

Ekaterina Tewes „Revising the Cinematic Projection, Modelling the Proletarian Method of Production. Solomon Nikritin’s “The Museum of Static Film” (1927): Lecture at the Filmforum 2018 Conference EXPOSING THE MOVING IMAGE. The Cinematic Medium across World Fairs, Art Museum, and Cultural Exhibitions, Gorizia, February 28th - March 3rd 2018

My paper focuses on the essay “The Museum of Static Film”, written in 1927 by the Soviet avant-garde artist Solomon Nikritin, as well as on his conception of art as projection or projectionist art, an approach Nikritin developed in Moscow during the 1920s. The concept of projection figures in Nikritin’s writings explicitly not as a thought-figure taken from film and light projection. Whenever Nikritin sketches his projectionist painting and his projectionist theatre in his manuscripts, which to a large extent remain unpublished until today, he talks about projection as the method of an artist-engineer who develops a *project*. That is, when he *projects*, the artist-engineer plans, anticipates, creates, and builds models which can then be realized, *transposed* into life – very much in the sense of the original meaning of the Latin *proicere* (to throw out, to fling). Thus, according to Nikritin, the best possible re-organization of the painterly product and production serves as a model to be *projected* and thereby transmitted onto various spheres of life. As a result, artistic experimentation should anticipate the development of the principles of the new mode of socialist, proletarian industrial production.

Yet cinema plays an important role in Nikritin’s writings. In his 1927 Essay “The Museum of Static Film” Nikritin proclaims film to be the “basic representational art for influencing the masses in the transitional period from developed industrial capitalism to the epoch of developed industrial communism.” Likewise, according to Nikritin, the “work of perfecting the thematic, figurative and formal construction as well as the expressiveness of film” is the only kind of work which is “socially [justified] for the contemporary artist working with visually perceivable material” (Nikritin 1927/2004, 512).

The industrial conditions of film production – the technological production method underlying film – is, in Nikritin’s view, a factor that makes cinema the only art form adequate to the present. At the same time, the industrial conditions of film production are, according to Nikritin, a factor that inhibits cinema from unfolding its aesthetic potential. Consequently, Nikritin proclaims that easel painting should become the “projection plane” and the “laboratory” for the best possible construction of the cinematic image. Moreover, painting series and exhibition spaces should constitute “methodological projections” for entire films (Nikritin 1927/2004, 512–513).

Easel painting as an art form and the museum as a cultural institution thus attain a new legitimation through the new art form of cinema. Such a legitimation became necessary within the context of the early 1920s debates in the Soviet Union about the abolition of bourgeois and the establishment of a socialist culture, debates in which cinema was

frequently cited as the prototype for a future socialist culture. This, of course, was done under the condition that we are dealing with revolutionary cinema, which is precisely not tied to the bourgeois production of illusions and which breaks, as Dziga Vertov put it, with the convention of illustrating the “literary skeleton” cinematically (Vertov 1923/1984, 12). In this sense, Nikritin as well Vertov were concerned with a cinema that had to be anticipated. Or, as Vertov again put it (Vertov 1922/1984, 7): “We affirm the future of cinema by denying its present.” Nikritin, in turn, tried to model this new cinema with recourse to the means and achievements of painting.

For this reason, my aim here is to discuss Nikritin’s essay “The Museum of Static Film” against the background of the debates concerning the relation between new and old art, in particular of painting and cinema. Certainly, this was a theme that the international artistic avant-gardes actively engaged with as well. Prominent in this regard are, for example, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy’s “Painting, Photography, Film” from 1925 as well as other art theoretical writings of his that develop ideas about light as a medium in various art forms. And certainly, the considerations about the specific medial characteristics of painting and cinema also played an important role in the comparable Soviet debates. Yet I would like to shift the focus in this paper to a different aspect that shaped the Soviet debate in a fundamental way. That is, the old and the new arts were not only compared and analysed on the level of the qualities of their respective medium and expressive potential, but also – to a significant degree – on the level of *production*.

