

Trotsky's theory of art

Bret Schneider

At its Third Annual International Convention, held at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago between April 29-May 1, Platypus hosted a conversation on "Art, Culture, and Politics: Marxist Approaches." Platypus members Omair Hussain, Lucy Parker, Pac Pobric, and Bret Schneider sought to address "What might the problems of aesthetics and culture have to do with the political project of the self-education of the Left?" What follows are Bret Schneider's opening remarks.

THIS ESSAY IS SIMPLY TITLED "Trotsky's Theory of Art."

The title may sound banal, but it is actually quite bizarre. For it is not self-evident why Trotsky would devote such time in 1924, in the midst of social revolution, to the history and prospects of Russian literature. Problematizing the unproblematized expanse of contemporary art production through Leon Trotsky's writings on art may initially appear counterintuitive as well. Though he is well-known for his journalistic exploits, as an integral leader of the Bolshevik revolution, as a ceaseless proponent of Marxism and Leninism, and as the "last man standing" from the Second International, an art critic Trotsky was not, and so his central book, *Literature and Revolution*, appears as an odd duck (or a platypus, perhaps!). Nevertheless, *Literature and Revolution* scintillates with original artistic revelations and even a *new theory* of art, and one gets the impression that such unprecedented clarity, and even an unrivaled comprehensive perspective on the diverse art of his moment, is the artifact of, and only of, the ebullience of a new world in the making that now appears petrified. That is, the way art was framed was revolutionized—or in the state of revolutionizing itself—in various ways through *Literature and Revolution*. If, as Gregg Horowitz said in a recent discussion on contemporary critical theory,¹ we are standing in the way of history, if we are blocking the passage of a new world articulated long ago, then it

might behoove us to investigate the original stakes of this historical venture and use it as a foil for the confounded present. These stakes included a new culture and a new art as only one of its elements, but such a new culture was clearly an integral concern for Leon Trotsky.

Literature and Revolution is a theory of history parallel to Trotsky's 1906 *Results and Prospects*. In *Results and Prospects*, Trotsky assesses the 19th century bourgeois revolutions, and what unfulfilled latencies seemed to lead to their redemption by a socialist revolution (in 1905, but foreshadowing 1917). Trotsky's examination was not merely a "cause and effect" study, but a living theory of how the revolution also changed the meaning of history and in what ways. I will not get into *Results and Prospects* here, but *Literature and Revolution* is a similar exegesis of bourgeois art, what its implications were for the self-determining *constitution* of a *new* culture, and how the new demands of revolution changed the way traditional art forms are and might come to be perceived. In this sense, *Literature and Revolution* is an artifact of a political *becoming*, the postulating of a new culture beyond class, as a *category*, not a reality attained by Bolshevik revolution, or to be identified with it. A decade earlier, Georg Lukács wrote a Hegelian study on the novel, articulating the novel as distinct from pre-modern literature by way of its being a form in flux, a self-constituting form in the process of its own transformation; in other words the novel is the paramount modern literary form specifically because it is a social *problem*, not a social *solution*, in a similar sense to how *reification* is a new problem to be resolved, and with something new to be gained by resolving it. This means framing political and artistic forms as problems, though: problems of tradition, how to depart from it, of the newfound contradictions between the individual and society, the new as the old in distress, as only some examples. Form in flux, open to new possibilities, co-developed with the new subject or the new human, as Trotsky framed it, is also why Benjamin later opened his "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" essay with a new theory of the receiver: "Baudelaire envisaged readers to whom the reading of lyric poetry would present difficulties."² By the time Trotsky wrote *Literature and Revolution*, the modern becoming—a departure away from everything about the old world, but one that redeems it through abstract relationships with it—which Lukács articulated in the novel form had become such an inescapable problem that new, dynamic forms, unseen and unprecedented, were unanimously called for by social revolution, which sought to problematize this autonomy of art to pursue new, self-determining courses. Thus, Trotsky's letter to *Partisan Review* in 1938 concerns overcoming the old world's ideology of too easily *rectifying* art and politics, instead of understanding the newfound

open possibility of each as a problem:

Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but by its very essence, cannot tolerate them. Artistic creation has its laws—even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself.³

Trotsky echoes—or prefigures, or both—Walter Benjamin’s idea that art can only have the correct political “tendency” if it has aesthetic “quality,” an idea that would later influence Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory, in the sense that what Adorno later identified as the *incomprehensibility* of art is the precondition for greater reflection and a more adequate social reality (I will get into this a bit later). Every moment of Trotsky’s theory argues the autonomy of art, recently freed, and not constricted by political “reality.” In a sense, Trotsky is the first non-philistine, because he is arguing against a newfound possibility of philistinism, depending on which way international politics will go. In other words, there is an analogy to be drawn between Rosa Luxemburg’s “socialism or barbarism?” insofar as Trotsky seems to be asking, “aesthetics or philistinism?” But what does this mean?

