contemporaneous but also the aesthetic and the ideological.

Deyneka presented Soviet athletics as an idealized landscape ripe for artistic—and sociopolitical—interpretation. “Sports,” Deyneka suggested, “contain all shades of feelings. They are lyrical, they are buoyant. In sports is so much optimism. In them is the beginning of the heroic.”⁶⁴ A distinct lyricism would indeed permeate Deyneka’s scenes of athletics, as would an optimistic, heroic tone that presaged and then accommodated Socialist Realism. Replete with athletic vigor and joyous movement, Deyneka’s multitude of sports paintings and drawings reflected the evolving social parameters of Soviet athletics while also underscoring the aesthetic appeal of athletics under Stalin.

As the painter explained, he could not help but recognize the ubiquity of sports in Soviet society, and that compelled him to probe sports as a theme throughout his career from the early 1920s up through his late works in the 1950s and 1960s. Calling sports “a captivating spectacle,” Deyneka reveled in the “beauty of unrestricted movements, the determination of runners, the elasticity of jumpers, the picture-perfect blue sky and the green field,” facets of everyday athletic activity in the Soviet Union that he attempted to amplify in his art.⁶⁵ “My artwork is extremely wide-reaching in terms of form and subject,” he explained, “but at every phase I have perceived in it an urge toward sports, health, movement.”⁶⁶ For Deyneka, sports and art were inseparable, as he emphasized in “Art and Sports.”

Sports have one wonderful feature—they lie within the most diverse limits of art. As a topic, they are inexhaustible, for they are democratic and popular. . . .

For my work sports entail a whole host of successes and beautiful opportunities, which are revealed in every new match and competition for millions of participants and viewers of all ages.

I am fortunate that I live in a time when the novelty of things and phenomena gives rise to new forms so indispensable to the artist.⁶⁷

Although Deyneka would eventually become synonymous with Socialist Realist painting and the strict ideological parameters of Stalinist art and life, it is possible to see—as with Rodchenko (and to some extent Olesha)—that he did not merely submit to the tenets of Socialist Realism but found in sports a measure of experimental freedom and personal expression well into the Stalinist era.

Having grown up in Kursk, where he participated in local artistic organizations formed after 1917, the athletically inclined Deyneka moved in the early 1920s to Moscow and began studying at VKhUTEMAS, the state art and technical school founded in 1920 (and where Lissitzky and Rodchenko, among others, taught). As Vladimir Sysoev explains, the “wonderful” sports hall at

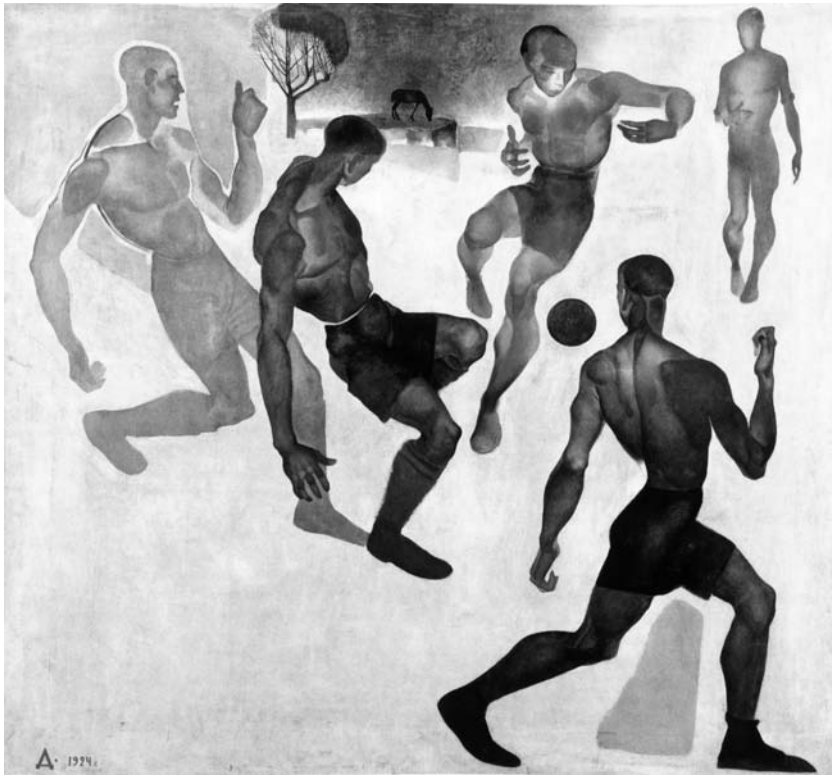


Figure 30. Aleksandr Deyneka, *Soccer*, 1924. Oil on canvas, 105 × 113.5 cm. Collection Vladimir Tsarenkov, London. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.

VKhUTEMAS allowed Deyneka to practice boxing against the likes of celebrated boxers such as Moscow champion K. V. Gradopolov, who subsequently became the subject of several drawings and paintings by the artist.⁶⁸ The writer (and aviator) Ivan Rakhillo, a contemporary of Deyneka's and fellow student at VKhUTEMAS at the time, likewise describes the vigorous athletic activity at the school in his reminiscences on Deyneka. Similar to the Bauhaus in Germany, VKhUTEMAS, according to Rakhillo, held championships in various sports (volleyball, fencing, boxing, rowing, and gymnastics), and Deyneka participated in many of these athletic activities, particularly boxing.⁶⁹ Rakhillo emphasized Deyneka's boxing prowess as well as his "powerful shoulders and broad chest."⁷⁰ It was also at this time at VKhUTEMAS that Deyneka made the acquaintance of Mayakovsky, another broad-chested artistic figure of the era, whose acquaintance with the painter coincided with Deyneka's initial

avant-garde period and his participation in the OST (Society of Easel Artists) avant-garde group.

As early as 1923, just prior to joining OST, Deyneka began probing the motif of sports in his paintings and drawings. Most notable is his 1924 painting *Soccer (Futbol, fig. 30)*, which he displayed at the *First Discussional Exhibition of Associations of Active Revolutionary Art (Pervaia diskussionnaia vystavka ob "edinenii aktivnogo revoliutsionnogo iskusstva)* in 1924. It shows five shirtless men in shorts with impressive musculature kicking about a ball. These five athletes seem to materialize almost out of thin air: there is no discernible background or clear spatial perspective or even soccer field, and while three of the players appear in vivid hues, two are painted in muted, faded colors, as if shrouded in fog. Based on a 1923 drawing that featured a sharper background and perspective, *Soccer*, although undeniably figurative, is one of Deyneka's more experimental works. The athletes, sinewy and sculpted in a manner quite different from what predominated in Deyneka's later sports paintings, appear to float about the canvas, as if in a dream. In the upper central portion of the painting, a small bucolic scene of horses, a field, a tree, and blue sky can be found, adding to the oneiric air of semi-reality.

Deyneka's choice of soccer as the subject of this early painting was not incidental and would in fact prove crucial to his artistic development. In 1935, Deyneka retrospectively discussed the influence of soccer on his maturation as a young painter.

In 1924 I exhibited my work for the first time. I had drawn soccer. I loved the game and knew it, just as thousands of my peers did, just as tens of thousands of excited spectators did. The game every time pushed me toward wanting to paint a picture. I made tens of drawings and, outlining one of many unsuccessful sketches, I observed that the sketch did not fit into the compositional norms of familiar paintings. I began to establish a new plasticity and was compelled to work without any historical precedent. I surmised that I should paint that which excited and interested so many. In my work this proved a success. The game propelled me toward my own individual language.⁷¹

Deyneka's "own individual language" would, as he explains here, offer a "new plasticity" that drew in explicit ways on popular athletic games like soccer. His aim, he also declared in this same 1935 piece, was to produce art that was "at the pinnacle of its era," and he clearly accomplished this resolute aim by incorporating into his figurative work the action and inherent thrills of modern competitive sports. Such attention to athletic plasticity would prove unprecedented

in Soviet painting and quite distinct of course from the earlier treatment of athletics in Suprematist and Constructivist art that had preceded it.⁷²

From 1925 until 1927, Deyneka belonged to the artistic group known as the Society of Easel Artists, or OST, which in the mid-1920s organized four major exhibitions, where the group displayed figurative, albeit dreamlike, works that strikingly diverged from Left art's nonobjective aesthetic and focused on topical themes such as industry and, to a lesser extent, sports. Stating that their art should "be one of the factors in the cultural revolution affecting the reconstruction and design of our new way of life and the creation of the new Socialist culture," OST artists rejected abstraction for the sake of "Revolutionary contemporaneity and clarity of subject matter."⁷³ As John Bowlt notes, OST artists' "interest was in the present tense, not in historical episodes, and their conception of the work of art was a tendentious one—landscapes, still-lives and nudes were 'modernized,'" thus giving rise to paintings with "industrial complexes, scenes of violence, and track meets."⁷⁴ The propagandistic intent of OST painting, however, remained measured while the group flourished in the mid-1920s, even if, as Bowlt goes on to argue, OST paintings anticipated the later figurative fantasies found in Socialist Realist painting.⁷⁵ Eventually, as it turned out, the lyrical, semi-surreal images of OST would give way to the more doctrinaire figurative paintings produced by artists belonging to AKhRR (Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia), direct precursors of the Socialist Realists—and they only sporadically depicted sports (see, for instance, Sergey Luppov's *Sports Games at a Stadium* [*Sportivnye igry na stadione*, 1927], a proto-Socialist Realist scene full of smiling Soviet *fizkul'turniki* on a sunny sports field).

In his relatively brief OST phase, which entailed participation in several exhibitions, Deyneka produced only a limited number of paintings and drawings devoted to sports, for it was in the 1930s and 1940s that he would home in on Soviet athletics. At the second OST exhibit, which took place in 1926 at the State Historical Museum on Moscow's Red Square, Deyneka exhibited his canvas titled *Boxer Gradopolov* (*Bokser Gradopolov*, 1925), also referred to at the time as *Knockout* (*Nokaut*), in which a powerful boxer stands over his vanquished, sprawled-out opponent. Based on drawings Deyneka produced in the mid-1920s that show boxers in their corners or flattened on the ring floor, *Boxer Gradopolov* conveys a raw violence similar to the aggressive tenor of George Bellows's boxing paintings from the early twentieth century, albeit with less detailed figurative form than that found in the American Bellows's highly naturalistic, expressionistic boxing scenes (e.g., *Club Night* [1907] and *Stag at Sharkey's* [1908]). It is telling that Deyneka, who would become quite adept at navigating the vagaries of art policy under Stalin, ultimately adhered to growing public Soviet disdain for boxing and its inherent violence by destroying his *Boxer Gradopolov*.⁷⁶ Only a photograph of the painting exists today.

Deyneka was not, as it turns out, the only OST painter who experimented in creative ways with sports. Yury Pimenov, who would go on to produce relatively standard Socialist Realist fare in the 1930s, also produced a couple of notable sports scenes while a member of OST. In his 1926 painting *Tennis*, for instance, he presents an expressionistic and slightly unsettling image of Soviet athletics. Shown in 1929 at the *Exhibition of Contemporary Art of Soviet Russia* in New York City alongside other sports-related work (e.g., Pimenov's own *Race [Beg]*, K. Vyalov's *Start* [a rowing scene], and Deyneka's *Two Women [Dve naturshchitsy, 1923]*), *Tennis* features two female tennis players partnering in a game of doubles on a court behind which looms a dark sky along with a distant bridge.⁷⁷ Although figurative in the manner of all OST-related work, the painting uses an expressionist, graphic linear style of shadows and faintly grotesque forms to reveal the sinewy muscles of these two female tennis players, who appear to move about the court in a machine-like manner, much like Deyneka's 1924 soccer players. Only modestly resembling the robust, healthy-looking female athletes who would frequent Socialist Realist paintings in the late 1930s and 1940s, Pimenov's two tennis players exemplify the experimental yet figurative thrust of 1920s Soviet art devoted to athletics.⁷⁸ And in another painting of 1926, the artist's interest in athletics takes on a more idealized appearance: Pimenov's *Soccer (Futbol)* has three soaring soccer players gracefully converge, much as leaping players do in Deyneka's 1927 aquarelle that was likewise titled *Soccer (Futbol, 1927)*. As Pimenov later wrote, "The beauty of sports is the beauty of movement advancing toward perfection."⁷⁹ For both Deyneka and Pimenov, athletics provided a vivid, synecdochic illustration of their nation's progression toward a social ideal.⁸⁰

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Deyneka continued to maintain his commitment to a revolutionary, avant-garde approach to art as he shifted his allegiances from OST to the October Association, of which he was a member between 1928 and 1931. During this time, Deyneka began producing a series of paintings devoted to competitive runners and skiers: *The Race (Beg, 1930)*, *The Race (Women's X-Country) (Beg [Zhenskii kross], 1931)*, *Skiers (Lyzhniki, 1931)*, *The Race (Beg, 1932)*, and *The Race (Beg, 1932–33)* all celebrate the collective yet competitive spirit of early Soviet athletics. In each of these paintings, young, fit athletes focused on intense competition appear to hurdle toward a radiant Soviet ideal. In *Skiers*, for instance, a group of seven virtually faceless athletes (both men and women) races from left to right against an indiscriminate, blank background, the speed of their implicitly rhythmic motion accentuated by their dynamic positioning as they glide along the snow in two approximate rows and push themselves forward with their poles. They appear to be part of an ambitious collective vision, participating in an invigorating yet vague societal dash into the yet-to-be-determined future. As Christina Kiaer has observed of

Deyneka's early 1930s paintings devoted to the human body and athletics, the figures exude a dreamlike "inaccessibility," for the painter seems to have made almost no attempt to depict these athletes in a detailed, naturalistic manner (as he would in his later sports paintings from the 1940s and 1950s).⁸¹ Or consider Deyneka's *The Race* from 1932–33 (plate 12), in which five male runners run from right to left down the lanes of a track, with the lines of the track underscoring the rigorous formalism at play in the painting. Almost indistinguishable from each other, save for their colored uniforms or shirtless appearance (two are shirtless and three are, respectively, in white, red, and yellow uniforms), these five runners lean forward with determination while a young woman in the right foreground observes their fluid motion past her. With this spectator, we are meant to participate vicariously in the elusive and ultimately metaphorical race. Like many of Deyneka's sports paintings from the 1920s and 1930s, the indistinct forms and abstracted setting of *The Race* have an air of unreality to them, underscoring the early Soviet era's fusion of modernist aesthetics and modern athletics and alluding to a radiant new world predicated on collective athletic activity and healthy bodies.⁸² Boasting powerful physiques and headlong momentum, the five runners of *The Race* lead the way into the future, if only vaguely.

Further exemplifying Deyneka's delicate balance of the physical reality so essential to athletic play and his idealistic vision for both Soviet sports and the athletic New Man are two soccer paintings he produced in the first half of the 1930s. In *Soccer Player (Futbolist)*, 1932, plate 13), the athlete leaps through the sky, having evidently kicked a soccer ball that floats next to him in the upper-right corner of the painting, while in the background stands a Russian Orthodox church.⁸³ The juxtaposition of athletics and religion provides the painting with an unsettling, surreal dissonance that diverges from the more sublime aura evoked in the 1924 *Soccer*, yet the religious presence suggests that a secular form of transcendence is available to the athlete as his physical leap replaces the spiritual ascendance implicit in the Russian Orthodox backdrop.⁸⁴ This soccer player jumps upward into a higher, exalted realm, as sports play loosely approximates the young nation's advance—or leap—toward hallowed socialist ideals.⁸⁵

The Goalkeeper (Vratar'), from 1934, likewise links everyday athletics to dreams of the future. On an almost empty field with a small grove of trees in the background (similar to the trees found in the background of Deyneka's 1924 *Soccer*), a goalkeeping athlete leaps across the face of his goal to the left to grab an incoming ball as two other players in the distance follow the action from afar. In this semi-surreal scene depicted via a vantage point from behind the goal, the larger-than-life athlete seemingly floats through the air, his face and front side

not visible, while his giant, stretched-out frame and long arms expand across the long horizontal canvas. He appears to defy gravity, much like New Man Volodya Makarov does when keeping goal in Olesha's *Envy*. Both his appearance and performance border on the heroic. Here the artwork, with its impressive dimensions (119 × 352 cm), and the airborne athlete seem in harmonious equilibrium, as if to accentuate the unity of art and athletics envisioned by Deyneka.⁸⁶

But, despite the ephemeral quality of his sports paintings of the 1920s and 1930s and his early aesthetic resistance to Socialist Realist art, Deyneka could still be said to have pointed toward Socialist Realism. As Kiaer argues, Deyneka's "dynamic figures are all in motion, on their way toward becoming fully achieved and legible Soviet subjects, but as yet still in transition."⁸⁷ And in an oft-cited 1936 article on Deyneka, the Soviet critic Rafael Kaufman noted that Deyneka not only exhibited a predilection for depicting "the person in action, in motion" but also presented in his work "a new ideal of the human body" and a "solid cohesion with Soviet reality."⁸⁸ Just such an amalgamation of ideals and Soviet "reality" inspired "confidence in his future large-scale successes."⁸⁹ For Deyneka, Kaufman concluded, the way to these successes lay "through a struggle for completeness and for the ideological purity of the realistic image, for the true unity of his method."⁹⁰ Just such an attitude toward Deyneka's artwork, not surprisingly, came to dominate the Soviet perspective on his sports paintings. By 1931, Deyneka had left the October Association and joined the more conservative RAPKh (Russian Association of Proletarian Artists), a move that suggested at least a growing acquiescence to ideological authority. Several recent scholars, however, have argued that Deyneka's sports paintings and drawings in the 1930s reflected less an adherence to the evolving tenets of Socialist Realism than a sincere reflection of his desire to depict the optimistic, dynamic spirit of Soviet athletics, a nonideological sporting ethos to which he adhered. Irina Ostrakova, for instance, notes, "[Deyneka's] refrain 'To paint sunnily and with light!' was not a parroting of communist slogans, it was his internal position, hard-won and sincere."⁹¹ As an aficionado of sports, Deyneka infused his painting with a genuine appreciation for the harmony, joy, and freedom afforded by athletic activity.

Still, it is unmistakable that Deyneka's later sports paintings reveal that the artist ultimately yielded to Socialist Realism and the Stalinist vision of sports and Soviet society that prevailed after the mid-1930s. Thus Kaufman proved prescient in predicting Deyneka's "future large-scale successes" in depicting "Soviet reality" as the excitement, optimism, and formalist creativity of Deyneka's early sports images gave way to conventional scenes of athletic competition (and industry and war). Discussing Deyneka's passage into canonical

Socialist Realist art, Andrey Kovalev notes, “The ‘sports and youth thematic’ that was so dear to Deyneka catastrophically began to lose its past vitality. The *fizkul’turniki* floating above the water and the soccer players pictured in complex perspective had turned into a banal, trivialized standard for the design of public and recreational spaces.”⁹² Although Kovalev has in mind here Deyneka’s late Florentine mosaics *Skiers* (*Lyzhniki*, 1950) and *Hockey Players* (*Khokkeisty*, 1959–60), which clearly lack the creativity and dynamism of his earlier work (such as early paintings and drawings Deyneka devoted to the Dynamo swimming facility in Sevastopol, e.g., *Sevastopol: Water Station “Dynamo”* [*Sevastopol’: Vodnaia stantsiia “Dinamo,”* 1934]), one can begin to see just such a “catastrophic” loss of vitality in his paintings by the 1940s, when, as Kovalev notes, Deyneka “suddenly lost reality, that very reality that had stimulated him so.”⁹³ The painter’s previous balance of dream and reality dissipated, as a contrived form of Stalinist reality (a realized dream?) proliferated in Deyneka’s work from the 1940s and 1950s.

