

Article

“A Nursery of Technique,” the Laboratory in the Socio-Cultural Context of the 1920s–1930s: Between Practice and Metaphor [†]

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Abstract

This article analyzes the laboratory discourse in Soviet society during the first third of the twentieth century through the lens of *tékhnē*—the ancient fusion of making and knowing—arguing that the laboratory became a key site for redefining artistic practice as a form of knowledge production. Drawing on the institutional critique of the laboratory (Bruno Latour), the author raises the question of the potential for mutual influence between different types of laboratories established in the fields of art, technical sciences, and production. The mechanisms of a laboratory’s influence on society, as identified by Latour, allow for a new interpretation of the phenomenology of the All-Russian Theatre Society and its significant internal divisions. The history of the emergence and defeat of the Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the All-Russian Theatre Society (ARTS) in the 1920s–1930s is reconstructed on the basis of archival materials from RGALI (fund 970). Meeting minutes and documents from 1929 to 1932 reveal the main modes of the anthropology of the “laboratory genre” within the ARTS system (1920s–1980s). These are examined within the general experimental context of the era: the laboratory boom of the 1920s–1930s reshaped the boundaries between the natural sciences and the humanities. The second mode is the human experience of being on the threshold between life and death—a transgressive state. The third mode is the laboratory as a site for new forms of labor and technology. Within the laboratory’s work, psychotechnics acquired particular significance, reaching its culmination in 1931–1932. This period, marked by an intense flurry of events and new laboratory practices of psychological influence, was rightly called a “psychosis of activities” by the participants of the ARTS laboratory themselves.

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1. Defining “Laboratory” as an Analytical Category

Before turning to the historical material, it is necessary to clarify how the term “laboratory” is used in this article. It functions not merely as a historical descriptor but as an analytical category with three distinct yet interrelated levels of meaning. Acknowledging these levels explicitly is essential, because the article’s interpretive power depends on the internal coherence of this key term.¹

First, the laboratory as institution—a concrete organizational unit with formal boundaries, staffing, material infrastructure, documentation, and hierarchical subordination. Examples include factory-and-plant laboratories under the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry (discussed below), as well as the Laboratory of Mass Psychology within the All-Russian Theatre Society (ARTS). This level enables analysis of budgets, reporting lines, political economy, and the institutional conditions that made experimentation possible—or impossible.

Second, the laboratory as a method—a mode of working based on repeatability, controlled conditions, trial and error, protocol keeping, and isolation of variables. In the theatrical context, this manifests in training exercises (*études*), psychotechnical procedures, testing hypotheses about audience impact, and rehearsal processes understood as experimental protocols. Crucially, the method can operate outside institutional laboratories; for instance, an actor’s rehearsal can function as a laboratory procedure even without a formally designated “laboratory” space, and Stanislavsky’s “if only” levers constitute a methodical toolkit for controlled experimentation with affective states.

Third, the laboratory as metaphor—a broader cultural and epistemic imaginary in which entire spheres of social, historical, or anthropological processes are conceived in experimental terms: the “melting pot” of the new Soviet person, the “incubator” of the Soviet nation, the “test tube” of history, and the “laboratory boom” of the era. This level connects micro-analysis of concrete practices with macro-historical narratives. When Willi Münzenberg (Münzenberg 1925) describes the revolutionary era itself as a “giant laboratory,” or when Andrei Bely speaks of “laboratories for the emergence of a new mode of life,” they are operating primarily at the metaphorical level—but this metaphor is grounded in, and interacts with, actual institutional and methodical realities.

To summarize, the term “laboratory” in this article operates simultaneously as an institution (a formal organizational unit), a method (a mode of experimental, repeatable practice), and a metaphor (a cultural imaginary in which social and historical processes are conceived as experimental). These three levels are analytically distinct but historically intertwined.

Indeed, this metaphor of a web accurately characterizes the mode of evolution of the ARTS laboratory as a specific phenomenon. Griftsov’s text is a classic instance of the metaphorical level—but note how it feeds back into institutional description (small rooms, folders, shelves). The three levels are here collapsed into a single evocative image.

Throughout the article, these three levels do not remain separate but actively overlap and illuminate each other. For example, Boris Griftsov’s metaphor of the laboratory as a “labyrinth” (cited below) simultaneously functions as institutional description (small rooms filled with folders, tangled corridors) and as metaphorical program (irrational web of passages, distant kinship with mythical spaces). Isaak Shpilrein’s psychotechnical method is institutionally embedded (the ARTS laboratory) and simultaneously inscribed into the metaphor of “psychosis of activities” used by the laboratory’s own participants. Making these levels explicit does not dissolve the productive ambiguity of the term but rather strengthens the article’s ability to demonstrate *how* these different meanings interact in the historical material.

This tripartite framework also allows the article to enter into a dialog with recent scholarship. Alla Vronskaya (Vronskaya 2014, 2021) has examined laboratory formats in Soviet avant-garde architecture and design, showing how the “design bureau” and “laboratory” became intertwined spatial paradigms for producing not just objects but new forms of collective subjectivity—a claim that resonates with the ARTS case. Margarete Vöhringer (Vöhringer 2007, 2015) has traced the career of psychotechnics in the interwar period, particularly the intersection of labor psychology, biopolitics, and mass persuasion in both Weimar Germany and the Soviet Union. Her analysis of how psychotechnical

methods migrated between factory, clinic, and experimental theater provides crucial comparative material for understanding Shpilrein's laboratory as a site of methodical transfer. Christina Kiaer (Kiaer 2005, 2018) has developed a typology of laboratories as "knowledge formats" in Russian avant-garde and Soviet visual culture, distinguishing between the laboratory as a site of material experimentation (in Constructivism) and as a metaphor for social engineering (in Socialist Realism). Her distinction helps to refine the boundary—and the overlap—between laboratory as method and laboratory as metaphor in the theatrical context.

2. Historical Background of the Laboratory Discourse

The concept of technology and the principles of managing society, culture, and art associated with it changed many times throughout the twentieth century. Some of these changes were driven by inventions and scientific discoveries, while others were shaped by the transformation of the subject's structure and socio-political reality. This article argues that the laboratory discourse of the 1920s–1930s can be understood as a particular articulation of *tékhnē*—the ancient Greek concept that fuses making and knowing, craft and knowledge. In the avant-garde context, the laboratory became the site where this fusion was actively pursued: artists, engineers, and psychologists sought to transform artistic practice into a form of knowledge production, where the act of making was inseparable from the act of understanding.

At the turn of the 1920s–1930s in the USSR, experience modified by the technological environment quite rapidly became a part of everyday life.

The implementation of the industrial program began in 1926. By the time the First Five-Year Plan (1928–1932) was officially approved in 1929, industrialization was already in full swing. The project to transform a peasant country into an industrial military power required enormous expenditures. To achieve it, strategies of varying degrees of harshness were employed: from the confiscation of church property, the sale of artworks abroad, and the creation of fifteen hundred Torgsin stores—where people could buy food in exchange for "household gold," silver, and antiques—to collectivization. At the same time, the task of the Five-Year Plan was not only to build hundreds of new facilities (including giants like DneproGES, Turksib, or Magnitogorsk) (Figure 1), but also to purchase machinery, enterprise projects, and entire production lines abroad and find the right specialists. It was necessary to "arrange the release" of new (or updated) Soviet people. The ambitions extended to both revolutionary industrial progress and human development itself, and it was assumed that a new, "Soviet" nation would be formed at that time.

The Soviet authorities believed in the power of economic factors to change the behavior and mindset of individuals. At the same time, the authorities constantly turned to the means of education, the press, and culture, which could continuously and emotionally influence the vast masses (Figure 2).



Figure 1. The first train (Turkestan-Siberian railway). 1929. Central State Archive of Film and Photographic Documents.



Figure 2. Alexander Rodchenko. Poster “There Never Were and Are No Better Pacifiers”. Rezinotrest (*The State Rubber Trust*). Mayakovsky Museum. Moscow.

3. The Structure of the Laboratory Landscape

The history of laboratories in the 1920s and early 1930s can be explained, not least of all, by the “laboratory boom” (operating here primarily at the metaphorical level, but grounded in institutional and methodical realities) that had been intensifying since the late 1910s.