First, this can be illustrated by the very attentive historical and formal criticism of “pre-revolutionary” bourgeois literature: a newly constructed *tradition* that can be *constructively negated* (foreshadowing Greenberg’s description of art as its “further entrenchment in the area of its competence,” as well as Adorno’s exhaustive ideas of “tradition”). This is where Trotsky contributes something absolutely new to the theory of art, and here does the previously unthinkable for Marxists: He promotes (and does not condemn) the art of the peasantry. This is not to say that he promotes the *politics* of the peasantry, but makes a significant distinction between art and the political sentiments contained in it. In other words, he defends the art over the artist. An idea emerges here of “the fellow traveler” of the proletarian socialist revolution, not equivalent to it, but parallel with it. Politics and art grasp each other *indirectly* for perhaps the first time, and the sheer inescapability of the revolution allows room for their autonomous expression, providing multiple, new, and dynamic perspectives that allow them to be seen more holistically, unobstructed by ideology. Regarding young peasant poets, Trotsky says,

It is as if they feel for the first time that art has its own rights....Why do we relegate them to being “fellow-travellers” of ours? Because they are bound up with the Revolution, because this tie is still very unformed,

because they are so very young, and because nothing definite can be said about their tomorrow....As if an artist ever could be “without a tendency,” without a definite relation to social life, even though unformulated or unexpressed in political terms.⁴

Trotsky reconstructs Kliuev’s literary peasant world in order to illuminate, from an alternate angle of different subjectivity, the dynamism of the revolution. The way Trotsky speaks of Kliuev’s world is as a “tinsel fairyland,” and that “a modern person cannot live in such an environment” (68). Kliuev’s world is a mesmerizing individual dreamworld, a bucolic, slowly rotating mobile of glistening objects. Kliuev’s peasant world is portrayed as somewhat womb-like, a narcotic experience whose apparent individual peace is also a foreboding of social awakening.

Through delimiting the autonomous formalism of art Trotsky is able to construct an adequate image of cultural and political prospects previously unseen. Would Trotsky have been able to glean, concretely even, that the peasant world was in the process of withering away without literary investigation? Almost certainly. This raises the question of why it is necessary to retain multiple perspectives. Simply put, the achievement of multiple perspectives is an index of the crawling out of instrumental analyses. The exhaustive portrait of the individual peasant dreamworld throws into relief the radically different set of objects and subjects emerging in modern experience—the telephone, the train, the bustling development of metropolises, and the subjective openness of possibility, for example—in order to understand the world in flux more consciously. Similar to the way Lukács thought that the short story would take grip of the transient world—or rather the way that he took seriously the novel’s “half art” as a real expression of transforming social conditions—Trotsky perceived that social conditions exerted an influence on the form of Russian literature, demanding *études*, or sketches. It is easy to see how new cultural forms and media like radio, television and so forth would soon come to pass, as continual transformations would be required to meet the needs of a “modern person”, or a “new human” that needs art less and less, in accord with a society whose emancipated subjects are no longer bound to the continued suffering that is art’s *raison d’être*.

What Trotsky sees in the literary works of the “fellow travelers” is an openness of perspective that they participate in, but are not the wholly constituting expression of, because their seemingly complete and self-subsistent worlds, what Adorno would later call their hermetically sealed quality, are open to a new form of *criticism* that sees them as “dissonant” with society but not outside of it. Art

has a newfound ability to be dissonant with and therefore critical of the social totality. It is nowhere implied that even the most repulsive or “anti-Marxist” principles should be foreclosed by Marxist critique, but rather diagnosed to provide a portrait of social conditions at their most dynamic and heterogeneous. Even Kliuev’s occasional anti-Leninism is a welcome critique for Trotsky. Art is not only *not* exempt from this, but is exemplary in its *problematic* symptomology. Regarding another young writer’s confrontation with a new openness, Trotsky said, “One can take man, not only social, but even psycho-physical man and approach him from different angles—from above, from below, from the side, or walk all around him” (74). That he pathetically “steals up to him from below,” evident through the literary form, shows that the old world fosters inadequate cliché assumptions of a “human nature” that need not exist. The autonomy to perceive humans from different angles artistically—which means a “formalist” problem—is a freedom opened up by political conditions, and one that implies the “new humans” Trotsky called for without even needing to enforce explicit ideology upon the art:

Our Marxist conception of the objective social dependence and social utility of art, when translated into the language of politics, does not at all mean a desire to dominate art by means of decrees and orders. It is not true that we regard only that art as new and revolutionary which speaks of the worker, and it is nonsense to say that we demand that the poets should describe inevitably a factory chimney, or the uprising against capital! Of course the new art cannot but place the struggle of the proletariat in the center of its attention. But the plough of the new art is not limited to numbered strips. On the contrary, it must plough the entire field in all directions. Personal lyrics of the very smallest scope have an absolute right to exist within the new art. Moreover, the new man cannot be formed without a new lyric poetry. But to create it, the poet himself must feel the world in a new way. (143-144)

“Feeling the world in a new way” has resonance with us today as an intellectual *idea* specifically because it seems stifled. But the new feelings are, again, tied to the radically incomplete world in flux.

Life in Revolution is camp life. Personal life, institutions, methods, ideas, sentiments, everything is unusual, temporary, transitional, recognizing its temporariness and expressing this everywhere, even in names. Hence the difficulty of an artistic approach. The transitory and the episodic have in them an element of the accidental and the accidental bears the stamp of insignificance.

The Revolution, taken episodically, appears quite insignificant. Where is the Revolution, then? Here lies the difficulty. Only he will overcome it who fully understands and feels the inner meaning of this episodic character and who will reveal the historic axis of crystallization that lies behind it Pilnyak has no theme because of his fear of being episodic.... Pilnyak wants to show present-day life in its relations and in its movement and he grasps at it in this way and in that, making parallel and perpendicular cross-cuts in different places, because it is nowhere the same as it was. The themes, more truly the theme *possibilities*, which cross his stories, are only samples of life taken at random, and life, let us note, is now much fuller of subject matter than ever before. (76-78, italics added)

Art played a role in determining social totality by articulating the incompleteness of it. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács describes art as always saying, “‘And yet!’ to life. The creation of forms is the most profound confirmation of a dissonance.”⁵ Such a framework—endemic to Lukács’s theory of the novel and Trotsky’s theory of the fellow traveler, notwithstanding Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*—brings up a vast number of questions for the contemporary, and also forces some all too easy associations. Contemporary artworks are often framed not as the *problem*, but the solution—or at least there is not a clearly defined dissonance between an artwork and the society it expresses.

This is enough to warrant the question of whether or not what passes itself off as art today could even be called so, but I will leave that to the side. In contemporary artworks we are faced with similar formal problems to those that Trotsky faced. For instance, if Trotsky was critical of the many nefarious endeavors to create a permanent proletarian culture (e.g., artists enlisting in the *Proletkult*) because the proletariat was a transitional phase to a much broader human freedom yet to be determined, but certainly one beyond the primitive class divisions of “proletariat” and “bourgeois,” what then can be said about the “radical” art activism of today that seeks to ally itself with a vague “working class” that is increasingly depoliticized? Is this alliance doomed to an eternal struggle? Moreover, Trotsky noticed that such political “commitments” were not without their compromising effects on the aesthetic experience and consequently the transformation of subjectivity. In order to “be pals with socialism and with the Revolution,” Mayakovsky had to rely on antiquated cliché truisms that were backwards of modern life and articulated retrogression from Mayakovsky’s earlier, more progressive imagery (using skulls as ashtrays is an amusing example of retrogressive imagery) (133). Trotsky also saw this wanting

to be “pals” with the people, or a “mass base” without distinction, as a return to the bourgeois intelligentsia in the 19th century, who,

deprived of a cultural environment, sought support in the lower strata of society and tried to prove to the “people” that it was thinking only of them, living only for them and that it loved them “terribly.” And just as the populists who went to the people were ready to do without clean linen and without a comb and without a toothbrush, so the intelligentsia was ready to sacrifice the “subtleties” of form in its art, in order to give the most direct and spontaneous expression to the sufferings and hopes of the oppressed. [143]

That is, such an appeal to the “people” disregards the “splintering” or dissonant pluralism that Trotsky saw as endemic to the most significant successes of the Left over the course of its history.

