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Aesthetic Techniques and Political Effects

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If the *Author as a Producer* is the topic of discussion, the author's counterpart is, consciously or not, also the subject: the recipient, or rather the recipients, as the perception of most works of art happens in plural, in collectives. In the case of Benjamin's lecture, there is no want of clearness: The author addresses his audience directly even in the first sentence, and he repeats the invocation throughout the text again and again. Yet it is probable that this is all a mystification; up to the present, no proof has been found that Benjamin ever held a lecture at the *Institut pour l'étude du Facisme* at all. He tried to publish his text in Klaus Mann's exile magazine *Die Sammlung*, but in vain; and thus only a few readers read the manuscript of the *Author as a Producer* prior to its first publication in 1966.[1]

This was unfortunate for the text, all the more as it addresses, to some extent, exactly the question of the relation of the author to his readers. Instead of dealing with the actual contents of a text, Benjamin discusses how it is produced and for whose benefit. He takes for granted that the "progressive type of author ... places himself on the side of the proletariat,"[2] though he might not write for them. I'll come to that later.

I have taken three passages from the text where Benjamin addresses the question of the recipients in more detail. The first of these is his description of Tretyakov's experiences at the kolkhoz *Communist Lighthouse*: among other activities the writer undertook to organize mass meetings and to convince peasants to join the collective farm. With this, Benjamin presents a striking juxtaposition to what was - and still is today - commonly understood as an author's profession: he should not focus on writing alone but on the mobilization, the organization of his readers, for which a text can be but one means. Or in more general terms: it is not the single work that is important, but rather the impact it has on the audience.

Benjamin deals more explicitly with the recipients a second time when he talks about working for the papers: it is the reader's impatience that ties him to a certain newspaper, the impatience "of the excluded who thinks he has a right to have his own interests heard."[3] The bourgeois press channels this by opening ever new columns for letters to the editor at random. In the Soviet press however, "the reader is ready to become a writer at any time, namely a describer or even a prescriber. As an expert, he gains access to authorship."[4] The work of the author here is characterized by its activating momentum, triggering the readers to become writers. In other words: the position of the author should not be an established one, but open and operative. Implicitly, Benjamin refers to this again later when stressing that "[the] writer who does not teach other writers teaches nobody."[5] The writers, that means potentially all readers.

Finally, Benjamin elaborates on the author's public again when quoting René Maublanc's answer to a query: "Without a doubt I mainly write for the bourgeois public," he answers to the question about his audience, "because I am of bourgeois origin and of

bourgeois education and come from a bourgeois milieu, and thus I am inclined to address the class I belong to and which I know and understand the best. However this does not mean that I write to please or to support them. On the one hand I am convinced that the proletarian revolution is necessary and desirable, and on the other, that it will be the quicker, the easier, more successful and less bloody, the more the bourgeoisie is weakened."[6]

With these examples, Benjamin names three features of the task of author: he should help to organize the proletariat, and he should activate them; he should weaken their enemies. If one wants to avoid the term proletariat as being somewhat dubious today, one could generalize with Benjamin that it is the momentum of organizing, activating and subverting that can signify art with the correct political tendency and the correct aesthetic tendency - with the *correct* political tendency, since no art can avoid the political even if it tries to be apolitical. Benjamin's argumentation is indeed based on the assumption that the political tendency is inherent to the artistic.

In his time, Benjamin was by far not the only one concerned with the position of the author - or the artist - in political struggles. It is hardly a coincidence that he quotes Tretyakov and Brecht, both of whom had dealt with similar questions before. In 1923, six years after the victorious Russian Revolution, Tretyakov turned against what he regarded as a misunderstanding of the revolutionization of art: "Initially the kind of art was considered revolutionary that understood art as an organized process of production to make the most appropriate use of the linguistic, colored, plastic and musical material. The revolutionary element usually ended up treating a revolutionary subject or including a revolutionary figure in the work. ... Only the themes changed, all the rest remained as it was, the isolation of art from life and the way it limped behind."[7]

Tretyakov's alternatives were aimed in a similar direction as Benjamin's: "'Art for all' should not intend to make everybody a spectator, on the contrary: it should see that everybody acquires the proficiency and competence to manipulate and manage the material in ways that had been exclusive to the artistic specialists before. In the context of the revolution and the perspectives opened by it, the question of art as aesthetic production and consumption along with the interrelation of art and life needs to be analyzed."[8] His demand is thus to re-build the apparatus of production, to re-organize it: art should not be produced by specialists but by everybody; and it should not be an aestheticist luxury but a necessity in active life.