During this period, an active semantization of laboratory patterns took place against a backdrop of severe social catastrophes and political ruptures, as well as the birth of a different aesthetic, new forms and styles in art. In fact, the historical era itself became an “incubator,” a “melting pot, a giant laboratory” (Münzenberg 1925, p. 17) (Figure 3). The metaphorical level here does not replace but rather interacts with institutional and methodical levels: the era is imagined as a laboratory, and within it, actual laboratories multiply and develop methodical protocols.



Figure 3. Münzenberg, W. “Cinema and Revolution”. Moscow: Mezhrabpom Publishing House, 1925.

The heightened sensitivity of the humanities and creative spheres to the scientific and industrial, the theoretical and applied, inevitably accompanied the search for common grounds for convergence and, ultimately, for opportunities for the mutual technologization of processes (Rassokhin 1910, p. 3).

Andrei Bely, identifying the signs of the “laboratorization” of life, very accurately captures the image of a general epidemic. “Within less than five years, these ‘tea tables,’ around which we, banished from everywhere, used to relax, became circles, salons, editorial offices, publishing houses—at first for the ‘few,’ people like us, discontented and banished by everyday life; the tendency towards a different way of life, a different art, a

different sociality grew stronger among us; thus, yesterday's product of the disintegration of the intellectual elite began to organize itself into laboratories for the emergence of a new mode of life; from some kind of laboratory there..." (Bely 1989, p. 247). Here Bely operates at the metaphorical-institutional boundary: the "laboratories" he describes are not yet formal institutions but emergent collective forms that nonetheless adopt a methodical, experimental stance toward life.

A fantastic experiment with the category of time reveals an autonomous power over the existence of the novella's hero, who finds himself in a land of clock faces. These experiments with the discreteness of time turn into a painful torture and take place under conditions of laboratory psychosis and "laboratory contamination" in Krzhizhanovsky's novella, written in 1924 "The Wandering Strangely" (Krzhizhanovsky 1990, p.219–23). Here the metaphorical level ("laboratory psychosis") is explicitly thematized by the literary text itself, showing how the laboratory imaginary penetrates subjective experience.

"...several years later, working in my laboratory, I expended much effort trying, like Charcot who manufactured his anti-plague serum, to give suffering humanity an inoculation against time. ... The bacilli of time, as I soon convinced myself, multiplied with every twitching movement of the hour, minute, and even second hand. Nimble and tiny Seconds lived, clinging to the second hand like sparrows to a hazel branch... Having made their way into a person, the bacilli of time deployed their stings: and the victim, into whom they had introduced the toxin of durations, inevitably fell ill with Time.... Before my wanderings through the land of clock faces, I had imagined that the concepts of order and time were inseparable from each other: living experience overthrew this fiction, invented by metaphysicians and clockmakers. ... But it sometimes happened that the bacilli of time, having fulfilled their purpose, would not give way to the new swarms arriving to replace them and would continue to parasitize the human brain and thoughts, irritating their old stings with an empty venom. These unfortunates fared badly during the days of the recent revolution: they lacked... mm... immunity to time." (Krzhizhanovsky 1990, pp. 219, 222)

4. The Laboratory as a Reflection and Stimulus of Sociocultural Transformations

The extreme reassembly of the world picture, accompanied by existential trials, also gives rise to a heightened "laboratory-like quality" of the era. This "laboratory-like quality" operates primarily at the metaphorical level: society itself is imagined as an experimental setting, a "test tube" of history. Yet this metaphor is grounded in concrete institutional realities—from factory laboratories to theatrical research units—and in methodical practices of repetition, measurement, and controlled intervention. The man of the 1920s exists in an eccentric state of transition and the overcoming of boundaries between the extraordinary, the incredible, and the everyday, striving for extremes (Küenzlen 1994). Researchers refer to such a man of the 1920s–1930s as "radical" (Grigorieva 2012). Human nature, the human essence, becomes a laboratory site, a stage, an object of "surgical interventions" up to and including complete annihilation (Gubin 2001, pp. 40–47).

Why was this particular period so susceptible to reconfiguration? Not least of all, the ground had been prepared even earlier, when a shift occurred in the post-Symbolist paradigm, which affected the entire European cultural organism without exception. At the same time, the "second avant-garde" rose in parallel with the formation of totalitarian aesthetics and philosophy (Smirnov 2006). On the wave of the Russian Revolution, as we recall, avant-garde projects emerged aimed at reconstructing and creating a new human being, at correcting his natural foundation (Plessner 2004). However, if from the late 1910s

to the mid-1920s society sought in various ways to create an artificial human being, then from the second half of the 1920s up to the 1940s, a turning point occurred, and various models emerged that rejected the romantic pragmatics of the revolutionary era (Naiman 1997).

In the 1920s–1930s, a leap was planned from historical man to an unprecedented being (regardless of how it was named—a biologically regenerated individual, a collective subject, or a product of technological progress) (Chechulin 1999). Reflections on human nature and the construction of its image in the 1920s in Europe and Russia captivated various intellectual spheres—philosophical anthropology, political science, history, and the sociology of culture. Often, discussions and practical searches for a “human studies” language took place at the intersection of aesthetic theory, literature, theater, cinema, architecture, and the psychology of creativity (Hofmann et al. 2019, pp. 2–39). The slogan “mastering technology” (*ovladenie tekhnikoï*) was a famous party directive of the era, most notably expressed in Stalin’s speech “The Tasks of Economic Executives” (1931): “Bolsheviks must master technology” (Figure 4).



Figure 4. Vasily Yolkin (an active member of the “October” association (*obshchestvo “Oktyabr”*), working alongside prominent artists such as Alexander Deineka, Gustav Klutis, and Diego Rivera). “Through polytechnic education poster 1931”. Tretyakov Gallery online archives.

By the 1920s–1930s, one can diagnose the irreversible violent death of nineteenth-century culture, the disintegration of the cultural stratum, and the inevitable Soviet mimicry of its representatives. The archive as a laboratory of culture and the laboratory as a space for experiment (Ebeling and Günzel 2015; Ernst 2017), for contemporary research, and for designing a new aesthetic language (Glan 1988), paradoxically brought alternative practices closer together (Didi-Huberman and Ebeling 2018) and often became supporting links in the construction of Soviet culture.

5. Laboratory Discourse and Technical Aesthetics in an Interdisciplinary Optic

In the first third of the twentieth century, a complex of ideas concerning technical aesthetics emerged in various spheres of production, industry, and art, within which the formation of a laboratory discourse can be traced.

Theorists of the revolutionary art of LEF, in particular Boris Arvatov, put forward the figure of the *seeker* as the main hero of cultural transformations (Arvatov 1923, p. 74). In his work “*Art and Classes*,” he raises the question of the methodological foundations of proletarian art, of replacing the principle of equal rights for several methodological possibilities with the dictatorship of the true, the only possible one. The modernist logic of reasoning leads the author to the conclusion that in art, the production not of a fetish but of a thing can only be carried out by the artist-technician, the artist-engineer.

According to Arvatov, constructivism understands art as a laboratory-based, practical analysis of materials. Here, “laboratory-based” refers primarily to the method level—a materialist, experimental approach to form-creation—but it also implies an institutional critique of the traditional artist’s studio. Thus, a new opposition appears in aesthetics, within which laboratory skill (the materialistically understood foundation for the form-creation of the constructivists) is contrasted with the method of representing a theme, the method of following a template, and the method of mimetic transposition. In the post-war decades, the ideas of production aesthetics were developed and gained universal resonance thanks to the popularization of Walter Benjamin’s theory. The reflection on the emergence in culture of the author-as-producer, present in his report “The Author as Producer,” prepared in the mid-1930s for a lecture at the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism, concerns laboratory theater in the most direct way (Benjamin 2011, pp. 127–28).

The lecture did not take place, which did not prevent this text from gaining wide recognition in the critical theory of contemporary art and culture. Benjamin’s central theses, which allow us to understand the spread of laboratory work in art and, in particular, in theater, concern the social function of intellectual activity. Developing the argument in favor of the autonomy of art, Benjamin critiques the concept of the work, shifting the emphasis onto technology, the creative method, which he declares to be the content of the artist’s (writer’s, etc.) labor. In other words, the result of the artist’s work turns out to be the invention of a new method of art production, and its addressee is those who are involved in the production of art.

The historical cases on which Benjamin’s report is built are the methods of Sergei Tretyakov and Bertolt Brecht (Russian Literature 2019). Tretyakov interests Benjamin not only as a practitioner but also as a theorist: he dwells on Tretyakov’s thesis about two types of writers—the *informing* writer and the *operating* writer; of course, priority remains with the latter. It is worth noting that Benjamin’s conception of the literary process acquires a spatial dimension: this process is concentrated in a special place (akin to a design bureau), where social problems impel the creator (the poet) to invent new means of producing meanings and to attract new participants (communities, as one might say today) who contribute to the progress of social relations.

