

Ekaterina Tewes „**Transmitting Body: Electro-Organism as Manifesto, Painting, and Body** “: NECS-Conference “Sensibility and the Senses” at the Université Sorbonne Nouvelle Paris 3, July 2017

The main focus of my lecture is the concept of the Electro-organism, which was developed by Kliment Red’ko (1897-1956) in Moscow in the early 1920s as an art theory manifesto. Red’ko also put the ideas for the Electro-organism into practice in his avant-garde painting. In this lecture, I will outline the ways in which the philosophical discourses of his time on energetics and monism informed and inspired Red’ko’s art concept. Second, I would like to show how Red’ko’s artistic thought linked these philosophical concepts to electronic, acoustic, and optical "new" mass media such as radio and cinema. Third, and finally, I would like to examine the kind of anthropological project Red’ko pursued against the background of his philosophical and medial considerations. I will thereby attempt to map the philosophical, medial, and anthropological positions in Red’ko’s concept of the painting of the Electro-organism.

I will argue that these helped Red’ko develop a monistic notion of art production and perception, through which he developed an idiosyncratic connection between media, the body, and the senses. It should be noted that the concept of Electro-organism has yet to be researched systematically or discursively. My lecture is mostly based on my own findings in Kliment Red’ko’s archive manuscripts.

In his manifesto "Art of Electro-organism" Kliment Red’ko (1922/2004, 505) writes: “The art of today declares: I build with air, water, wind, dynamite, and these are the Electro-organism’s architectonic elements”.

In 1922, dynamite, invented by Alfred Nobel, had already been around for over 50 years. Max Planck, Albert Einstein, and Niels Bohr had already formulated groundbreaking scientific discoveries. Among these discoveries were the laws of thermodynamics and especially the possibilities of energy conversion, the principles of electrodynamics and particularly electromagnetism, the theory of relativity and fundamental natural constants such as the speed of light, and even early quantum theories (with wave-particle duality). Moreover, as many of these discoveries were being implemented, they were in the process of revolutionizing the living environment with new technology and media.

In the Soviet Union, the GOELRO-Plan was passed in 1920. GOELRO is the Russian acronym for the “State Commission for the Electrification of Russia.” The plan would provide for the targeted expansion of electricity grids with the intension of enabling the complete restructuring and industrialization of the economy. It set forth the rapid

transformation of the country from a strictly agrarian society to an industrial state. Two of Lenin's slogans still characterize the first years after the October Revolution: "Communism – that is, Soviet power plus electrification of the whole country" and "Cinema is the most important of all the arts." It is remarkable that both slogans targeted technologies whose essences are constituted by light. It is not surprising how important and nearly omnipresent discussions on energy, electricity and optical mass media were in Soviet avant-garde art.

I can only briefly point to discursive sources and artistic discussions around this animated interest in energy. Here I would like to mention, above all, Wilhelm Ostwald's energetics, which was widely received in Russian art and culture circles during the first decades of the 20th century. (Ostwald's energetics is monistic, tracing material and consciousness as well as all processes of change and development back to transformations in forms of energy.)

At this point I should also point to the significant links between energetics and monistic discourses, which were led, among others, by Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach at the threshold of the 20th century. Within the framework of these philosophical views, energy was conceptualized as a single fundamental principle to which the most diverse phenomena could be traced back, such as the organization and functioning of the universe, matter, society, the human body and human perception. Sergei Podolinsky, Pavel Florensky and Aleksandr Bogdanov are among the notable Russian theorists of energy and monistic energetics.

Among the artistic approaches that were inspired by the discourse around energy, Michail Larionov's Rayonism, Michail Matjušin's Organic Culture, as well as the siblings Boris, Jurij, Marija and Ksenija Ėnder are the most noteworthy.

Kliment Red'ko also moved in the avant-garde artistic circles in post-revolutionary Moscow. He was strongly influenced by "left-wing art movements such as Cubism and Futurism. He also studied at WCHUTEMAS, the Higher Art-Technical Workshops. Many influential artists and cultural practitioners were among the tutors there, such as noted philosopher Pavel Florenskiy, Wassily Kandinsky and Alexandra Exter, and particularly many constructivists such as Alexander Rodchenko, Gustavs Klucis, El Lissitzky, Warvara Stepanova, Vladimir Tatlin, and Ljubov Popova.

In 1922, Kliment Red'ko published his manifesto, "Art of Electro-organism". The concept of energy and the view of energy in constant transformation bring together the aesthetic, symbolic and medial components of Red'ko's Electro-organism. First, Red'ko establishes a specific iconographic inventory. This includes, for example, rays of light, transmission towers, or headlights. Red'ko evidently had a monistic notion of energy and energy

conversion; he saw light, and especially sunlight, as the source of all subsequent transformations of energy and matter: "Light is the highest manifestation of matter ..." (Redko 1922/2004, 505).

Red'ko thereby brought the quality of light as electromagnetic wave into relation with media technology that are also grounded in electromagnetism and light, namely the defining media of his time, radio and cinema. Yet this is not just technical enthusiasm; the new mass media release a fundamental renewal in Red'ko's artistic thought and perception. He argues that when "an electromagnetic wave is given the form of human speech", then not only radio, but also "a remote transmission of the images" will be possible (Red'ko 1920s).

