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Changing the Production Apparatus

Anti-Universalist Concepts of Intelligentsia in the early Soviet Union

Gerald Raunig

Translated by Aileen Derieg

In his essay “The Author as Producer” Walter Benjamin draws a clear
line of distinction between the question of how a work relates *to* the production conditions of its era, a question motivated by content, and the variation of this question that shifts technique, function and production apparatus into the foreground, namely the question of how a work is positioned *in* the production conditions of its era.[1] Benjamin outlines a distinction here that becomes central wherever the stance, positioning and attitude of artists and intellectuals in political struggles are examined. In reference to his own context in Germany under the Weimar Republic he writes: “It has been one of the decisive processes of the last ten years in Germany that a considerable proportion of its productive minds, under the pressure of economic conditions, have passed through a revolutionary development in their attitudes, without being able simultaneously to rethink their own work, their relation to the

means of production, their technique, in a really revolutionary way."[2]

The Bolshevik Specialists

Benjamin's essay was a draft that was prepared for a lecture in Paris in April 1934, but for unknown reasons, the lecture probably did not take place. Benjamin uses the negative foil of diverse content-centred German examples of art and knowledge production mainly to implicitly criticize recognized leftist, but purely content-focused, agitational strategies in art, i.e. Socialist Realism, in a specific communist context: At the Paris Institute for the Study of Fascism, a sham organization controlled by the Comintern, he would have found himself on thin ice with this, as he was well aware. Even before Stalin's cultural politics, such diverse positions as Lenin's, Bogdanov's and Lunacharsky's were all, despite their very disparate ideas of proletarian culture, oriented to the artistic production and presentation of proletarian *contents*. In Germany, in the socialist circles of the 1920s and 30s, there was also a tendency to give precedence to revolutionary contents over *form*. Benjamin's attitude, which focused primarily on the technique and organizing function of art practice, was the exception. For Benjamin's assumed audience, presumably an audience that was similarly skeptical about formal considerations, reactionary German positions may have seemed excellently suited as a negative point of approach to an implicit attack on Socialist Realism, they may have functioned as a suitable backdrop for Benjamin to highlight the organisational experiments of Sergei Tretyakov in the kolkhoz as positive counter-example of attempts at also changing the production apparatus.

Why “changing the prodcution apparatus”? For Benjamin the work of writing *for* the proletariat from the position of a bearer of the law and a fighter *for* justice is a presumption; the status of the universal intellectual is an untenable one. If the intellectual’s solidarity with the proletariat can always only be a mediated solidarity, then the intellectual, who has become a *bourgeois* intellectual due to social and educational privilege, must become, according to Benjamin, a “betrayer of his [bourgeois] class of origin”.[3] This necessary betrayal consists in the transformation of his position, from someone who *supplies* the production apparatus with contents, as revolutionary as they may be, to an engineer who *changes* the production apparatus; as Benjamin formulates it, someone who “sees his as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution”.[4]

Yet, the intellectuals’ betrayal must go beyond simply rejecting their role as universal consultants and spectacular suppliers of key words. Benjamin’s demand must therefore ask what it means not only to not supply the production apparatus, but also how it can be changed. Benjamin states that in the debate on the stance of the Russian intellectuals after the October Revolution, a crucial clarification was achieved through the concept of the “specialist”. The concept initially remains obscure; at first glance it even seems to contradict organizing a revolutionary alliance between the proletariat and intellectuals. Here Benjamin is referring to Sergei Tretyakov’s figure of the “Bolshevik specialist”, and this figure confounds the dualism of universality and particularity. The task of artists and intellectuals as specialists initially consists in calling to mind their own position in the production process, so as not to be tempted to present oneself as a universal intellectual. Instead of appealing to universality and autonomy as “catalysts” or “transmission belts”, the point is to abandon central positions and

become a “betrayer to one’s class of origin” as a specialist, as a *specific* intellectual, with specific competences, from a specific position.

