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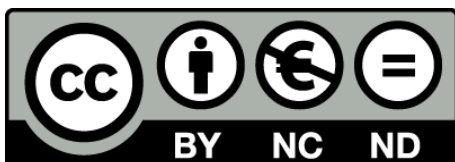
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Footballers in Avant-garde Art and Socialist Realism before World War II

Przemysław Strożek

Summary

This study is dedicated in its major part to visual representations of footballers in Soviet Russia prior to World War II. It discusses the stylistic transformations that occurred in artistic praxis in Avant-garde and Socialist Realist art through the lens of football. Football served to represent modernity and new political agendas, and was clearly an intrinsic part of the cultural revolution connected to physical culture propaganda. This study analyses footballer motifs in works by Kasimir Malevich, El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and the October group, Gustav Klutis, Dziga Vertov, Aleksandr Samokhvalov and Aleksandr Deineka. Its aim is to open up broader perspectives for future studies of football in Avant-garde art and Socialist Realism in other regions of Eastern Europe.

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Introduction

For a number of years every World Cup has been accompanied by art exhibitions examining the relationship between football and art. Such exhibitions have displayed several hundred works testifying to the great span of artistic references to the phenomenon of football. To mention only a few: during the World Cup in Italy, Spazio Peroni opened *I domini del calcio*; the 2002 World Cup in Korea and Japan brought the *Football Through Art* exhibition to Chosun Ilbo Art Museum; the biggest show until now: *Rundlederwelten. Eine Internationale Ausstellung zum Thema Kunst & Fussball* was opened at the Martin Gropius Bau in Berlin in anticipation of the 2006 World Cup in Germany; and the 2010 World Cup in South Africa featured contemporary African art in a show entitled *Halakasha!* at Standard Bank Arts.

The 2006 show in Berlin, prepared by the world famous art historian and curator Harald Szeemann, played an important role in extending the interest of researching football and art. However, neither *Rundlederwelten* nor the above-mentioned exhibitions featured many works by artists from Eastern Europe. Despite that, art historians

devoted their studies to sport and visual culture in the USSR to a certain extent, including some research on football and art. However, no comprehensive display of football in the art of this region has been held so far, and no comprehensive and separate publications on the topic have been released. The 2018 World Cup will be held in Russia – the first time in Eastern Europe – and it is highly likely that, as in the previous World Cups, associated exhibitions will be organised. The context of the 2018 World Cup will therefore be a great opportunity to show to a greater extent the importance of intersections between football and visual art, which have been vividly present throughout Russian and Eastern European history.

This study is limited to the football motifs present only in the oeuvre of Avant-garde and Socialist Realist artists, who were ideologically committed to Socialism and Communism, and wanted to create the foundations of a new proletariat culture. It would not appear, however, that football was of no interest to those artists who did not support leftist ideologies. But being aware of the huge historical material on football and art in Eastern Europe, which has not yet been subject to comprehensive research, I have decided to restrict myself to an analysis of selected artworks representative of two artistic styles: Avant-garde and Socialist Realism, in order to analyse the importance of football for the proletariat art they designed. Constructivism connected avant-garde attitudes to working class movements and soon inspired leftist artists in Central and Eastern Europe, who were “opposed to nationalism and conservatism, [and] were drawn to internationalism with messianic fervour”¹. The very term referred not only to the art of the Working Group of Constructivists in Moscow², but was also an idiom attached to all Central and Eastern European artists, who “were particularly keen on overcoming national and societal differences in order to fully realise their social and artistic avant-garde programs”³. In the 1920s and later in the 1930s, when Constructivism was replaced in the USSR by the doctrine of Socialist Realism, sport and especially football were continuously seen as emblems of working class culture.

According to leftist ideologies, new social conditions and new ideologies needed a new art for the masses. The notions of ‘bourgeois art’ associated with ‘high art’ favoured contemplation, inwardness and solitude, and were seen by the avant-garde artists as outdated at a time of mass production, because they affirmed class distinctions. Constructivists created experimental art following the superior ideal of constructing the cultural foundations of the new post-revolutionary state, while Socialist Realism artists had to adjust their art to the rigours of Stalinist propaganda. During the 1930s many Soviet avant-garde artists were persecuted by Stalin for being too candid in voicing their personal views about society and art. The creative potential of Constructivists was increasingly suppressed by political terror. Socialist Realism fa-

1 BENSON/FORGÁCS: Introduction, p. 25.

2 GOUGH: The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution.

3 FORGÁCS: International Constructivism in Central Europe, p. 487.

voured a more realist approach, intended to be "national in form and Socialist in content", over the earlier revolutionary Constructivism, and produced an ideologically-loaded form of figurative expression.

Despite many differences, both Constructivists and artists associated with Socialist Realism were searching for new means of creating the foundations of a new proletarian culture. Sport themes thus became an important issue among artists, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers, who explored visual modes of popularising and glamorising physical culture. What turned out to be an essential element, and inherent in establishing the dialogue between art and the masses, was the visual representation of footballers. Football did not only function as the embodiment of the new secularised religion for crowds, but also served to represent the issues of modernity bound up with new political agendas. It was far from accidental that football motifs found a prominent position in the leftist art of the time, when the phenomenon of popular culture, together with political ideologies, essentially transformed the approach to artistic practice. This study focuses on these transformations through the lens of football.

I intend to show how the images of footballers operated as a signifier of modernity and post-revolutionary transformations in the Communist State of the 1920s and 1930s. In doing so I explore the images of floating football players as constructions of a worker's hero, a New Soviet Man, and images of women ball players as a potential means by which gender equality was constructed. The latter examples do not refer strictly to football per se⁴, but female participation in ball games and their sports fashion, which was based on football clothing, were important signals of the post-revolutionary emancipation. I apply chronological order and state that these motifs were present both in Avant-garde and Socialist Realist art, and that they link to the importance of football in fizkultura propaganda, both for men and for women. I believe this to be a point of departure, opening up broader perspectives for future studies of football in leftist artistic projects in other regions of Eastern Europe.

Research Overview

Research on sport in Soviet society undertaken by Western scholarship gained increasing interest back in the 1960s. In 1963, Henry W. Morton explored Soviet sport as a mirror of Soviet society⁵, in 1977 James Riordan examined the historical role of Soviet sport in association with health, hygiene, labour and defence⁶, and few years later John Hoberman compared Marxist and fascist sport ideologies in his famous

4 It is worth mentioning that girls' schools were organising football teams as early as 1911. McREYNOLDS: *Russia at Play*, p. 108.