Figurative contrivance, I would argue, detracts from much of Deyneka’s later athletic scenes. It is an artificial veneer of idealized Stalinist reality and athletic archetypes, for example, that exemplifies such well-known Deyneka paintings as *Expanse* (*Razdol’e*, 1944) and *Relay on Ring Road “B”* (*Estafeta po kol’tsu “B,”* 1947), both of which are infused with bright sunshine and vivid detail, evincing a style that undermines the athletic dream while rendering the reality illegitimate and false. *Expanse*, painted as World War II was drawing to a close for the victorious Soviet Union, shows a cross-country race of young women through a hilly rural landscape, apparently celebrating the nation’s imminent military victory (thanks to all the conspicuously absent men, who are off competing on another front). Yet whereas Deyneka’s earlier paintings of running and ski races (e.g., *The Race* [*Women’s X-Country*] from 1931) featured an overt drive and vitality in their depiction of athletics, boasting an array of indeterminate forms against virtually abstract backgrounds and from unconventional perspectives, in *Expanse* the female runners appear slightly less dynamic than Deyneka’s earlier athletes while all the highly naturalistic details and specificity of place suggest a prescribed, state-approved aesthetic devoid of yesteryear’s experimentation. The painting thus departs from the ambitions and urgency of Deyneka’s early work and instead promotes a fixed, harmonious pseudo reality that would characterize so many Socialist Realist paintings of the era. Meanwhile, the style and context of Deyneka’s *Relay on Ring Road “B”* (plate 14) even more explicitly conform to the ideology of Socialist Realism. Here three rather static female runners pass their batons to their male counterparts on a wide Moscow Ring Road in a setting that exudes an aura of authoritarian monumentalism, given the wide streets, the imposing Stalinist architecture, and the

handsome countenance of both athletes and onlookers. Dynamo flags flap in the wind as spectators gaze passively at the athletes.⁹⁴ The specificity of the event and place undermines the ambition of the painting and both its social and aesthetic impact. Storm clouds may loom in the distance and several cracks may be forming in the Moscow asphalt, but the sunshine and naturalistic detail lend the painting a finality that runs counter to the revolutionary spirit of Deyneka's earlier sports paintings and indicate that the painter ultimately accommodated the Stalinist aestheticization of sports.

But if Deyneka can be said to have largely succumbed to Socialist Realism, he also can be said to have retained elements of artistic and psychological individuality. One need only look at Deyneka's *Self-Portrait* (*Avtoportret*, plate 15) of 1948. It shows a large, almost life-size image of the painter (175.2 × 110 cm.), as physically fit as any New Man or young *fizkul'turnik*.⁹⁵ Dressed in shorts and in an open striped robe revealing his chiseled bare chest and strong legs, the middle-aged Deyneka confidently gazes toward the viewer. He stands in front of a blank wall, a blank canvas, and a simple bed on which lie a pillow and magazine. The surroundings mark him as an artist while their austerity accentuates his bold, athletic presence. Although compliant in certain respects to the era's realist aesthetic and state-sponsored subtext of *fizkul'tura*, the painting nevertheless presents Deyneka himself as at once an athlete, an artist, and an inveterate individual.

Deyneka's *Self-Portrait*, I would also propose, provides a conclusion of sorts to the long, fervent period of Russian and Soviet art devoted to sports that began at the beginning of the twentieth century and lasted nearly half a century. In this it might be paired as a pictorial bookend to the era with Ilya Mashkov's aforementioned *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Konchalovsky* from 1910. These two self-portraits frame the development of sports from late Imperial Russia into the late Stalinist era and illustrate the persistence through change of the athletic artist as revolutionary figure. In Mashkov's portrait, the artist and his colleague Konchalovsky, also a painter, pose as strongmen in a provocative—and slightly humorous—manner that emphasizes their muscles and creative might. Deyneka's version may be less dramatic and less humorous, but given its historical and political context, it constitutes just as strong a statement of artistic individuality. In *Self-Portrait*, Deyneka has carried the bravado of strongmen and avant-garde artists into the late Stalinist era, illustrating the expressive freedom that sports and art share at their best.

Conclusion

This New Sporting Life

Artistic treatment of sports in Russia and the Soviet Union, as the juxtaposition in chapter 6 of Mashkov's *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Konchalovsky* and Deyneka's *Self-Portrait* suggests, followed a discernible trajectory from turn-of-the-century imperial culture up through the 1917 Revolution and well into the Stalinist era. Although Soviet art devoted to sports would of course continue into the 1950s and beyond, it was in the first half of the twentieth century, when Russian and Soviet society underwent rapid change and when the nation's sports system had yet to achieve full institutionalization, that artists experimented so notably—and freely, at least for a time—with sporting culture and made athletic action an explicit component of their creative vision. The period's art took to heart the energy and ideals of sports. Russian and early Soviet art fused modern sports with innovation, revolution, and the widespread belief that such creativity could help bring about not only a better human physique, but also a better society. That is evident in Kuprin's glorification of the Herculean circus wrestler; Mandel'shtam's playful appreciation for the modern era's sports; and avant-garde writing, painting, clothing design, cinema, and photography that reflected Left artists' vision of a new athletic person and a new athletic way of life. A future fortified by the collective, positive ideals of modern athletics beckoned, even as Soviet culture shifted toward a more authoritarian and less creative vision for sports under Stalin.

Prior to and then in defiance of the mounting political pressure, the Russian and early Soviet artists discussed in this study turned to sports to further their own aesthetic and ideological aims. Emulation of the modern athlete became both enticing and expedient. The powerful strongman, the well-trained

wrestler, the swift soccer player, and the industrious *fizkul'turnik* as envisioned and presented by the era's painters, writers, and filmmakers possessed the physical strength and presence to elevate both sports and art as vehicles for social change. Whether avant-garde artists such as Lentulov staging mock wrestling matches, poets as diverse in their outlook as Blok and Kamensky taking up athletics to bolster their poetic personae, or—in a somewhat different vein—the artists associated with *Victory over the Sun* depicting the sportsman as iconoclastic revolutionary, Russian and early Soviet artists did not just home in on the theme of modern sports, for they also allowed the era's athletic spirit to transform their radical artistic outlook. Vertov and Kaufman even ran about with the athletes they filmed to expand their radical vision of modernity, just as October Association photographers—Rodchenko, Langman, and so on—wielded their Leicas like young sportsmen as they traversed the dynamic landscape of the new Soviet state. The modern athlete defied tradition in ways that artists personalized and took in provocative, inventive directions.

Yet, given the prevalence of sports in early Soviet society, it is somewhat surprising that there were not even more films, novels, and paintings devoted to the phenomenon of organized athletics. Popular sports such as wrestling and soccer and then *fizkul'tura* may have altered the cultural landscape, but not every Russian and early Soviet artist aestheticized athletic activity. The close connections between cinema and sports, for instance, did not translate into a slew of Soviet films celebrating modern athletics, and only the likes of inventive writers such as Olesha (or a much less talented one such as Breshko-Breshkovsky before the Revolution) had the temerity to incorporate into prose the athletic particulars of the era. Early Soviet painters and photographers had an easier time of it since they could depict one distinct moment of sports action, but filmmakers and writers in particular faced the challenge of capturing the flow and physicality of sporting events through a narrative format (despite American writers having notable success tapping into the sport of baseball and its more leisurely tempo).¹ Questions thus remain about art's ability to replicate the excitement and energy so unique to athletic action. Although early twentieth-century sports generated conspicuous dynamism and a revolutionary, iconoclastic spirit of immediate importance to the era's literature, painting, and cinema, artists had to broaden the scope of their work if they were to evoke the spontaneity and spectacle of athletics. In elevating impulse over intellect, sports challenged artists and compelled those who embraced the athletic to reevaluate the relationship between art and physical reality as well as between art and audience.

Irrespective of the applicability of athletics to the arts, early twentieth-century sports proved an exhilarating phenomenon bolstered by its novelty

and implicit affront to the staid, sedentary past. The carefree play so fundamental to athletic games and the fresh, interactive form of public entertainment found at circuses, on fields, and in stadiums were what first induced artists to incorporate elements of sports into their work and to appeal to audiences as athletes so often do. But once the initial thrill of these new games began to wear off and once athletic play became a more routine, established facet of everyday life, the innovative artistic approaches to sports accordingly dwindled, even as art devoted to athletics increased under Stalin. And once Soviet society had achieved the outward stability of the Stalinist era, what diminished was the originality and idealism that had initially accompanied so much of the nation's sports-inspired artwork. The energizing ideals of competitive sports and *fizkul'tura* soon became subsumed by political concerns and censorship, resurfacing only later in the 1960s and 1970s through works like Andrey Sinyavsky's novel *The Trial Begins* (*Sud idet*, 1960), which features a soccer match, or Elem Klimov's 1970 *Sports, Sports, Sports* (*Sport, Sport, Sport*), which combines documentary footage with fiction film.

Sports, it is clear, had a major role to play in the social—and artistic—designs of the Soviet state. What had begun as seemingly innocent athletic games in prerevolutionary Russia became in the end a vehicle for the ideological objectives of an authoritarian Soviet regime. Both Olesha and Deyneka, along with others such as Rodchenko, felt the need in the 1930s to balance their aesthetic appreciation for athletic play with submission to pressure from a government intent on using sports not only to entertain the masses but also to legitimize the socialist “way of life” aggressively constructed under Stalin. Sports proved quite malleable for Stalinist social design, as the contribution of athletics to an egalitarian, idealistic vision for the country and a powerful New Man was transformed into something more doctrinaire, dystopian, and devoid of the joy and harmony so intrinsic to athletic games. As John Hoberman broadly notes, “Sport is a latently political issue in any society, since the cultural themes which inhere in a sport culture are potentially ideological in a political sense.”² We can surely factor art into such an equation. The artistic treatment of sports in Stalinist Russia—as in Nazi Germany, so vividly illustrated by Riefenstahl's *Olympia* films—reflected, it seems fair to say, political ideology and social design in ways that tainted the entire enterprise of modern athletics in the country and beyond.

That said, sports and avant-garde notions of the artist-athlete provided a means for defying the strong winds of Stalinist ideology and Socialist Realism. Paperny, whom I have cited at various points in this book, notes that within Stalinist culture “the idea of authorship [had] no place; every author [moved] in the one and only direction,” yet early Soviet artists still used sports to maintain a measure of their own individuality well into the Stalinist era.³ The physical

freedom intrinsic to sports led to a broader cultural freedom that artists accessed through the athletic body. Although Deyneka's 1948 self-portrait did not exactly flout the nullification of authorship under Socialist Realism, and neither did Soviet sports photography of the 1930s, given the state-sponsored "direction" of Stalinist sports, it is nevertheless clear that sports allowed for personal expression and at least some artistic resistance to the dominant trends of Socialist Realism. And although sports-related art may have ultimately bolstered the impact of Socialist Realism in the Soviet Union, the doctrinaire vision of Soviet sports found in Socialist Realist art should not be perceived as the inevitable result of Russian and early Soviet artists' enthusiasm for sports.

Other scholars, however, have tended to see sports as linking the avant-garde to Socialist Realism. In his study of sports-related Soviet visual culture, O'Mahony does not dwell on the question of whether avant-garde treatment of athletics anticipated Socialist Realism's treatment of athletics, yet he does acknowledge that "many official engagements with the *fizkul'tura* theme produced during the 1930s and later do not conform to the common Western paradigm of Socialist Realist 'style' . . . [and] draw more on the immediate avant-garde past."⁴ Bowlt, meanwhile, contends that through "the image of a healthy, youthful, and radiant hero who could climb great heights and run great lengths without exhaustion or complaint . . . Socialist Realism developed, and did not negate, the traditions of the avant-garde."⁵ Referring to Malevich's late peasant paintings (works often associated with the Malevich's *Sportsmen* of 1928–32), Bowlt claims that the painter celebrated "the abundance, strength, and optimism of a new race"—although such a reading is far from evident in Malevich's faceless figures and stark, empty landscapes, which hardly seem to anticipate Stalinist art.⁶ But even if Socialist Realism "radicalized" aesthetic notions of avant-garde art of the 1920s, as Boris Groys puts it, sports served the art of the 1920s and the later Stalinist period in very different ways.⁷ Malevich's *Suprematism: Painterly Realism of a Soccer Player—Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension* and Rodchenko's wrestlers series from 1918–20 feature a modern, creative approach to the phenomenon of sports virtually absent in Sergey Luppov's 1927 *Sports Games at a Stadium* or in the iconic and highly realistic portraits of Soviet athletes produced throughout the 1930s by Aleksandr Samokhvalov (e.g., *Girl Wearing a Soccer Jersey* [*Devushka v futbolke*, 1932]). Similarly, Vertov's long sports sequence in *The Man with the Movie Camera* has little in common with Timoshenko's popular 1936 film musical *Goalkeeper*, save the broadly conceived sports premise and some exuberant goalkeeping. Modern athletics, I would therefore emphasize, did not compel Soviet artists to embrace Socialist Realism but proved a pliable, protean theme for painters, writers, photographers, and filmmakers as they warily adapted to Stalinist ideology.

Coda

“Unearthly Order and Splendor”

Further proof that sports need not have led to the triumphant athletic heroes of Socialist Realist art (or, for that matter, fascist art in Germany) can be found in Russian émigré literature of the 1920s and ensuing decades. The writings of Vladimir Nabokov, an artist adversely affected by both the rise of the Soviet state and the emergence of Nazism in Germany, reveal an émigré who throughout his life and career returned again and again to sports for inspiration. Like Olesha and Deyneka (and that other sports-obsessed writer of worldwide renown, Ernest Hemingway), Nabokov was born in 1899 and grew up at a time when sports had begun to permeate modern culture. When he left Russia in 1919, he was not only an avid athlete but also a budding writer ever appreciative of the beauty and aesthetic potential of athletic games. Nabokov’s creative appreciation for the widespread appeal, joyous play, and imaginative freedom of sports provided a valuable contrast to the politicization of sports that transpired in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany. Linking the prerevolutionary era with the post-1917 era, albeit in exile, Nabokov’s writing returns us to the very roots of modern sports in all their creative, playful, and proper glory.¹

The young Nabokov, it should be noted, was a zealous if inconsistent athlete.² From his early tennis-playing days at the family estate outside St. Petersburg to soccer games in St. Petersburg at the Tenishev School (likewise attended by the poet and keen sports admirer Mandel’shtam), Nabokov took up a wide range of athletic activities with a fervor almost commensurate with his emerging passions for Lepidoptera and literature. And when forced into exile, he not only honed his tennis game and boxing skills but also played goalkeeper on

teams in England and Germany in the 1920s and early 1930s.³ Nabokov's involvement in athletics decreased as his literary career evolved, yet he long maintained an impassioned observer's admiration for sports that would inform and enrich much of his early fiction and poetry as well as his more celebrated later fiction.

Without a doubt, Nabokov's athletic outlook reflected his broader preoccupation with games and play. Whether devising chess problems, chasing butterflies, or mischievously toying with his readers, Nabokov engaged in games and gamesmanship in ways that both reflected and enhanced his personal zeal for competitive sports.⁴ Nabokov, Thomas Karshan argues, "was a student of play in all its forms."⁵ And by placing such an emphasis on modern sports in both his early poetry and major prose, Nabokov encouraged his readers' vicarious, spectatorial involvement in a wide range of fictional athletic contests. Through the prism of literature, Nabokov celebrated the ability of sports to stir the imagination and transform ordinary, physical reality into an ecstatic and sometimes revelatory experience not just for athletes but also for spectators and, it follows, writers and readers.

Like Olesha, Nabokov would explore his athletic youth through a later-in-life memoir. In the autobiographical *Speak, Memory* (1966), which underscores in vivid ways the popularity of sports in prerevolutionary Russia, Nabokov offers a retrospective, nostalgic summation of his personal and artistic enthusiasm for modern athletics, which he fuses with issues of freedom, both artistic and political. Early on, for instance, he mentions that his father, imprisoned for three months due to participation in protests against the Tsar in 1906, took with him into captivity "his books, his collapsible bathtub, and his copy of J. P. Muller's manual of home gymnastics."⁶ Linking popular gymnastics to his father's political resistance, Nabokov suggests that books, baths, and athletics together helped sustain him.⁷ Later, Nabokov similarly integrates the literary, the hygienic, and the athletic in his description of the fencing and boxing he observed his father practicing at their St. Petersburg home in the family library, where "the scholarly and the athletic, the leather of books and the leather of boxing gloves" merged.⁸ Already an engaged spectator of sports, the adolescent Nabokov cherished his father's athletic activity and the intersection of books and sports on display in the family library.

In a kindred vein, Nabokov emphasized that sports could contribute to the power of literature. In "Breitensträter—Paolino," a 1925 essay devoted primarily to boxing and sports spectatorship, Nabokov noted that George Bernard Shaw, Jack London, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Kuprin all drew upon the romance and beauty of boxing in their writing. And in much later lectures on Russian and European literature, he underlined Tolstoy's attention to skating

and tennis in *Anna Karenina*.⁹ Or consider Nabokov's own novel *Pnin* (1957) and its central protagonist, Timofey Pnin, who in addition to purchasing a soccer ball for his unathletic godson lectures at length to him on sports and literature: "I will now speak to you about sport," Pnin declares. "The first description of box [Pnin resorts to the Russian term for boxing] in Russian literature we find in a poem by Mihail Lermontov," and "the first description of tennis . . . is found in *Anna Karenina*, Tolstoy's novel, and is related to year 1875."¹⁰ For both Pnin and Nabokov, sports were not merely some minor pursuit but a contribution to Russian literature's historical, narrative, and philosophical fabric.

Sports, from Nabokov's perspective, helped the imagination to flourish and creativity to ensue. In a manner similar to what Olesha submitted in *No Day without a Line*, Nabokov saw his own creative impulse springing forth from athletic activity. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov caringly recounts his time as goalkeeper on a soccer team at Cambridge University's Trinity College, where he studied and lived between 1919 and 1922. He begins these recollections by noting that "the literary set . . . while commending my nocturnal [literary] labors, frowned upon various other things I went in for, such as entomology, practical jokes, girls, and, especially, athletics."¹¹ Evidently, Nabokov's literary companions failed to grasp how sports could possibly accommodate creativity. The budding writer, however, goes on to illustrate the way soccer and literature became so entangled for him. In England, he admits, he may have been deprived of the "thrilled adulation" typically afforded the "gallant art" of goalkeeping in "Russia and Latin countries," yet his role as goalkeeper provided not only a range of vivid impressions but also a springboard for his poetry.¹² With exuberance he describes the "bright days—the good smell of turf, that famous inter-Varsity forward dribbling closer and closer to me with the new tawny ball at his twinkling toe, then the stinging shot, the lucky save, its protracted tingle." But he also had "more memorable, more esoteric days" when he languished in goal with his "head racked with neuralgia after a sleepless night of verse-making."¹³ Not to be discouraged in either soccer or writing, Nabokov found a way to play the game and compose at the same time. After the excitement of making a save, he had the "luxury" of musing while play unfolded at the opposite end of the pitch.