As another example, in much new “experimental” music we hear the sounds of Kliuev’s “tinsel fairyland,” the subtle droning of vintage synth gear, a nostalgia for a private world. The “music” is like a narcotic, a therapeutic substance applied to the subject to cure what ails it. Electronic music might have once been counted amongst those modern things, an artifact of a dynamic mutability, but one that is stillborn in a state of endless, almost unsustainable decay. One is reminded again of Trotsky’s description of Kliuev, when we look at much recent album artwork. For example:

A wheat and honey paradise: a singing bird on the carved wing of the house and a sun shining in jasper and diamonds. Not without hesitation does Kliuev admit into his peasant paradise the radio and magnetism and electricity. [67]

In new experimental music a social torpor is embellished and sublimated into an ornate sort of poverty. What does it mean that the bourgeois individual experience of art is still naturally occurring today, without its being formulated as the progressive crisis of its own withering away?

One could go on with new art forms hearkening back to the past, re-digesting those bourgeois, bohemian tropes that fail to die, in the futuristic aspects of new net art for example (Trotsky considered Futurism to be retrograde bohemianism), or the return to painting, and so on. But what does this all amount to? Art wants to pass, it wants to finally die—it is not mere eccentricity that great artists once believed they were making the last artwork. If art finally died, this would signal that the “untransfigured suffering of man”⁶ over the ages would finally be transfigured into

something else. Simply pronouncing art dead, or irrelevant to the everyday is not enough to warrant its demise, as if it were so simple to eradicate the suffering of man. The culture industry—with its ceaseless thrusting of art in our faces—is the penance for failing to achieve socialism, but also the petrified reminder of its possibility. In this sense, art and culture are not the solution to, but rather the problem of, our own suffering, and the crystallization of this problem also implies redemption. Does it not seem that, contrary to this, we want to *preserve* art, to restore the world through art, and wasn’t this specifically a crucial element of fascism, or less dramatically, conservatism? In an era of where there are no historical tasks or clearly defined problems, any proposed solution is a false reconciliation. In Adorno’s words, “that the world which, as Baudelaire wrote, has lost its fragrance and then since its color, could have them restored by art strikes only the artless as possible.”⁷

We might today treat Trotsky with the critical method which Trotsky treated bourgeois art, except that this task seems impossible. The salience of Trotsky’s critique today—that we can so easily view the same problems as he did in apparently “new” art—is not the solution, but the problem. The continual indigestion of culture is a problem that needs to be problematized—no simple solutions can present themselves today without also seeing history as a problem. In other words, without historical consciousness that articulates the social situation of art, we are all relegated to philistinism, nostalgic for a moment where all possibilities didn’t seem foreclosed, or predetermined the way they do today. Perhaps now more than ever, art works yearn to be recognized as distinct from the political or social ideas that underlie them—that is, we should not condemn the nostalgia of new age experimental music for example, or the vulgar politics of social art, but formulate them as incomprehensible aesthetic problems that constantly reintroduce social redemption without exactly fulfilling it.

Contemporary art’s biggest and perhaps only problem is that it doesn’t formulate itself as a problem, but instead endeavors to devise quick-fix solutions. This is evident in everything from Fried and Greenberg’s criticism of “literal” art, to relational aesthetics, to the social turn that endeavors to make ‘concrete’ interventions in the world, as if even the most rhetorical things are without effect. Ultimately this implies a distance so alienated that there seems no connection to the world we live in whatsoever. This is counterposed to a would-be “revolutionary art,” insofar as Trotsky (as quoted above) saw it as impossible for any form of art, no matter how depoliticized, to be somehow illuminative of a seemingly inevitable political becoming. Trotsky understood the forms of both peasant literature and futurism as illuminated by a concept of history that was

no longer intact, but fragmentary. As mentioned earlier, Trotsky thought the idea that a work of art could ever be *without* a political or social tendency—or that some were more “social” than others—was absurd. It is no longer self-evident, as it once was, that *all* objects, art or otherwise, are shaped by social conditions in such a way that they imply society’s (as we understand it) exhaustion and deserve critical attention. Bourgeois art was withering away and seemed to be yielding to something else.

But without a concept of history—that is, the construction of historical problems—viewers are reduced to philistines, and artists are reduced to dilettantes, grappling for whatever is available, and this is not limited to art, but includes every other cultural object in the world (I think that Shana Moulton’s videos of subjective interactions with the abstract, everyday objects not limited to art, but nonetheless arty, captures this reified desperation quite well). In this light it is easy to frame the return to the avant-garde art styles—e.g. geometric abstraction, Ab-Ex, or Dada—as something almost wholly inartistic, and reducible to other kitschy objects utilized for the decoration of one’s apparent individuality. It is *possibility* that is longed for in ever more quixotic ways, and “avant-garde” *style* is the compromise when it can’t be grasped as a historical problem. This, of course, is kitsch.