5 MORTON: *Soviet Sport, Mirror of Soviet society*.

6 RIORDAN: *Sport in Soviet Society*.

study Sport and Political Ideology.⁷ These studies were not devoted to the exploration of the connections between sport and art, but signified important issues about constructions of the post-revolutionary sportsman – an inevitable new type of man, a new healthy hero, who is fit to build Socialism⁸. ‘The image of the new man as sportsman is a natural analogue to that of the hero-worker, and much favoured subject in Soviet art’⁹ – stated the art historian Toby Clark, and Susan Grant mentioned a few sporting artworks that testified to the aim of physical culture propaganda to transform the Soviet population into ideal citizens.¹⁰ The connections between the ‘new Soviet body’ and post-revolutionary art was important in the role of visualising social, cultural and political developments within the Soviet Union. The abovementioned studies only signalled this important issue, and were not intended to explore the connections between sport and art as a whole. The problem of sporting themes in Soviet art started to gain much more interest in recent years within studies on visual culture and art history.

“While rigorous analytical explorations of the intersections between visual culture and the history of sports are still relatively new, they are now beginning to attract scholarly interest”,¹¹ state the editors of the recently published book *The Visual and Sport*. To support this statement they mention previous studies by Ann Wingfield and Peter Kühnst,¹² and most of all the recent publications on visual culture in the Soviet Union: *Sport in the USSR* and *Euphoria and Exhaustion*, which both tackle the complex problem of the importance of physical culture in Soviet Russia.¹³ They explore how the issues of fizkultura were meant to demonstrate the triumph of the Revolution, the efficacy of Socialism, and the achievements of the Soviet state, connecting art history and studies on visual culture with the sociological approach. These studies, together with Nina Sobol Levent’s earlier published book *Healthy spirit in a healthy body*, apply not only to respective sports disciplines, but also to physical exercises, gymnastics, and hygienic practices. Mike O’Mahony went as far as examining the role of visual representations of fizkultura during military conflicts, going well beyond strictly sports topics. His ground-breaking book, as well as the other publications

7 HOBBERMAN: *Sport and Political Ideology*.

8 See also: MAKOVEEVA: *Soviet Sports as a Cultural Phenomenon: Body and/or Intellect*.

9 CLARK: *The ‘new man’s’ body: a Motif in early Soviet culture*, p. 40.

10 “Physical culture and sports themes became popular among artists, sculptors, and photographers, [...] for example, Aleksandr Deineka, Aleksandr Samokhvalov, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Gustav Klutis, Ivan Shagin, Iosif Chaikov, and others. Paintings, sculpture, and other artistic forms became integrated into the everyday existence of fizkultura.” GRANT: *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s*, p. 124.

11 HUGGINS/O’MAHONY: *Prologue: Extending Study of the Visual in the History of Sport*, p. 3.

12 WINGFIELD: *Sport and the Artist*, KÜHNST: *Sports: A Cultural History in the Mirror of Art*.

13 We should note that only some chapters of “*Euphoria and Exhaustion*” focused on the visual representation of sports in Soviet Russia. They were devoted to such topics as: sports as a component of public life; the role of memory within various milieus linked to sports; and the perpetuation of gender norms in sports.

on art and physical culture in USSR, deal with the essential epistemic notions of how and why artists created/visualised the imagery of the Soviet body and what influence the propaganda of fizkultura had on Soviet spectatorship.¹⁴ The research by Kiaer, Jungen and Levent is devoted to much more specific issues of sportswomen in Socialist Realist art and their place in the collective portrait of Soviet society. This problem is also discussed in an essay by Pat Simpson, who is concerned with representations of sporting women in the context of gendered myths of Soviet national identity.¹⁵

Publications devoted to sport in Soviet art have analysed mainly the artworks made in the 1930s by artists associated with Socialist Realism (Aleksandr Deineka, Aleksandr Samokhvalov)¹⁶, and Aleksandr Rodchenko's photography under Stalinism.¹⁷ The choice of this time period is not accidental, because of the crucial year 1928, when the First Working Spartakiad was established, marking a growing interest in sports, which was reflected increasingly in art after this date. Yet the connections between sporting issues and Russian Avant-garde art before 1928 remain insufficiently studied. One of the Constructivist works from the early 1920s that gained the most scholarly attention is Varvara Stepanova's sporting clothes, discussed in O'Mahony's book¹⁸, as well as in publications on Constructivist fashion.¹⁹ Other works connected to sport, created by Kasimir Malevich²⁰, El Lissitzky²¹, Gustav Klucis and others, have not attracted any great attention within art historical studies, and it seems that they have not yet been discussed together as a study on the Constructivist approach to sport.

Research on sporting themes in visual Soviet culture is for the most part linked with ideas on the New Soviet body. But the abovementioned publications did not discuss artistic references to particular disciplines as a separate issue. And this is what interests me most: the importance of 'football' in Soviet art of the 1920s and 1930s.

- 14 O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, O'MAHONY: Archaeological Fantasies, KIAER: Was Socialist Realism Forced Labour? The Case of Aleksandr Deineka in the 1930s, KIAER: The Swimming Vtorova Sisters, BUDY: Changing Images of Sport in the Early Soviet Press, LEVENT: Healthy Spirit in the Healthy Body.
- 15 SIMPSON: Soviet Superwoman in the Landscape of Liberty: Aleksandr Deineka's *Razdol'e*, 1944. An extended study on gender roles in Socialist Realist Art see also: REID: All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s.
- 16 Apart from the aforementioned publications see also: KREMPEL: Alexander Deineka, Malerei, Graphik, Plakat; BECKER/CAIGER-SMITH: Art and Power: Images of the 1930s; ADASKINA: Soviet Painting in the Tretyakov Gallery.
- 17 TUPITSYN: Aleksandr Rodchenko: The New Moscow.
- 18 O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, p. 26–28.
- 19 BOWLT: Constructivism and Early Soviet Fashion Design; BARTLETT: Fashion East: The Spectre that Haunted Socialism; ZALETOVA (et al.): Costume Revolution: Textiles, Clothing and Costume of the Soviet Union in the 1920s; STRIZHENOVA: Soviet Costume and Textiles: 1917–1945; KIAER: Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism; WEST: "hap-hap-hap-happy clothes". Avant-Garde Experiments in/with Material(s).
- 20 It is worth mentioning the brief comments on Malevich's painting *Sportsmen* (1928–1932) in Serge Fauchereau's study. FAUCHEREAU: Kazimir Malevich, p. 182.
- 21 Lissitzky's *Runner in the city* (1926) was briefly commented on by Budy and O'Mahony.