About ten years later, Brecht wrote "Writing the Truth. Five Difficulties." Published in 1934 the text was intended to be instructive for literary and propagandistic work under the conditions of capitalism in general and of fascism in particular. Less than Tretyakov and Benjamin, Brecht stresses activating the recipient to autonomous artistic production; however he reflects extensively on how the truth should be written to reach those who can make use of it: "The truth cannot just be written; it needs to be written *to someone* who can do something with it."[9] Or in Benjamin's words: the political tendency of a work is contingent on the reader addressed; it not only needs to be correct, but it needs to be correct for the specific reader. Consequently, Brecht deals most extensively with the cunning that is necessary for spreading the truth. With a number of examples he illustrates that literary forms are not mere decoration but the mandatory means for representing and mediating the truth. And after all, the writer is not obliged to address only the main contradictions: "The avant-garde of truth can choose relatively unobserved battle-grounds. It is most important to teach correct thinking, that is, thinking that

questions everything and every process in terms of its mutability and transitoriness."[10]

If Benjamin's questions and demands - and with them, Tretyakov's and Brecht's - were of no relevance any more, this conference would be an idle academic pastime. Nevertheless one has to take into consideration how fundamentally the conditions have changed since Brecht's, Tretyakov's and Benjamin's days. First of all, the audience of art in general and of political art in particular has changed radically: it has become bigger, and at the same time it has become more diffuse. With the old masters and ancient treasures, contemporary art has enjoyed an exceptional run, profiting from tourism, from costly shows and from the attractiveness of collecting art as an investment - the exchange value is recognized as an important part of the exhibition value. Little is to be said against this connection of art to mass culture; on the contrary, it counters the aesthetic pleasure in elitist connoisseurship, and the range of artistic impact has at least potentially expanded. It becomes problematic, however, when art settles in mass culture, giving up its efficiency by supplying the production apparatus instead of changing attitudes; and supplying this kind of service can assume quite peculiar forms. Let me relate an anecdote: In 1999 I was to write a review on the show *After the Wall* in Stockholm having no more first-hand knowledge of it than the catalogue. To ask some more questions I called the Moderne Museet and through some strange coincidence I came across a journalist who told me about some of the frictions going on backstage. It seemed that not all the invited artists were happy about being subsumed in a geographical and political entity that had once - as seen from the West - been behind the wall: Coming from countries as different as Moldavia, Latvia, Poland and Yugoslavia, they insisted that their art was different, too. The only thing they had in common,

concluded the journalist, was that they came from countries without a market for art. Since then, this thought somehow followed me. Except for Yugoslavia, Hungary and Slovenia, I haven't traveled much to those countries in recent years, but I have been exposed to quite a bit of art that has been produced there and exhibited in the West, in other words an acquaintance through the art market. And I found the Swedish journalist's argument even more striking when seeing the Dakar Biennale in 2002, where a similar generalization took place generating - to the dismay of the artists - African Art. Yet installations from Morocco, sculptures from Togo and photograph from South Africa did not really have much in common. In both cases, however, it is crucial that the artistic production is targeted to the Western art market by this kind of labeling. The artists are certainly not to blame for this kind of concentration: they go where their work and their works are paid for. Lack of intellectual and financial support, unpleasant circumstances of life and more or less autocratic regimes triggered a vast brain-drain for instance, but not only in Yugoslavia, crippling cultural production to no small extent. In the world of art, so to speak, the Cold War and its division of the world hasn't ended yet: the production might take place everywhere, but the business is conducted neither in the East nor in the South but in the West.