This understanding is very close to a spatial conception of artistic practice, which quite literally transforms into a space of social experiment. Benjamin and other representatives of Marxist criticism evaluate literature and society using a scale of progress. And this, in our view, is important for understanding the laboratory discourse.

Can it be assumed that the proclamation of laboratory-based artistic work as having priority over other models of creativity (for example, over the principle of the artist’s “inner necessity,” the idea of perfection, the representation of the artist’s identity(ies) or that

of a community, etc.) implicitly contains an expectation of a social effect, as Walter Benjamin saw it?

According to Benjamin, the old bourgeois culture is based on the authority of professionalism, while the new proletarian culture is based on the authority of the proletarian community; namely, the community in labor.

Benjamin describes the bourgeois professional through the concept of *Routinier* (the author of bourgeois society, whose authority rests on professionalism), who will be replaced by the inventor, the engineer, and the manager of the artistic process. In addition to this circle of ideas, which, in our opinion, had a huge influence on the laboratory discourse, Benjamin also introduces the very concept of the laboratory in relation to theater. He writes that Brecht's epic theater contrasts the *Gesamtkunstwerk* with the dramatic laboratory, in which theater returns to its once-lost function of "showing what is at hand" (Benjamin 2011, p. 136) (Figure 5).

Explaining the concept of epic theater, he contrasts it with the Aristotelian model: the boundary between them runs through epic theater's appeal to the intellect, rather than to the audience's feelings, through the modest tasks, as Benjamin characterizes them, which consist in alienating the audience from the circumstances in which they live, rather than infecting them with a rebellious mood. Benjamin's "dramatic laboratory" operates primarily at the method level—a new way of producing theatrical meaning—but it also implies an institutional form distinct from the commercial or state theater. The laboratory form always has the producer as its addressee and always promises the rationalization and reinvention of the production tool (the group, the actor's body); the goal is not the mastery of a method, but precisely the creation and rationalization of the tool(s) in relation to the current task.

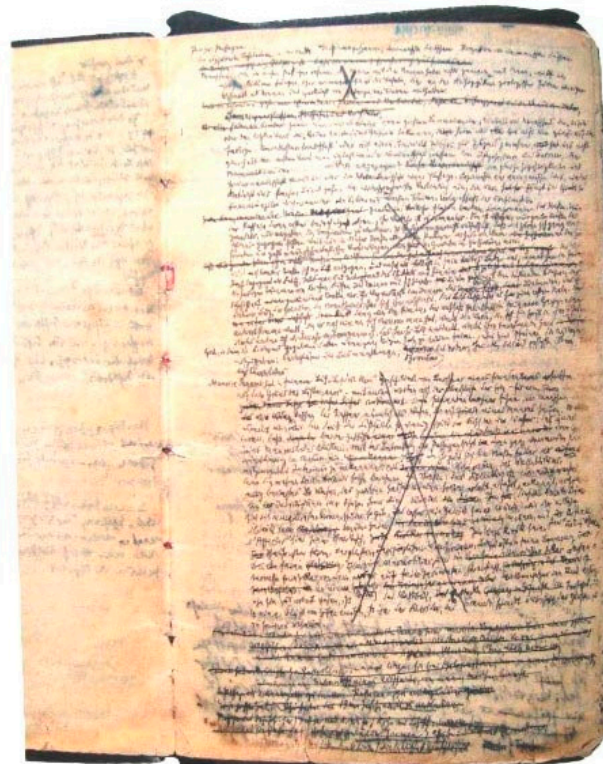




Figure 5. From Walter Benjamin's Archive: Images, Texts, Signs (<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/commonplace-book-writing-inspiration-book-journal--28921622580524246/>, accessed on 17 January 2019).

Secondly, the influence of the revolution on the theory of culture and the theory of art—in particular, the discussions about proletarian art, the construction, organization, and techniques of which have a performative function (i.e., they are ascribed the function of reforming the former configuration of art, its institutions, the class affiliation of the author, and the means of text production in the broad sense)—leads to the fact that the current tasks of its practitioners turn out to be connected with the dismantling and annulment of previous forms. Thirdly, in the theory and practice of revolutionary art, specifically theatrical experiments are brought to the fore, since the class conceptions of the proletariat—the main driving force of history—are linked to the idea of collectivism. That is, theater as a collective creative activity by its very origin turns out to be consonant with the idea of inventing a revolutionary, proletarian art and society.

In the humanities, it is precisely the ideas of the social influence of scientific laboratories that give rise to a sociological critique of the methods of participant observation as the primary method for studying laboratories (Latour 2002, p. 11). This point deserves

closer examination. Bruno Latour's critique of scientific laboratories as institutions of political influence is built on a deconstruction of scientific rhetoric (or the rhetoric of laboratory work). Reading his texts allows us to approach the key concepts of the laboratory discourse. Latour's critique makes it possible to shift the focus from the analysis of the "scientific fact" to the conditions under which laboratory knowledge emerges.

He speaks of the political influence exerted on society by the social institution of the "scientific fact" that is produced in a scientific laboratory (Latour 2002, p. 22), directly asserting that only knowledge arising within the framework of the sciences (regardless of disciplinary affiliation), and not classical political games, has an impact on modern society. According to Latour, instead of talking about the emergence of "discoveries" in the laboratory—that is, of something new—one should shift the focus of attention onto the conditions of the laboratory's activity, onto scientific rhetoric.

The triad that ensures the political influence of scientific knowledge is formulated by him as follows: (1) rhetoric permits a change in the relationship between the internal and the external; (2) rhetoric permits a change in the meanings of scales and levels; (3) for the presentation of knowledge, a "lapidary inscription" is permitted (Figure 6).

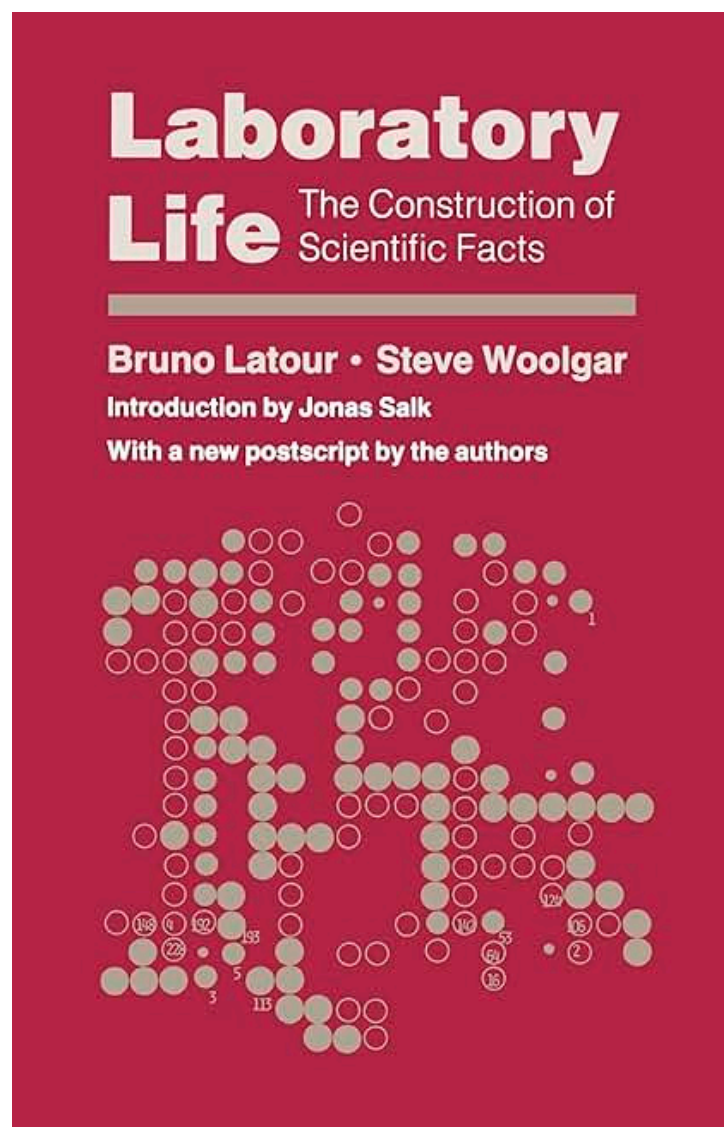




Figure 6. Bruno Latour. *“Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts”*. 1979.