There are only few references to football in cited publications²² and we can trace different approaches to that topic by art historians. For example, in the studies on Socialist Realist paintings, which are devoted to the images of women ball players, Kiaer emphasises gender roles in Deineka's *The Ball Game* (1932), while O'Mahony analyses Samokhvalov's *Girl Wearing a Football Jersey* (1932) not within gender issues, but in the context of their allusions to both tradition and modernity. Other studies, which I see as complementary, have discussed the figure of the goalkeeper in Socialist Realist art: O'Mahony analyses works by Deineka linking the figure with a symbolic border guard of the Soviet state, and John E. Bowlt, referring to Solomon Nikritin's painting, observes the goalkeeper as the one who seems to save the whole world.

My further comments on football in Socialist Realist art will rely on these earlier studies and link interpretations of the figure of the footballer (and women ball players) with Avant-garde imagery. This paper also differs from earlier research in that it refers to one discipline only, i.e., football in leftist art, showing its meaning both for Russian Avant-garde and Socialist Realist artists in the context of propagandistic constructions of the New Soviet Man. Focusing on one topic and following its related motifs chronologically allows an observation of how the approach to the artistic practice in the 20th century was being transformed under communist ideology. Such an approach enables me to exploit the previous studies, and link them with my own examination of the case of one particular sportsman, namely the footballer, in Soviet art.

Football and the Avant-garde

The artists who embraced Constructivist aesthetics were affected by the issues of early Soviet propaganda, among which the propagation of physical culture and sports was widely discussed. The Constructivists' main approach was to use artistic and literary references to sport to meet the needs of the proletariat masses. The political and cultural aspects of football, the most popular sport in Europe, became at the time an important exemplification of dynamism and health. The use of football motifs in art also allowed for an exploration of new dimensions and new ways of seeing, which together with football's function as a modern mass spectacle and a new form of modern entertainment, perfectly served Constructivist purposes.

The first football games in Russia were reported around 1895, the formation of a league with regularly scheduled matches in 1909, and 1913 saw the formation of the All-Russian Football Union, joining together more than 150 clubs in thirty-three cities²³. Football started to operate as an important cultural phenomenon and even the

22 The most visible interpretation of football motifs is a reference to Chaikov's sculptures *Football Players* from 1928 and 1938 by O'MAHONY: Sport in USSR.

23 McREYNOLDS: Russia at Play, p. 102–105.

outbreak of war did not stop the growth of the game²⁴. What followed next was that the imagery of football entered artistic fields. In around 1913 the Suprematist art of Kasimir Malevich proposed a theory of non-representational art that dismissed figurative painting in favour of the exploration of a pure, non-objective world, composed only of basic plastic elements, such as colour and shape. Malevich called his artistic concept “the new pictorial realism”, by means of which he attempted to integrate the fourth dimension of time into a spatial representation. Around 1915, he executed a work entitled Painterly Realism of a Football Player. Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension. It was no accident that Malevich referred to the image of a footballer. An athlete combined all that was dynamic and modern with the expression of the new century’s health and virility, the heroic man of the future, “powerful, and in perfect control of his mind and body”²⁵, appealing to the masses. Using the word “footballer” in the title, Malevich also wanted to show the link between the natural world and non-objective art, expressing the supremacy of a new painterly realism over the forms of nature. The sensation of bodily dynamism was thus rendered in compositions of purely geometric forms.

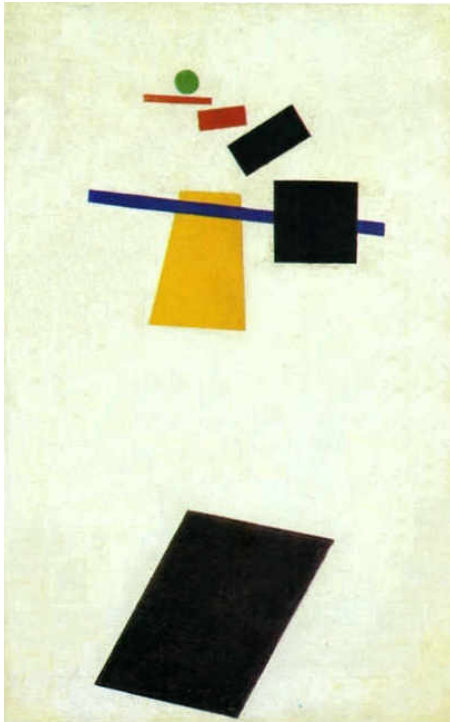


Fig. 1: Kasimir Malevich, Painterly Realism of a Football Player. Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension (1915)

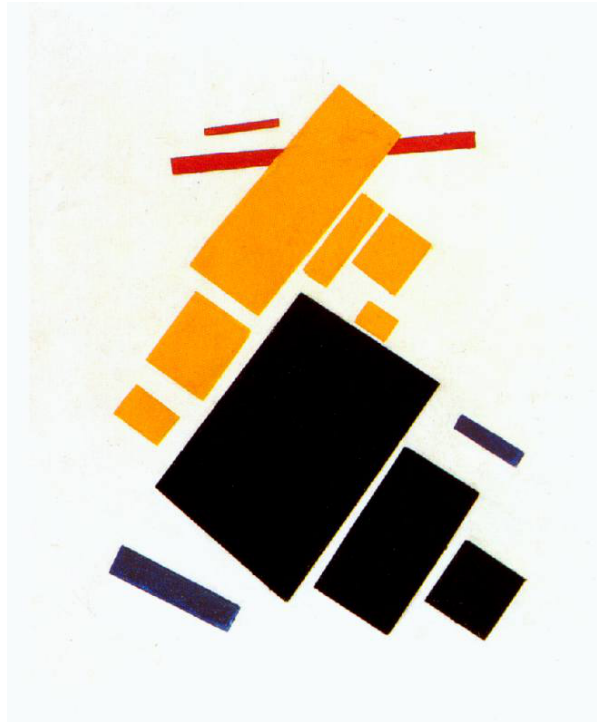


Fig. 2: Kasimir Malevich, Aeroplane Flying (1915)

The issues of dynamic movement in painting became a theme in many Suprematist works, one of which was called Aeroplane Flying (1915). Here Malevich seems to ap-

24 EDELMAN: Spartak Moscow: A History of the People’s Team in the Workers’ State, p. 22.

25 DOUGLAS: Malevich, p. 120.

ply an aerial view, and again, just like in the representation of a moving footballer, the forms pull and push without relying on any reference to the physical world. In both cases the organisation of the dynamics of floating geometric shapes overturned conventional relationships and the force of gravity. The combination of a footballer's skills with the capacity to fly, which would become an indicator of later experiments in Constructivist and Socialist Realist art, was already apparent in Malevich's work.