Production – artistic as well as industrial – figures in the discourse of the Soviet avant-gardes as transversal concepts. The subject matter is the scientific organisation of production. The Futurist poet Alexei Gastev was the head of the “Central Labour Institute,” where models of manual labour were studied and rhythmically optimised. Solomon Nikritin’s projectionist theatre was part of the institute and investigated with artistic means the bio-mechanics of the human body. This was done in collaboration with the bio-mechanical laboratory of the institute, led by the scientist and physiologist Nikolai Bernstein. In the idea of industrial production, in the exactitude and the dynamic of the movement of machines, artistic, socio-cultural and anthropological aspirations, which are associated with the socialist culture of the future, come together. The human, society, and technology figure in the discourse of Soviet avant-garde as reciprocal systems that influence each other. The theoretician of Constructivist art, Niklai Tarabukin (1925/2000, 65) even wrote that: “We are now entering an era when all social production is the result of machine technology.”

Solomon Nikritin develops his Projectionism within the context of this debate. Nikritin’s first reflections on Projectionist art are found in notes from his time as a student. In 1920 he began studying at the Vkhutemas art school in Moscow. During his studies he was exposed to the artistic and theoretical approaches of other Vkhutemas teachers and exponents of the artistic avant-garde. Foremost among these were the philosopher Pavel Florensky – who, among other things, dealt with the idea of organ projection – as well as

practitioners and theoreticians of Constructivist and Productivist art, such as Aleksandr Rodčenko and Ossip Brik.

The scientific organisation of artistic production lies at the core of the idea of Projectionism. Nikritin argues that the "old spontaneous, emotional and aesthetically established art... will be replaced by the new, scientifically established and systematic art. [This will be done] in the name of a productive form of work, one that will organize the everyday through fact" (Nikritin 1923).

Nikritin's belief that art should actively shape everyday life suggests that his Projectionism should be viewed in relation to Constructivism and Productivism. In 1921, several left-wing avant-garde artists, including Varvara Stepanova, Ljubov 'Popova, and Aleksandr Rodčenko, abolished easel painting and declared the artist's place to be in industrial mass production. In the first half of the 1920s, the influential texts that substantiated Productivism theoretically appeared primarily in the anthology "Art in Production," published by Ossip Brik in 1921. Of particular importance were the essays "From Easel to Machine," by Nikolaj Tarabukin (1923) and "Art and Production" by Boris Arvatov (1926).

Nikritin retains the idea of an optimisation of production as such, but he does not see the function of the artist in a form of immediate production; rather, he sees the artist's function in the construction of models. The consequences he infers from this are as the following: "Painters should stay in their [working] spaces and NOT go into production. Their work should be solely in planning and methodology" (Nikritin 1923). Projectionist painting should serve as a model for both research and industrial production. According to Nikritin, the planning and methodological work of the artist will serve as "a foundation upon which thousands of schools and laboratories should be built. These should train THE NEW SKILLS AND AWARENESS OF THE MASSES concerning the optimum of the social and technical function of materials." This will result in "millions of producers" capable of producing optimized "objects of everyday life" (Nikritin 1924, 9).

Consequently, Nikritin holds on to easel painting and argues against the proclaim of its death. He describes the picture plane as a field of knowledge and reflection. According to Nikritin, the painting plain is "a projective expression of the empirical world as recognized by science; that is to say, of its mode of action, which, if recognized, can be used towards bettering its environment's design" (Nikritin 1923).

When Nikritin applies his concept of projection in the domain of film, cinema achieves a synergy that is aimed at optimising film production and legitimating painting. In the same way, museums and exhibitions are legitimated, as they now function as an experimental model for an entire film. Also this thesis of Nikritin's is associated with the Constructivist debates about a re-structuring of the museum as well as the infrastructure of art in a socialist state, a state in which capitalist art market structures no longer exist.

The Constructivism of the first half of the 1920s sets for itself the explicit aim of constructing no art objects that could be placed in a museum, inasmuch as this would imply playing in accordance with the rules of the bourgeois art market. This attitude raised the question of the museum's function in a yet more radical way. And in this case as well, the proposed solutions centered around approaches that were based on *scientificity* and *organisation*.