The far, blurred sounds, a cry, a whistle, the thud of a kick, all that was perfectly unimportant and had no connection with me. I was less the keeper of a soccer goal than the keeper of a secret. As with folded arms I leant my back against the left goalpost, I enjoyed the luxury of closing my eyes, and thus I would listen to my heart knocking and feel the blind

drizzle on my face and hear, in the distance, the broken sounds of the game, and think of myself as of a fabulous exotic being in an English footballer's disguise, composing verse in a tongue nobody understood about a remote country nobody knew. Small wonder I was not very popular with my teammates.¹⁴

At times removed from the game (and thus offering a sharp contrast to Olesha's heroic Soviet goalkeeper), Nabokov could indulge in literary composition, the athleticism of the one presenting a context for the other. Blurring the line between sports and art, he achieved a vigorous celebration of artistic consciousness, all of it stirred by athletic play.

By the time Nabokov had settled in Berlin in the mid-1920s, he had become all the more occupied with play and sports. His essay "Breitensträter—Paolino" exemplifies that. Originally called "Play" ("Igra") and first delivered to a small circle of Russian émigrés in 1925, it explores the modern "holiday for humanity" experienced through sporting events, particularly boxing. "People have played for as long as they have existed," he writes. "During certain eras—holidays for humanity—people have taken a particular fancy to games. As it was in ancient Greece and ancient Rome, so it is in our present-day Europe."¹⁵ He proceeds here to present a vivid account of a heavyweight boxing match he attended at Berlin's Sports Palace (*Sportpalast*) between the German Hans Breitensträter and the Basque Paolino Uzcudun.¹⁶ He views the bout less as combat than play. And he dwells at length on the active involvement of the spectators, remarking that the crowd at sporting events "has nothing in common with the so-called rabble and, far more than the throngs welcoming home national heroes, is enveloped by a pure, sincere, and good-natured delight."¹⁷ Nabokov, it seems clear, attended boxing matches and other sporting events with the enthusiasm of a true devotee, and he relished the energy and communality of the engrossed crowds.¹⁸

In celebrating the thrills of sports spectatorship, Nabokov portrays in "Breitensträter—Paolino" the Berlin boxing crowd as virtually participating in the athletic action. As the essay's central boxing match comes to a head, Nabokov notes, "With every blow received by Breitensträter, my neighbor inhaled with a whistle, as if he himself received these blows, and the entire darkness and all the tiers grunted with a certain sort of huge, supernatural grunt."¹⁹ The crowd suffers—and grunts—through the travails of the hometown favorite, for Breitensträter's setbacks become its own. And at the conclusion of the piece, Nabokov describes the uplifting delight he and other fans have derived from witnessing such intense, exhilarating play.

The competition came to an end, and when we all poured out onto the street and into the frosty blue light of a snowy night, I am sure that . . . in the souls and muscles of the entire crowd, which tomorrow morning would disperse to offices, shops, and factories, there was a general feeling of wonder, which surely justified matching up these two great boxers, for this was a feeling of confident, sparkling strength, vivacity, and courage, all infused with the sense of play inherent to the boxing. And this playful feeling is perhaps more essential and purer than many of life's so-called "lofty pursuits."²⁰

Here Nabokov discerned in the boxing fans a "general feeling of wonder" produced by the union in athletics of the spiritual ("souls") and the physical ("muscles"). Moreover, he suggests that this "playful feeling" might surpass high culture ("life's so-called 'lofty pursuits'"), providing something "more essential and purer" to audiences.

The prominence Nabokov gave to athletics stemmed in large part from what he saw as the capacity of sports to stir the emotions, imagination, and dreams not only of athletes and spectators but of writers as well. Many of his writings demonstrate that. In a variety of early works, Nabokov imbues athletes with animating visions of victory, and he gives his readers an elevating sense of harmony in what they behold. Take Nabokov's early poem "The Bicyclist" ("Velosipedist," 1918), in which the thrills of physical activity merge with vibrant dreams, a crucial link that will continue in the writer's subsequent prose. Evoking Symbolist Blok's 1903 poem "I Dreamed of Cheerful Thoughts . . ." ("Mne snilis' veselye dumy . . ."), Nabokov begins "The Bicyclist" with the romance of the road as experienced from a fast-moving bicycle:

Мне снились полевые дали,
дороги белой полоса,
руль низкий, быстрые педали,
два серебристых колеса.

Восторг мне снился буйно-юный,
и упоенье быстроты,
и меж столбов стальные струны,
и тень стремительной версты.²¹

[I dreamed of the fielded distances,
The white road's stripe,

the low handle-bars, the quick pedals,
the two silver wheels.

I dreamed of wild-youthful delight,
and the ecstasy of speed,
and the steel strings between milestones
and the shadow of a headlong verst.]

Here cycling elicits a dream of ecstatic speed and “delight,” as the physical thrills of the road occupy a liminal space between mystical, dreamlike euphoria and the tangible, mechanical details of the bicycle itself.

In *A University Poem* (*Universitetskaja poema*), a semiautobiographical novella-in-verse from 1927, Nabokov highlights the intersection of romantic dreams and sports for a student like his former self at Cambridge University. Comprising sixty-three Pushkinesque stanzas (à la *Eugene Onegin*), *A University Poem* recounts the first-person protagonist’s courtship of Violet, a young Englishwoman, against a backdrop of modern activities, including tennis. In stanza 34, the frustrated protagonist, a “passionate player” (*plamennyi igrok*), contrasts Violet’s athletic—and romantic—lethargy with that of the great tennis champion Suzanne Lenglen. Recalling the beauty and speed of Lenglen’s movements, he lets his imagination soar to lofty heights:

Она лениво— значит, скверно—
играла; не летала серной,
как легконогая Ленглен.
Ах, признаюсь, люблю я, други,
на всем разбеге взмах упругий
богини в платье до колен!
Подбросить мяч, назад согнуться,
молниеносно развернуться,
и струнной плоскостью плеча
скользнуть по темени мяча,
и, ринувшись, ответ свистящий
уничтожительно прервать,—
на свете нет забавы слаще . . .
В раю мы будем в мяч играть.²²

[She lazily—that means poorly—
played; she did not fly like a chamois,

like the fleet-footed Lenglen.
 Oh, I confess I love, my friends,
 at a full run the elastic stroke
 of the goddess in her knee-length dress!
 To toss up the ball, to bend back,
 to turn around with lightning speed,
 and with the strung plane from the shoulder
 to hit the crown of the ball,
 and, having advanced, to devastatingly volley
 the whistling return,—
 on earth there is no sweeter pastime . . .
 In heaven we will play ball.]

Lenglen's divine strokes and alluring artistry transport both the narrator, who is at once observer, athlete, and dreamer, and the inferred reader into the realm of "heaven."²³

Following *A University Poem*, Nabokov hit his stride probing the joyful ecstasies of sports and the dreams elicited by athletic action in *Glory* (*Podvig*, 1932), his fourth novel. Here the central protagonist, Martin Edelweiss, plays both tennis and soccer, while also trying his hand at boxing, skiing, and mountain climbing. These athletic activities are crucial to Martin's education and maturation, for sports provide the young hero the opportunity to develop his strength and courage in preparation for a risky, clandestine, and potentially fatal journey into Soviet Russia. These activities also stir his dreams and his efforts to realize them. Martin—like Nabokov, a goalkeeper on a Cambridge soccer team and an avid tennis player—boasts an active imagination, yet, unlike Nabokov, he proves incapable of expressing his fantasies in words, as a writer might. Instead, he resorts to physical, often athletic expression of his nascent, creative sense of self, as competition prompts dreams of greatness. After an unsuccessful tennis match with a French tennis pro, for instance, Martin imagines a more advantageous result to the game: "On the way home [Martin] mentally replayed every shot, transforming defeat into victory, then shaking his head: how very, very hard it was to capture happiness!"²⁴ Romantic dreamer and ardent athlete, Martin attempts to achieve a state of physical harmony and joy through both his dreams and action. In emphasizing Martin's heroic ambitions, Nabokov alludes to work by Russian poet Nikolay Gumilev and the then world-popular Jack London, whose evocations of valor, manliness, adventure, and death constitute a literary foundation for Martin's romantic dreams of daring adventure—the feat, or *podvig*, constituting the Russian title of Nabokov's novel.²⁵ Sports underpin Martin's own *Bildung*, enabling the young hero to realize the powerful

potential of both his body and creative consciousness. In a 1971 interview, Nabokov referred to Martin as one of his “favorite creatures, my resplendent characters,” one of his “victors in the long run,” for this fictional victor triumphs by overcoming his deep-seated fear of defeat and mortality through both his athleticism and imagination.²⁶

Whether playing or observing sports, Nabokov’s fictional characters reflected the stimulating fusion of athletics and aesthetics—an artistic, harmonized ideal—that the author himself found in sports and which he often evoked in his writing. In *The Gift* (*Dar*, 1937), Nabokov’s final Russian novel and one full of metaphysical—and metaliterary—elements, the central protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, may not be as avid an athlete as *Glory*’s Martin, but as a writer he derives inspiration from a range of leisurely activities, from tennis to picnics: “Bicycling and riding, boating and bathing, tennis and croquet; picnicking under the pines; the lure of the water mill and the hayloft—this is a general list of the themes that move our author.”²⁷ More spectator than participant, Fyodor observes the physical—and athletic—world around him with a careful eye before infusing his art with all that he sees and appreciates. In one instance, he describes to his muse and lover, Zina Mertz, a painting of a soccer player by the fictional painter Vsevolod Romanov, which he had seen in a Berlin magazine.²⁸ It shows, he says,

the pale, sweaty, tensely distorted face of a player depicted from top to toe preparing at full speed to shoot with terrible force at the goal. Tousled red hair, a burst of mud on his temple, the taut muscles of his bare neck. A wrinkled, soaking wet, violet singlet, clinging in spots to his body, comes down low over his spattered shorts, and is crossed with the wonderful diagonal of a mighty crease. He is in the act of hooking the ball sideways; one raised hand with wide-splayed fingers is a participant in the general tension and surge. But most important, of course, are the legs: a glistening white thigh, an enormous scarred knee, boots swollen with dark mud, thick and shapeless, but nevertheless marked by an extraordinarily precise and powerful grace. The stocking has slipped down one vigorously twisted calf, one foot is buried in rich mud, the other is about to kick—and how!—the hideous, tarblack ball—and all this against a dark gray background saturated with rain and snow. Looking at this picture one could *already* hear the whiz of the leather missile, *already* see the goalkeeper’s desperate dive.²⁹

This colorful, dense description of a soccer player in the act of kicking a ball on a cold, muddy field encapsulates the ability of art, be it literature or painting, to

capture the aesthetic thrills of sports. Through Fyodor's inventive description, Nabokov conveys the physicality, beauty, and "powerful grace" of the athlete at play, viewed from "top to toe" down the soccer player's body to the ball he is about to kick, anticipating its launch past the goalkeeper. Hair, neck, hand, thigh, knee, calf, and foot all contribute to the athletic harmony of the scene. Perhaps only Nabokov, with his unique literary gifts and grasp of sports, could have produced such an intricate, appreciative account of the soccer player.

Nabokov's later fiction, particularly that produced in the United States, would continue to use the theme of sports, sometimes in profound ways. In *Lolita*, two lengthy passages devoted to tennis stand out with their athletic verisimilitude and aesthetic power. Narrator Humbert Humbert observes Lolita's tennis playing with an appreciative eye and then describes it with an eloquence and insight that, at least for a moment, eclipses the despotic pedophilia so central to the novel's plot.³⁰ *Lolita*'s tennis playing, subsequently referred to by Nabokov as one of "the nerves of the novel," becomes a series of timeless acts of grace, elegance, and artistry—"unearthly order and splendor," as the narrator puts it—for Lolita, Humbert, and the reader.³¹ And in *Pnin*, a keen appreciation for the transformative power of sports comes over the novel's elusive narrator when Timofey Pnin picks up a croquet mallet. At the summer home of a fellow Russian émigré, Pnin is "transfigured," as the narrator observes, once he ventures into a competitive game of croquet: "From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self [Pnin] changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback" while prompting "cries of admiration from the onlookers."³² Through athletic competition, Pnin briefly transcends the painful, everyday reality of exile in a foreign land. Nabokov, like his own narrator as well as the other onlookers, marvels at not only the skill and beauty of the athletic Pnin but also the ability of sports to alter the ordinary.

In exploring sports, Nabokov brought out the power and joy of athletic action while also integrating such physical activity with the imaginative act of writing. Sports were never a mere Nabokovian metaphor for art (or sex, as some have argued); rather, they provided the writer with a rich source of wonderment, vigor, and inventiveness.³³ The harmony achieved through vigorous athletic play established an enticing ideal that Nabokov continued to strive for in his own writing throughout his long career. In articulating a nostalgic, idealistic belief in the elevated, untrammelled (and untrampled) world of youthful athleticism and athletic play, Nabokov expressed the aesthetic potential of sports like no other artist of his era. His art, all things considered, proved the culmination of Russian artistic culture's protean affirmation of modern athletics.

Such an essential, ubiquitous facet of twentieth-century Western life, modern athletics may have been used for authoritarian, political purposes—and continue

to be used to such ends (and for corrosive commercial purposes as well, I would add)—yet the fact remains that, at their core, sports have remained a playful, joyous physical activity capable of stirring the imagination. In transforming modern existence as we know it and enhancing our appreciation of the human body, sports had a crucial role to play in the development of twentieth-century art, whether it took the form of literature, film, painting, or other media. And Russian artists inserted themselves into this artistic-athletic discourse through ingenious, groundbreaking means. Nabokov and his compatriots discovered in sports an optimistic, natural vitality that invigorated the creative process and resonated in ways that have never been fully acknowledged, given the overtly physical nature of athletics and the manner in which sports often vie with art for public attention. But since the beginning of the twentieth century, sports have offered an intense, corporeal engagement with reality that has had a profound, lasting impact on artistic creativity and on artistic understanding of what it means to be alive, active, and striving. Through sports, Russian and early Soviet artists raced after an ideal that to this day inspires.

Notes

Introduction

1. Aleksandr Blok, *Vozmezdnie*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Gos. izdatel'stvo khudozh. literatury, 1960), 3:296.
2. *Ibid.*, 297.
3. An example of intellectual disdain for sports comes from Theodor Adorno, who in 1944 noted, "In its naked literalness, in the brutish seriousness which hardens every gesture of play into an automatic reflex, sport becomes the colourless reflection of a hardened callous life." Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (London: Routledge, 1991), 90.
4. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 7–9. Other theoretical works on games include Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Barash Meyer (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1961); and Jacques Ehrmann, *Game, Play, Literature* (Boston: Beacon, 1971).
5. Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 46.
6. *Ibid.*, 132. Huizinga builds upon Friedrich Schiller's notion of the "play-instinct" (*Spieltrieb*), yet he maintains that Schiller's "play-instinct" only goes so far in contributing to the rise of art, for "the origin of art is not explained by a reference to a play-'instinct,' however innate." Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, 168.
7. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2006), 70.
8. Gregory Nagy, *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 136.
9. As Giamatti emphasizes in his discussion of sports, "Athletes and actors—let actors stand for the set of performing artists—share much." See A. Bartlett Giamatti, *Take Time for Paradise: Americans and Their Games* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2011), 29.
10. Roland Barthes, *What Is Sport?*, trans. Richard Howard (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 57.

11. Ibid., 59.

12. Tom Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde,” in *Critical Visions in Film Theory: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Timothy Corrigan, Patricia White, and Meta Mazaj (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2011), 73.

13. One could, of course, explore the prominence of chess in Vladimir Nabokov’s fiction or Vsevolod Pudovkin’s silent comedy *Chess Fever* (*Shakhmatnaia goriachka*, 1926), but chess does not constitute an athletic activity. It may require mental stamina and even physical fortitude, but these prove secondary to the game’s sedentary, cerebral essence.

14. As the late essayist and novelist David Foster Wallace put it in a 2006 article about the tennis great Roger Federer, “Beauty is not the goal of competitive sports, but high-level sports are a prime venue for the expression of human beauty. The relation is roughly that of courage to war.” In this same essay, Wallace acknowledges that “a top athlete’s beauty is next to impossible to describe directly. Or to evoke.” David Foster Wallace, “Federer as Religious Experience,” *New York Times* (*Play Magazine*), August 20, 2006.

15. Vladimir Nabokov, “Braitenshtreter—Paolino,” in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh* (St. Petersburg: “Simpozium,” 1999–2000), 1:751.

16. John Updike, “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu,” *New Yorker*, October 22, 1960; Norman Mailer, “Ego,” *Life* 70, no. 10 (March 19, 1971): 19 (here Mailer, describing a Muhammad Ali–Joe Frazier heavyweight bout, writes, “If they become champions they begin to have inner lives like Hemingway or Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust”); Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (Garden City, NY: Dolphin/Doubleday, 1987), 63; David Foster Wallace, “Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff about Choice, Freedom, Limitation, Joy, Grotesquerie, and Human Completeness,” in *A Supposedly Fun Thing I’ll Never Do Again: Essays and Arguments* (New York: Little, Brown, 1997), 254.

17. Benjamin Lowe, *The Beauty of Sport: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 3, xiv.

18. Gumbrecht, *In Praise of Athletic Beauty*, 45.

19. Stephen Miller, *Ancient Greek Athletics* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 30.

20. Pindar, *Olympian Ode* 7.1–16, 80–93. Quoted and translated in Stephen Miller, *Arete: Ancient Writers, Papyri, and Inscriptions on the History and Ideals of Greek Athletics and Games* (Chicago: Ares, 1979), 98.

21. Mark Golden, *Sport and Society in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79–80.

22. A. F. Boe and L. I. Olson, “Beauty, Strength, and Wisdom: Aidos in Athletics,” *Arete* 1, no. 1 (1983): 169.

23. Plato allegedly wrestled as a youth. See Heather Reid, “Sport and Moral Education in Plato’s Republic,” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 34, no. 2 (2007): 160–75.

24. Larry Silver, “Civic Courtship: Albrecht Dürer, the Saxon Duke, and the Emperor,” in *The Essential Dürer*, ed. Larry Silver and Jeffrey Chipps Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 135.

25. François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. Burton Raffel (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 51–56.