A similar approach to the image of a footballer can be found in an artwork executed by Malevich's student El Lissitzky. Lissitzky – the main propagator of Constructivism – wanted to develop the idea of visual experiments brought by Suprematism.²⁶ He proposed new formal discoveries which he called Prouns (an acronym for "Project for the Affirmation of the New"): abstract representations of form relations in space. The Prouns flew into a void and signified an infinite horizon, relating their movement to the fourth dimension. Lissitzky claimed that they were a method for constructing the new world and signs of a social utopia that the Revolution would bring about: "The Proun begins with surface arrangements, then moves to spatially modelled constructions, before reaching the stage of constructing all forms of life".²⁷



Fig. 3: El Lissitzky: Footballer (1922)

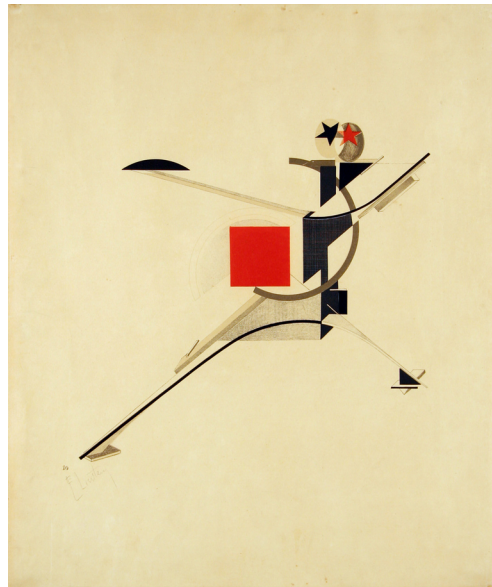


Fig. 4: El Lissitzky: New Man from The Victory Over the Sun (1923)

In 1922, one of Lissitzky's Proun-like works incorporated a documentary photograph of a football player into geometrical forms. The photograph helped Lissitzky to invest

26 It is worth mentioning that Constructivism was an offshoot of Suprematism, and later some Russian Constructivists opposed Malevich, because of a fundamental difference between the concept of reality, which for Suprematism had spiritual meaning, and the materialist understanding of Constructivism. FORGÁCS: *Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky's Proun Room*, p. 55.

27 Quoted after SHASTKIKH: *Vitebsk: the Life of Art*, p. 166.

his severe formal scheme with real-life content, which was represented here by a footballer captured while kicking a ball. The figurative player, as well as the unexpected spatial relationships and distorted regularity of the shapes of abstract figures, were meant to render a feeling of movement and enhance dynamic tensions. The issues of gravity, which were overcome in the Proun world, tackle floating geometrical elements and a feature of a photographed footballer who seems also to be floating over the whole dynamic composition. Just as Malevich did in his Suprematist painting, the image of a footballer combined with geometric and spatial forms was meant as a way of rendering its revolutionary and infinite force. The black circle resembles a ball to be kicked by the footballer and he is seen rising towards it, just like Icarus towards the sun²⁸. In contrast to the mythological protagonist, however, he has no need to fear the forces of nature, since thanks to the victorious Revolution he has become a steadfast anonymous superman who crosses time and space with his ability to fly.

The footballer who breaks the law of gravity and floats just like pure Proun compositions bears similarities with Lissitzky's New Man from the 1923 portfolio Victory over the Sun. The portfolio was based on the Futurist opera written by Aleksiej Kruczenykh with libretto by Mikhail Matiushin and set designs by Malevich, first staged in 1913, where the sun was replaced by a black circle. The embodiment of eternal values and forces of nature was captured by the Futurist "strongmen" who, together with sportsmen and the aviator, were all agents of change. They represented the New Order to be brought about by the great Revolution. Lissitzky's New Man was depicted as a proud, Communist protagonist, fearless to conquer the universe. Just like the photographed footballer, he is sketched in a movement taking a step towards the future, towards the conquest of the sun and the forces of nature, which will enable him to destroy the old cosmic energy. This was to lead to a release of the new energy which Lissitzky spoke of, the new energy brought about by the Communist revolution and its aim to establish a new proletarian culture. Defeating the sun was related to establishing a new natural order in the universe and implied the dawn of the new era of human immortality. As can be observed, both Malevich and Lissitzky used an image of a footballer-aviator who linked Suprematist cosmic infinity and dynamic Proun constructions to the Communist utopia.²⁹

In the 1920s, football not only constituted the embodiment of the victory of the Revolution over the forces of nature, but was also a more down-to-earth way of highlighting an important leisure activity promoted by the Communist authorities. An influential agitprop theatre collective established in 1923, called the Blue Blouse groups, frequently performed in footballers' outfits to promote the issues of sporting culture across the Soviet Union. Through performances of "living newspapers" that

28 A Constructivist vision of Icarus can be also observed in Vladimir Tatlin's work, who would in 1932 construct the flying machine Letatlin as a monument to the New Soviet Man.

29 It is also worth to mention that in 1926 Lissitzky developed his interest in sports and produced another photomontage on football theme.

consisted of typical sketches, songs, and dances they explained current events and the government's policies in popular entertaining ways. One of the sketches showed performers wearing the modern football kit, so called futbolka – the black and white vertically striped shirt, which was to become an embodiment of new post-revolutionary unisex clothing.

It was not only the Blue Blouse groups, but also Constructivist artists who were interested in sportswear and its possible adaptation into daily life. In 1923, Varvara Stepanova and Liubov Popova designed a new type of sportswear for the Soviet citizen. In it, gender and class distinctions gave way to functional geometric design. In that manner, designs introduced by Stepanova resembled the idea of a futbolka and testified to the influence that sports had on the development of unisex clothing, which suggested gender equality as one of the means of the cultural revolution.