The specialist no longer presumes to be the bearer of universal values, but fights local and specific struggles contributing her or his specific knowledge there. It is not a matter of communicating the (right) revolutionary contents to “the masses”, for the kind of truth does not exist that would be the privilege of a certain class.

Constructing Socialism on the Countryside

Sergej Tretyakov and Gustav Klucis were both born in Latvia in the early/mid 1890s and were both influenced by the radical leftist streams of the Moscow Proletkult in the early 1920s. While Tretyakov was working in the experimental theatres of Moscow together with Eisenstein and Arvatov, Klucis brought his agitprop-kiosks to the streets as early as 1922. Concatenating radio statements, screens and newspaper reels into a mediatic arrangement, he linked up the different media to invent utmost functional forms at the service of the revolution. With these experiments on the functions of media, Klucis was quite ahead of Tretyakov and Eisenstein who at the same time began to establish first short films in their theatre pieces of the early 1920s. But in the following years it became clear for all the productivist artists that they had to go one step further in their politics of adapting the production apparatus: The masses themselves had to become authors as producers.

Tretyakov saw the future of Soviet production art in the mass of worker correspondents, the reporters and amateur photographers, the newspaper and radio-makers, in short the “factographs”. In

1928 it seemed fortuitous to him to interpret and channel a widespread call from state cultural policies in this, his own sense. “Writers to the Kolkhoz!” was the call that sounded odd even in the Soviet context: as supplementary measures to accompany the first five-year plan, art workers were also to contribute to the collectivization, mechanization and efficiency of the agricultural production. While Klucis created posters like “Der Aufbau der Sowchosen und Kolchosen ist der Aufbau des Sozialismus auf dem Land” (1930), Tretyakov struggled to develop art’s organisational function in an even more concrete way.

He describes the ambiguity and vagueness of the call and his own confusion along with divergent advice from all sides in his book *Feld-Herren*: Some thought that the task of the artists/intellectuals/writers called on to leave their urban surroundings was to closely observe the way the kolkhoz was managed and to describe the expediency and profitability of the collective farms. Others maintained to the contrary that the writers knew too little about it and should instead limit themselves to describing everyday life and the “living human being”. Still others whispered, “Check whether they are building silos, you must check that.”[5]

On the whole, it seemed that the campaign was not strategically well planned. Those responsible in Moscow were more conspicuous for the tone of emotional invocation, which was used to mask the lack of clear instructions, but the protagonists on both sides did not seem overly pleased: the majority of the writers were still not interested in production art, much less in spending a longer period of time in the countryside; the agronomists and workers in the kolkhoz were not at all happy about the “tourists”, “holiday-makers” and “guests of honor”[6]. Tretyakov was the only one who described the work as a further stage along the long and often interrupted flow that never carried him and the Soviet Union into

the sea of the masses. Against the background of his insights from the prior first decade of the Proletkult, however, this stage did not involve art "going among the people" as suggested by the title of the call. It involved a further facet and refinement of experiences with specific public spheres and collectivity. Concretely, it involved an organizational process in the limited space of a rural collective.

Tretyakov's catalogue of competencies

Tretyakov thus responded to the call and went to the North Caucasian kolkhoz commune "Communist Watchtower" for the first time in July 1928. Walter Benjamin summarized sections of Tretyakov's catalogue of competencies in "The Author as Producer"[7]. The following is the extensive version of Tretyakov's self-portrayal in *Feld-Herren*:

> "What did I do in the kolkhoz?
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> I took part in the directors' meetings, where all the vital questions of the kolkhoz were raised: starting from the purchase of spark plugs for the tractors and mending the tarpaulins and ending with setting up the threshing machines and help for single farms.
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> I held mass assemblies in the kolkhozes and collected money to pay for the tractors and for the state fund. Explained Yakovlev's theses (the People's Commissioner for Agriculture). Provided the collectivists with an account of the work done by the combine. Persuaded single farmers to join the kolkhoz. Made peace among fighting mothers in the children's nurseries. Took part in consultations about how to distribute the harvest. Argued with overly zealous economists, who didn't want

to give the education functionaries any horses. Wrung material for the newspaper from intellectuals. Helped participants in radio courses to figure out passages of the lectures that were hard to understand. Investigated farmers' complaints in all directions for their justification. I spoke at assemblies, where the cleansing of the kolkhoz from kulaks and anti-collectivist elements was conducted.