26. Ibid., 58.
27. Ibid., 128.
28. Washington Irving, *Tales of a Traveller*, by Geoffrey Crayon, Gent., vol. 1 (New York: Putnam, 1850), 213.
29. Kasia Boddy, *Boxing: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 56.
30. Wray Vamplew, *Pay Up and Play the Game* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 28, 38.
31. J. A. Mangan and Callum McKenzie, “The Other Side of the Coin: Victorian Masculinity, Field Sports and English Elite Education,” in *Making European Masculinities: Sport, Europe, Gender*, ed. J. A. Mangan (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 65. See also Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1918), 207–42.
32. Housman objected to the inclusion of “Twice a week the winter thorough” (along with “To an Athlete Dying Young” and “Is my team ploughing”) in *The Athlete’s Garland*, a 1905 anthology of sports verse. “Twice a week the winter thorough,” Housman wrote to editor Wallace Rice, “merely mentions football and cricket as palliations of misery.” A. E. Housman, *The Poems of A. E. Housman*, ed. Archie Burnett (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 332. *The Athlete’s Garland* included poems by Pindar, Whitman, Byron, Wordsworth, and Kipling, among others.
33. Harold Aspiz, *Walt Whitman and the Body Beautiful* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 3.
34. *Mens sana in corpore sano* comes from Juvenal’s *Satire X*. An earlier version of the phrase can be found in the work of the pre-Socratic Greek philosopher Thales of Miletus.
35. Toney Frazier, “Whitman, Eakins, and the Athletic Figure in American Art,” *Aethlon* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 89.
36. See Michael Hatt, “The Male Body in Another Frame: Thomas Eakins’ *The Swimming Hole* as a Homoerotic Image,” in *Manly Pursuits: Writings on the Sporting Images of Thomas Eakins*, ed. Ilene Susan Fort (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2010), 262–81.
37. Thomas C. Mendenhall, *A Short History of American Rowing* (Boston: Charles River Books, 1980), 13–20.
38. See, for instance, Eakins’s two boxing paintings, *Taking the Count* (1898) and *Salutat* (1898), as well as his *The Wrestlers* (1899).
39. For more on Henrik Ling, who not only devised gymnastic exercises but also wrote poetry, see Allen Guttmann, *Sports: The First Five Millennia* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 280.
40. Allen Guttmann, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 8.
41. Guttmann, *Sports*, 4–5.
42. See John Windhausen and Irina Tsyapkina, “National Identity and the Emergence of the Sports Movement in Late Imperial Russia,” *International Journal of the History of Sport* 12, no. 2 (1995): 167. Among the Russian peasantry, however, the ancient national games of *gorodki*, *svaika*, and *lapta* proved popular.
43. During the 1860s, the “English Club” of Moscow and other exclusive clubs imported British sporting culture as a model for Russia’s elite. James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 9.

44. Photographs of the time document the rise in Russian sports—for instance, scenes of Tsar Nicholas II and his family in tennis garb. See Marvin Lyons, *Nicholas II: The Last Tsar* (London: Routledge, 1974), 135.

45. Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 30.

46. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 26; Windhausen and Tsyapkina, “National Identity,” 168.

47. For more on Petr Lesgaft, see Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 47–53.

48. Windhausen and Tsyapkina, “National Identity,” 168.

49. Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 38.

50. Windhausen and Tsyapkina, “National Identity,” 176.

51. Riordan, “Development of Football in Russia and the USSR, Part I,” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* 9 (Winter 1972): 66.

52. For more on Butkovsky’s role on the IOC, see Guttmann, *The Olympics*, 15–16.

53. Windhausen and Tsyapkina, “National Identity,” 170.

54. For more on Tolstoy’s athleticism, see A. Grinevskii, *Graf Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi kak sportsmen* (St. Petersburg, 1910).

55. Vissarion Belinsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Izd. Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1953–59), 5:119.

56. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael Katz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 283. A parodic take on Rakhmetov’s turn toward gymnastics can be found in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* (*Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 1866); when the magistrate Porfiry Petrovich questions Raskolnikov in Chapter Five of Book Four, he complains about his hemorrhoids and states his intention of taking up gymnastics (“I plan to cure myself through gymnastics”) and becoming as active as the various privy counselors who had taken up rope jumping (“they willingly jump over a rope”). “It’s like a science in our century,” Porfiry declares. See Fedor Dostoevskii, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15 tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1988), 5:317.

57. Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 11–12.

58. Leo Tolstoy, *A Confession*, trans. D. Patterson (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 37.

59. Quoted in Riordan, *Sports in Soviet Society*, 45. Chekhov’s speech at the Russian Gymnastics Society was reproduced in 1898 in the popular athletic magazine *Hercules* (*Gerkules*). In 1883 in his newspaper column “Fragments of Moscow Life” (“Oskolki moskovskoi zhizni”), Chekhov mentions witnessing physically impressive wrestlers (e.g., a certain Tarasov) at the Russian Gymnastics Society and he exclaims, paraphrasing Archimedes, “We will do gymnastics! Out of grief, we will become strongmen and, having nothing to do, will turn over the land. The Russian gets by without a foothold.” Anton Chekhov, *Oskolki moskovskoi zhizni* (Moscow: URSS, 2010), 27.

60. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 3.

61. See John E. Bowlt, “Body Beautiful: The Artistic Search for the Perfect Physique,” in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 38.

62. Sergei Tretiakov, “From Where to Where” (“Otkuda kuda”), *Lef*, no. 1 (1923), translated in Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle, eds., *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 208.

63. Anatoly Lunacharsky, one of the founders of the Proletkul't movement and, throughout the 1920s, the Soviet People's Commissar of Education, invited the American dancer Isadora Duncan to Soviet Russia in 1921, as a result of which Duncan's style of dance and movement informed early Soviet calisthenics. See Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 105.
64. Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 4.
65. Edelman, *Serious Fun*, 6.
66. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1975), 254–55, quoted in John Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 173.
67. Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, 256.
68. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology*, 173.
69. Vladimir Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin: Culture Two*, trans. John Hill and Roan Barris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 70.
70. *Ibid.*, 210.
71. *Ibid.*, 16.
72. *Ibid.*, 15.
73. Edelman, *Serious Fun*, 37. Edelman, however, argues here that such mass displays of athletics “were the wrapping rather than the package.”
74. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*, 218.
75. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 36.
76. Notable studies of Western art's treatment of the sports theme include Peter Kühnst, *Sports: A Cultural History in the Mirror of Art* (Amsterdam: G+B Fine Arts Verlag, 1996); Allen Guttmann, *Sports and American Art: From Benjamin West to Andy Warhol* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011); and, most recently, Bernard Vere, *Sport and Modernism in the Visual Arts in Europe, c. 1909–1919* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), which includes some discussion of Lissitzky, Klutskis, and Soviet sports.
77. Mike O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR: Physical Culture—Visual Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), 23.
78. Bowlit, “Body Beautiful,” in Bowlit and Match, *Laboratory of Dreams*, 37.
79. John Malmstad, “Wrestling with Representation: Reforging Images of the Artist and Art in the Russian Avant-Garde,” in *Cultures of Forgery: Making Nations, Making Selves*, ed. Judith Ryan and Alfred Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2003), 163.
80. “Ot redaktsii,” *Russkii sport*, no. 1 (July 28, 1909): 7.

Chapter 1. Herculean Heights

1. Roland Barthes, “The World of Wrestling,” in *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1972), 15.
2. Blok, *Vozmezdnie*, 296.
3. Iurii Dmitriev, *Tsirk v Rossii: Ot istokov do 1917 goda* (Moscow: “Iskusstvo,” 1977), 234.
4. Aleksandr Sunik, *Rossiiskii sport i olimpiiskoe dvizhenie na rubezhe XIX–XX vekov* (Moscow: “Sovetskii sport,” 2004), 112.
5. *Ibid.*, 107–8.

6. Ibid., 108.
7. For more on the cultural relevance of masculinity and sexuality at the time, see George Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
8. Aleksandr Kuprin, “O bor’be,” *Novosti sezona*, no. 1803 (Moscow, 1913); 8. Louise McReynolds mentions the 1907 play *The Professor of Athletics: Scenes from the Life of a School for Physical Development in Three Acts* (*Professor atletiki: Sseny iz zhizni shkoly fizicheskogo razvitiia v trekh deistviakh*), a minor dramatic work by A. Bakhmetev that dwelled on the work Russia had to do to catch up to the West in terms of physical fitness. See Louise McReynolds, *Russia at Play: Leisure Activities at the End of the Tsarist Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 92.
9. Kuprin, “O bor’be,” 9.
10. Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovskii, “Morskie sokoliata,” *Sinii zhurnal*, no. 13 (March 19, 1911): 7.
11. Sunik, *Rossiiskii sport i olimpiiskoe dvizhenie*, 109.
12. Another noteworthy St. Petersburg club, the Bogatyr Society for Physical Education, arose in 1904 and advanced physical education for Russian schoolchildren. Boasting among its members the painter Ilya Repin and the writer Aleksey Tolstoy, this altruistic club played a large role in promoting sports among Russia’s youth. See McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 94.
13. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the floor of the circus was covered with what in Russian was called *tyrsa*, a combination of sand and sawdust.
14. As circus historian Marian Murray has noted, the eighteenth-century fair featured “dwarfs, midgets, monsters, trained fleas, fat women, contortionists, and all manner of other human and animal oddities,” thus anticipating the modern circus. Marian Murray, *Circus! From Rome to Ringling* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1956), 63.
15. Dmitriev, *Russkii tsirk* (Moscow: “Iskusstvo,” 1953), 235.
16. The French soldier Jean Exbrayat developed the Greco-Roman style of wrestling in the 1840s before establishing the rules of the sport in 1848. The Italian wrestler Basilio Bartoletti, meanwhile, applied the term “Greco-Roman” to the sport in an effort to accentuate the “ancient values” of such wrestling.
17. Pytiasinsky published his own primer on wrestling, *Frantsuzskaia bor’ba* (St. Petersburg, 1896), which detailed various training methods and wrestling moves.
18. In England and the United States at the start of the twentieth century, freestyle wrestling was more popular than Greco-Roman wrestling, but to this day it remains a prominent Olympic sport (and one in which Russian wrestlers have had notable success). In February 2013, the International Olympic Committee voted to declassify Greco-Roman wrestling as an Olympic sport, but seven months later the IOC reinstated the sport.
19. Ivan Lebedev, *Tiazhelaia atletika* (Petrograd: Izd. V. I. Gubinskogo, 1916), 90. Lebedev gives the date of March 9, 1895, when the Frenchman Auguste Robinet (Robineti) from Marseille fought a Swiss wrestler at St. Petersburg’s Cinizelli Circus, as the start of professional wrestling in Russia.
20. McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 132. Boxing—also popular among the peasantry—was banned for similar reasons.
21. In 1903 a Russian translation appeared of Léon Ville’s 1891 *La Lutte et Les Lutteurs* (*Wrestling and Wrestlers*), which emphasized the ancient, classical origins of the sport.

22. At the 1912 Olympics, the gold-medal light-heavyweight match between Anders Ahlgren of Sweden and Finland's Ivar Boehling dragged on for nine hours before being declared a draw; both wrestlers were awarded the silver medal.

23. The Nikitin Circus was located on Tsvetnoi Boulevard in Moscow next to the present-day Nikulin Circus and at what is now the site of the movie theater "Mir."

24. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 185.

25. For more on the different wrestling venues, see Dmitriev, *Russkii tsirk*, 242.

26. Kuprin, "O bor'be," 9.

27. Dmitriev, *Russkii tsirk*, 241.

28. McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 90.

29. Dmitriev, *Tsirk v Rossii*, 364. According to Dmitriev, Lebedev also introduced music to the wrestling tournaments (music was against the rules of the sport) and encouraged wrestlers to wear masks that they would tear off once defeated.

30. Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," 15.

31. Lebedev, *Tiazhelaia atletika*, 1.

32. Commenting on the myth-making in early twentieth-century wrestling, Simon Garfield notes: "It became known that Hackenschmidt had won tournament after tournament all over Europe, and was probably the finest Graeco-Roman specialist the world had seen." See Simon Garfield, *The Wrestling* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 15.

33. McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 135. Lurikh, McReynolds suggests, was "the first Russian wrestler to develop a persona." For more on Lurikh and other prerevolutionary Baltic wrestlers, see Karsten Brüggemann, "Imperial Careers and National Recollection: Baltic Wrestlers and the Organization of National Sports in the Late Tsarist Empire (Using the Example of Estonia)," in *Euphoria and Exhaustion: Modern Sport in Soviet Culture and Society*, ed. Nikolaus Katzer, Sandra Budy, Alexandra Köhring, and Manfred Zeller (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2010), 133–57.

34. Ivan Poddubnyi is the subject of the recent Russian film *Poddubnyi* (dir. Gleb Orlov, 2014).

35. McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 141.

36. "Gerkulesy XX veka," *Sinii zhurnal*, no. 10 (March 2, 1912): 12.

37. In the Russian sports journal *Hercules* (*Gerkules*), published by Lebedev, one finds, for instance, photographs of the wrestler Ivan Zaikin posing with Grigory Rasputin. At the height of its popularity, this journal had a circulation of twenty-seven thousand.

38. N. Verzhbitsky, "A. Kuprin, Circus Fan," in *The Soviet Circus*, ed. Aleksandr Lipovsky, trans. Fainna Glagoleva (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1967), 199–201. See also V. Merkur'ev, *Ivan Poddubnyi: Biograficheskii ocherk* (Krasnodar, 1971), 12.

39. See Aleksandr Kuprin, "Moi poet," *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow: Izd. Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1973), 5:225.

40. Other sources confirm Chekhov's interest in wrestling and gymnastics—for instance, a piece by the journalist and poet Vladimir Giliarovsky. An avid wrestler and boxer himself, he discusses Chekhov's interest in activities at a Moscow gymnastics club. See Vladimir Giliarovskii, "Antosha Chekhonte," *Druz'ia i vstrechi* (Moscow, 1934). Anatoly Yusin quotes Giliarovsky remarking on both Chekhov's and Kuprin's interest in wrestling. See Anatolii Iusin, *Dushoi ispolnennyi poet* (Moscow: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1988), 70–71. See also Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 20.

41. C. A., "A. P. Chekhov na bor'be," *Russkii sport*, no. 2 (July 5, 1909): 5.
42. Anton Chekhov, letter to Alexei Pleshcheyev, Oct. 4, 1888, in *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary* ed. Simon Karlinsky, trans. Michael Heim (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 109.
43. See Chekhov, "Zhenshchina bez predrassudkov," *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem: Sochineniia* (Moscow: Izd. "Nauka," 1975), 2:52. "A Woman without Preconceptions" begins with a description of the main protagonist reflective of the era's burgeoning athletic ethos: the tall, broad-shouldered Maksim Kuz'mich Saliutov, Chekhov writes, had an "athletic" build and "extreme" strength. "Brave and bold" and boasting a deep baritone voice, Saliutov "bends twenty-ruble pieces, tears young trees from their roots, lifts weights with his teeth and swears that there is no one on this earth who would dare fight him." Saliutov, however, becomes desperate and weak in the presence of the young woman he hopes to marry, all because he has hidden from her his "shameful" past. At the story's end, Saliutov divulges to his betrothed (Lelia) that he once worked in the circus as a clown. At a time when wrestling matches were starting to garner attention, Chekhov's story suggests that the clown filled all sorts of roles in the Russian circus, including that of the strongman. "A Woman without Preconceptions" ends with Saliutov having to prove to his fiancée that he was indeed a clown, whereby he performs a dangerous stunt just as his future in-laws walk into the room: "In the middle of the bedroom stood Maksim Kuz'mich, who performed in the air a most desperate *salto mortale*; next to him Lelia stood and applauded. Both of their faces shone with happiness." A minor work by Chekhov, "A Woman without Preconceptions" nevertheless points to the increasing prominence of athletics in Russia and the role the circus would play in the process.
44. Konstantin Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art*, trans. Jean Benedetti (London: Routledge, 2008), 310.
45. Vladimir Gotovtsev, "'Merry Evenings' at the Art Theater," in Lipovsky, *The Soviet Circus*, 212–13.
46. Aristarkh Lentulov, *Vospominaniia* (St. Petersburg: Galereia "Nashi khudozhniki," 2014), 62–63. Some of this is quoted and briefly discussed in Malmstad, "Wrestling with Representation," in Ryan and Thomas, *Cultures of Forgery*, 159.
47. Lentulov, *Vospominaniia*, 64.
48. A. Lebedeva, "Maxim Gorky's Impressions of the Circus," in Lipovsky, *The Soviet Circus*, 207.
49. Iurii Annenkov, *Dnevnik moikh vstrech* (New York: Mezhdunarodnoe lit. sodruzhestvo, 1966), 1:30–31.
50. *Ibid.*, 31.
51. Malmstad, "Wrestling with Representation," 160.
52. Irina Paperno, introduction to *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, ed. Irina Paperno and Joan Delaney Grossman (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 5.
53. Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What Is to Be Done?*, trans. Michael Katz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 278–79.
54. Paperno, introduction to *Creating Life*, 18.
55. Andrei Belyi, "Fridrich Nitsche," *Arabeski* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1969), 74.
56. See Bengt Jangfeldt, "Nietzsche and the Young Mayakovsky," in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1994), 35–57. Another source of inspiration for self-created athletic personae and active individuality among Russian modernists was Walt Whitman. Many invoked the poetry of Whitman, seeing the American poet as a model for their own promotion of the athletic, artistic self. Prototypical of a liberated, physically robust artist and emblematic of a dynamic, young nation that cherished athleticism, Whitman and his creative persona appealed to a wide variety of Russian and early Soviet artists. The homoerotic tone of Whitman's verse likewise attracted the attention of many of these artists. Korney Chukovsky, who translated Whitman's poetry into Russian, claimed that in the early period of Futurism, Mayakovsky's "multifaceted style was the style of another rebel, Walt Whitman." See Kornei Chukovskii, *Moi Uitmen: Ego zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Progress, 1969), 280.

57. McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 140. In his short 1920 sketch "Lemon Rind" ("Limonnaia korka"), Kuprin would also delve into the sport of boxing.

58. In a 1902 letter to Kuprin, Chekhov wrote that Tolstoy had read "At the Circus" and liked it very much. See I. V. Koretskaia, "Chekhov i Kuprin," *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* 68 (1960): 363–94. See also Nikolas Luker, *Alexander Kuprin* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978), 57.

59. Kuprin, "V tsirke," in *Sochineniia v shesti tomakh* (Moscow: Gos. izd. khodozh. lit. eratury, 1957), 3:5. Page numbers for subsequent quotations from "At the Circus" will be given in parentheses after the quoted text. Several translations of the story exist, such as Kuprin, *"Sentimental Romance" and Other Stories*, trans. S. E. Berkenblit (New York: Pageant Press, 1969), 43–78, but I have provided my own translations.

60. Luker, *Alexander Kuprin*, 58.

61. Earlier in "At the Circus," a feverish Arbuzov envisions "granite blocks" and a "thin wire that, stretching endlessly, buzzes monotonously, exhaustingly, and sleepily" (21), as the word "boomerang" echoes in his head.

62. Kuprin's candle evokes the burned-down candle mentioned in *Anna Karenina* before the death of Tolstoy's eponymous heroine. The tragic arc of "At the Circus" and its aging athlete also presaged Jack London's 1909 boxing story "A Piece of Steak." And, jumping ahead a century, there is Daren Aronofsky's 2008 film *The Wrestler*, starring Mickey Rourke as an over-the-hill, ailing wrestler similarly compelled to wrestle one last bout.

63. Barthes, "The World of Wrestling," 18.

64. Ekaterina Breshko-Breshkovskaia was arrested and exiled in September 1874 (the very year of her son's birth), and thus Breshko-Breshkovsky was raised by his uncle.

65. Kuprin, "N. Breshko-Breshkovskii. Etiud," foreword to Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovskii, *Zhutkaia sila* (Riga: "Mir," 1930). In a short 1911 piece ("Poet of the Arena"), however, Kuprin praised Breshko-Breshkovsky's wrestling fiction. See Kuprin, "Poet areny," *Sinii zhurnal*, no. 8 (February 12, 1911): 12. For more on these two writers' relationship and mutual interest in wrestling, see Boris Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze, 1907–1934* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 49–60.

