The first decade in the history of Soviet art was characterized by many varied researches and investigations. This was a stormy period for the Soviet theatre and also for the ballet. The most embittered conflicts developed around the ballet. Many people foresaw its early death, asserting that such a fragile plant could grow only in the hothouse climate of the imperial theatres. Others felt that there was no need to wait for it to die: it should be destroyed now as an art that was "socially alien." Thanks to the declaration of intent issued by the Soviet government, i.e., to save the cultural heritage and to make it the property of future generations, the ballet was preserved in its traditional forms: subsequently, the classical experience aided in the formation of the ballet as we know it today. At the same time, however, and within the ballet itself a search was undertaken for new approaches.

A wave of experimentation inundated the choreographic theatre. This was that same wave whose crest bore the most remarkable achievements of Soviet art—Eisenstein's movies, Meierkhol'd's productions, Maiakovsky's poetry. The ballet was made the equal of the revolutionary poster, it resorted to the methods of political or agitational theatre, it spoke of the Revolution in the language of symbol and allegory. The ballet addressed itself to the traditions of the popular theatre—always efficacious, always tinged with satire—whether of the Old Russian skomorokhi, or of the Commedia dell'arte. The ballet became associated with the most modern trends in the visual arts and music. One of the sources from which the masters of the dance drew their creative ideas was Constructivism.

As we know, the Constructivists, in principle, insisted not on the transformation of art, but on its destruction. As the highest ideal, and in contradistinction to art, they advocated the perfection of technology. "Constructivism is advancing—the slender child of an industrial culture.... Art is finished! It has no place in the human labor apparatus.... Without art, by means of intellectual-material production, the Constructivist joins the proletarian order...."2

1. The skomorokhi (sing. skomorokh) were wandering buffoons or clowns who performed at fairs and other public gatherings. They had great popularity among the peasantry.

2. A. Gan, Konstruktivism (Tver': Tyverskoe izd-vo, 1922), pp. 19, 49, 56. This text was the first and most exuberant of the Constructivist manifestoes.
The Constructivists deified the machine, identifying it as a means of restructuring reality.¹ In their orientation towards some kind of model of a perfect world, they wished to subject everything in life to the principle of “expediency.” “The object in place of painting, the agit-stage in place of the play, the slogan in place of the romance.”² Life, of course, renounced their tentative ideas. But the various arts did interpret the concepts of Constructivism in their own ways.

In the theatre Constructivism denotes, first and foremost, the stage area, one that differs fundamentally from that used in the traditional theatre. In Meierkhol’d’s productions, the artist-constructors dismissed the decorative and depictive elements and attempted to implement an expedient, constructive ambience, one that contained the decor, the props and the costumes. Naturally, this in turn presupposed a different structure for the mise en scène and different devices in the actors’ play. Consequently, Meierkhol’d’s experiments in the sphere of “bio-mechanics” (directed towards training the actor to be in complete control of his body, i.e., his “instrument of production”) were, in part, closely linked to Constructivism.

The ballet stage witnessed similar experiments. No doubt, it would be impossible to define this or that ballet or dance as “Constructivist.” But one may certainly speak of the influence of Constructivism, of a uniformity of intentions, and of a similar employment of methods. A work of the ballet, be it a whole production or one number, is a synthesis of several arts. An indispensable component is the dance movement (without it there can be neither a ballet nor an individual dance). Music is almost always in evidence (although exceptions are possible). It is rare that a ballet does without the visual arts—decor, costumes, accessories. Ideally, a kind of stylistic uniformity is intended. But that is not always the case. If we turn to the Constructivist influences on the ballet and the dance in the 1920s, we discover that there were diverse sources of influence. Constructivism might enter the ballet, refracted through the researches of the stage designer, while the music might prove to be of the most traditional, most classical kind. Conversely, the ballet might connect with Constructivism through music. Finally, the ballet might borrow the Constructivists’ ideal of the triumph of technology, of the humanized machine and the mechanical man, and develop the lexicon of the dance in its own distinctive fashion.

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