I was a member of the commission for military physical examinations and had to check the readiness of the kolkhoz for cultivating in spring. This I found difficult, because in the beginning I could not tell which horse collar was good and which was bad or if parts of the plow were missing. There are people who find this trivial. They think smiths are there for the plows, it is not necessary to trouble the writer with that. This is wrong: without exact knowledge of the plow, one could attain no clarity about the moods of the collectivists, consequently one could not step forth with a speech, a sketch, a purely authorial work, in other words.

I inspected reading huts, clubs and kept an eye on the children that I wanted to set up a nursery for in the coming summer. I introduced delegations, visitors and brigades to the operations. I initiated wall newspapers and helped to produce them. I worked on methods for a clear and generally intelligible control over socialist competition in the steppes. I drafted a plan for the cultural offerings for the combine with booth cinemas and temporary clubs. For this I assembled the right people, apparatuses, aids and money. Obtained portable radios and a sufficient library from Moscow, a traveling cinema from Georgievsk. This became the foundation for

our educational work, in which Comrade Schimann from the brigade of the 'twenty-five thousand' assisted me.

I led congresses of the education functionaries, conferences of the village correspondents and organized an exhibition of wall newspapers. I continuously reported to the Moscow newspapers from the kolkhoz front, mostly to the 'Pravda' and the 'Socialist Agriculturalist', and to magazines.

I organized and led the kolkhoz newspaper. Originally it was only a supplement to the newspaper 'Terek', which provided information for preparing to cultivate the fields.

Later I fought, yes fought and achieved, after many meetings, telephone discussions, letters, telegrams, reminders, depressions and promises, that Moscow newspapers ('The Farmworker' and the 'Farmer's Newspaper') assumed patronage. Moscow provided the typesetter, the paper and the setting material. And our newspaper 'The Challenge', of which more than sixty editions had already been published, proved to be a highly tangible lever of collectivization, without which we could hardly have done it. I provided the typesetter with an apprentice, a former shepherd, an artist by his own power. Aside from notes, minutes, documents and sketches, I have been documenting life in the kolkhoz with the camera. I currently have about two thousand negatives. To more completely and impressively capture the profound change in the countryside, unique throughout the course of history, I have suggested a system of permanent filming, such that a cinema troop would record the changes taking place in a kolkhoz over a

> long period of time. A cinema troop of this kind was provided for me by the film company 'Meschrabpom'. Although it turned out that there were substantial gaps in their work, they nevertheless collected a certain amount of valuable material."[8]

Tretyakov's seemingly endless activity report may at first look more like the bureaucracy of an organizer and controller from Moscow with an inclination to be more of a universal intellectual and intervening administrator than a transversal specialist. The gesture of a full statement of accounts is probably also due to his function. Yet, as cautious accounts of his first period in the kolkhoz suggest, Tretyakov saw himself as a careful participant in a collective process. As he became increasingly critical of his own term of the "specialist Bolshevik" seeing it as culminating in a savior figure and as a completely excessive demand in reality, as much too complex and exceptional to go into mass production, in the kolkhoz he realized that it was not necessary for one person to unite these characteristics alone. His experiences in the "active" of the kolkhoz even led him to see that "conventionally rejected attitudes like specialized narrow-mindedness, a mania for innovation or conservative hesitancy become useful, when they criticize one another"; here a change of positions fosters "the necessary flexibility of the active"[9]. Tretyakov had abstractly developed the theoretical figure of the specialist Bolshevik from work in the production and reception structures of the institutions of theater and film, which were still classically hierarchical despite the Proletkult. In the practice of the organizational work in the kolkhoz this concept evolved into the "flexible socialist active of very different personalities"[10], in which the different specific competencies of the individual participants in the collective had a productive impact. Linking these competencies meant linking one

specific knowledge with another specific knowledge in a patchwork that did not have wholeness as its goal, but rather a transversal relationship of exchange.