66. V. G. Korolenko, *O literature* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957), 404.

67. See, for instance, an anonymous article on Breshko-Breshkovsky that appeared in the journal *Russkii sport* in 1909. Here the author discusses the "polemic" established by Breshko-Breshkovsky with Lurikh. See "N. N. Breshko-Breshkovskii," *Russkii sport*, no. 17 (October 18, 1909): 10.

68. Nikolai Breshko-Breshkovskii, *Chempion mira*, in Breshko-Breshkovskii, *V mire atletov* (St. Petersburg: A. V. Koreliakov, 1909), 42.

69. Ibid.

70. At the start of the 1910s, according to some sources, Breshko-Breshkovsky was the most widely read writer in Russia. See N. N. Skatov, ed., *Russkaia literatura XX veka* (Moscow: OLMA-PRESS Invest, 2005), 277.

71. Breshko-Breshkovskii, *Chempion mira*, 29.

72. Ibid., 44.

73. See also Breshko-Breshkovsky's popular 1909 play *Gladiators* (*Gladiatory*).

74. Breshko-Breshkovskii, *Gladiatory nashikh dnei*, in Breshko-Breshkovskii, *V mire atletov*, 95. Several chapters of *Gladiators of Our Times* have been translated and republished in James von Geldern and Louise McReynolds, eds., *Entertaining Tsarist Russia: Tales, Song, Plays, Movies, Jokes, Ads, and Images from Russian Urban Life, 1779–1917* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 323–29.

75. As the 1909 piece on Breshko-Breshkovsky from *Russkii sport* put it, “Three years ago the sensational behind-the-scenes expose of wrestling exploded. [Breshko-Breshkovsky's] polemic in this sphere with Lurikh was read by everyone, even by those who had only a passing interest in this athletic sport.” “N. N. Breshko-Breshkovskii,” 10. McReynolds also notes this “polemic” with Lurikh. See McReynolds, *Russia at Play*, 144–45. Here McReynolds probes the misogynistic tone of Breshko-Breshkovsky's wrestling fiction.

76. Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 62.

77. Mire, “*Borets pod chernoï maskoi*: Posledniaia novinka russkoi kinematografii,” *Sinii zhurnal*, no. 35 (August 30, 1913): 12.

Chapter 2. Lyrical Games

1. Blok, *Vozmezdīe*, 296.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., 297.

4. Konstantin Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, trans. Doris V. Johnson (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 270–71. In the foreword to *Retribution*, Blok follows his circus wrestling discussion with mention of all the airplanes flying in 1911: “In this specific year, finally, aviation was particularly popular for us; we all recall the series of beautiful loops in the air, the upside-down flights and the fatal crashes of both talented and incompetent pilots.” Blok, *Vozmezdīe*, 296–97. Also note Blok's poem “Aviator” from 1910–12: “But again in the golden haze / As if an unearthly chord . . . / He is near, a burst of applause / And a measly world record!” Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3:33–34.

5. Harold B. Segel, *Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 5–6.

6. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:331.

7. Ibid., 3:144.

8. Ibid., 3:137.

9. Dmitrii Maksimov, *Poeziia i proza Aleksandra Bloka* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1975), 135–36.

10. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:332.

11. See, for instance, Blok's November 1910 letter to his mother where he describes attending the circus (Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:321) or diary entries from February 1912 that mention circus wrestling (Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 7:129).

12. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:332.
13. Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, 293.
14. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 8:332, emphasis added.
15. Ibid., 8:412, also quoted in Maksimov, *Poeziia i proza Aleksandra Bloka*, 170.
16. Blok, "Predislovie," *Vozmezdie*, 297.
17. Jenifer Presto, *Beyond the Flesh: Alexander Blok, Zinaida Gippius, and Symbolist Sublimation of Sex* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 117.
18. Blok, *Vozmezdie*, 296.
19. F. D. Reeve, *Aleksandr Blok: Between Image and Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 176.
20. Blok, *Vozmezdie*, 303.
21. Ibid., 297.
22. Ibid., 303.
23. Ibid., 305–6.
24. See, for instance, Gleb Struve, *O chetyrekh poetakh: Blok, Sologub, Gumilev, Mandel'shtam* (London: Overseas Publication Interchange Ltd., 1981), 12–13.
25. Blok, "Krushenie gumanizma," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, 6:114. See also Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, 417.
26. Blok, "Krushenie gumanizma," 115.
27. Joan Delaney Grossman, introduction to Valery Bryusov, *The Diary of Valery Bryusov (1893–1905)*, ed. and trans. Joan Delaney Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 3.
28. Valerii Briusov, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh* (Moscow: Khud. literatura, 1973) 1:332. The translation is my own.
29. In the autobiographical *Iz moei zhizni* (*From My Life*, 1927), Bryusov noted that in his youth "he passionately loved horse racing," particularly "the struggle of horses and jockeys for superiority." Quoted in Briusov, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, 1:614.
30. For more on Bryusov's influence on Blok, see Mochulsky, *Aleksandr Blok*, 167. As Mochulsky notes here, "Blok has only one predecessor in Russian poetry—Bryusov."
31. The Clarist poet Mikhail Kuzmin mentions gymnasts at play in his 1907 poem "Ia iznemog, ia tak ustal . . ." ("I am exhausted, I am so tired . . .").
32. Bryusov's *Sem' tsvetov radugi* also featured a poem devoted to skiing, "Na lyzhakh" ("On Skis," 1914): "Op'ianiaet smelyi beg. / Ovevaet belyi sneg. . ." (The bold dash intoxicates. / The white snow envelops. . .). See Briusov, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, 2:137.
33. Briusov, *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, 2:109–10.
34. Alsu Akmal'dinova, Oleg Lekmanov, and Mikhail Sverdlov, *"Likuet forward na begu": Futbol v russkoi i sovetskoi poezii 1910–1950 godov* (Moscow: Izd. dom Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2016). The title of this volume comes from the opening line of Nikolay Zabolotsky's 1926 poem "Futbol."
35. Bryusov included the cycle "On Saimaa" ("Na Saime") in his 1906 collection of verse *Stephanos*. "On Saimaa" commemorated the time the poet spent on the Finnish lake with his then mistress Nina Petrovskaja. See Briusov, "Na Saime," in *Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh*, 1:378–82.
36. Segel, *Body Ascendant*, 143.
37. Osip Mandel'shtam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, trans. Jane Gary Harris and Constance Link (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979), 63.
38. The first version of "Tennis" amplifies, in particular, the English flavor of the

sport (and modern sports in general) by making a subsequently removed reference to rowing on the Thames (“Vizhu mel’nitsy, kak vstar’, / I grebtsov na Temze krotkoi” [I see a windmill, as in the old days, / And rowers on the gentle river Thames]).

39. Mandel’shtam initially published *Kamen’* in 1913 without “Tennis,” since the final version of the poem had yet to be written, but subsequent editions of the collection, which appeared in 1916, 1923, and 1928, included “Tennis.”

40. An earlier version of this discussion and close analysis of Mandel’shtam’s four sports poems can be found in Timothy C. Harte, “Game, Set, Stanza: Modern Sport in Russia and the Poetry of Osip Mandel’shtam,” *Russian Review* 59 (July 2000): 353–70.

41. See Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 185.

42. See annotations to Mandel’shtam’s *The Noise of Time* (*Shum vremeni*) in Osip Mandel’shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozh. literatura, 1990), 2:393.

43. Osip Mandel’shtam, *The Noise of Time: The Prose of Osip Mandelstam*, trans. Clarence Brown (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1986), 90.

44. Mandel’shtam, *The Complete Critical Prose and Letters*, 64.

45. See Mandel’shtam’s essay “O prirode slova” (1921–22), in Mandel’shtam, *Sochineniia*, 2:172–87.

46. Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 195.

47. Osip Mandel’shtam, *Stone*, trans. Robert Tracy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 121.

48. *Ibid.*, 59.

49. Mandel’shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 1:90.

50. The translations of “Tennis” and the other sports poems are my own.

51. See, for instance, Blok’s 1906 poem “I stroll, I wander downcast . . .” (“Khozhu, brozhu ponuryi . . .”): “The gloomy street organ player comes, / He begins to cry in the yard” (Pridet sharmanshchik khmuryi, / Zaplachet na dvore).

52. For more on the Anglophilia that prevailed at the time in Russia’s capital, see Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 79–94. As Nabokov recounts, “All sorts of snug, mellow things came in a steady procession from the English Shop on Nevskii Avenue: fruitcakes, smelling salts, playing cards, picture puzzles, striped blazers, talcum-white tennis balls.” Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 79.

53. After killing Penthesilea, Achilles mourned over her body while marveling at her beauty. She was also the subject of German playwright Herbert van Kleist’s well-known 1808 tragedy *Penthesilea*, which probed Achilles’s passion for the Amazon queen.

54. In the 1913 *Jeux*, which Sergey Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes staged in Paris, the dancers appear in tennis garb as a search for a lost tennis ball becomes a homosexual tryst between three athletic young men.

55. Mandel’shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 1:294–95.

56. These lines highlight an important source of “Futbol”: Konstantin Sluchevsky’s “Posle kazni v Zheneve,” a poem mentioned by Mandel’shtam in *The Noise of Time*. Sluchevsky writes, “Ia videl kazn’: bagrovyi eshafot / Davil kak budto by sbezhavshiisia narod,” and a stanza later, “Kaznili. Golova otprianula, kak miach!” Although Sluchevsky has little interest in the world of sports, his references to the crowd at the execution and the ball-like head presage Mandel’shtam’s central theme of athletics.

57. A. Akhmatova, *Listki iz dnevnika*, quoted in Mandel’shtam, *Kamen’*, ed. S. Reiser (Leningrad: Nauka, 1990), 327.

58. Mandel'shtam, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 1:295.
59. Aleksandr Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin: Roman v stikhakh*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiatii tomakh* (Moscow: Izd. Akademiia nauk SSSR, 1957), 5:22.
60. Mandel'shtam included only three sonnets in *Kamen'*: "Peshekhod," "Kazino," and "Paden'e—neizmennyi sputnik strakha," all of 1912.
61. In several poems written in the early 1930s—most notably, "Today you can make decals . . ." ("Segodnia možno sniat' dekal'komani . . .," 1931)—Mandel'shtam's fascination with athleticism and physical beauty briefly reemerged, albeit from an older perspective ("Oh, I will not go with young people / To those streamlined stadiums . . . [Uzh ia ne vyidu v nogu s molodezh'iu / Na razlinovannye stadiony . . .]").

Chapter 3. Revolutionary Goals

1. These sentiments, paraphrasing a 1914 lecture by Mayakovsky on Futurism, were reported in the Kishinev newspaper *Bessarabian Life* via Kamensky's memoir *Life with Mayakovsky*. See Vasilii Kamenskii, *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1974), 103.
2. Vladimir Maiakovskii, "Budetliane (Rozhdenie budetlian)," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khud. literatura, 1955), 1:332.
3. Ibid., 329.
4. Ibid., 332.
5. David Burliuk, Aleksey Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov, "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," in *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928*, ed. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1988), 3.
6. Aleksandr Shevchenko, "Neoprimitivism: Its Theory, Its Potentials, Its Achievements," trans. John Bowlt, in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism*, ed. John E. Bowlt (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 48.
7. Natalia Goncharova, "Preface to Catalogue of One-Man Exhibition," trans. John Bowlt, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 58.
8. Ibid., 60.
9. Goncharova's 1909 *Les Lutteurs (Bortsy)* belongs to the Centre Pompidou in Paris, while the 1908–9 *Wrestlers*, discussed here, belongs to the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.
10. In *Rowers* (1912, Private Collection), Goncharova depicts in a Neoprimitivist style two figures in striped shirts rowing through choppy waters. In a recent monograph on Goncharova, Anthony Parton discusses a variety of wrestling and weightlifting paintings produced by both Goncharova and Larionov in 1910–11, yet there is ample reason to believe that several of the works discussed by Parton, most notably Goncharova's *The Wrestlers* (1910–11), which differs dramatically from her other wrestler canvases, and Larionov's *The Athlete* (1910), which features a circus strongman lifting a weight, are forgeries, given the lack of documentation or other scholarship on them. See Anthony Parton, *Goncharova: The Art and Design of Natalia Goncharova* (Suffolk, UK: Antique Collectors' Club, 2010), 116–19. For discussion of these probable forgeries cited by Parton, see A. D. Sarabianov, "Alternativnaia Goncharova," *Artkhronika*, March 2011.
11. Vladimir Burlyuk's rare strength and athletic ways are noted in Benedikt Livshits, *One-Eyed Archer*, trans. John Bowlt (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), 42–43.

12. In 1912, Myasoedov published his “Manifesto of Nudity” (“Manifest o nagote”) in Nikolai Evreinov’s *Nudity on the Stage* (*Nagota na stsene*), which in addition to Myasoedov’s manifesto included a photograph of a scantily clad, muscular Myasoedov, along with another photograph of a hooded wrestler displaying his impressive musculature. For more on Ivan Myasoedov’s obsession with body building, see B. Chesnokov, “Khudozhnikatlet I. G. Miasoedov,” *K sportu*, no. 19 (April 6, 1912): 6; and also Bowlt, “Body Beautiful,” in Bowlt and Match, *Laboratory of Dreams*, 46. Mashkov’s studio sign, along with another one warning, “Those working in my studio are strictly forbidden to be sick,” and a third one listing “health” and “physical strength” as two of the ten qualities required for those wanting to work in the studio, are mentioned in I. S. Bolotina, *Il’ia Mashkov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1977), 422, 424.

13. Mikhail Larionov and Ilya Zdanevich, “Why We Paint Ourselves: A Futurist Manifesto,” trans. John Bowlt, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 81.

14. *Ibid.*, 80.

15. *Ibid.*, 81.

16. According to Bolotina, Konchalovsky’s wife insisted that her small portrait be removed from the painting. Bolotina, *Il’ia Mashkov*, 46.

17. *Ibid.*, 154.

18. K. Tomashevskii, “Vladimir Maiakovskii,” *Teatr*, no. 4 (1938): 139. A translation of Tomashevsky’s account of *Victory over the Sun* and *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy* appeared in 1971 in *Drama Review* (alongside a translation of *Victory over the Sun*), where the translators provide an overly literal translation of “Greco-Roman wrestling” (*frantsuzskaia bor’ba*) as “French fighting” and describe it as a French form of boxing in which both hands and feet are used.

19. Anthony Parton, “Killing the Moonlight and Conquering the Sun,” in *A Victory over the Sun Album*, by A. Kruchenykh, K. Malevich, and M. Matiushin, ed. Patricia Railing (London: Artists Bookworks, 2009), 2:140.

20. Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 44–45.

21. Aleksey Kruchenykh, “The First Futurist Shows in the World,” translated by Alan Meyers and reprinted in Kruchenykh, Malevich, and Matiushin, *A Victory over the Sun Album*, 1:140.

22. Mikhail Matyushin, “Futurism in St. Petersburg: Performances on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th of December, 1913,” trans. Ewa Bartos and Victoria Nes Kirby, *Drama Review* 15, no. 4 (Autumn 1971): 104. This short piece by Matyushin, also included in *A Victory over the Sun Album*, first appeared in *Futuristy: Pervyi zhurnal russkikh futuristov*, nos. 1–2 (Moscow, January 1914).

23. Velimir Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem*, in *Poeziia russkogo futurizma*, ed. A. S. Kushner (St. Petersburg: Gumanitarnoe agentsvo “Akademicheskii proekt,” 1999), 213.

24. *Ibid.*, 214. Feminine grammatical endings have generally been removed in the libretto. For more on the hypermasculine, misogynistic underpinnings of the Cubo-Futurists’ *Victory over the Sun*, see Malmstad, “Wrestling with Representation,” in Ryan and Thomas, *Cultures of Forgery*, 162.

25. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem*, 219.

26. *Ibid.*, 221.

27. *Ibid.*, 223.

28. Ibid., 228.
29. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism 1909,” in *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio, trans. Robert Brain et al. (Boston: MFA, 2001), 21.
30. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, “Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words-in-Freedom 1913,” in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 97.
31. Umberto Boccioni, “Futurist Painting” (lecture delivered at the Circolo Artistico, Rome, May 29, 1911), in Ester Coen, *Umberto Boccioni* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), 237.
32. Marianne Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory, 1909–1915* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 171.
33. Umberto Boccioni, “Plastic Dynamism 1913,” in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 92. Boccioni’s concept of dynamism alludes to the ideas of Henri Bergson, so crucial to modernist perceptions of time, space, and flux. For discussion of Bergson and the French Cubist treatment of sports, see Mark Antliff, *Inventing Bergson: Cultural Politics and the Parisian Avant-Garde* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 96–100.
34. Boccioni may not specify a sports thematic in *Speeding Muscles*, but the sculpted figure resembles in conspicuous ways the muscular athlete in Boccioni’s 1913 drawing *Dynamism of the Human Body: Boxer*.
35. Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Ball, and Gino Severini, “The Exhibitors of the Public 1912,” in Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 47.
36. See, for instance, Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 45–47.
37. Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem*, 218.
38. Kazimir Malevich, “From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting,” trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus, in Kazimir Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, vol. 1, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 24. The italics are Malevich’s. Malevich allegedly belonged to an athletic club as a young man, and while living in St. Petersburg, he joined the St. Petersburg Athletic Club, which featured a successful soccer team. See Andrey Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute* (Surrey, UK: Lund Humphries, 2010), 2:87.
39. For more on the so-called fourth dimension in work by Malevich and other artists at the time, see Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).
40. Nakov, *Malevich*, 87.
41. Ibid., 89.
42. Jean-Claude Marcadé, “Malevich, Painting, and Writing: On the Development of a Suprematist Philosophy,” in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003), 34. The italics are Marcadé’s.
43. Vasilii Kamenskii, “Ivan Zaikin,” in *Devushki bosikom: Stikhi* (Tiflis: Tipografia “Progress,” 1917), 137–38.
44. Vasilii Kamenskii, *Put’ entuziasta*, in *Vasilii Kamenskii* (Moscow: Kniga, 1990), 508–9.
45. Kamenskii, *Žizn’ s Maiakovskim*, 186.
46. Kamenskii, *Put’ entuziasta*, 507. For more on Gol’tshmidt and his propensity for “life-creation,” see E. A. Bobrinskaia, *Futurizm* (Moscow: Galart, 2000), 186.
47. Vladimir Gol’tshmidt, *Poslaniia Vladimira zhizni s Puti k Istine* (Petropavlovsk, 1919), 13.

48. Aleksandr Rodchenko refers in a dismissive way to Gol'tsschmidt in his memoir *Rabota s Maiakovskim* (*Working with Mayakovsky*). Describing the gathering of avant-garde artists at the Poet's Café on Moscow's Nastasinskii Lane, Rodchenko writes, "Petrovsky and Vladimir Gol'tsschmidt were strolling there—Gol'tsschmidt—a 'Futurist of life,' was a talentless poet but a handsome fellow, who had incredible physical strength. He went around in some sort of blue shirt with an open collar, with a gold ring on his head, something in the spirit of the ancient Greeks or warriors." Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Working with Mayakovsky," in *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 224.

49. Kamenskii, *Zhizn' s Maiakovskim*, 175–76.

50. Another problem that arose for professional wrestling in Russia at this time was the overabundance of championships/titles (a problem plaguing professional boxing today). See, for instance, V. Chesnokov, "Krizis bor'by," *K sportu*, no. 10 (April 21, 1913): 17–18.