Latour describes the laboratory as a special space where a group of people, through their activity, gains the power to transform social interactions beyond its walls. He compares the principle of the laboratory’s influence on society to the mechanics of a lever—by adjusting the scale and by claiming the right to dissolve the inside/outside dichotomy, those questions that have matured in society receive a simple, readable answer, recorded in black and white (Latour 2002, p. 25). Latour’s analysis operates primarily at the institutional level, but his “lever” metaphor also borders on the metaphorical level—which is precisely why his framework is so productive for analyzing the ARTS laboratory.

Identifying the main concepts, prerequisites, and discourse in the texts of bearers of laboratory experience can assist both researchers and practitioners in the processes of assimilating the experience of various theatrical cultures and communities (Lederman 2022, pp. 161–75).

6. The Laboratory in Art and in Production: Organizational and Semantic Identity

There is an obvious parallelism that brings together the technical laboratory discourse, born in the depths of production, and the creative, artistic laboratory discourse, taking shape in the space of art and culture.

It is indicative that, starting from the early 1920s, there was a rapid growth of factory and plant laboratories. This section primarily concerns the institutional level—factory laboratories as organizational units—but the semantic parallelism with artistic laboratories already hints at the metaphorical transfer between domains.

For the first time, the factory laboratory attracted the attention of the authorities during the years of industrialization, becoming an important stronghold for the reorganization of branch-specific science and an object of centralized management. At the Fifteenth Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in December 1927, tasks were set for “the broad development of a network of industrial research institutes and factory-and-plant laboratories, the decisive approximation of academic scientific work to industry and agriculture, the broadest possible use of Western European and American scientific and scientific-industrial experience, and the thorough study of all the latest discoveries and inventions...” The appeal to foreign experience was not accidental. The materials of

the All-Union Conference on the Issue of Factory Laboratories in the Chemical Industry (1928) noted their potential.

The intensification of the work of factory laboratories was seen as a condition for the development of a close union between science and production, and the laboratories themselves were viewed as “primary research cells,” tasked with carrying out work of an experimental nature. Here, “experimental nature” refers to the method level: systematic testing, measurement, and control. The laboratories differed from one another not only in their functions—whether control or research—but also organizationally, in the scale of their work, their personnel composition, and their technical equipment. The type of laboratory depended on the nature of the plant; some of them had only control organizations and had no need for research units. In the process of discussing the specifics of the Soviet factory laboratory, the management of these laboratories and the coordination of the research conducted within them were of particular interest. The role of the factory laboratory in the scientific and technical policy of the industrialization period was regarded as significant. Production laboratories became a nodal point between the tasks of economic development, scientific achievements, and research work.

At the end of the 1920s, a number of specific measures were proposed: to standardize the construction of new laboratories (to develop standard designs); to establish a percentage of deductions from the gross output value of the plant for the needs of the laboratory; to define the profile of specialists (head of the laboratory, research engineer, analytical technician, laboratory assistant) and even to ensure their specialized training in higher technical educational institutions. The integration of laboratory work into scientific and technical policy was to be facilitated by strengthening the ties between laboratories and branch-specific research institutes serving the needs of particular industries: it was envisioned that factory-and-plant laboratories should be grouped around branch-specific institutes for the purpose of providing them with guidance and involving them in research work (Figure 7).





Figure 7. Physical Laboratory. Polytechnic Museum. 1930s. “Archive of the Leningrad Polytechnic Institute named after M.I. Kalinin”. 1920s.

The basis of the Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars of the USSR of 7 August 1928, “On the Organization of Scientific Research Work for the Needs of Industry,” was the idea of delimiting the network of scientific institutions among departments: a clear typology was established, dividing them into central, branch-specific, higher education institution-based, regional, and local lore research institutes, and “lower-level scientific research institutions” (including factory and plant laboratories). The commitment to activating the laboratories of factories and plants was confirmed in 1934 by the Seventeenth Party Congress, which formalized the transfer of factory-and-plant laboratories to the status of independent workshops subordinate directly to the technical director of the enterprise; the transformation of laboratories into a technical support point for production meetings of the shock worker movement (including the Stakhanovite movement), circles of inventors and rationalization groups; and the mandatory provision of continuous guidance for the laboratories by branch-specific institutes.

The expansion of the network of laboratories and the enhancement of their role in organizing scientific control of production necessitated the emergence of a special body for the general direction of their activities. Under the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry of the USSR, a Council of Factory Laboratories was established, which included representatives of the USSR Academy of Sciences, the USSR State Planning Committee (Gosplan), the Communist Academy, institutes of the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry, and the largest factory laboratories (Figure 8). The Council of Factory Laboratories was charged with reviewing regulations concerning them, resolving issues related to the coordination of work between laboratories and research institutes, and introducing accelerated methods of testing and research. Attention to the “primary research cells” contributed to a rapid increase in their number during the years of the Second Five-Year Plan: the periodical press noted that in 1934, over three hundred laboratories were already conducting scientific research work in industry, many of which had up to 450–480 employees on their staff (Klepikov 1935, p. 154).

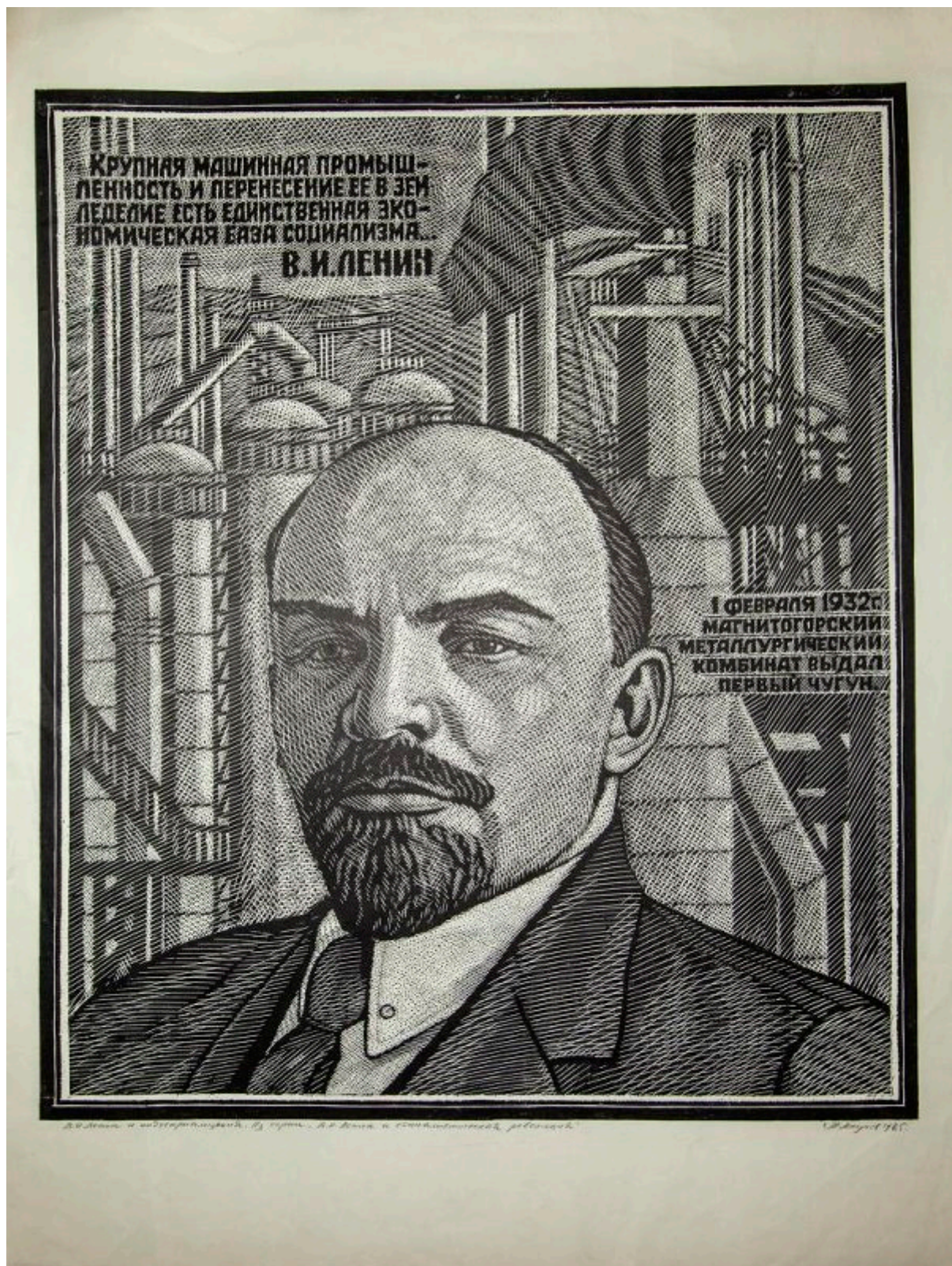


Figure 8. Akhunov M. V. *I. Lenin Against the Background of a Factory*. Propaganda poster with the inscription: “Large-scale machine industry and its extension to agriculture is the sole economic basis of socialism.” National Library of Russia, St. Petersburg.