In the contemporary state of affairs, where life is a series of arbitrary events without meaning or problematic substance, “fellow travelers” are perhaps reduced to particles in the arbitrariness of natural law. One can’t simply propose that “contemporary art is about this” notion, or is “embodied by that” reality, nor can one find revolutionary qualities in a certain style over another, as we are left without models or a concept of history to shape experience. For example, on the one hand, “art” and “politics” do not only fail to travel side by side, urging each other forward, but we can’t even find an apt metaphor for such traveling in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, whose characters aimlessly wander the scorched earth, carrying some vague human torch for future generations that may not exist, going “further along a dreary road,” occasionally bumping paths and sharing what precious scraps of humanity remain, as if it ever did. Rather, both contemporary “art” and “politics” might each be akin to the nameless, free-floating subject in Samuel Beckett’s novel *The Unnameable*, who resembles a lawn ornament more than a human with anything that might be called agency: it is able to freely reminisce about past events that may, or may not have happened—no one really knows for certain—but is ultimately static, congealed into an object, ashen with the soot of forgetfulness and plagued by its never-has-been-ness, trying to reminisce, “but images of this kind the will cannot revive without doing them

violence.”⁸ One can say that there are no fellow travelers, not even travelers: “art” and “politics” today are lawn ornaments, helpless, kitschy novelties that are permitted continued existence only because they provide a source of petty entertainment to some alien and unknowable authority who finds them amusing in their harmlessness. Sharing a lawn, the contemporary Left and contemporary art believe they have finally found common ground. For instance, at two recent panel discussions hosted by the Platypus Affiliated Society on the theme of art and activism, many panelists unanimously agreed that the propagandistic poster is a paradigm of art. With this idea they browbeat the audience into believing that this is the highest achievement of artistic form. Whether or not one agrees or disagrees with them is hardly the point. The problem is the regulation of aesthetic forms, naturalized without the criticism that Trotsky perceived as constitutive of the new world. Trotsky—like Benjamin, Adorno, and Greenberg—never foreclosed the endlessly open possibilities of any aesthetic form. As Adorno would later argue in “Commitment,” there are no rules, no formulae for artistic experimentation; certain artworks may be, as Benjamin put it, “exemplary”, but “not a model”⁹ Although Trotsky had deep and well-justified political qualms with the peasantry as much as with Futurism, he was constantly open, and even endeavored to further open the possible directions that their art might take. He criticized at length, taking the work more seriously than the artists often took their own work, and he ends many sections of *Literature and Revolution* with, “we must wish them luck” even when he disagreed. Trotsky thought, and hoped, that art would “plough the field in all directions.” We have to wonder what the prospects for this are like today. In some ways, there is no “ploughing in all directions,” but rather ploughing in a provincial expanse that rarely leaves the circumference of one’s own arm-length, *constrained* instead of *liberated* by a politics filled with “reality principles,” and “lived-world” abstractions that Adorno once criticized. Indeed, it is specifically “directionality” that is lacking, and so, helplessly, art contemplatively turns its critical shafts inwards—the confusion of autonomous art for a depoliticized “art for art’s sake” illustrates this. Ultimately, in the meandering reminiscences of one’s own inner fantasia, one must occasionally pass into the recognition of this contemplation—the question is whether or not this recognition can then be constructed, or if the possibility of life will pass us by.

Or, perhaps, on the other hand, it may be the case that contemporary art production ploughs *too much*, works overzealously, ploughing aimlessly, taking the new and autonomous freedom of art as natural law. It may be that political ideology and social criticism cannot penetrate art

as the constrained suffering of humans' failure to move forward, consequently becoming more mute. |PR

-
1. J.M. Bernstein, Lydia Goehr, Gregg Horowitz, and Chris Cutrone, "The Relevance of Critical Theory to Art Today," *Platypus Review* 31 (January 2011). Available online at <<http://platypus1917.org/2011/01/01/the-relevance-of-critical-theory-to-art-today/>>.
 2. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 155.
 3. Leon Trotsky, "Art and politics in our epoch," *Partisan Review* 1938. Available online at <<http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1938/06/artpol.htm>>.
 4. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, trans. Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005 [1924]), 70–71. Available online at <http://marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1924/lit_revo/index.htm>. Hereafter cited in the text.
 5. Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1971 [1920]), 72.
 6. Theodor Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 2004 [1958]), 41–42.
 7. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (New York: Continuum 2004), 50.
 8. Samuel Beckett, *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (New York: Grove Press, 2009), 109.
 9. Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 201.