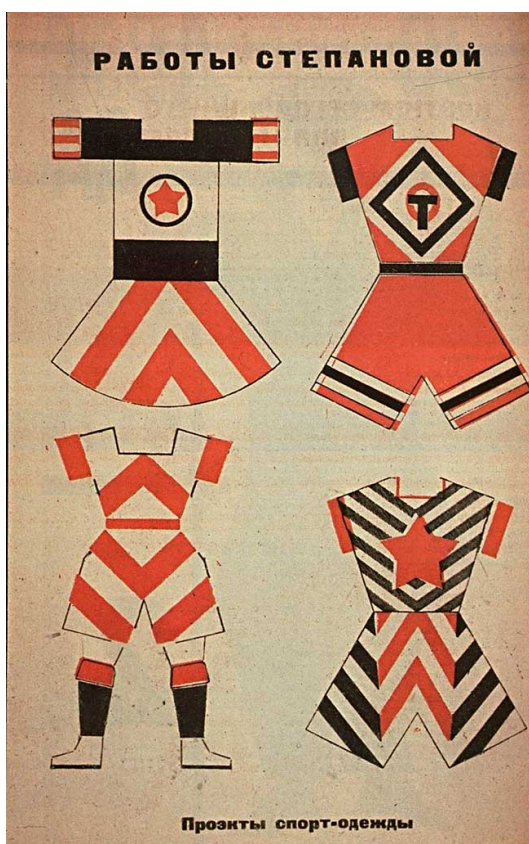


Fig. 5: Varvara Stepanova, Designs for sports clothes (1923)

“Soviet physical culture is one of the components of the cultural revolution in the USSR”³⁰, indicated Gustav Klutss on one of his postcards devoted to the first international Spartakiad, organised in Moscow in 1928³¹. Such postcards promoted this multi-sports event, meant as an alternative to the “bourgeois” Olympic Games, and served the promotion of physical culture. Klutss pasted together female and male sportsmen in the form of sporting heroes who remain anonymous. They were the heroes of the proletarian masses, equalling Lenin, whose effigy was also visible on the postcards. Among other sports disciplines, we can observe a footballer floating above the whole background composed of stills from football matches, cut and pasted in various arrangements.

The letter S for Spartakiada is set at a dynamic angle across the perfect athletic body. The footballer is captured at

the moment of shooting a goal, with his right leg raised after the kick. Here, just like in Lissitzky's Prouns, gravity has been overcome by the new sporting superman.

30 DICKERMAN: Building Collective. Soviet Graphic Design 1917–1937, p. 108.

31 *Spartakiad* was an international sporting event dedicated to the inception of the First Five Year Plan and the tenth anniversary of the Soviet sports movement, largely dominated by Soviet athletes. Many Soviet artists designed posters and postcards to promote this event. On the First Workers' *Spartakiad* see: O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, p. 30–37.

The photomontage technique applied by Klutsis was regarded by Russian Avant-garde artists as a component of the new common language and an ideal medium for visual propaganda. It appeared not only in postcards but also in the illustrated press. One of the most famous photomontages was Political Football by Aleksandr Rodchenko³², which served as the cover illustration for the magazine *Za Rubezhom* (Abroad), No. 5 of 1930. The magazine was founded by Maxim Gorky and supported by Joseph Stalin. It was aimed at informing people of the events in Western Europe and the world. Rodchenko collaborated with the magazine as its designer, executing for it some political designs



Fig. 6: Gustav Klutsis: Spartakiada (1928)



Fig. 7: Aleksandr Rodchenko, Political Football (1930)

with anti-war statements on what was going on outside of the Soviet state.³³ 1930 was the year of the first World Cup in Uruguay, and football became more popular than ever before. Rodchenko's photomontage, however, does not show the beauty of the game, but features British policemen juxtaposed with football players. The characteristic hats pasted on photographic stills of footballers suggest a riot between the footballers and the police. The whole situation is witnessed by football fans and controlled by one policeman who resembles a referee. Rodchenko seems to show how a football game between the two teams could be compared to a fight between the proletariat and bourgeoisie. He focuses on England, the birthplace of football and a country governed by a monarchy that suppresses its proletarian masses, therefore serving and reinforcing Com-

32 DABROWSKI/DICKERMAN/GALASSI/LAVRENT'EV: Aleksandr Rodchenko, p. 325.

33 DABROWSKI/DICKERMAN/GALASSI/LAVRENT'EV: Aleksandr Rodchenko, p. 325.

munist propaganda. He also shows the status of equality among the people and how the bourgeois authorities are suppressors, represented through the use of appropriate uniforms. The sporting uniform again refers here to equality. If the police uniforms were removed, the photomontage would not convey such a strong political message.



Fig. 8: Olga Ignatovich: *Ça alors* (1930)

Rodchenko, just like other Constructivists, rejected traditional plastic art and from the late 1920s focused almost entirely on new media. In 1928, in a text entitled *The Paths of Modern Photography*, he suggested that photography should surely undertake to show the world from all vantage points, and to develop people's capacity to see from all sides.³⁴ Later on he joined one of the most famous groups of photographers called *October*³⁵. They experimented with cropping and used diagonal compositions, extreme close-ups, bird's and worm's eye views, applying all this to the expression of Socialist ideas.³⁶ Rodchenko suggested that the photographer should find the most expressive viewpoint to alert the viewer to the potential of the medium. As part of the *October* group, it was Olga Ignatovich who took a shot of a football game from a new

34 RODCHENKO: *The Paths of Modern Photography*.

35 LAVRENTEV: *Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography*, p. 209; TUPITSYN: *The Soviet Photograph 1924–1937*.

36 Rodchenko's and *October* group photography is referred to as *New Vision* – a term employed to define the new photographic practice of the 1920s and early 1930s. Russian Avant-garde photographers, as well as Bauhaus *New Vision* artists, considered photography to be an autonomous artistic practice, where the lens of the camera becomes a second eye for looking at the world. The new photographic vision was tied to the specific spatial, perceptual and somatic experience. HAMBOURG/PHILLIPS: *The New Vision: Photography Between the World Wars*.

perspective, capturing an attack from behind the goal in her work called *Ça alors* (1930).

New ways of capturing images of a football game were also introduced in the sphere of Constructivist film. Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) presented scenes from a football game as an intrinsic part of his portrayal of "a day in the life of the Soviet Union". In one of the scenes the hand-held camera focuses directly on the ball floating in the air. The cameraman constantly changes the camera's position, angle and speed of movement through space. In doing so the camera's point of view and motion are identified with those of the footballers and contribute to the viewer's motor-sensory experience of the event. The screen directions and comparative velocities from one shot to the next are such that their movements seemed to blend or fuse, one into another.³⁷ As Vlada Petrić observed: "overlapping (...) slows down the actual movement of the football players and creates the illusion that they are dancing or that the ball is "flying" in the air".³⁸ A football game thus became an embodiment of a new proletarian theatre for the masses.