51. In autobiographical notes, Rodchenko writes, "Once my father took us to the circus. It amazed me so much that the circus has remained my favorite spectacle to this day. Everything was astonishing: everyday objects darted about, revolved and became transformed; men stood on their heads or hands and flew through the air." Quoted (and translated) in German Karginov, *Rodchenko* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979), 9.

52. Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Opyt dlia budushchego," in *Experiments for the Future*, 126–27.

53. For more on Gan's unpublished and now lost play, *We*, and Rodchenko's costume designs for the play, see Aleksandr Lavrentiev, *Aleksei Gan* (Moscow: S. E. Gordeev, 2010), 51–59.

54. John Milner, *Design: Rodchenko* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors' Club Ltd., 2009), 20. Here Milner refers to Rodchenko's wrestlers as mere "sportsmen," oddly claiming that details in the drawings convey "the collective identity of the sports team." Milner also mistakenly claims that Gan's 1919 play *We* is a dramatization of Evgeny Zamiatin's 1920 novel *We*, which of course appeared after Gan's play.

55. In a 1920 essay on Tatlin's *Monument to the III International*, Nikolay Punin emphasized the physical attributes of the tower: "By flexing its muscles the form is searching for the way out along the most resilient and dynamic lines the world knows of—spirals. They are full of movement, aspiration, and speed, and they are as tight as a creative will and an arm-muscle strained with holding a hammer." See Nikolai Punin, "The Monument to the Third International," in *Tatlin*, ed. Larissa Zhadova (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), 345.

56. Rodchenko and Mayakovsky collaborated extensively, as attested to by Rodchenko's *Working with Mayakovsky* (*Rabota s Maiakovskim*), reminiscences that he wrote in 1939. For more on Rodchenko's collaboration with Mayakovsky, see Aleksandr Lavrentiev, ed., *Maiakovskii-Rodchenko: Klassika konstruktivizma* (Moscow: Fortuna El, 2004), 81–98.

57. For a translation and discussion of Mayakovsky's circus play, see his *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle*, trans. Frantisek Dean, in *Drama Review: TDR* 17, no. 1 (1973): 53–63, quoted in part in Miriam Neirick, *When Pigs Could Fly and Bears Could Dance: A History of the Soviet Circus* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 34–35.

58. The manuscript for this circus play was in fact discovered in Lazarenko's archive and then published on June 5, 1935, in *Literaturnaia gazeta*, no. 31. According to Dmitriev, Lazarenko was to play the Revolution as well as the Referee, despite the fact that they appear together at the end of the short play. See Iurii Dmitriev, *Sovetskii tsirk, ocherk istorii, 1917–1941* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963), 61–62.

59. Mayakovsky, *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle*, 56. The Russian text of the play can be found in Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 2:395–404.

60. Mayakovsky, *The Championship of the Universal Class Struggle*, 57.

61. *Ibid.*, 58.

62. *Ibid.*, 62.

63. *Ibid.*, 63.

64. *Ibid.*

65. In 1928, Mayakovsky adopted quite a different tone at the start of his 1928 poem “Comrades, Let’s Discuss Red Sports!” (“Tovarishchi, pospor’te o krasnom sporte!”), in which he bemoaned the ubiquity of sports in contemporary culture: “Подымая / Гири и гантели, / обливаясь / сто десятым потом, / нагоняя / мускулы на теле, / все двуногие / заувлекались спортом” (Lifting / weights and dumbbells, / sweating / a hundred and tenth out, / catching / muscles on the body, / all two-legged creatures / have taken up sports). Maiakovskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 9:174.

66. Tatiana Goriacheva, “UNOVIS: ‘My budem ognem i dadim silu novogo,’” in *V krughe Malevicha: Soratniki, ucheniki, nasledovateli v Rossii 1920–1950-x*, ed. Elena Basner et al. (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 18–19.

67. Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 96.

68. See Antonina Zainchkovskaia, “‘Khudozhnik — ne shutochnoe zvanie,’” in *Vera Ermolaeva, 1893–1937* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions-Graficart, 2008), 12.

69. *Ibid.*, 126.

70. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 97.

71. Antonina Marochkina, “Vera Ermolaeva,” in Basner et al., *V krughe Malevicha*, 124.

72. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 97–98.

73. El Lissitzky, “The Plastic Form of the Electro-Mechanical Peepshow ‘Victory over the Sun,’” in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 351.

74. *Ibid.*, 352.

75. *Ibid.*

76. By October 1923, for instance, thirty-six sections of Dynamo existed in Moscow, with more than three thousand members altogether. For more on the turn to sports by Vsevoluch and Komsomol, and on the formation of Dynamo, see Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 84–88 and 93–94.

77. *Ibid.*, 85.

78. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 38. Eurythmics, a system of rhythm-based physical movement promoted by the Swiss composer and educator Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, and eukinetics, a system of body movements for dancers promoted by Hungarian dance theorist Rudolf Laban, both proved popular in the 1920s in the Soviet Union.

79. Goldberg, *Performance Art*, 38.

80. For more on the concept of *Novyi byt*, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 40–87.

81. Tretiakov, “From Where to Where?,” in Lawton and Eagle, *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes*, 209. The *chastushka* is a traditional type of short Russian folk song.

82. Working in the theater at an early stage of his career, Eisenstein developed a theory of “kinetic construction” for the actor onstage and in action. One of Eisenstein’s most popular theatrical productions—*The Mexican* (1921)—involved a boxing match with incessant emphasis on the human body’s dynamism and strength, and by 1924 Eisenstein was applying these same principles to his film work, most notably *Strike* (*Stachka*).

83. See Mel Gordon, “Meyerhold’s Biomechanics,” *Drama Review* 18, no. 3 (1974): 74–88. In his 1922 lecture “The Actor of the Future and Biomechanics” (“Aktor budushchego i biomekhanika”), Meyerhold reportedly (via an article on this lecture in *Teatral’naia Moskva*) made the connection between athletics and labor explicit: “If we place him in an environment in which gymnastics and all forms of sport are both available and compulsory, we shall achieve the new man who is capable of any form of labor.” See Vsevolod Meyerhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, ed. Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 200.

84. Owen Hatherley, *The Chaplin Machine: Slapstick, Fordism and the Communist Avant-Garde* (London: Pluto Press, 2016), 66.

85. Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 173.

86. See John Bowlt, “The Construction of Caprice: The Russian Avant-Garde Onstage,” in *Theatre in Revolution: Russian Avant-Garde Stage Design 1913–1935*, by Nancy Baer (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 78.

87. For more on the Hygienists and *Proletkul’t*, see Edelman, *Serious Fun*, 33–36.

88. Quoted in Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Kto takaia Varvara Stepanova?,” in *Chelovek ne mozhnet zhit’ bez chuda*, by Varvara Stepanova (Moscow: Izd. “Sfera,” 1994), 6.

89. See, for instance, O’Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 27–28.

90. Tatyana Strizenova, “Textiles and Soviet Fashion in the Twenties,” in *Costume Revolution: Textiles, Clothing and Costume of the Soviet Union in the Twenties*, ed. Tatyana Strizenova, trans. Elizabeth Dafinone (London: Trefoil, 1987), 12.

91. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*, 109.

92. This quote comes from Varst (Varvara Stepanova), “Kostium segodniashnego dnia—prozodezhda,” *Lef* 2 (1923): 65–68, reprinted and translated in Strizenova, *Costume Revolution*, 173–74.

93. For more on the Constructivists’ “art into life,” see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 50.

94. Varst, “Kostium segodniashnego dnia,” quoted in Strizenova, *Costume Revolution*, 173–74.

95. Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 113–17.

96. For more on the Academy of Communist Education performances that showcased Stepanova’s *sportodezhda*, see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 113–14.

97. Yuri Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 134.

98. Ibid.

Chapter 4. An Eye for Athletics

1. Wolfgang Rothe, “When Sports Conquered the Republic: A Forgotten Chapter from the ‘The Roaring Twenties,’” *Studies in Twentieth and Twenty-First Century Literature* 1, no. 4 (1979): 6, quoted in John Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1984), 11.
2. For more on the inclusion of jazz in early Stalinist-era cinema, see Emma Widdis, *Socialist Senses: Film, Feeling, and the Soviet Subject, 1917–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 347–51.
3. Vladimir Maiakovskii, “Kino i kino,” *Kino-Fot*, no. 4 (October 5–12, 1922): 5.
4. “Propaganda,” Plekhanov wrote in 1891, “is agitation that is conducted in the normal everyday course of the life of a particular country. Agitation is propaganda occasioned by events that are not entirely ordinary and that provoke a certain upsurge in the public mood.” G. V. Plekhanov, “The Tasks of the Social Democrats in the Struggle against the Famine in Russia,” in *Marxism in Russia: Key Documents 1879–1906*, ed. Neil Harding, trans. Richard Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 103. See also Joshua Malitsky, *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film: Building the Soviet and Cuban Nations* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 40.
5. In a brief overview of sports and Soviet cinema of the 1920s and 1930s, François Albera notes the short instructional films *The Jump* and *The Healthy Man’s Morning*. See François Albera, “Soviet Cinema and Sport in the 1920s and 1930s,” in *The Russian Avant-Garde and Sport*, ed. François Albera, Cécile Pinchon-Bonin, Aleksandr Lavrentiev, and Daniel Girardin (Lausanne: Olympic Museum, 2014), 91.
6. The athletic club featured in Vertov’s *Kino-nedel’ia No. 9* is the Maccabi Federation, a Jewish sports club that spread to cities around the globe in the 1910s (and exists to this day as the Maccabi World Union). A print of Vertov’s *Kino-nedel’ia No. 9* can be found in the Russian State Film and Photo Archive (RGAKFD).
7. Malitsky, *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film*, 40.
8. See, for instance, Malitsky, *Post-Revolution Nonfiction Film*, 93; see also Seth Feldman, “‘Cinema Weekly’ and ‘Cinema Truth’: Dziga Vertov and the Leninist Proportion,” in *Show Us Life’: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary*, ed. Thomas Waugh (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 3–20.
9. Dziga Vertov, “The Fifth Issue of *Kinopravda*” (1922), in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, by Dziga Vertov, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 10.
10. Aleksey Gan, “The Tenth *Kino-Pravda*,” in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian (Gemonia, Italy: Le Giornate del Cinema Muto, 2004), 55. Gan’s article (“10-aia ‘Kino-Pravda’”) on the tenth installment of *Kino-Pravda* originally appeared in *Kino-fot*, no. 4 (October 5–12, 1922): 5.
11. Anatoli Lunacharsky, “Conversation with Lenin. I. Of All the Arts . . .,” in *The Film Factory*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1988), 57.
12. *Ibid.*, 55.
13. Aleksei Gan, *Da zdavstvuet demonstratsiia byta!* (Moscow: V. N. Pozdniakov Press, 1923), 8. This short tract on “Constructivist” cinema prompted a falling-out between Vertov and Gan, whose socialist aims for cinema diverged from Vertov’s more expansive vision for avant-garde film. See Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 65n1.

14. Rodchenko's intertitles for *Kino-Pravda No. 10* have unfortunately been lost. See Yuri Tsivian, "Turning Objects, Toppled Pictures: Give and Take between Vertov's Films and Constructivist Art," *October*, no. 121, New Vertov Studies (Summer 2007): 98.
15. Dziga Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," in Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 8.
16. Dziga Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution" (1923), in Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 17.
17. The phrase *Kurs na trenazh* can be linked to Gastev.
18. Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," 8.
19. Vertov, "Kinoks: A Revolution," 16.
20. Dziga Vertov, "A Sixth Part of the World (A Conversation with Dziga Vertov)," in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 182.
21. For more on the broad scope of Shub's *The Great Way*, see Graham Roberts, *Forward Soviet! History and Non-Fiction Film in the USSR* (London: Tauris, 1999), 56–64.
22. For more on the Leninist film-proportion, see Leyda, *Kino*, 160–62.
23. François Albera, "Soviet Cinema and Sport in the 1920s and 1930s," in Albera et al., *The Russian Avant-Garde and Sport*, 94.
24. Only 23 percent of all the films released in the Soviet Union during the 1920s were in fact Soviet-made, whereas 42 percent were from Hollywood (the remainder came from France and Germany). See Denise Youngblood, "Americanitis: The Amerikanshchina in Soviet Cinema," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 19, no. 4 (1992): 149.
25. The third in the famous triumvirate of silent comic actors, Charlie Chaplin, highlights golf and roller skating in several early shorts, but he never probed America's love of sports the way Keaton and Lloyd did. Mention should also be made of the American film star Douglas Fairbanks, whose long series of action films (*The Mark of Zorro*, *Robin Hood*, *The Thief of Baghdad*, etc.) featured ample athleticism and enjoyed great popularity in Soviet Russia in the first half of the 1920s.
26. Martin Scorsese drew on *Battling Butler* when making his celebrated boxing film, *Raging Bull* (1980), noting that Keaton was "the only person who had the right attitude about boxing in the movies for me." Martin Scorsese, *Scorsese on Scorsese*, ed. D. Thompson and I. Christie (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), 80.
27. Anatoly Lunacharsky cast a critical eye on the predominance of sports on U.S. university campuses in his *Thoughts about Sports (Mysli o sporte)*, 1930: "When you learn of the enormous place sports occupy in the life of the American student, you cannot help asking yourself when, specifically, does the American student find the time to receive the knowledge he needs." Anatolii Lunacharskii, *Mysli o sporte* (Moscow: Ogonek, 1930), 6.
28. For more on the prominence of U.S. films on the world market, see Kristin Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment: America in the World Film Market 1907–34* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985).
29. Lev Kuleshov, "Art of the Cinema," in *Kuleshov on Film: Writings of Lev Kuleshov*, trans. and ed. Ronald Levaco (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 106.
30. Quoted in Vlada Petrić, "A Subtextual Reading of Kuleshov's Satire *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*," in *Inside Soviet Film Satire: Laughter with a Lash*, ed. Andrew Horton (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 67.
31. For more on the intersection of sports, biomechanics, and cinema, see Alma Law and Mel Gordon, *Meyerhold, Eisenstein and Biomechanics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 37–38.
32. Mikhail Yampolsky, "Kuleshov's Experiments and the New Anthropology of the Actor," in *Inside the Film Factory*, ed. Richard Taylor and Ian Christie (London: Routledge, 1991), 48.

33. Also known under the English title *Moscow That Weeps and Laughs*.
34. Bernard Eisenschitz, "A Fickle Man, or Portrait of Boris Barnet as a Soviet Director," in Taylor, *Inside the Film Factory*, 155.
35. Steven Riess, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 1.
36. Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," 8.
37. Annette Michelson, introduction to Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, xxxvii.
38. Malcolm Turvey, "Vertov: Between the Organism and the Machine," *October*, no. 121, New Vertov Studies (Summer 2007): 17.
39. Ibid.
40. Aleksandr Fevralsky, "Stride, Soviet!," in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 161. Fevralsky's review of *Stride, Soviet!* originally appeared on the pages of *Pravda* in March 1926.
41. Ruttmann, much to the detriment of his artistic reputation, went on to make propaganda films for the Nazis in the 1930s, working with Leni Riefenstahl in 1935 on *Triumph of the Will* while also helping edit *Olympia*, Riefenstahl's monumental two-part film on the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics.
42. In 1923 Kaufman assisted Vertov on the aviation film *The Challenge of the Sky* (*Daesh' vozdukh!*), and in 1934 he directed *Air-Force March* (*Aviamarsh*). His *In Spring* (1929) also features extensive aerial shots.
43. Lev Kuleshov, "The Screen Today," in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 273.
44. Although paling in comparison to subsequent films by both Kaufman and Vertov, *Moscow* impressed Eisenstein (who had well-documented differences with Vertov). In addition to calling the film "brilliant," Eisenstein argued in a 1927 letter to the editor of the German journal *Filmtechnik* that "*Moscow* shows *kinoculism* the healthy path and the area—newsreel—which it should occupy in the construction of Soviet cinema." For Eisenstein, the straightforward matter-of-factness of Kaufman and Kopalin's film diverged positively from the lofty ambitions of Vertov's work, derogatorily referred to by Eisenstein as "kinoculism." Sergei Eisenstein, "Sergei Eisenstein's Reply to Oleg Voinov's Article," in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 145.
45. Also known as Shabolovka Tower (after its Moscow address, 37 Shabolovka Street), the Shukhov Radio Tower was designed by Vladimir Shukhov and erected between 1920 and 1922.
46. Siegfried Kracauer, "Man with a Movie Camera," translated and reprinted in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 356. Kracauer's article "Der Mann mit dem Kinoapparat" originally appeared in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on May 19, 1929.
47. Kracauer, "Man with a Movie Camera," 356.
48. Vlada Petrić, *Constructivism in Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 125.
49. See Ben Singer, "Connoisseurs of Chaos: Whitman, Vertov and the 'Poetic Survey,'" *Literature/Film Quarterly* 15, no. 4 (1987): 247–58. Vertov, moreover, cited Whitman in his diaries. See Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, 235.
50. Singer, "Connoisseurs of Chaos," 253.
51. Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1973), 94. In commentary included on the 1996 DVD recording of *The Man with the Movie Camera*, Yuri Tsivian, quoting directly from "I Sing the Body Electric," echoes Singer on Vertov's close connections with Whitman, particularly the two artists' mutual appreciation for the body.

52. Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 93.

53. See, for instance, Georges Sadoul, *Dictionary of Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 402.

54. It should also be noted that Vertov and Kaufman's younger brother, Boris Kaufman, emigrated after the Revolution to France, where he was the cinematographer on such notable films as Jean Vigo's *À Propos de Nice* (1930), and then to the United States, where he was the cinematographer (director of photography) on Elia Kazan's famous boxing film, *On the Waterfront* (1954), among other major films.

55. Regarding the two brothers' falling out, Kaufman believed that Vertov's montage and associated images would prove too complex for the average viewer. In an interview that appeared in the late seventies in the journal *October*, Kaufman touched on some of the differences he had with Vertov—for instance, what Kaufman saw as the doctrinaire approach Vertov took to fiction film. See Mikhail Kaufman, "An Interview with Mikhail Kaufman," *October*, no. 11, Essays in Honor of Jay Leyda (Winter 1979): 54–76.

56. Mikhail Kaufman, "Film Analysis," in Tsivian, *Lines of Resistance*, 391. Kaufman's essay "Kinoanaliz" appeared in the journal *Proletarian Cinema* (*Proletarskoe kino*, no. 4 [1931]: 8–11). Here Kaufman evokes the theoretical work and dialectical montage of Eisenstein as well as the less challenging editing of Pudovkin (Eisenstein's "clashing" of film images and Pudovkin's notion of linkage [*stseplenie*] are both mentioned).

57. Kaufman, "Film Analysis," 394.

58. *Ibid.*, 395.

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. In 1928 the Soviet Party Conference on Cinema passed a decree stating that Soviet films were to be "understood by the millions."

Chapter 5. Framing for the Future

1. For more on the interplay between cinema and photography, with attention paid to early Soviet films and photos, see David Company, *Photography and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), esp. 31, referencing Rodchenko and Vertov: "In Constructivism still photos began to look like film frames, while films were built up with almost still photographic shots."