A second difference to the times of Benjamin, Brecht and Tretyakov is the lack of any political instance or institution to discuss whether a certain tendency is correct or not. Hardly anyone here will long for the communist parties, neither those of the 20s and the 30s with their massacres euphemistically called cleansings, nor those of the 70s and 80s with their suffocating bureaucracy and their mostly philistine ideas about art. Nevertheless these parties, partly due to the power they asserted, partly due to the authority ascribed to them as representatives of the revolutionary proletariat,

were either partners or opponents for determining what is right or wrong in art and literature. Since the end of the Soviet Union, neither the Social Democrats nor any other left-wing group or faction has been able to succeed to this role - the first due to a lack of interest and mostly of competence, too, the latter because of their own quarrels about how to criticize victorious capitalism. In part the art market filled the breach: certain political attitudes can be sales arguments - though this is hardly what Benjamin had in mind. Yet these difficulties demonstrate once more that it is neither the subject of a work that makes it revolutionary - as Socialist Realism has unwittingly proven - but that formal and technical discussions are of the utmost importance.

A third problem is the devaluation and discrediting of the political premises that Benjamin sympathized with: neither in the West nor in the East do we find parties left with the goal of abolishing capitalism. Defining oneself as left-wing today too often means proposing social or ecological reforms of the current economical system, a pragmatic restriction to the feasible, or a plain affirmation of the status quo. But though this might make it harder to determine what is correct, it opens up an interesting situation for the arts and with them, for art history and art criticism, too. Benjamin argues that "the tendency which is politically correct includes a literary tendency. ... [This] literary tendency, which is implicitly or explicitly included in every correct political tendency, this and nothing else makes up the quality of a work."[11] Benjamin thus refuses to understand the political and the artistic tendencies as components separate from one other that have to be added to a work like spices to a soup. Both of them are necessary though not sufficient elements of each and every work; and if Benjamin remarks in another passage that the "literary tendency may consist in a progressive development of literary technique, or

in a regressive one,"[12] it becomes clear that the political tendency of a work does not necessarily need to be the *correct* one.

If all these aforementioned difficulties exist (and certainly there are more); if the majority of the art audience prefers to ignore art's political contents; if there are few relevant instances left for discussions; and if one still holds the opinion that the world, in order to remain alive and for life to be more worth living, needs more fundamental changes than one in the American presidency - if all this is true, the question remains as to how art and its potentials can be instrumental. I think that Benjamin's text has some viable suggestions.

The equivalence that Benjamin established in the relation of artistic and political tendency indicates a first possibility: this means more or less that a work of art with the correct artistic tendency must necessarily contain the correct political tendency. Thus it is not only art that has to justify to politics as it was mostly practiced in the old days, but the other way around, too: politics can be held responsible by art. In other words: by asking about the relations between the implications of art and the realities of society, art can become a political indicator. However, to raise the division between art and politics because of this or at least to astheticize politics is by no means an imperative conclusion. On the contrary: in his essay on *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin points out how fascism promoted this aestheticization: "The masses have a right to change property relations; Fascism seeks to give them an *expression* while preserving property. ... The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with it *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values."[13]

The apparatus Benjamin discusses here also appears in his text on the *Author as a Producer*: here the production apparatus denotes the productive context in and for which the author works: theater, literature, film etc. Benjamin again refers to Brecht and his epic theater as a counter-model to make his point clear, that "to supply a production apparatus without trying ... to change it, is a highly disputable activity even when the material supplied appears to be of revolutionary nature."[14] In comparison, the epic theater succeeded, particularly through technical interventions, in changing "the nexus between stage and audience, between text and performance, between director and actor." These interventions in the production apparatus require that its structure is subject to an analysis - an analysis whose consequences intend exactly these kinds of interventions.

What can such a collaboration of analysis and action look like? Let me illustrate my ideas with an example: in the framework of a bigger project in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, in 2002 the artist group LIGNA executed their *Radioballett* in the main station nearby. Having practically and theoretically discussed the structures of the production and reception of radio since the 1990s, with the *Radioballett* they undertook to make the public space the location and subject of their work, choosing a location that had become one of the most prominent models for re-forming city centers: with the transformation of the German Bundesbahn into the Deutsche Bahn Inc., the stations became private property, too. Soon they changed from transitional zones, where homeless, drug-addicts and other poor were at least tolerated, into shopping malls with rail connections, where the presence of such fringes of society was reduced to a hindrance to business. The *Radioballett* did not intend to report on the sometimes insignificant and surreptitious shifts that had taken place. Rather it was to allow the listeners to