The close-to-chronological order applied in this subchapter shows the presence of football in accordance with the dynamic transformations of Russian Avant-garde art: from Malevich's pre-revolutionary Suprematist painting to Lissitzky's Prouns, modern "antibourgeois" sportswear design, Klutsis' and Rodchenko's photomontage practices, the October group's ideas of photography, and Vertov's new language of the cinema. The artists approached football through different means of expression and, in time, gradually focused more on new media as opposed to traditional painting and sculpture, which in the Constructivists' view were forms useless for the new proletarian culture. The deployment of new media, such as photography and photomontage, exemplified the possibilities for mass-reproduction, which were intended to play an important role as a component of popular, and not elitist culture. Photography and film proved to be the ideal means for transmitting propaganda messages to the masses. It was precisely in Avant-garde art that an anonymous footballer was first of all created to be a people's hero and a signifier of modernity. He was often perceived as an embodiment of the New Soviet Man, devoid of the sense of gravity, capable of rising into the air just like young confident Icarus.³⁹ It was around that time that he became a symbol of the cultural revolution projected by the constructors of the collective imagination in Soviet Russia.

37 O'Mahony connected Vertov's experiments with Klutsis' photomontages and highlighted that sporting themes in his films followed on from the success of the first *Spartakiad*: "Rapid editing technique deployed within Verov's movie act as a cinematic analogy to Klutsis's Spartakiad postcards", O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, p. 33.

38 PETRIĆ: Constructivism in Film, p. 115.

39 Maria Tsantsanoglou explored the issues of The Soviet Icarus in Soviet art, but she focused her research on the images of aviators only, not on sporting heroes. TSANTSANOGLOU: The Soviet Icarus.

Football and the Art of Socialist Realism

By 1932, with Joseph Stalin having consolidated power as the head of the Communist Party in the wake of the newly-defined aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism⁴⁰, Constructivism was accused of “formalism”, and outlawed. From 1934 until the late 1950s, a compositional method “national in form and Socialist in content” was the only possible and acceptable way of artistic creation. Artists were forced to resume traditional modes of expression such as painting and sculpture, and to search for new Socialist content, adjusting it to the realistic style in art⁴¹. In the 1920s, Deineka, Samokhvalov, and Solomon Nikritin – the future representative artists of Socialist Realism – attended the Vkhutemas Academy, which taught Constructivist principles. However, it was the founding of the Moscow Organisation of the Union Artists of the USSR and the establishment of Vsekhudozhnik – backed by Stalin – that prompted them to focus on the new form of realism.⁴²

The genuine embodiment of this new style was the famous Soviet sculpture, *A Worker and a Collective Farm Woman* by Vera Mukhina, which represented the unification of man and woman⁴³. The building of the Soviet state embodies female identity as constructed through Soviet propaganda, opposed to bourgeois depictions of women as passive and sentimental objects of desire. Here, the woman is depicted as being equal to man, an indispensable element in the collective effort of the proletariat aspiring to create a new better Socialist state.

These issues of gender equality through physical culture propaganda can be found in the Socialist Realism paintings that used football motifs. Artists like Samokhvalov and Deineka wanted to show women who performed new and dynamic roles, and ball games became areas where Soviet female identity was constructed. In 1932, Samokhvalov painted *A Girl Wearing a Football Jersey* (1932). The work portrayed a female in a futbolka, a vertically black-and-white striped shirt of a particular cut used by the Blue Blouses. It shows that even in the early 1930s a futbolka, the modern sportswear in line with Constructivist clothing, was seen as a new type of costume for the post-revolutionary era, and was still a visible form of propaganda of fizkultura across the country. The girl shown in Samokhvalov’s painting is a strongly

40 Socialist Realist style already came into existence in the 1920s. This fact is testified e.g. by a small-scale sculpture representing two football players by Iosif Chaikov. O’Mahony sees in that work the tensions between formalism and traditionalist figurativeness adequate to Socialist Realism: “Chaikov’s work incorporates formal influences from Cubism and Constructivism, but deploys these within a figurative, representational work based predominantly upon the modern practice of *fizkultura*”. For more on that sculpture see: O’MAHONY: *Sport in the USSR*, p. 34–37.

41 REID: *Socialist Realism in the Stalinist Terror: The Industry of Socialism Art Exhibition 1935–1941*.

42 KORNETSCHUK: *Soviet Art and the State*.

43 JUNGEN: *Frozen Action: Thought on Sport, Discipline and the Arts in the Soviet Union of the 1930s*, p. 63.



Fig. 9: Aleksandr Samokhvalov, Girl Wearing a Football Jersey (1932)

individual, confident woman, apart from the activities of the collective agitprop presentations of the Blue Blouses, or during a sports match. It is a clear-cut portrait of an anonymous sporting hero, and a figuration of the sportive proletarian body. Her portrait became so popular that it was often called the "Soviet Gioconda"⁴⁴, a name that Samokhvalov rejected, as he personally regarded Gioconda as a passive figure. Girl wearing a Football Jersey was also viewed in the context of the icon tradition, invoking traditional Russian religious culture. In O'Mahony's analysis of this painting, Samokhvalov "reinvented the icon to produce new images of devotion applicable of the modern revolutionary age"⁴⁵ and showed new sporting icons as a secular alternative to traditional Russian religious icons. The hostile attitude of communism to all forms of religion did not allow

for clear references even to the Orthodox Church. If there were any references to the icon tradition, they needed to be contrary to religious connotations. A Girl wearing a Football Jersey was meant to stand for the vitality of a young Socialist nation. Moreover her outfit, health, and confidence suggest gender equality as an exemplification of the cultural revolution.

The Ball Game, painted by Deineka in the same year, 1932, also represented the female sporting body through connotations with ball games. Just as in Samokhvalov's work the female figures are not specifically soccer players, but they could be regarded as referring to football as general participants of fizkultura. In Deineka's painting three females are shown playing with a ball. Their naked muscular bodies speak more about their femininity than the athletic ones



Fig. 10: Aleksandr Deineka, The Ball Game (1932)

44 LEVENT: Healthy Spirit, p. 96.

45 O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, p. 42.



Fig. 11: Aleksandr Deineka, Nikitka (1940)

that had prevailed over the centuries.