Throughout the Soviet period, the factory laboratory was an element of decentralization within a centralized economy. It was perceived as an alien, uncomfortable, yet simultaneously “living,” “pulsating” research unit, closely connected to production and capable of providing the necessary impetus for implementation, technical innovation, and

invention. In this regard, its work was associated with solving strategic and applied problems.

Here, the “mega-laboratory” metaphor for ARTS operates at the metaphorical level, but it is grounded in the actual proliferation of laboratory divisions within the Society—an institutional reality.

7. The All-Russian Theatre Society as a Mega-Laboratory

The general experimental character of the era and the extraordinary excitement surrounding laboratory initiatives in the 1920s–1930s consequently erased the boundaries between the natural, exact, and human sciences, and between technical and creative practices (Figure 9). Here, the “mega-laboratory” metaphor for ARTS operates at the metaphorical level, but it is grounded in the actual proliferation of laboratory divisions within the Society—an institutional reality.



Figure 9. From the Machine to the Stage. Poster for the Theaters of Working Youth (Soviet amateur proletarian theater movement, 1920s–1930s). A. Bakhrushin State Theatre Museum Collection.

A similar symmetry and equivalence of factory and plant laboratory saturation can be observed in the sphere of high concentration of theater laboratories.

In this context, the functioning of an institution such as the All-Russian Theatre Society is indicative—a “large-scale factory that simultaneously combined the features of a laboratory and an incubator” (Sakhnovsky 1925, p. 2). Its transformations reflected the fundamental shifts in Soviet political and cultural tectonics that took place in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The change in its substantive hypostases, “signboard-names,” leaders, and organizational formats testifies to the evolution that the organization underwent, constantly being in a state of transition, multiplication, or, on the contrary, reduction, division, or merger of certain internal divisions.

The ARTS (All-Russian Theatre Society) itself can be considered a mega-laboratory, a kind of melting pot, a laboratory-empire, where the legal and economic mechanisms for the functioning of the Russian, and later Soviet, theater system were tested, and the institution of consulting and expertise was actively developed.

A full description of the laboratory hypostasis of the RTS–ARTS is a separate major topic. Constructing a typology and classification of laboratory formats in the context of the evolution of the All-Russian Theatre Society requires distinct approaches to study. The body of materials from this institution makes it possible to note the constant presence in the history of the ARTS of both laboratory practices and laboratories as independent divisions.

A characteristic example is a series of eleven memoranda from 1930 to 1932 concerning the organization of the Laboratory of Synthetic Theater, the laboratory workshops of the Experimental-Heroic Theater, the Workers’ Theater Workshops, and others (Ferdinandov 1930–1932, RGALI archival materials, pp. 2–54). The programs were not fully implemented.

Within the laboratory diversity of the RTS–ARTS, several categories can be conditionally identified:

Creative and creative-practical laboratories.

1. Applied laboratories.
2. Network laboratories—international and for the national theaters of the peoples of the USSR.
3. Laboratory classics. “Eponymous” or “author’s” study-laboratories (the study-laboratories of A. N. Ostrovsky, of the theater of W. Shakespeare and Western drama).

The composition of the RTS–ARTS as a mega-laboratory also included “branch-specific” or “guild” laboratories for musical, children’s, puppet, amateur, and folk theaters (Figure 10). Constant reorganization processes, in keeping with the spirit of the times, accompanied the development of the laboratory organisms.



Figure 10. The emblem of the All-Russian Theatrical Society of the 1920s.

The RTS–ARTS, in its structure, resembled a gigantic factory whose activity never stopped for a minute: “the processing of material and the human breed went on continuously... into laboratory flasks or test tubes were placed various samples, details taken from the theater of Shakespeare or the theater of Ostrovsky for experiments... Each has their own Pantheon, their own kitchen, their own glass-enclosed cabinet life... and their own personal menagerie... The Laboratory” (Grossman 1963, p. 11).

“Our theater laboratories, in violation of all conceivable laws of language and etymological logic, are without a doubt distant relatives of labyrinths. Indeed, non-random sound parallels are obvious. The kinship of the phonetic family is further confirmed by their internal structure. Laboratories and labyrinths. In them there are so many passages, internal tunnels, galleries, tangled corridors, closets and storerooms where Bluebeard left a vague memory of himself. And this irrational web fills some small rooms of just a few meters, whose walls from floor to ceiling are filled with plump folders, scattered haphazardly on shelves and racks.” (Griftsov 1930, p. 3).

The image of the labyrinth in Griftsov’s text is more than a metaphor for the ARTS laboratory’s evolution. It simultaneously functions as institutional description: the small rooms, the scattered folders, the shelves crammed with documents. Thus, the laboratory’s metaphorical, methodical, and institutional dimensions collapse into a single evocative figure—demonstrating precisely how these levels intersected in the historical material.

8. The Creation and Defeat of the Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the All-Russian Theatre Society

Against the backdrop of the “long” laboratories of the post-war period, which “flowed” from one state into another, the semantics of the laboratories of the 1920s and early 1930s is curious; their history is explained, not least of all, by the “laboratory boom” that had been intensifying since the late 1910s.

The problems of “extreme transgression” and radical changes in man and art in the first third of the twentieth century, as well as the theoretical and practical reflection on the exhaustion of the anthropo-utopia of the early avant-garde (Hofmann et al. 2019), became the main lines of the program of the “Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the RTS” (1929), which was cut short in 1932.

The archive of the Laboratory contains minutes of meetings, tables, and articles—materials on the basis of which this three-year period can be reconstructed in outline form (Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the RTS [LMP RTS], 1929–1932) (Figure 11). An analysis of the surviving archive makes it possible to conclude that psychotechnics constituted one of the key modes of the laboratory studies. Here, “modes” refers to methodical practices—but the laboratory as an institution provides the container for these practices.

Among the “participants of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS” (the full original name), we find one of the founders of psychotechnics, Isaak Shpilrein (1891–1937), a psychologist, linguist, and philosopher; Ilya Berezark (1897–1981), a theater critic, journalist, and theater scholar¹; Olga Obolenskaya (1886–1985) (Gorelaya 2015, pp. 86–89), an actress of the Maly Theater and the Vakhtangov Studio²; Betty Glan (1904–1992), a director, journalist, and director of Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure (Glan 1988); and others (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1929, pp. 3–9).

The concept of the laboratory included two components. One was based on traditional concepts developed by the Stanislavski system, which designated a set of techniques for creating the correct onstage well-being and the sequential development of a character along the line of through-action, for merging the actor with the character through knowledge of psychophysiological laws, for the excitation and stimulation, and

at the same time the direction, of the actor's artistic nature (Figure 12). These reflected levers and professional training appealed to the unconscious and became the guarantee of the actor's creative activity. The school of experiencing presupposed perfect mastery of the entire set of internal emotional, plastic, and communicative elements capable of influencing the spectator, of drawing them into the communicative space of the stage.