However, the conclusion to his consideration is not merely the anticipation of new technology and another form of mass media, which had already been experimented with and which we now know as television. Red'ko's position would be better interpreted as media-anthropological. In his *Electro-organism*, he anticipates and models the idea of constant interaction between the human and her media. Red'ko is concerned with a reciprocal development and design process in which the human is apparently driven to develop media as an extension of herself, while simultaneously being shaped and defined by her media. Redko writes: "The art of today is the contemplation of the substance of radio" (Redko 1922/2004, 505).

In Russian, as in English, the word "radio" refers both to the medium of radio and to the radio device. The word stems from the Latin "radius" meaning "rod", "wheel spokes", "beam" and finally, "ray of light". In modern European languages, the word correspondingly refers to a geometric radius (derived from the spoke) in *radio* as well as *broadcast*, and *radioactivity*, all of which relate to emanation. The word itself thus includes the dual notion of sound and sound waves as well as light emanation and light waves.

But what exactly does Red'ko propose when he defines the essence of art as a "contemplation of the substance of radio"? Is it the contemplation of sound, or of radio? Or perhaps he means the contemplation of the substance of the sound? Electromagnetic waves? As physical phenomena these are scientific abstractions insofar as humans can only perceive them as concrete sounds, visible light or as material objects reflecting light.

I would like to argue that Red'ko proposes to do both simultaneously. His notions demand the formation of a new kind of "synthetic" perception: a perception in which "the association of different, but nevertheless simultaneous processes" is possible (Red'ko 1924). Synthetic perception should be capable of integrating rational knowledge and sensory perception in a quasi-organic way.

Red'ko's "synthetic perception" is similarly monistic in relation to matter, energy, human environments, as well as the epistemes and sensory perception. A quote from his diary reads: „Outside of me: light, color, form, space and time. Inside of me: intensity, excitement, haptics, exploration, knowledge. [...] The development of synthetic methods leads us to associations [interrelations] between different, simultaneous processes. [In painting:] Ways to reflect the extremely complex reflexivity that takes place in the human psyche” (Red'ko 1924).

The intention of developing synthetic perception is brought to its logical conclusion through Red'ko's conception of an entirely new sense (alongside the normal senses of sight and hearing, etc.), which must be supported and developed for this kind of perception. Painting is the necessary tool for this task. Red'ko's notes state: “The task of painting is to master the laws of light and to develop the sense of luminosity in us according to these laws” (Red'ko 1924).

One could paraphrase Red'ko to state that the artist of today anticipates and tests out this new perception, training the luminosity in himself and his spectators by means of electro-organism painting. Red'ko's point of departure to this end: «We see that the construction of the color is only one among numerous systems for the reflective production of light [...]» (Red'ko 1924).

Building on this statement that color is "only" one form of light reflection, he foregrounds light in painting. In doing so, he opens the space for experimentation with the newly discovered painterly techniques, which liberate light and shadows from the tradition of mimetic representation. Light is transformed into an autonomous artistic medium, presenting the artist with a whole set of materials, as well as form and spatial structures. Red'ko adds: „Light and its effects raise new questions regarding form and color” (Red'ko 1924).

I would, however, like to omit the analysis of pictorial techniques developed by Red'ko at this point. In the context of this conference, it seems more interesting to me to consider how and in which ways Red'ko integrated the medium of optical light and, above all, cinema into his artistic thinking. Regarding the technique and practice of the Electro-organism, Red'ko writes: „As a two-dimensional image, film refers "electro-kinetically" to the method by which the electro-organism can be developed in painting” (Red'ko 1924). And again: “Film [light] introduces new questions regarding form in painting. Film technology is the means to the solution [of this question]. Cinema's light and color displace pigment, which is subordinate to 'light-matter'. The essence of today's art is in light-electro-matter. The artist of today implements that which film technology perceives [...]” (Red'ko 1924).

I would like to emphasize two moments that appear in these lines. First, Red'ko sees both the plane of the canvas as well as the cinema screen as a kind of interface, onto which light is reflected in a significant way. Perhaps Red'ko was also aware of the ontological nature of the film. What is meant here, of course, is the fact that analog film is created through chemical reactions, triggered by the incidence of light on the filmstrip. Film is thereby characterized by a specific indexicality. The analog film image is determinedly the direct impression of real light conditions.

Second, I would like to return to one of Red'ko's sentences: "The artist of today implements that which film technology perceives [...]" (Red'ko 1924). I understand this sentence to situate Red'ko's Electro-organism among the contributions to the media-anthropological debates within the Soviet avant-garde. This would refer to manifestos and practices, in which new technical media were explored. These were part of the anthropological ambition for media to not only compliment and optimize perception, but to challenge and revolutionize it. One of the most prominent representatives of this debate is, of course, Dziga Vertov with his "Cine-eye."

Red'ko ultimately viewed light as the universal organizing principle that shapes the functioning of the universe, life on earth, the human body and perception, technology, media and art. The Electro-organism is therefore a form of painting organized according to the laws of light and through light. A painting, which can be perceived as an instant film – "at the speed threshold", as Red'ko formulates it (Red'ko 1924) – is possibly included in this vein. The painting, this "lightning" film, according to Red'ko, has the utopian and emancipatory potential to create synthetic perception: perception through luminosity.

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