“Sport is our living modernity and the artist is obligated to affirm this in art”⁴⁷, Deineka claimed. Among all the sports disciplines that he presented in his oeuvre, football took priority. He had dedicated some of his works to football motifs in the 1920s, even prior to the onset of Socialist Realist art. In the 1932 work *Football Player*, the sportsman’s body is depicted as if suspended in time, endlessly floating above the ground, perceived while shooting a goal in a very similar body arrangement to the footballer posed in Klutskis’s aforementioned photomontage. The player

covered with unisex clothes.⁴⁶ One of them is keeping a ball between her legs as if during a football practice. They are playing with balls in the wood, perhaps echoing the scenery of Botticelli’s *Three Venuses*. However, it is not beauty and subtlety in this respect that determine their femininity but rather their healthy, muscular, sporting bodies. Sporting culture is what has transformed their bodies into the strong confident women that we see, as opposed to the stiff upright bodies of female aristocrats. Through the lens of sports and football practice, Deineka seems to be searching for the truth of the female body, thus counteracting the pre-revolutionary canon of feminine beauty



Fig. 12: Aleksandr Deineka, *The Football Player* (1932)

46 Kiaer argues: “Yet despite the documentable ‘realism’ of the sport on offer in *The Ball Game*, it produces only an unstable figuration of the sportive proletarian body, rather than an affirmation of it”. KIAER: *Was Socialist Realism*, p. 331. In my view the painting still contains an affirmation of *fizkultura*. It is dedicated to femininity which, thanks to Socialist Realism, does not have to adjust to the bourgeois beauty canon. Instead, it had to adjust to the Soviet canon in which depictions of naked female bodies could happen in sport or similar contexts, because nakedness was seen as not referring enough to the working class.

47 Quoted after KIAER: *Was Socialist Realism*, p. 330.

is not on the pitch, but is shown against Moscow's Kremlin, uniting with one of Russia's most important symbols. The football painted in the top right-hand corner resembles the sun, whilst the player himself looks like a New Soviet Icarus. Both the confidence and belief in being able to overcome the forces of nature visible in the picture allowed him to conquer the sky.

In 1940, Deineka directly refers to one of Icarus' embodiments: Nikitka, who during the reign of Ivan the Terrible in the 15th century announced that he had built a flying machine. Deineka clearly explained that: "Our age is characterised by a love of flying, a love for men with a genius for design (...). Modern times have given us in Nikitka an exemplar of Russian ability, courage, and determination".⁴⁸ The footballer, painted several years earlier, may have been presented as one of the embodiments of Nikitka who turned out to be the metaphor of the first Russian aviator. It is worth mentioning that both figures were painted against exactly the same tower.

Sporting culture together with the fulfilment of a dream to fly by ordinary men created the ideal of post-revolutionary Russian society. The footballer-aviator's motif had previously appeared in works by Malevich, Lissitzky and Klutsis. It is not only



Fig. 13: Aleksandr Deineka, Lunch Break in Donbass (1935)

visible in the comparison of the paintings Football Player and Nikitka against the background of Russian architecture, but also in the combination of two other paintings, Lunch Break in Donbass (1935) and Future Aviators (1937),

showing naked boys against a water horizon. The first painting shows them in action, playing football, while the latter bestows upon them a more passive role, depicting boys looking at a plane and dreaming about their future profession.⁴⁹ In Deineka's art both professions, footballer and aviator, combined the motifs of the new Socialist Man who, thanks to the social transformation under Communist rule, was capable of rising into the air and overcoming the laws of nature.

48 Quoted after TTSANTSANOGLU: Soviet Icarus, p. 51.

49 We recall Mike O'Mahony observing that their spectatorship was presented as a form of training, contributing to the youngsters' future role as aviators themselves. O'MAHONY: Sport in the USSR, p. 123.

In Socialist Realist art the goalkeeper also played important role. Deineka's *Goalkeeper* from 1934 shows him with his back to the viewer at the moment of catching the kicked ball. Similarly as in the *Football Player*, his body is floating above the ground and suspended in time. The



Fig. 14: Aleksandr Deineka, *Future Aviators* (1937)

goalkeeper differs however from other representations of footballers, playing a more distinct role pointed to by O'Mahony, who suggested that goalkeepers in Soviet art were symbolic border guards, therefore emphasising sport's military associations.⁵⁰ A similar message indeed is evident in the film *The Goalkeeper* (1936) by Simon Timoshenko, which shows the transformation of a young peasant boy into a keeper of his nation's last line of football defence. It is



Fig. 15: Aleksandr Deineka: *The Goalkeeper* (1934)

precisely the perfectly mastered art of goalkeeping that prevents the young Soviet nation from losing.⁵¹ In the painting *The Old and the New* (1935) by Nikritin, a komсомоlets resembles a goalkeeper who is reaching for the ball, as if leaning toward the

50 O'MAHONY: *Sport in the USSR*, p. 131–145.

51 EDELMAN: *The Goalkeeper*, HAYNES: *Film as Political Football*.

globe to save the world. Here again the footballer seems to float into the cosmic dimension.⁵²

Socialist Realism artists seemed to tackle similar issues to Avant-garde artists through the use of football motifs. For example, gender in post-revolutionary society, the significance of health and the sporting body as an embodiment of the vitality of a young Socialist nation, propagandistic constructions of the



Fig. 16: Solomon Nikritin – The Old and the New (1935)

New Soviet Man and the nation's ideal of a footballer-aviator. Some of the images highlight just one footballer: the striker or the goalkeeper, showing a visible and interesting tension between the individual player (the last one in defence/the first one in attack) and the team collective. The images of footballers can be viewed as signifiers of modernity, new iconic figures of post-revolutionary Russian society. When comparing the “floating footballers” by Malevich, El Lissitzky and Klutskis with Deineka's paintings; Stepanova's new design of sporting clothes with Samokhvalov's *Girl Wearing a Football Jersey*; and the goalkeeper fragments in Vertov's experimental film with Timoshenko's narrative film, one can observe lively and interesting embodiments of leftist art aspiring to create the foundations of the proletarian culture. The content emerging from these images is very similar, yet the form, style, and the means used essentially differ. Although Stalin accused Constructivism of “formalism”, artists representing Socialist Realism somehow transformed the content of their Constructivist art into a visually realistic message, much more comprehensible to the proletarian masses.⁵³ It can be seen clearly that Soviet artists were interested to a much greater

⁵² On the painting see: BOWLT: *The Old and the New*.