2. N. Shebuev, "Vystavochnye vpechatleniia: O slone, kotorogo ne zamechaiut, o ptich'em duaze i o prochikh fotopoleznykh predmetakh," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 9 (1929): 289. In this short article, Shebuev praises Arkady Shaikhet's photograph of a track and field relay race while criticizing sports photographs by a certain Kudoyarov. Shebuev also states that although a good quarter of the photographs on display addressed the theme of industrialization, the most prevalent of early Soviet themes, 10 percent of the photographs were devoted to athletics.

3. See, for instance, Osip Brik, "Blizhe k faktu," *Novyi lef*, no. 2 (1927): 34. For more on the early Soviet avant-garde emphasis on photographs and facts, see Leah Dickerman, "The Fact and the Photograph," *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006): 132–52.

4. Marey was also involved in the 1900 Paris Olympics commission on hygiene and physiology. See Marta Braun, *Picturing Time: The Work of Etienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 200.

5. Anne-Marie Garat, preface to Jacques Lartigue, *Jacques Henri Lartigue: A Sporting Life* (Arles: Actes Sud/Hermès, 2013), 15.
6. For discussion of early Russian photographs taken at popular prerevolutionary sports venues, see Ekaterina Emeliantseva, “Sports Visions and Sports Palaces: The Social Topography of Sport in Late Imperial St. Petersburg and its Representation in Contemporary Photography (1890–1914),” in Katzer et al., *Euphoria and Exhaustion*, 19–40.
7. Gustav Klutsis, “The Photomontage as a New Kind of Agitational Art,” trans. Cathy Young, in *Gustav Klutsis and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage after Constructivism*, by Margarita Tupitsyn (New York: Steidl, 2004), 238. This essay originally appeared in *Izofront klassovaia bor’ba na fronte prostranstvennykh iskusstv: Sbornik statei ob’edineniia “Oktiabr’*,” ed. P. I. Novitskii (Moscow: Ogiz-Izogiz, 1931).
8. GeSoLei was formed from the words *Gesundheitspflege* (health care), *Soziale Fürsorge* (social work), and *Leibesübungen* (physical exercise). Willi Baumeister, among others, showed his sports-oriented work at GeSoLei’s *Art and Sport, Art and Physical Exercise* exhibition.
9. John (Helmut) Heartfield, who produced several sports-oriented magazine covers in Germany in the 1920s, visited the Soviet Union on several occasions as an avowed communist, with his work appearing not only on the pages of *Proletarian Photo* (*Proletarskoe foto*) in the early 1930s but also on the cover of a 1931 edition of *The USSR in Construction* (*SSSR na stroike*).
10. For a comprehensive discussion of sports in Weimar Germany’s art, see Joann Skrypzak, “Sporting Modernity: Sports, Art, and the Athletic Body in Germany, 1918–1938” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 2007).
11. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision*, trans. Daphne M. Hoffman (New York: Wittenborn, 1946), 15.
12. For more on Moholy-Nagy’s close ties to the early Soviet avant-garde, see Aleksandr Lavrentiev, “Soviet Photography of the 1920s and 1930s in Its Cultural Context: The Photo Landscape of the Period,” in *The Power of Pictures: Early Soviet Photography, Early Soviet Film*, ed. Susan Tumarkin Goodman and Jens Hoffmann (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015), 52–53.
13. Organized by Lissitzky, *The First Exhibition of Russian Art* (*Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*) in Berlin offered a survey of Russian art from the 1890s to 1922.
14. Julie Saul, *Moholy-Nagy Fotoplastiks: The Bauhaus Years* (Bronx, NY: Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1983), 39.
15. László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: Fundamentals of Bauhaus Design, Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 197, also quoted in Saul, *Moholy-Nagy Fotoplastiks*, 39.
16. Other titles Moholy-Nagy used for his sports-oriented *Fotoplastiken* include *How to Remain Young and Beautiful* (*Wie bleibe ich jung und schön*, 1925), *Sport Creates an Appetite* (*Sport Macht Appetit*, 1927), and *Corset* (*Das Korsett*, 1927).
17. In 1922, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg together published the periodical *Veshch’/Gegenstand/Objet* in Berlin.
18. Matthew Drutt, “El Lissitzky in Germany, 1922–1925,” in *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, by Margarita Tupitsyn (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 12.
19. El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, “The Blockade of Russia Is Coming to an End,” trans. Stephen Bann, in *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. Stephen Bann (New York: Viking Press, 1974), 55, also printed in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 344–45.

20. Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, 56, emphasis added.

21. Ibid.

22. K. Michael Hays, “Photomontage and Its Audience: El Lissitzky Meets Berlin Dada,” in *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1910–1930*, ed. Gail Harrison Roman and Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992), 169–70. See also O’Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 25–26.

23. Benjamin Buchloh, “From *Faktura* to Factography,” *October*, no. 30 (Autumn 1984): 94–95.

24. Peter Nisbet, “An Introduction to El Lissitzky,” in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museum, 1988), 19.

25. Whereas in 1913 registered sports club members numbered 50,000, by 1925, around 250,000 Soviet citizens belonged to Soviet sports clubs. By 1929 that number would increase to 759,000. See Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 109.

26. Irina Kokkinaki, “Mezhdunarodnyi Krasnyi stadion: K istorii proektirovaniia i stroitel’sтва,” *Arkhitektura SSSR*, no. 6 (November–December 1985): 100.

27. Ibid., 100, 102.

28. In a January 1926 letter, Lissitzky mentions teaching at VKhUTEMAS. See Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 73.

29. Maria Gough, “Lissitzky on Broadway,” in *Object:Photo. Modern Photographs: The Thomas Walther Collection 1909–1949. An Online Project of the Museum of Modern Art*, ed. Mitra Abbaspour, Lee Ann Daner, and Maria Morris Hambourg (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 7, <http://www.moma.org/interactives/objectphoto/assets/essays/Gough.pdf>. For more on Mikhail Korzhev and his International Red Stadium sports club design, see C. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Mikhail Korzhev* (Moscow: Fond “Russkii avangard,” 2009), 73–83; and Vere, *Sport and Modernism*, 152–57.

30. Once the steep incline of Moscow’s Lenin Hills was deemed unsuitable for the International Red Stadium project, plans were made to move the sports complex to a flat plane across the Moscow River from Lenin Hills (where Luzhniki Stadium now stands). But when the project stalled in the late 1920s, the Dynamo sports complex in north-central Moscow, built in 1928–29, became the city’s main stadium while parts of the innovative plans for the International Red Stadium were adopted in 1928 by Constructivist architect Konstantin Mel’nikov for Moscow’s Central Park of Culture and Leisure (TSPKiO), or what became known as Gorky Park. See Kokkinaki, “Mezhdunarodnyi Krasnyi stadion, 106. For more on the use of the Dynamo Stadium in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Edelman, *Serious Fun*, 39–42.

31. For more on the various versions (and titles) of Lissitzky’s hurdler(s), see Gough, “Lissitzky on Broadway,” 1–7.

32. Ibid., 1.

33. Margarita Tupitsyn, “After Vitebsk: El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, 1924–1929,” in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 186.

34. El Lissitzky, “Exhibition Rooms,” in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 366.

35. Gough, “Lissitzky on Broadway,” 7.

36. This Party document is quoted in Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 106.

37. El Lissitzky, “Sport u.a.,” in *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna: Verlag Anton Schroll, 1930), 23.

38. Klutsis's photomontage work included sports imagery ranging from boxers (illustrations for Yury Libedinsky's *Tomorrow* [*Zavtra*]) to Babe Ruth (illustrations for Mayakovsky's poem *Lenin*). By all accounts, Klutsis himself was an avid athlete.

39. O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 24.

40. Klutsis, "The Photomontage," 237.

41. As the foreword to a 1928 album commemorating *The Spartakiad of the USSR* suggested, the goal of the festival and art connected to it was "not to further even greater popularity of Soviet champions and record-breakers, nor to inflate the sporting achievements of 'protégés'" but "to immortalize the Spartakiad as a festival of the masses, to convey the pulse and nerve of our physical culture." Cited and discussed in Mikhail Karasik and Manfred Heiting, *The Soviet Photobook 1920–1941* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2015), 136. Named after the gladiatorial slave-turned-revolutionary Spartacus, these games were held in Moscow's Dynamo Stadium and the Park of Culture and Rest (aka Gorky Park). Between 1917 and 1948, the Soviet Union did not send athletes to the Olympics and founded these games as a proletarian alternative that included participants from seventeen nations beyond the USSR. In 1931, the Spartakiad games, held in Berlin, were begun but dissolved by the German authorities, while the third Games, scheduled for Moscow in 1933, were canceled for political reasons. Meanwhile, the fourth Games, held in Barcelona in 1936, were called off due to Franco's coup-d'état and the Spanish Civil War. Two winter Spartakiads, meanwhile, were held in Oslo in 1928 and 1936.

42. Daniel Girardin, "Photography and Photomontage in Soviet Russia (1920–1940)," in Albera et al., *The Russian Avant-Garde and Sport*, 74–75.

43. Klutsis, "The Photomontage," 238.

44. O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 32.

45. See Larisa Oginskaia, *Gustav Klutsis* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1981), 81; Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 118.

46. Klutsis, "The Photomontage," 238.

47. Christopher Mount, *Stenberg Brothers: Constructing a Revolution in Soviet Design* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 15.

48. In albums devoted to the Stenberg brothers, both Christopher Mount and Susan Pack erroneously claim that *Bitaiia kotleta* was the Russian title given to *The Yokel* (1926), another film short starring Snub Pollard.

49. Edelman, *Serious Fun*, 35.

50. October—Association of Artist Labor, "Declaration," trans. John E. Bowlt, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 277.

51. Aleksandr Rodchenko, "The Paths of Contemporary Photography," in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 211. This piece by Rodchenko originally appeared in *Novyi lef*, no. 10 (1928).

52. Hans-Michael Koetzle, "'The Leica Is the Only Camera a Motor Enthusiast Can Possibly Need': 35 mm and Photo Avant-Garde in the Years Prior to the Second World War," in *Eyes Wide Open: 100 Years of Leica Photography*, ed. Hans-Michael Koetzle (Berlin: Kehrler, 2015), 69. Koetzle quotes here from a 1929 German magazine (*Schaja Photo-Mitteilungen*).

53. For more on the Leica and the later Soviet version, ominously called the FED in honor of CHEKA founder Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky, see Leah Bendavid-Val, *Propaganda and Dreams: Photographing the 1930s in the USSR and the US* (Zurich: Edition Stemmle, 1999), 43–44.

54. Rodchenko, letter to Varvara Stepanova, August 20, 1930, in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 283.

55. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Sport in 1930s Soviet Photography," in Goodman and Hoffman, *The Power of Pictures*, 51–53.

56. Margarita Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph, 1924–1937* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996), 99.

57. See "Programma fotosektsii ob"edineniia 'Oktiabr'," 151.

58. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*, 106.

59. Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Reconstructing the Artist" ("Perestroika khudozhnika"), in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 301.

60. L. Mezhericher, "Segodniashnii den' sovetskogo fotoreportazha," *Proletarskoe foto*, no. 1 (1931): 10.

61. Ibid. As Tupitsyn notes in her study of Soviet photography, what Mezhericher's article reflected was "a widespread tendency in the Soviet press to glorify and heroize the proletariat. Workers were not shown as an undifferentiated class whose personal deeds were subsumed under a united desire for a utopian society (as is the case in the photographs of Rodchenko, Ignatovich, and Langman), but as a class of heroes whose achievements were 'determined by objective forces at work in society.'" Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*, 103. Tupitsyn quotes here from György Lukács, *Realism in Our Time: Literature and the Class Struggle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).

62. Mezhericher, "Segodniashnii den' sovetskogo fotoreportazha," 10. Mezhericher is referring here to the "right" group of Soviet artists who painted in a figurative style.

63. As Rodchenko himself wrote, "After the attacks on my *Pioneer*, the October Association expelled me in an attempt to disassociate itself from formalism." See Rodchenko, "Reconstructing the Artist," in *Experiments for the Future*, 297.

64. Ibid.

65. Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Sport in 1930s Soviet Photography," in Albera et al., *The Russian Avant-Garde and Sport*, 54.

66. Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*, 146.

67. Rodchenko's diver, one critic at the time stated, was "killed by biological detail." Rodchenko responded to such criticism by remarking that the diver was "not a ballerina and thus his legs are not shaved." See Tupitsyn, *The Soviet Photograph*, 154.

68. For more on the scarcity of female photographers in the early Soviet period (in comparison to the relatively large number of Soviet women involved with other arts at this time), see Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Soviet Photography of the 1920s and 1930s in Its Cultural Context," in Goodman and Hoffmann, *The Power of Pictures*, 69–71. Lavrentiev argues that this scarcity stemmed from Soviet women's lack of access to equipment needed for taking, developing, and printing photographs.

69. "Gotovy k trudu i oborone," *SSSR na stroike*, nos. 7–8 (July–August 1934): 2.

70. For more on female participation in early Soviet sports, see Kateryna Kobchenko, "Emancipation with the Ruling Ideology: Soviet Women in Fizkul'tura and Sport in the 1920s and 1930s," in Katzer et al., *Euphoria and Exhaustion*, 252–67.

71. Anri Vartanov, "Uroki mastera," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 12 (1972): 30, also quoted in Aleksandr Lavrentiev, "Boris Ignatovich: Umenie videt'," in *Boris Ignatovich, Photography, 1927–1963*, ed. M. A. Zhotikova and A. N. Lavrentiev (exhibition catalog, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, 2002), 28.

72. In the mid-1930s, Ignatovich did shoot a series of photographs devoted to boxing.
73. For a contemporary Soviet view of Ignatovich's *Youth*, see I. Sosfenov, "Ob brazhe molodogo cheloveka v sovetskom fotoiskusstve," *Sovetskoe foto*, no. 13 (1938): 15–16.
74. In the early 1930s, Penson produced a number of sports photographs that captured Soviet athletics through an explicitly formal style (e.g., *The Jump* [*Pryzhok*] and *Kurash: National Wrestling Match* [*Kuresh: Natsional'naia bor'ba*]). See Ildar Galeev and Miron Penson, *Max Penson: Photographer of the Uzbek Avant-Garde 1920s–1940s* (Stuttgart: Arnoldsche Art Publishers, 2011), 168–71. For much of his career, Penson worked in Tashkent (Uzbekistan).
75. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*, 18.
76. *SSSR na stroike*, no. 12 (December 1935): 3.
77. For more on GTO, see Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society*, 128–32.
78. Buchloh, "From *Faktura* to Factography," 114. The White Sea Canal project, which was the site of a Stalinist prison camp, caused the death of more than 100,000 workers, a grisly aspect of the project that Rodchenko must surely have noted while producing his photographs for *USSR in Construction*.
79. John Bowl, "Aleksandr Rodchenko as Photographer," in *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930: New Perspectives*, ed. Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1980), 58.
80. *Ibid.*

Chapter 6. Higher and Faster

1. For more on Stalinist sports parades, see O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 80–96. "Orchestrated spontaneity," as O'Mahony aptly calls it, characterized "an ultimately failed attempt by both the state and official artists to suggest the uncertainty and unpredictability so beloved of popular sports such as soccer, whilst maintaining the strict controls that typified the theatricality of parade culture." O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 80.
2. Andrey Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature—The Richest in Ideas: The Most Advanced Literature," in *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism; Gorky, Radek, Bukharin, Zhdanov and Others*, ed. H. G. Scott (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935; facs. reprint London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), 21.
3. Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 247.
4. As Evgeny Dobrenko puts it, under Stalin, "the utopian project ceased to be a project and was declared real." See Evgeny Dobrenko, "Socialist Realism and Stasis," in *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori, and Maria Mileeva (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 193–202.
5. As the "sunny" introductory statement to the 1934 sports issue of *USSR in Construction* declared, "Take a look beyond the city on a fine weekend day, the rivers are full of boats, the swimming pools and schools for swimming are full, on the beaches are tens of thousands of citizens. Bathing, games in the fresh air, rowing have become the property of everyone. The enormous life-giving force of the sun, air, and water together with physical exercises has been firmly realized by everyone. Physical culture in a broad sense of this word has spread throughout the Soviet Union in unprecedented fashion." See "Gotovy k trudu i oborone," *SSSR na stroike*, nos. 7–8 (July–August 1934): 2.
6. Toby Clark, "The 'New Man's' Body: A Motif in Early Soviet Culture," in *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917–1992*, ed. Matthew

Cullerne Brown and Brandon Taylor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 48, also quoted in Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 2008), 6–7.

7. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Era of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 250–51.

8. Yuri Olesha, *No Day without a Line*, ed. and trans. Judson Rosengrant (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 56.

9. Ibid., 56.

10. Ibid., 69.

11. Ibid.

12. The circus, where Zaikin performed, made a deep impression on the young Olesha, who in numerous works evoked his admiration for the artistry and athleticism of the period’s circus performers. See Neil Cornwell, “At the Circus with Olesha and Siniavskii,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 71, no. 1 (January 1993): 1–13.

13. Olesha, *No Day without a Line*, 76, 79–80. Here Olesha describes Bogemsky being tossed in the air by a crowd of spectators after a game, a celebration of athletic prowess that anticipates what occurs in *Envy*.

14. Ibid., 78.

15. Victor Peppard, *The Poetics of Yuri Olesha* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), 3.

16. Ibid., 77–78.

17. Ibid., 78–79.

18. Olesha, *Envy*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967), 1.

19. Ibid., 1–2.

20. Ibid., 101.

21. Ibid., 102.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 63, 2.

24. Ibid., 103.

25. Peppard, “The Carnival World of *Envy*,” in *Olesha’s Envy: A Critical Companion*, ed. Ringaila Salys (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 93.

26. Olesha, *Envy*, 105.

27. Ibid., 104.

28. Ibid., 106.

29. Ibid., 105.

30. Ibid., 106–7.

31. Ibid., 106. Like a Soviet avant-garde film by Vertov or Kaufman, Olesha’s account of the soccer match fluctuates between action on the field and perceptions of it in the stands. The camera-like narrative eye begins with the player Getzke — “As soon as he got the ball” — then jumps immediately to Valya’s point of view: “From her height [she] would scream as though about to witness some horrible crime. . . . But she watched the fearful movements of Getzke through squinting eyes.” Even the voyeuristic perspective of the players themselves is acknowledged in Olesha’s filmic description of the game: “The Russians [‘ours’ (*nashi*)], writes Olesha] played their best while keeping a sharp eye on the Germans’ style of play.” And Olesha extends his cinematic rendering

of the soccer match by pausing it—explicitly like an interrupted film—in chapter 9, when the ball flies into the stands and lands at the feet of the startled onlooker Kavalero: “The game was interrupted. The players froze in their tracks, caught by the unexpected. The picture of the field, green with multicolored spots, a picture that had been moving all the time, now became immobile the way a film stops when the projector breaks down and the star remains motionless in a pose that only makes sense in rapid motion.” See Olesha, *Envy*, 107–11.

32. See Olesha, *Envy*, 106. The juxtaposition of the two stars even extends to their appearance: Getzke is “a medium-sized, swarthy, round-shouldered man,” whereas Makarov is, in his own words, “a human machine” and, it is implied, handsome. *Ibid.*, 106, 49.

33. Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917–1929* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 182.