A laboratory still waiting for concatenation

Parallel to this a radicalized turn was evident again on Tretyakov's part following Klucis' and his colleagues' interest in the whole arrangement of media six years before, away from the traditional media and genres of the bourgeois concept of art. Instead of the experimental expansion of the concept of theater or literature, he was interested in the media of an organizing production art: club, demonstration, film, photo, radio and especially newspaper. The art worker's competency turns away from the famous attempts to transform the bourgeois theater toward an actuation of newer media or media still to be invented and the new forms of these media, and toward organizing activities that pick up from Tretyakov's earlier Proletkult experiences in the experimental organization of collectives. At the same time when Klucis developped his agit-prop-kiosks, Tretyakov had also worked together with Eisenstein and Arvatov on the "Experimental Laboratory of Kinetic Constructions" of the Moscow Proletkult. All possible forms of social assembly were to be experimentally tested in the workshops in the course of training: "Conference, banquet, tribunal, assembly, meeting, audience space, sport events and competitions, club evenings, foyers, public cantines, mass celebrations, processions, carnival, funerals, parades, demonstrations, flying assemblies, company work, election campaigns, etc. etc."[11] It almost seems as though Tretyakov seized a long sought opportunity almost a decade later with his work in the kolkhoz to try out the same work on the forms of organization that he had conducted in the meanwhile closed

laboratory of the Proletkult, but now decidedly outside the realm of art institutions. In the jargon of socialist art theory, "he made his literary theme the site of his social activity."

Tretykov's art practice consisted in continuously changing the production apparatus, but also in changing the concept of art: following the paring of the grand ideas of art being absorbed in life, after the first specifications of theater work with Eisenstein in the factory, after turning away from theater again, Tretyakov arrived at his most radical strategy, almost outside the realm of art. In the setting of a broad campaign in socialist society, in which potentially thousands of experiments of this kind could have taken place in parallel, Tretyakov's micro-politics functioned as a laboratory still waiting for concatenation. Then, like in Klucis' and so many other cases, the mechanisms of Stalin's molar apparatus caught up with him and increasingly prevented him from working. In 1937 he was arrested, in 1939 he was shot, in 1956 he was rehabilitated, as it is euphemistically called in the historiography of the Soviet Union.

This text is a montage of the following earlier pieces:

„Anstelle einer Einleitung: *Spacing the Line*. ‚Grenzüberschreitung' als Dilatation der Grenzlinie", in: *Charon. Eine Ästhetik der Grenzüberschreitung*, Wien: Passagen 1999, 11-15.

„Grandparents of Interventionist Art, or Intervention in the Form. Rewriting Walter Benjamin's ‚Der Autor als Produzent'", online http://eipcp.net/transversal/0601/raunig/en.

Art and Revolution. Transversal Activism in the Long 20th Century, New York/Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) 2007, 113-130, 163-169.

It was first published as:

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[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", in: ibid., *Reflections*, New York: Schocken 1986, 220-238; 222.

[2] Ibid., 226.

[3] ibid., 237.

[4] ibid., 237-238.

[5] cf. Sergej Tretyakov, *Feld-Herren. Der Kampf um eine Kollektiv-Wirtschaft*, Berlin: Malik 1931, 32 f.

[6] ibid., 34-36.

[7] Benjamin, "The Author as Producer", 223 f.

[8] Tretyakov, *Feld-Herren*, 20-22.

[9] On Tretyakov's abandonment of the type of the specialist Bolshevik, cf. the summary in Mierau, *Erfindung und Korrektur. Tretjakows Ästhetik der Operativität*, Berlin: Akademie 1976, 110 f.

[10] ibid., 112

[11] Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion*, Munich: Hanser 1972, 92