⁵³ John E. Bowlit takes a similar view analysing the artistic references to the New Soviet Body. In his discussion on Constructivist and Socialist Realist depictions of a post-revolutionary ‘perfect physique’ he writes: ‘The notion of humanity as artifact and the development of a new body (...) did not disappear with the demise of the avant-garde in the late 1920s. (...) Socialist Realism itself, advanced in the early 1930s, nurtured the image of a healthy, youthful, and radiant hero who could climb great heights and run great lengths without exhaustion or complaint. In this sense, Socialist Realism developed, and did not negate, the traditions of the avant-garde. BOWLT: *Body Beautiful. The Artistic Search for*

extent in a footballer's figure than in the football match. The figure of a footballer floating above the ground was its most frequently used image, clearly fitting with the Socialist dream of conquering space. The flight towards the sky embodied the victory of the fighting proletariat. Yuri Gagarin's expedition in 1961 and the emergence of the first Soviet Man in space coincided with the first international trophy of the Soviet Union in football, the European Cup in 1960. It would be extremely interesting to follow the visual representations of this football victory and the Soviet victory in the Space Race. This, however, constitutes a task for a separate and future study.⁵⁴

Football in the Avant-garde and Socialist Realist Art of Eastern Europe. Directions for further research.

Although studies have been written on the visual representations of sports in the USSR, similar studies of the intersections between sport and leftist art in other countries of Eastern Europe have presumably received less attention.⁵⁵ In Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans it was Avant-garde, and especially Constructivist art, that defined new practices of the artistic left in the 1920s. The artists struggling to make new proletarian art in the countries of the region which regained independence in 1918 were the Czech group Devětsil, the Polish group Blok, the Hungarian Ma circle and the Serbian zenitists. They were all enchanted with Constructivist aesthetics and the ideals of the Third International. What role did football play in their artistic experiments? Was it similarly to the Russian Constructivists who reflected the dialogue between art and the social masses, as well as constituted the embodiment of the cultural revolution? Was it equally present in all the artistic experiments? It would be worth answering these questions by establishing an international project, which could undertake the task of finding and analysing all of the football motifs in the art of the countries from this region. Even though studies exist at national level, they are not well known abroad and the international approach to the subject is still missing.

the Perfect Physique, p. 58.

54 Interest in studies of the representations of the space victories in Soviet art is growing and includes e.g. ANDREWS/SIDIQUI: Into the Cosmos; SIDIQUI: The Red Rocket's Glare: Spaceflight and the Russian Imagination; SHARP: The Personal Visions and Public Spaces of the Movement Group.

55 We should not forget that football frequently appeared in art in the light of given countries preparing to participate in artistic competitions during the Olympics, usually organised by the Olympic Committee of the respective countries up to 1948. In interwar Poland there were two exhibitions devoted to Sport and Art, which were meant to determine the winners to represent Poland in artistic competitions: held in 1931 and 1936 at the Institute of Arts Propaganda in Warsaw. There are some studies on the history of Polish participation in artistic competition before the war. See: LIPONSKI: Sport, Literatura, Sztuka; NOWAKOWSKA-SITO: Od Paryża do Berlina. Artyści polscy na Olimpijskich Konkursach Sztuki 1924–1939.

Some artistic references to football in Eastern European Avant-garde are well known and include, for example a story called “F.C. Ball” (1922) issued by Vladislav Vančura, in which he depicted members of the Czech Dadaist and Constructivist group Devětsil playing for an imaginary football club, thus connecting the artistic left with the beautiful game. Another example can be found in a poem by the Polish Avant-garde poet Tadeusz Peiper entitled Football which introduces Constructivist principles to literature. It would also be worth mentioning a pictopoem Avio-gram from “75HP” (1924) by the Romanian Constructivists Ilarye Voronca and Victor Brauner, which ends with the word “foot-



Fig. 17: Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: Dynamics of the Metropolis (1921–1922)

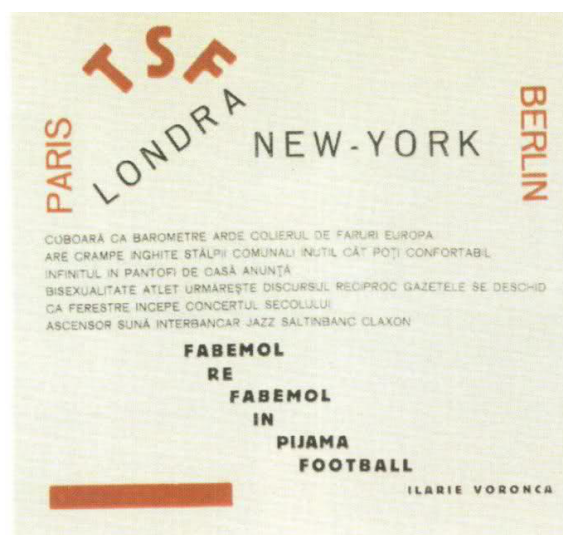


Fig. 18: Victor Brauner, Ilarye Voronca – Avio-gram (1924)

ball”. Another football motif can be seen in the fragment of Sketch for a Manuscript for a Film of “Dynamics of the Metropolis” (1921–1922) by the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy, where he uses a documentary photograph of Hungarian footballers and arranges it alongside geometric figures. In this case the inspiration drawn from Lissitzky’s formal compositional strategies can be clearly traced.

The abovementioned examples clearly show that football motifs appeared in Avant-garde art outside Soviet Russia and there are undoubtedly more cases to be researched in all of the countries of Eastern Europe. The same can be

said of the art of Socialist Realism, though here the research would be far more prob-

lematic as the latter was an artistic tendency imposed from above by the Stalinist doctrine. So while Constructivism was a conscious choice in Poland, Hungary, or Czechoslovakia, Socialist Realism was to a far greater extent identified with Stalinist repressions. It would be worth investigating the changing images of football in the art of the Eastern Block during the Cold War, particularly in view of the triumphs of the Hungarian Golden Team (Magical Magyars) in the 1950s, the brilliant performance of Soviet Russia in the 1960 European Cup, the Czechoslovakian team in the 1962 World Cup, and the Polish “Gorski’s Eagles” in the 1974 World Cup⁵⁶, whose successes were reflected in the art of their times.

This study is dedicated for the most part to visual representations of football in Soviet Russia prior to WW II, allowing the ideas behind the designs of the new proletarian art formulated by leftist artists to be understood. It also draws attention to the clear formal and stylistic transformations that occurred in artistic praxis. An in-depth study into the way in which footballers were represented in the context of the leftist art of the remaining countries of Eastern Europe would constitute a major move in the holistic appreciation of the impact football had on Constructivist and Socialist Realist art in the 20th century. With the prospect of the impending 2018 World Cup there is great potential for establishing an international group of scholars to expand on this important area of research.

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56 Football references in the context of the 1974 World Cup were present for example in the art of Zbigniew Warpechowski and Zdzisław Sosnowski at that time. Strożek: Off-field Spectacle.

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