Osip Brik wrote 1919 in his Essay „The Museum of Proletarian Culture“: “The value of any collection is determined by the organizing principle laid down at its starting point. It is necessary to ascertain what each collection presents itself as, and the extent to which its organizing idea has a right to exist” (Brik 1919/2015, 290). He takes the criterion of scientific value as a basis, arguing that the museum shall primarily serve research, not archival purposes. Yet this demand does not imply a unification and conditioning of cultural institutions, but a tentative search for a new form of the museum. About this, Brik writes that: “Initially, museums of different kinds should be preserved – as many kinds as there are approaches. In the end, a unified science of art and culture will be found and we will have a scientific institution where cultural issues are studied by one specific method” (Brik 1919/2015, 292).

One attempt to develop such a method is undertaken through the establishment of the “Museum of Painterly Culture”. Aleksandr Rodchenko, who led this museum as the successor of Wassili Kandinsky, writes around 1921 about the conception of the museum as a cultural institution: “The historic museum of the past is an ARCHIVE; it is a museum that preserves works, and not a museum as a cultural factor.” The new museum is “based on a scientific, professional-material approach to art.” “The selection criteria are the presence of movement or the painterly achievement of the work [...]” “The new museum is being built, above all, of works, and not of artists. The product of productions stands in first place.” (Rodchenko 1920-21/2015, 301)

It is significant that the new conception of the museum is also worked out through the concepts of organisation, production and product. Moreover, Solomon Nikritin is also a staff member of the museum. He directs the division of the museum called the “Analytic Cabinet,” where he develops approaches for an art analytic procedure which in turn is focused on the organisation of painterly materials on canvas.

The omnipresence of the idea of *organisation* and the conception of *production* as a universal principle that equally pervades all domains of human action can be traced back to the influence that the philosopher Alexander Bogdanov had on the Soviet avant-garde and on Solomon Nikritin in particular. For one thing, Alexander Bogdanov founded *Proletkult*, a cultural revolutionary movement that led to the creation of proletarian universities in several Soviet cities as well as to an art theoretical debate about the question as to what form proletarian culture should take, a culture from which theoreticians of Constructivist and Productionist art, such as the aforementioned Nikolai Tarabukin, Osip Brik and Boris Arvatov, would eventually emerge. For another, Bogdanov was the author of the

epistemological treatise “Tektology, the General Science of Organization“ (1913, 1917), a text that was widely read among the Soviet avant-garde.

With his “Tektology” Bogdanov intended to establish an entirely new discipline in the context of which all physical, biological and social phenomena were considered as systems. Bogdanov thus worked out universal organisational principles, which governed the functioning of each system. In the first volume of Tektology, Bogdanov proclaimed that “*any* scientific problem may be stated and solved from the organizational viewpoint” (Bogdanov 1913-1917/1996, 96). This was linked to the idea that all social subsystems such as ideology, production, and culture are *organized* according to the same principle and stand in relations of non-hierarchic interaction with each other. At the same time, Bogdanov criticised the existing sciences, which lead, due to their continually increasing differentiation, to a fragmentation of knowledge.

Bogdanov attempts to go “beyond Marx” in his philosophy and merges Marx’s historical materialism with the empiriocriticism of Richard Avenarius and Ernst Mach. Departing generally from a monistic framework and from the monism of organizational principles in particular, Bogdanov’s work aimed at a discursive turn in Marxist theory by emphasizing the potential of sociocultural “superstructure” for revolutionizing the economic “base”.

Bogdanov’s conception of the reciprocal and non-hierarchical organisation of systems is taken up in Nirkitin as a guiding paradigm. Organisational principles which can be studied in the system of easel painting are transposable into other systems, hence projectable. Once one recognises the optimal organisational principles in a system, one is able to optimise any other system – be it the museum, cinema or industrial production. It is significant in this regard that the machine and, by implication, technology and industry, function as prototypes of optimal organisation. What is thus anticipated with the cinematographic apparatus is a machine by means of which one can fundamentally re-organize human and social life. The gap between the insufficient present and an optimally organised future is bridged through projection.

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