investigate "the grey areas between permitted, dubious and prohibited gestures" for themselves. It was not their empathy that was sought, but an active reflection on the presumed normality of such places. The setup of the *Radioballett* is quickly explained: with the help of the local independent radio FSK a pre-produced broadcast was transmitted, containing instructions for actions as well as *theses on gestural listening*. The participants were asked to come to the area of the main station equipped with portable radios. It was quite helpful that the Deutsche Bahn went to court in the attempt to prohibit the *Radioballett* as an unauthorized gathering on private ground; the judge followed the LIGNA's argumentation that on the one hand private property can very well be public space and on the other that the *Radioballett* was not a gathering, on the contrary - it was a public dissipation. In the end it was a beautiful Saturday afternoon when about 300 people were seen all over in the main station synchronously extending their hands, sitting on the ground, dancing or simply listening to the radio.

To anticipate one of the occasional objections to the *Radioballett*, the reproach of manipulation: at any given time the listeners had precisely the liberty that society today offers to most of its members: not to participate, only to observe, to walk away or to tune out; in other words, to turn down one of the manifold invocations present at the station, such as train announcements, special offers or the silent threat of the securities. The *Radioballett* did not counter these invocations - it made them perceptible and evaluated the tiny differences separating the legal from the illegalized: shaking hands is an acknowledged ritual,l but to extend the hand for begging is banned. And a medium was used for this evaluation that is hardly comparable with any other in its ubiquity: the broadcast could be received nearly everywhere in town at very low cost - a small radio today hardly costs more than a newspaper.

In this way, the *Radioballett* changed the production apparatus it served, that of radio as well as that of art: The ballet picked up the settings of a medium, applying them for its own intentions in activating its listeners to make use of the medium for themselves: whether the instructions were executed, and if so, where and how this happened was solely the responsibility of the participants. Later works of LIGNA picked up this momentum: a *Radiodemonstration* helped to circumvent a ban on demonstrations in the inner city of Hamburg: The listeners were again called on to walk the streets equipped with portable radios listening to a program dealing with the banned demonstration - and, if they felt like it, to discuss the topic with the passers-by, to call into the studio reporting the situation on air to the other listeners, or simply to disturb the bustling malls with their presence.

Radioballett could also be helpful in another respect, as it takes into consideration distribution as the much too often neglected intermediary between production and consumption. To call upon its participants not to form a massive crowd but to disperse all over the station is more than just another theatrical trick: It makes use of the conditions under which radio in particular and quite a lot of other media such as television and papers are perceived: They are targeted to and reach an audience that is most likely to be dispersed, moving, ephemeral. This is hardly news; however, as experimental as they may be artistically, a majority of works of art self-evidently require recipients that are concentrated, located and willing to spend time on them.

"You may have noticed that the reflections whose conclusions we are now nearing make only one demand on the writer: the demand to *think*, to reflect upon his position in the production process."[15] In its generality, Benjamin's conclusion addresses only the writers, and he was certainly among them himself. The

Author as a Producer was but one text written at about the same time taking the social role of the writer, the intellectual as its subject, a role that for Benjamin at that time was precarious in every respect. Theoretically he supported communism, though keeping his distance. Practically his situation in particular in the first years of his Paris exile was bleak because of loneliness, constant changes of residence and the lack of money. Earning hardly enough to survive he was forced to grab every opportunity to publish. In his essay, Benjamin does not remark on how the author should earn his living, but a small text entitled *Venal, but not Usable* written at the same time gives us this information: "Most intellectuals ... are in a desolate situation, but neither character nor pride or reserve are responsible for this. The journalists, romanciers and writers are willing to compromise. But they don't know this, and that's the reason for their failings. And because they don't know, they don't understand how to separate those parts of their opinions, experiences and attitudes that might be of interest for the market. They make it a point of honor to be themselves in each and every thing. Because they want to sell themselves only in one piece, they become as unusable as a calf that the butcher would give to his customers only as a whole."[16]

Note: A full English translation of the Author as a Producer *was not available to me. I used the Blackwell edition wherever I could, and where it was incomplete I translated the quotes myself and referred to the German edition in the footnotes. I did the same wherever an English translation of a text or a passage was not available to me; the German text is then included in the footnote.*

Literature

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[1] Cf. Benjamin 1991d

[2] Benjamin 1995, p. 484

[3] Benjamin 1991a, p, 688 ["des Ausgeschlossenen, der ein Recht zu haben glaubt, selber mit eigenen Interessen zu Wort zu kommen."]