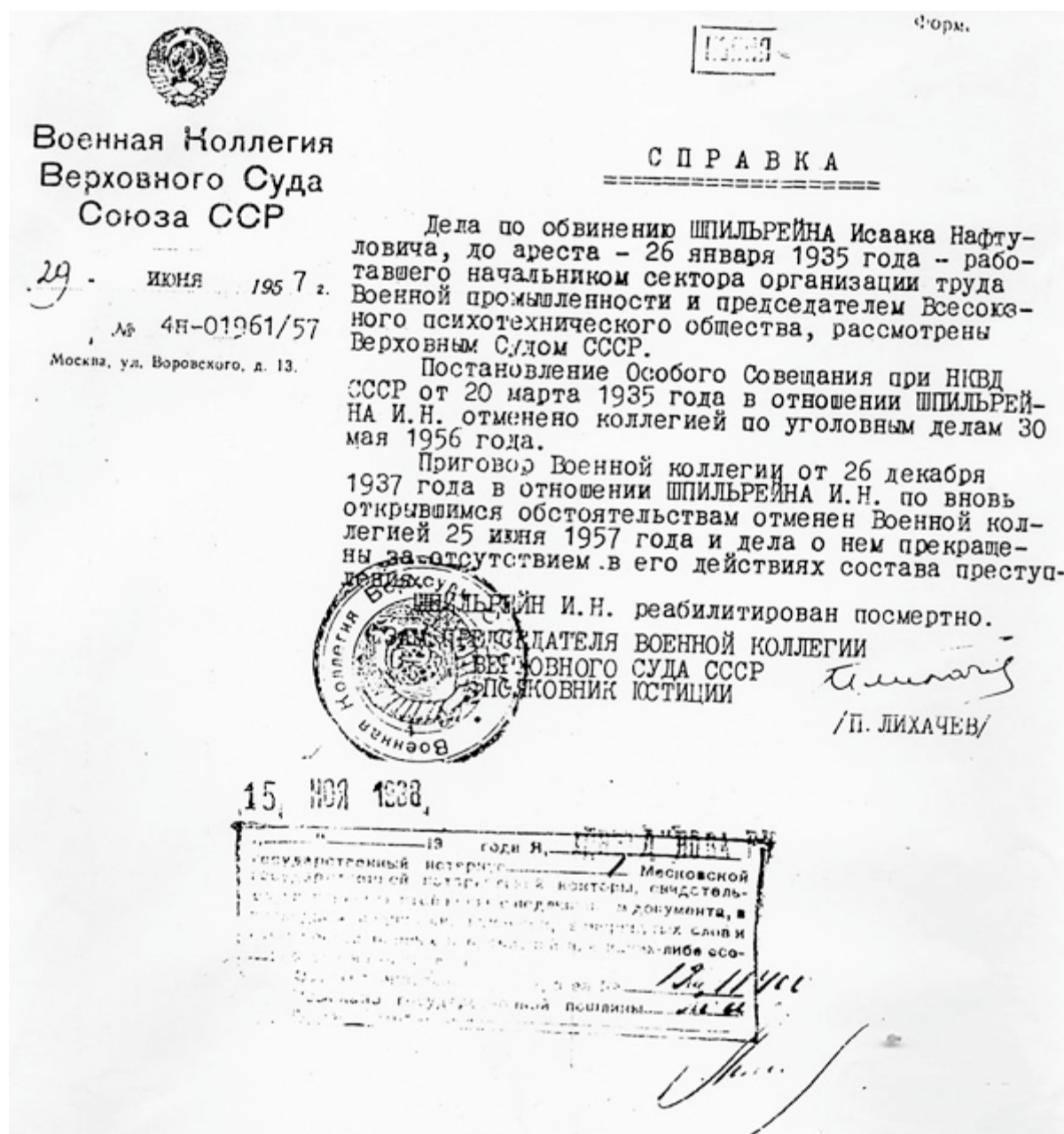


Figure 11. A document confirming the arrest in 1935 of Isaak Shpilrein, a Soviet psychologist and linguist, one of the founders of Russian psychotechnics and industrial psychology.

The “if onlys” as the main levers of actors’ psychotechnics, developed by Stanislavski, were also used by other psychotechnicians and practical psychologists associated with the psychology of labor, career guidance, and professional selection. The acting profession itself proved to be an experimental laboratory site open to experimentation, on which linguistic, situational, and behavioral processes could be modeled, because the actor masters “all” techniques, is capable, when necessary, of “mimicry,” of “playing” other professions, knows how to respond to the stimuli of the time, and provokes certain reactions. Here,

the actor's body and profession become a laboratory at the method level—a site of controlled experimentation—even outside a formal institutional laboratory. The participants of the RTS laboratory used elements of the actor's craft for “experimental” purposes.



Figure 12. Isaak Shpilrein. 1920s.

“The introduction of a professional actor into a non-acting environment for observation and active influence on human organisms” was planned as a series of experiments. The actor-worker and the worker-actor technologically complement each other, undergoing a joint school of training. The duality of the “actor,” representing Another in place of himself, is observed in those cases when the performer of a role is replaced by someone who does not “act” but “labors” (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1930a, pp. 12–28).

The opposition between abstract concepts and an objective practical methodology for training the actor presupposed the teaching of the actor's internal and external technique

and included such skills as the ability to create a group, a team, to blend into an ensemble, and to apply utilitarian methods in the mastery of social skills and professions.

The use of theatrical technologies and universal stage techniques of acting beyond the stage opened up opportunities for professional orientation and the improvement of socialist everyday life (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1930b, pp. 24–52).

A number of meetings turned into complex performances, the scenarios of which can be judged from the transcripts. Thus, during two working meetings on 28 January and 17 February 1931, “abstracts” of the works of Helmuth Plessner (1892–1985), a German philosopher and sociologist and one of the founders of philosophical anthropology, written in the 1920s, were presented (Plessner 1923, 1924).

On 14 March 1931, the third and final discussion took place on the theory of the eccentric positionality of “visible man,” formulated in Plessner’s last work, *The Stages of the Organic* (Plessner 1928). Ilya Berezark prepared his presentations on the dual aspect of human nature as an eccentric, non-self-identical being, visible and invisible, capable of looking at oneself from the outside or distancing oneself from oneself; on the boundary of such a transition, of stepping beyond; on the “bare thread of being on which the existential marionette performs its movements.” Olga Obolenskaya, in connection with the discussed themes of researching the boundaries of human behavior, also touched upon other aspects of Plessner’s idea of eccentricity as the “extreme,” borderline states of man, and the ways of expressing emotions.

First of all, the discussion concerned such types of transmission of excitation as laughter and crying, which are compensation for blocked or, for some reason, tabooed means of communication, when the physiological automatism of the body is the only permissible option. According to Olga Obolenskaya’s interpretation, Plessner’s man-actor is a “laborer,” a “worker” —one who seriously, honestly, and responsibly fulfills his role in society, renounces himself, renounces his individuality in favor of the impersonal—the theatrical mask (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1931a, pp. 3–16).

In terms of its intensity, the micro-history of the laboratory could have been contained within a few decades. It coincided with the culminating period of the macro-history of another plot—the brief flash of Soviet psychotechnics, focused on the study and development of new practices and instruments for influencing mass consciousness.

It is not our task to provide a detailed correlation of the histories of the laboratory and psychotechnics. However, we will recall the general outlines to restore the context. The origins of psychotechnics became apparent as early as the mid-1920s. The First All-Union Conference on the Psychophysiology of Labor and Professional Selection, a landmark event, generated great public resonance and lasted almost a week, from 29 May to 3 June 1927. Its program included several dozen sections, nearly a hundred reports and presentations, and nineteen discussion platforms. I. N. Shpilrein pointed out a significant and underdeveloped area for the application of psychotechnics—the issues of the impactful effect on an individual or collective with the aim of their assimilation of knowledge or skills, in light of the gigantic movements of the masses to industrial construction sites taking place in the country (Shpilrein 1929, pp. 62–66).

In December 1929, speaking at the Communist Academy, I. N. Shpilrein presented the first results of the work of the RTS laboratory in the field of psychotechnics of influence. It is no coincidence that the theatrical stage, in turn, concentrated such experiments, finding itself at an experimental center. According to the working comments of A. V. Lunacharsky, who participated in one of the laboratory meetings, on Shpilrein’s report, psychotechnics in the laboratory fell, on the one hand, into the category of “particular cases,”

and on the other, became an “incubator” in which new ideas applicable on stage, in theatrical and non-theatrical reality, were tested (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1929, pp. 7–9). Lunacharsky’s “incubator” is again a metaphor—but it refers to the actual institutional laboratory where methodical experiments took place.

The first half of 1931 was associated with the ideological restructuring of the psychology of influence, a new political campaign for “the purity of Marxism-Leninism” in the humanities and natural sciences. All scientific and practical activity of psychotechnicians in 1931 took place under the sign of a widely deployed campaign of exposing one’s own and others’ mistakes, and from 1933, the section of psychotechnics at the State Institute of Experimental Psychology was liquidated.