34. Olesha, *Envy*, 108–9.

35. Ronald LeBlanc, “The Soccer Match in *Envy*,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 32, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 60.

36. LeBlanc, “The Soccer Match in *Envy*,” 61.

37. Olesha, *Envy*, 108–9.

38. *Ibid.*, 109–10.

39. *Ibid.*, 108.

40. For more on the broader sociocultural implications of the goalkeeper in early Soviet art (and a brief discussion of *Envy*), see O’Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 139–45. O’Mahony sees the goalkeeper in art—and in *Envy*—as a stand-in for the military border guard keeping foreign invaders at bay, a view reinforced by the popular 1930s Soviet song “The Sportsman’s March” (“Hey you, goalie, get ready for battle! / You’re a sentry by the goal!”). For more on this song, see Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*, 48–49.

41. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 91, 121–22.

42. *Ibid.*, 120.

43. Olesha, *Envy*, 113.

44. *Ibid.*, 64–65.

45. I. Grashchenkova, *Abram Room* (Moscow: “Iskusstvo,” 1977), 166.

46. Grisha Fokin and his youthful, athletic outlook on Soviet life can be traced back to Olesha’s 1934 address to the First All Union Congress of Soviet Writers, where he stated: “I myself have set myself the task of writing about the young. I shall write plays and stories in which the characters will solve moral problems. Somewhere, there lives in me the conviction that Communism is not only an economic system but also a moral system, and the first to embody this aspect of Communism will be our young men and women.” Quoted and translated in Elizabeth Beaujour, *The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Iurii Olesha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 117.

47. Olesha, *Strogi i unoshia*, in *Izbrannoe* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974), 310–11.

48. *Ibid.*, 304.

49. *Ibid.*, 330. To this short thesis, Room’s film adds, “We help those who fall behind, and strive for common development.”

50. Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism*, trans. Jesse Savage (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 237.

51. Paul Babitsky and John Rimberg, *The Soviet Film Industry* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1955), 154–55, also quoted in Beaujour, *The Invisible Land*, 130.

52. Beaujour, *The Invisible Land*, 130.

53. Room was eventually rehabilitated but continued to run up against censorship in the ensuing decades. For more on the problems encountered by *A Strict Youth*, see Milena Michalski, “Promises Broken, Promise Fulfilled: The Critical Failings and Creative Success of Abram Room’s ‘Strogii iunosha,’” *Slavonic and East European Review* 82, no. 4 (October 2004): 820–46.

54. Yuri Olesha, “The Stadium in Odessa,” in *Complete Short Stories & The Three Fat Men*, trans. Aimee Anderson (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1979), 122.

55. *Ibid.*, 122–24.

56. *Ibid.*, 123.

57. *Ibid.*, 124.

58. *Ibid.*

59. *Ibid.*

60. *Ibid.*

61. Yuri Olesha, “Turi Olesha Talks with His Readers,” trans. H. O. Whyte, *International Literature*, no. 3 (1936): 88, quoted in Beaujour, *The Invisible Land*, 9.

62. Aleksandr Deineka, “Iskusstvo i sport,” *Ogonek*, no. 28 (1946): 10.

63. *Ibid.*

64. *Ibid.*

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid.*

67. *Ibid.*

68. V. P. Sysoev, *Aleksandr Deineka* (Moscow: Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo, 1989), 1:18.

69. Ivan Rakhillo, *Serebrianyi pereulok* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1974), 455.

70. Rakhillo, *Serebrianyi pereulok*, 453. Rakhillo attributed to Deyneka the remark that sports represented “our living contemporaneity, which artists are obliged to affirm in their art” (461).

71. Aleksandr Deineka, “Tvorcheskaiia komandirovka,” *Iskusstvo*, no. 1 (1935): 157. This essay was reproduced in Deineka, *Žizn’, iskusstvo, vremia* (Leningrad: Izd. Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1974), 109–11. Deyneka also included these thoughts about soccer and its influence on his art in his book *From My Working Practice* (*Iz moei rabochei praktiki*, Moscow: Akademiia khudozhestv SSSR, 1961).

72. Deineka, “Tvorcheskaiia komandirovka,” 157.

73. OST [Society of Easel Artists], “Platform,” trans. John E. Bowlit, in Bowlit, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 281.

74. John E. Bowlit, “The Society of Easel Artists (OST),” *Russian History* 9, nos. 2/3, “NEP: Culture, Society, and Politics in the 1920s” (1982): 210.

75. *Ibid.*, 218.

76. Natal’ia Aleksandrova, Elena Voronovich, and Andrei Gubko, “Khronika zhizni Aleksandra Deineki: Opyt rekonstruktsii,” in Deineka, *Deineka: Zhivopis’* (Moscow: “Interrosa,” 2010), 29.

77. Among a large number of Deyneka paintings that highlight the naked or semi-naked human body and its physical potential are *Ball Game* (*Igra v miach*, 1932), *Midday* (*Polden’*, 1932), and *Lunchbreak in the Donbas* (*V obedennyi pereryv v Donbase*, 1935).

78. After the 1929 New York City exhibition, Pimenov's painting disappeared and now only exists in photographs.

79. Quoted and translated in Helena Goscilo, "Deineka's Heavenly Bodies: Space, Sports, and the Sacred," in *Russian Aviation, Space Flight, and Visual Culture*, ed. Vlad Strukov and Helena Goscilo (London: Routledge, 2017), 55.

80. Pimenov's athletes, it should be noted, closely resemble the workers found in other work by Pimenov from the 1920s—for instance, his 1929 propaganda poster *All to the Review!* (*Vse na smotr!*). I thank Helena Goscilo for drawing my attention to these similarities.

81. Christina Kiaer, "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s," *Oxford Art Journal* 28, no. 3 (2005): 332.

82. Discussing Deyneka's paintings from the early 1930s, Kiaer notes the painter's "refusal to pretend that the dream of collectivity is already knowable and therefore representable in a language of pictorial immediacy." See Kiaer, "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?," 327.

83. According to I. A. Pripachkin, the structure in the background of Deyneka's 1932 *Futbolist* is the bell tower and central structure of the Beheading of St. John the Baptist Church in Tolchkov in Yaroslavl. See Aleksandrova, Voronovich, and Gubko, "Khronika zhizni Aleksandra Deineki," 46.

84. As Goscilo notes in her insightful discussion of this painting and, more broadly, the close connection between Deyneka's sports-themed art and his work devoted to aviation, "One has only to compare *Football Player* with Serafina Riagina's *Higher and Higher* (*Vse vyshe i vyshe*, 1934), a transparent hymn to Stalin's Second Five-Year Plan, to gauge the distance between loyal Socialist Realists and Deineka at his original best." Helen Goscilo, "Deineka's Heavenly Bodies," in Strukov, *Russian Aviation*, 60.

85. In early work, Deyneka implied that modern sports offered an appealing alternative to religion in the new era. Consider, for instance, Deyneka's color illustration for the Soviet journal *Atheist* (*Bezbozhnik*), no. 5 (1926): 12–13. This illustration shows a large crowd of onlookers at an ongoing soccer game and in the background a church with a priest standing out in front but with no parishioners nearby. Below the image is the caption "Priests (in a chorus): On Saturday it's a 'rainy' day and no one goes to church. No one goes to church."

86. For a comparison of *The Goalkeeper* to Yosif Chaykov's famous soccer sculpture, *Soccer Players* (*Futbolisty*, 1929), see O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 141.

87. Kiaer, "Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour?," 340.

88. Rafael Kaufman, "Aleksandr Deineka," *Iskusstvo*, no. 3 (1936): 88, 87.

89. *Ibid.*, 100.

90. *Ibid.*

91. Irina Ostrakova, "Linii novoi zhizni," in Aleksandr Deineka, *Deineka: Grafika* (Moscow: "Interrosa," 2009), 21.

92. Andrei Kovalev, "Zashchita Deineki: Sil'nyi mittel'shpil'," in Deineka, *Deineka: Grafika*, 68.

93. *Ibid.*, 80. In the late 1930s, Deyneka produced an impressive series of athletic-themed mosaics for ceiling panels at the Mayakovskaya metro station in Moscow.

94. O'Mahony argues that *Relay on Ring Road "B"* "prioritizes strict competition over collective participation." O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 154.

95. O'Mahony makes the assertion that in his self-portrait, Deyneka "superimposed his head onto the fit and healthy body of an obviously much younger model." See O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 155.

Conclusion

1. Mark Twain, Ring Lardner, Thomas Wolfe, Bernard Malamud, John Updike, and Philip Roth are among those American writers who have taken on baseball in their work.

2. Hoberman, *Sport and Political Ideology*, 20.
3. Paperny, *Architecture in the Age of Stalin*, 199.
4. O'Mahony, *Sport in the USSR*, 21.
5. Bowlit, "Body Beautiful," in Bowlit, *Laboratory of Dreams*, 58.
6. Ibid.
7. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 37.

Coda

1. For a more extensive discussion of Nabokov and sports, see Tim Harte, "Athletic Inspiration: Vladimir Nabokov and the Aesthetic Thrill of Sports," *Nabokov Studies* 12 (2009/11): 147–66.

2. "I was an erratic but rather spectacular goalkeeper," Nabokov noted, somewhat ironically, in 1965. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 59. And as he recalled in *Speak, Memory*, "There existed in Russia, and still exists no doubt, a special type of school-age boy who, without necessarily being athletic in appearance or outstanding in mental scope, often having, in fact, no energy in class, a rather scrawny physique, and even, perhaps, a touch of pulmonary consumption, excels quite phenomenally at soccer *and* chess, and learns with the utmost ease and grace any kind of sport or game of skill (Borya Shik, Kostya Buketov, the famous brothers Sharabanov—where are they now, my teammates and rivals?)." Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 205.

3. Nabokov played goalkeeper for a Russian Sports Club in Berlin between 1931 and 1932. See Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 376–77.

4. Nabokov, Aleksandr Dolinin notes, "highly valued the magic of play that is based on deception, illusion, impersonation, and he himself was a connoisseur of various forms of play—the play of nature, the play of words and the mind, the play of chess pieces." Aleksandr Dolinin, "Istinnaia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina," in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, by Vladimir Nabokov (St. Petersburg: "Simpozium," 2000), 1:21.

5. Thomas Karshan, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

6. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 29. In 1904 J. P. Müller, a Danish gymnastics teacher, published his *Mit System (My System)* and it became, having been quickly translated into a variety of languages, an extremely popular book throughout Europe.

7. For more on the athletic ties between Nabokov and his father, see Gavriel Shapiro, *The Tender Friendship and the Charm of Perfect Accord: Nabokov and His Father* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 187–221.

8. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 181.
9. “Court-tennis,” Nabokov remarks in his discussion of *Anna Karenina*, “is mentioned both by Shakespeare and Cervantes. Ancient kings played it, stamping and panting in resounding halls. But this [lawn tennis], I repeat, is our modern game.” Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 234.
10. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 105–6. For “box,” Pnin has in mind Lermontov’s “A Song about *Tsar Ivan Vasilyevich*, His Young Bodyguard, and the Brave Merchant *Kalashnikov*” (1838), while Pnin’s mention of tennis in *Anna Karenina* echoes Nabokov’s own lectures on Tolstoy.
11. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 267.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 267–68.
14. Ibid., 268.
15. Vladimir Nabokov, “Braitenshtreter—Paolino,” in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 1:749. Translations of passages from this essay are my own. In December 1925 Nabokov delivered this essay to an émigré literary circle organized by Raisa Tatarinov and Yuly Aikhenval’d. A version of the talk appeared in a December issue of *BoxSport* (Berlin) and in the Latvian journal *Slovo*. For a translation of “Breitensträter—Paolino,” see Vladimir Nabokov, “Breitensträter—Paolino,” trans. Anastasia Tolstoy and Karshan, *Times Literary Supplement*, August 1, 2012.
16. Like the leftist playwright Bertolt Brecht, who also attended boxing matches at the Berlin Sports Palace in the 1920s, Nabokov found the excitement and drama of these matches ideal, compelling fodder for his art. For more on the importance of boxing—and the Berlin Sports Palace—in Brecht’s work, see Ole Gram, “Left Hook: Brecht, Boxing, and Committed Art,” *XCP* 9 (2001): 7–16; and Wolf van Eckardt and Sander L. Gilman, *Bertolt Brecht’s Berlin: A Scrapbook of the Twenties* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1975), 136–38.
17. Nabokov, “Braitenshtreter—Paolino,” 750.
18. Nabokov notes here that he attended bouts of some of his era’s most famous boxers: “I was lucky enough to see Smith, Bombardier Wells, Goddard, Wilde, Beckett, and the marvelous Carpentier, who defeated Beckett.” Ibid., 751.
19. Ibid., 753.
20. Ibid., 754.
21. Vladimir Nabokov, “Velosipedist,” in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh* (St. Petersburg: “Simpozium,” 2000), 1:543. Nabokov admitted that he “went through” a phase in the 1910s when Blok got “into [his] system—and everything [else seemed] unblokish and flat.” See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 94.
22. Vladimir Nabokov, *Universitetskaya poema*, in *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 2:574.
23. Alluding to the fashion sensation that the “goddess” Lenglen made in 1919, when she appeared at Wimbledon in a then risqué knee-length dress, Nabokov mixes sports and sensuality through his lyricism in ways that anticipate two tennis passages from *Lolita*.
24. Vladimir Nabokov, *Glory*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 47–48.

25. “The heroic spirit of Gumilev,” Vladimir Alexandrov suggests, “permeates *Glory*.” Vladimir Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 224. See also Tim Harte, “‘Transforming Defeat into Victory’: Jack London and Vladimir Nabokov’s *Glory*,” *Nabokov Online Journal* 10–11 (2016–17): 1–24, http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/19_harte_london.pdf.

26. Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 193.

27. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*, trans. Michael Scammell (New York: Vintage, 1991), 27.

28. For context on this soccer painting in *The Gift*, see Yuri Leving, *Keys to the Gift: A Guide to Vladimir Nabokov’s Novel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 204–5.

29. Nabokov, *The Gift*, 181–82.

30. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 162. For more on the important metaphysical links between the two tennis scenes, see Alexandrov, *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 173.

31. Vladimir Nabokov, “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” in *The Annotated Lolita*, 316; Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, 230. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov used tennis, mentioned repeatedly in the memoir, as a means for probing the character of his older brother Sergey, a sibling he admitted never sufficiently understanding: “The only game we both liked was tennis. . . . He was left-handed. He had a bad stammer that hampered discussions of doubtful points. Despite a weak service and an absence of any real backhand, he was not easy to beat, being the kind of player who never double-faults, and returns everything with the consistency of a banging wall.” See Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 258. Sergey, a homosexual, died in 1945 in a German concentration camp.

32. Nabokov, *Invitation*, 130.

33. Most notorious among the sexual readings of Nabokov’s sports scenes is William Rowe’s discussion of the *Lolita* tennis scenes. See William Rowe, *Nabokov’s Deceptive World* (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 143–45. See also David H. J. Larmour, “Getting One Past the Goalkeeper: Sports and Games in *Glory*,” in *Discourse and Ideology in Nabokov’s Prose*, ed. David H. J. Larmour (New York: Routledge, 2002), 59–73.

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Plate 1. Natalya Goncharova, *Wrestlers*, 1908–9. Oil on canvas, 100 × 122 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris.



Plate 2. Ilya Mashkov, *Self-Portrait and Portrait of Konchalovsky*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 208 × 270 cm. Photograph © 2019, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.



Plate 3. David Burlyuk, *Portrait of the Futurist and Singer-Warrior Vasily Kamensky*, 1916. Oil on canvas, 65.5 × 97 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.



Plate 4. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *The Champions of England and France*. From the series *Greco-Roman Wrestling*, 1919. Pastel paper, ink and pen, 37 × 28 cm. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, NY.

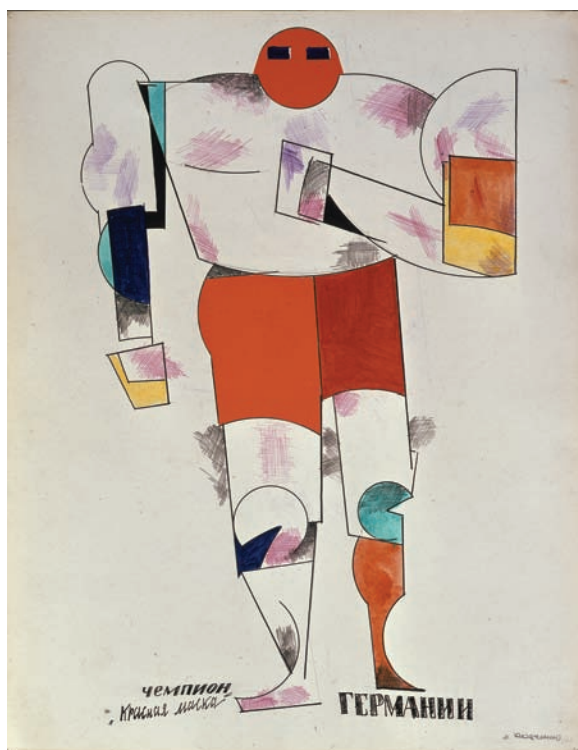


Plate 5. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *The Champion of Germany, "The Red Mask"*. From the series *Greco-Roman Wrestling*, 1919. Pastel paper, ink and pen, 37 × 28 cm. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, NY.

Plate 6. El Lissitzky, *The New One*, plate 10 from the portfolio *Victory over the Sun*, 1923. Color, lithograph, sheet, 53.3 × 45.7 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Plate 7. El Lissitzky, *Record*, 1926. Gelatin silver print, 26.7 × 22.4 cm. Thomas Walther Collection, Gift of Thomas Walther, Museum of Modern Art, New York. Digital image © Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY. Print © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.





Plate 8. Gustav Klutsis, postcard for the *Moscow Spartakiad 1928*, 1928. Lithograph, 14.6 × 10.2 cm. Russian State Library, Moscow. Photograph by HIP / Art Resource, NY. © 2019 Estate of Gustav Klutsis / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Plate 9. Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg, movie poster for Mikhail Kaufman, *In Spring*, 1929. Photograph by HIP / Art Resource, NY. © 2019 Estate of Georgii and Vldaimir Stenberg / UPRAVIS, Moscow / VAGA, New York.

Plate 10. Aleksandr Rodchenko, cover for the miscellany *Summer*, 1924. Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, New York.



Plate 11. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *A Jump into Water*, 1932. Gelatin silver print, 29.7 × 23.8 cm. Thomas Walther Collection. Gift of Shirley C. Burden, by exchange. © 2019 Estate of Alexander Rodchenko / UPRAVIS, Moscow / Artists Rights Society, New York.





Plate 12 (*above*). Aleksandr Deyneka, *The Race*, 1932–33. Oil on canvas, 229 × 259 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.

Plate 13 (*left*). Aleksandr Deyneka, *The Soccer Player*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 116.5 × 91.5 cm. A. A. Deineka Picture Gallery of Kursk, Russia. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.



Plate 14 (*above*). Aleksandr Deyneka, *Relay on Ring Road "B,"* 1947. Oil on canvas, 199 × 299 cm. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.

Plate 15 (*left*). Aleksandr Deyneka, *Self-Portrait*, 1948. Oil on canvas, 175.2 × 110 cm. A. A. Deineka Picture Gallery of Kursk, Russia. © 2019 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / UPRAVIS, Moscow.