[4] Benjamin 1991a, p, 688 ["dort jederzeit bereit [ist], ein Schreibender, nämlich ein Beschreibender oder auch Vorschreibender zu werden. Als Sachverständiger ... gewinnt er Zugang zur Autorschaft."]

[5] Benjamin 1995, p. 488

[6] Benjamin 1991a, p. 699 f. ["Unzweifelhaft schreibe ich fast ausschließlich für ein bürgerliches Publikum (...),weil ich von bürgerlicher Herkunft, bürgerlicher Erziehung bin und aus bürgerlichem Milieu stamme, dergestalt natürlich geneigt bin, mich an die Klasse zu wenden, der ich angehöre, die ich am besten kenne und am besten verstehen kann. Das will aber nicht heißen, daß ich schreibe, um ihr zu gefallen oder um sie zu stützen. Auf der einen Seite bin ich überzeugt, daß die proletarische Revolution notwendig und wünschenswert ist, auf der anderen Seite, daß sie um so schneller, leichter, erfolgreicher und weniger blutig sein wird, je schwächer der Widerstand der Bourgeoisie ist."]

[7] Tretjakow 1985, p. 92 f. ["Allerdings hielt man zunächst noch die Kunstarbeit für revolutionär, die die Kunst als einen organisierten Produktionsprozeß zur zweckmäßigsten Nutzung des sprachlichen, farblichen, plastischen und musikalischen Materials auffaßte. Das revolutionäre lief gewöhnlich auf die Verwendung eines revolutionären Sujets oder einer revolutionären Figur im Werk hinaus. ... Es ändert sich nur das Thema, alles übrige bleibt

beim alten, die Isoliertheit der Kunst vom Leben und ihr Hinterherhinken."]

[8] Tretjakow 1985, p. 96 ["'Kunst für Alle' [darf] ... nicht darauf ausgehen, alle Menschen in Zuschauer zu verwandeln, sondern muß im Gegenteil dafür sorgen, daß sich alle die Fähigkeiten und Fertigkeiten aneignen, Material zu handhaben und zu organisieren, was bislang den Kunstspezialisten vorbehalten war. ... Im Zusammenhang mit der Revolution und der durch sie eröffneten Perspektiven muß die Frage der Kunst als ästhetischer Produktion und Konsumtion und der Wechselbeziehung zwischen Kunst und Leben aufgeworfen und analysiert werden."]

[9] Brecht 1957, p. 93 ["Die Wahrheit kann man nicht eben schreiben; man muß sie durchaus *jemandem* schreiben, der damit etwas anfangen kann."]

[10] Brecht 1957, p. 99 ["Die Vorkämpfer der Wahrheit können sich Kampfplätze aussuchen, die verhältnismäßig unbeobachtet sind. Alles kommt darauf an, daß ein richtiges Denken gelehrt wird, ein Denken, das alle Dinge und Vorgänge nach ihrer vergänglichen und veränderbaren Seite fragt."]

[11] Benjamin 1995, p. 484

[12] Benjamin 1995, p, 485

[13] Benjamin 1991b, p. 506 [Illuminations, p. 234]

[14] Benjamin 1995, p. 486

[15] Benjamin 1995, p. 488

[16] Benjamin 1991c ["Die große Masse der Geistigen ... ist in trostloser Lage. Schuld ist an dieser Lage aber nicht Charakter,

Stolz und Unzugänglichkeit. Die Journalisten, Romanciers und Literaten sind meistens zu jedem Kompromiß bereit. Nur wissen sie das nicht, und eben dies ist der Grund ihrer Mißerfolge. Denn weil sie es nicht wissen oder nicht wissen wollen, daß sie käuflich sind, darum verstehen sie nicht, von ihren Meinungen, Erfahrungen, Verhaltungsweisen die Teile, die für den Markt Interesse haben, abzulösen. Sie suchen vielmehr ihre Ehre darin, in jeder Sache ganz sie selbst zu sein. Weil sie sich nur 'im Stück' verkaufen wollen, werden sie ganz genau so unverwertbar wie ein Kalb, welches der Schlächter seiner Kundin nur im ganzen würde überlassen wollen."]