In 1935, I. N. Shpilrein was arrested, and by 1936, the activity of Soviet psychotechnicians had been completely crushed (Noskova 2006, pp. 31–36).

Most of the projects remained on paper. The transcripts and documents, correspondence, and tables were stored in special cardboard boxes made by Shpilrein’s own hands.

Research in the field of mass audience psychology was conducted at the request of “clients.” The typology of commissions was diverse, and among the “clients” of the Laboratory, we find factories and plants, sports palaces, and enterprises where mass events were held in the late 1920s and 1930s: Moscow bakeries—“Zvyozdny,” “Moskvorechye,” “No. 9”; the Moscow Machine-Tool Plant named after Sergo Ordzhonikidze; the Lunacharsky Factory of Folk Musical Instruments; Serial Plant No. 704 (later the Molniya Machine-Building Plant [MZP]); the Bolshevichka garment factory; and others. The Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure occupies a special place in this chain of the Laboratory’s “clients” and partners (Figure 13).

It is no coincidence that Betty Glan, the first director of the Park, appointed in 1929, became the connecting link between the laboratory developments and the large-scale projects of the Park as the “progenitor and model of future Soviet and European parks,” carnivals, and mass theatrical performances (Tsekhnovitser 1931).

Glan, the keeper of the Park’s history, stood at its origins. With her active participation, on the site of a wasteland and dump near the Krymsky Bridge, the First All-Russian Agricultural and Handicraft-Industrial Exhibition was opened. “The pavilions of the exhibition became the foundation for a park of a new, Soviet type, whose task was not the traditional entertainment of the public, but the promotion of a healthy lifestyle, a beautiful athletic body, and cultural and popular science agitation.” (Figure 14).

Like many large-scale projects of those years, the park was created under conditions of a colossal shortage of materials and a cult of economy, but with great enthusiasm. Outstanding architects and artists participated in the planning and design of the park—Alexander Vlasov, Konstantin Melnikov, Ivan Zholtovsky, El Lissitzky, the brothers Vladimir and Georgy Stenberg, and others. The park became the visiting card of Moscow, where distinguished guests of the Soviet Union were invariably brought. Shaping a positive image of the country in the eyes of moral and intellectual authorities was an important part of the program for legitimizing Soviet power on the international stage. Among the famous foreign visitors were Romain Rolland, H.G. Wells, and Bernard Shaw, who called Gorky Park “an amazing institution that combines a people’s university with a mass festival” (Glan and Duvakin [1980] 2017).



Figure 13. Gorky Park in the summer of 1930: Propaganda car Agitation. The Mask Theater Betty Glan, in the days of Komsomol youth. Betty Glan and Budyonny in Gorky Park.



Figure 14. Gorky Park in 1930. Machinery for children.

Below we provide a list of projects that were tested and underwent expert review in the Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the RTS. These projects can be grouped into three methodological clusters, each illuminating a different aspect of the laboratory's operation:

(a) labor productivity and socialist emulation; (b) mass spectacle and festival design; and (c) architectural and environmental psychology.

Development of recommendations for organizing the work and selecting personnel for the “IZO-factory,” on the opening of design workshops for the production of masks, flags, toys, and costumes for mass festivals, carnivals, and theatrical performances (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1930a, pp. 17–37).

Methodology (sic—E.P.) of psychological incentives for an enterprise to fulfill or overfulfill the plan in the Hall of Factories and Collective Farms. On planning a space for eight hundred to a thousand people for holding meetings of representatives from various enterprises. Scenarios for two-act “factory days”: (a) exchange of experience, labor reports, competitions; (b) dramaturgy of the holiday of rest and leisure (busts of leading workers on the alleys and their significance for the overall action). Change in scenery, mood, and individual appearance (setting up “dressing rooms,” implying the creation of an “image of the vacationer”—clothes cleaning, hair washing, haircuts, and other hairdressing services). Scenario for the “entry” and “greeting” of visitors—beautiful girls with flowers or balloons. Decoration of gardens and parks; (c) scenography of “health-improving mysteries”: calculations for sports grounds and small parks for one-day recreation; (d) joint research with the Institute of Balneology and the Institute of Experimental Medicine (on the correlation of three to four days of one-day recreation under special festive conditions on labor productivity). (Figure 15).

A “schedule of visits to workers, actors, and representatives of other professions at their places of residence for conducting conversations and surveys in order to determine the range of interests and suggestions coming from the public” is approved (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1931a, pp. 9–16).

The structure of the 100th anniversary of the Alexandrinsky Theater (State Drama Theater) in 1932. Production of the play *Intrigue and Love* with M. I. Tsarev in the role of young Ferdinand. Forecasting audience success (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1931b, pp. 17–37).

Expert review of the repertoire of a sound cinema in 1932 (former Bromley factory, invitation of the architect Rodrigo Da Costa). Conducting audience surveys after the end of film screenings on the psychological impact of the interiors—black wood paneling, covered fluting (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1931a, pp. 3–10).

Expert review of the “Island of Dances” project and the creation of a school based on the section of artistic movement and amateur circles (first director E. V. Yavorsky, who participated in the Laboratory’s meetings in 1932). Development of educational courses (with the participation of teachers O. V. Nekrasova and A. A. Dzhuri), plans for attracting young people without interrupting their work—to the choreodramatic and rhythmoplastic departments, to acrobatics courses, and to a circus workshop. Discussion of the plasticity of stage structures, natural decorations, and a site with a flexible floor on Golitsynsky Pond. A meeting with architects and ballet master A. V. Shatin. Scenarios for synthetic performances. Planning of the design (light and water curtain, illuminated fountains) and repertoire: the ballets *Physical Culture Suite* (music by F. Chopin, choreography by A. V. Shatin), *Marco Bomba* (choreography by S. A. Khalatov), and *The Magic Flute* by R. E. Drigo (choreography by E. V. Yavorsky)—the public saw these after the Laboratory’s closure, in 1934–1936, as well as a whole program, *Dances of the Peoples of the Soviet Country*

(discussed in the Laboratory in 1932, realized in 1937—E.P.). Public spectacles on the “Island of Dances” (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1932a, pp. 11–18).

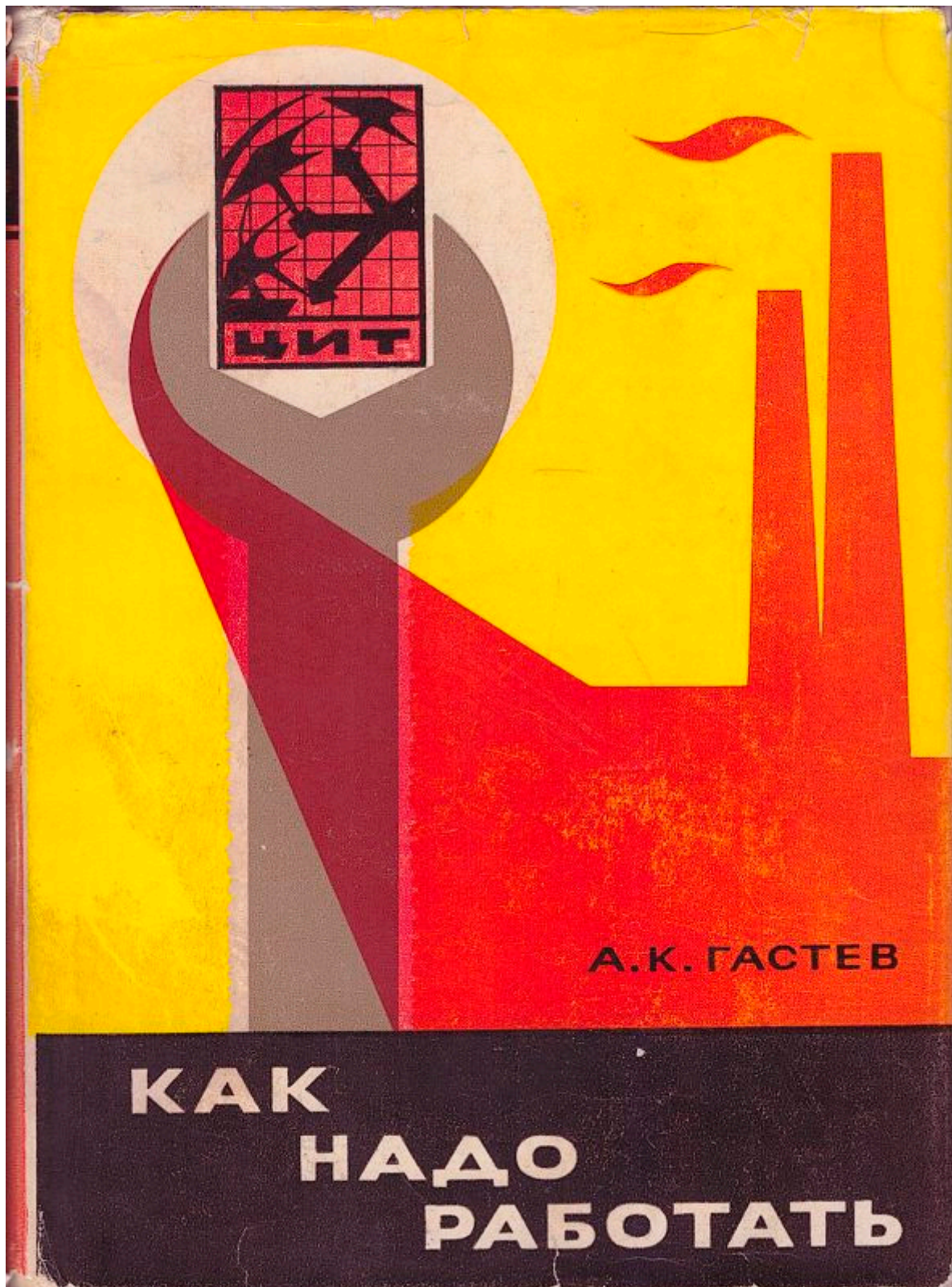


Figure 15. Alexey Gastev *“How to work: A practical introduction to the science of labor organization”* (1921). A book by the Soviet specialist in the field of labor rationalization, a prominent statesman and public figure, A. K. Gastev (1882–1939).

The Green Theater (1933)—an open-air amphitheater built in 1929–1933 on the territory of Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure, designed by architect Lazar Cherkover and opened on 6 July 1933—the main link in the theatrical “chain” of the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure—was actively discussed at meetings of the RTS Laboratory, where formats for “grandiose spectacles” and adaptations for the Green Theater (text, set design, and the reaction and behavior of the audience during performances were predicted) were specially developed. Preparation for the production of Bizet’s opera *Carmen*. Discussion on the possibility of introducing an open circus. (The production took place after the Laboratory’s closure, on 13 June 1935, and presented on stage Seville, a tobacco factory, and mountains. In the last act, a costumed insert carnival was placed in the circus stands—five hundred luxurious Spanish men and women. Amidst the scene, to the applause of the audience, a ceremonial column of matadors passed by, with a picador and a toreador on horses—E.P.) (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1932a, pp. 7–21).

At the invitation of the People’s Commissariat of Heavy Industry (authorized by S. Ordzhonikidze) (Figure 16), the RTS Laboratory participates in the joint development and design of a “science and technology town” in the Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure (together with scientific institutes, the Geological and Biological Museums) in 1932, as a large territory with a hundred rooms and a series of laboratories for entertaining physics, entertaining chemistry, exhibitions, and lecture halls in the field of polar discoveries and aviation (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1932b, pp. 4–9).





Figure 16. People's Commissariat of Heavy Industry (Narkomtyazhprom, NKTP. 1930s.).

The Fraser plant. Moscow. 1930s.

Consultations in connection with the staging of a grandiose theatrical performance in honor of the Sixteenth Congress of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) were held at the Laboratory in 1930. Preparation of a mass dramatization with the participation of director Sergei Razumov and artist Ya. D. Romas. Expert review of the script by N. N. Aseev (after the death of Mayakovsky, who had been brought in for the production), prepared on the basis of the Central Committee's report to the congress. The admissibility of combining satirical elements with large-scale plans. Montage of territories and stage spaces: the Green Theater, the Moskva River (the fleet as an element of the spectacle). Expert review of the pyrotechnic phantasmagoria in the finale, depicting Turksib, Traktorstroi, and the giant dam of Dneprostroi (Transcript of the meeting of the Experimental Laboratory for the Study of Psychotechnics and Mass Psychology of the RTS 1930b, pp. 16–29).

9. Conclusions

Thus, the socio-cultural context of the late 1920s–1930s outlined the main milestones in the development of the entire subsequent contradictory and chaotic fate of the diverse composition of the entire laboratory corps of the RTS–ARTS, and in particular, the Laboratory of Mass Psychology. The embeddedness of experiments and the demand for theatrical research in the course of Soviet political and cultural reforms demonstrated how much the concept of routine work, of labor, is synonymous with the multidimensional stylistics of acting, productively absorbs and is enriched by elements of theatrical festivity, of role-playing as the ability to perform multiple social roles.

The laboratory, one of the leading conceptual topoi for the construction of new objective forms of existence in the 1920s–1930s, becomes that “test tube” in which the “society of the spectacle” is born, a language for describing which would appear in European intellectual practice much later—only in the second half of the twentieth century (Debord 1967). This concluding sentence operates primarily at the metaphorical level—but thanks to the framework introduced above, the reader now understands that this metaphor is grounded in the institutional and methodical realities analyzed throughout the article.

However, this history also speaks to a larger narrative: the unfinished project of modernity itself. As Renato Poggioli argued in his theory of the avant-garde, the experimental impulse of the 1920s–1930s was driven by a structural logic of rupture, activism, and agonism—a logic that found its natural expression in the laboratory format. The laboratory was the space where the avant-garde’s “general dynamism” (Poggioli’s term) could be institutionalized, where the artist-engineer could pursue the fusion of making and knowing that defines *tékhnē*. And yet, as Jürgen Habermas later observed, modernity remains an “incomplete project”—incomplete precisely because the avant-garde’s aesthetic negations could not be seamlessly integrated into lasting cultural reconstruction. The Laboratory of Mass Psychology at the ARTS exemplifies this incompleteness. Its brief, intense flourishing (1929–1932) and its subsequent defeat—the arrest of Shpilrein, the liquidation of psychotechnics, the shelving of projects—mark the point where the Soviet avant-garde’s laboratory experiment collided with the hardening political and ideological structures of Stalinism. The laboratory did not fail because its methods were wrong; it failed because the conditions for its continued operation were systematically dismantled. In this sense, the laboratory discourse of the 1920s–1930s stands as both a testament to the avant-garde’s most radical aspirations and a monument to the forces that rendered those aspirations impossible. The unfinished project of modernity—the project of rethinking *tékhnē* as a fusion of artistic and technical knowledge—remains, to this day, incomplete.

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Notes

- ¹ In this article, “laboratory” is used as an analytical category comprising three interrelated levels: (1) *institution*—an organizational unit with formal boundaries, staffing, and infrastructure; (2) *method*—a mode of working based on experiment, repetition, protocol, and controlled conditions; (3) *metaphor*—a broader cultural imaginary in which social, historical, or anthropological processes are conceived in experimental terms (e.g., “melting pot,” “incubator,” “test tube of history”). These levels often overlap in the historical material, and the article aims to demonstrate their interactions rather than to separate them rigidly. For related attempts to theorize the laboratory as a multi-level concept in modernist culture, see Vronskaya (2014, 2021); Vöhringer (2007, 2015); and Kiaer (2005, 2018). In this article, “laboratory” is used as an analytical category comprising three interrelated levels: Ilya Berezark’s (real surname: Ryss) own sister, Silvia, was married to Yan Shpilrein, a mathematician and the brother of Isaak Shpilrein, so the composition of the Laboratory was partly of a familial, kinship nature, in both the literal and figurative sense.

2. In 1921, O. D. Obolenskaya was the secretary of the Artistic Council of the Russian Theatre Society. In 1931, she became an instructor at the Laboratory for the Study of Mass Audience Psychology (Gorelaya 2015, pp. 86–89). Already a well-known actress, from 1930 to 1933 she studied at the Moscow University of Arts under the Central Committee and the Moscow Regional Committee of Rabis and simultaneously worked at the Laboratory for the Study of Mass Spectacle at the RTS “in the field of scientific research.” Another document from that time has also been preserved, indicating that Obolenskaya continued to act in films. In 1920, Olga Dmitrievna married Alexander Evgenievich Fleisher, and in 1935, she was exiled together with him to Kazakhstan for three years; they lived in Pavlodar. Obolenskaya-Fleisher worked as an accountant, then as a director of the Pavlodar theater; during the Great Patriotic War, she mastered the profession of a surgical nurse.

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