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ART AS A POLITICAL ACT: THE RUSSIAN AGIT-PROPS OF THE 1920S[*]

POLİTİK BİR EYLEM OLARAK SANAT: 1920'LERDEKİ RUS AGİT-PROP UYGULAMALARI

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Abstract

Emerged in the mid-19th century, the mechanical reproduction techniques changed the definitions of work of art, artist, and social role of art. These transformations have triggered an extensive socio-cultural revolution during the 20th century. Art turned out to be an instrument for guiding the masses; and the communist ideology politicized aesthetics as a strategy of the power. The Russian Constructivists of the 1920s utilized agitation and propaganda techniques (agit-props) in their art for creating an aesthetic language for the political propaganda. This study argues that the Russian avant-garde aiming to bring art into everyday life and urban space became an instrument for aestheticization of politics. The scope is limited to the agit-props appropriated by the Bolshevik power. Dwelling on textual and visual documents from literature, it scrutinizes the topic with a historical interpretation research method. It aims to discuss the agit-props within the framework of politics and aesthetic revolution in everyday life and urban space.

Keywords: Power Strategies, Constructivism, Russian Agit-Props, Urban Space, Everyday Life.

Öz

19. yüzyılın ortalarında ortaya çıkan mekanik yeniden üretim teknikleri, sanat eserinin ve sanatçının tanımları ile sanatın toplumsal rolünü dönüştürmüş; 20. Yüzyıl boyunca sürecek geniş kapsamlı bir sosyo-kültürel devrimi de tetiklemiştir. Sanat, kitleleri yönlendirme aracına dönüşmüştür ve komünist ideoloji, iktidar stratejileri bağlamında estetiği siyasallaştırmıştır. 1920'lerin Rus Konstrüktivistleri sanatlarında, yeni bir estetik dil ve siyasi propaganda oluşturmak için ajitasyon ve propaganda tekniklerini (ajit-proplar) kullanmıştır. Bu çalışma, sanatı kente ve gündelik hayata katmayı amaçlayan Rus avangardının siyasetin estetikleştirilmesinde bir araç haline geldiğini savlamaktadır. Çalışmanın kapsamı, Bolşevik iktidar eliyle oluşturulmuş ajit-proplar ile sınırlandırılmıştır. Literatürden yazılı ve görsel kaynaklara başvuran çalışma, konuyu tarihsel-yorumlama araştırma yöntemiyle ele almaktadır. Ajit-propları, estetik-siyaset ilişkisi, kentsel mekânda ve gündelik hayatta estetik devrim çerçevesinde tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İktidar Stratejileri, Konstrüktivizm, Rus Agit-prop Uygulamaları, Kentsel Mekân, Gündelik Yaşam.

1. Introduction

Since the French Revolution, urban spaces witnessed not only physical transformation but also socio-political developments. In modern era, the change in the production and mechanical reproduction techniques in the mid-19th century paved the way for the transformation in the forms of production and artistic expressions, as well as

everyday life and urban spaces. The changes in physical and socio-political realms triggered an extensive socio-cultural revolution. Thus, at the beginning of the 20th century, the modern art and culture in search for a new vision figured out the avant-garde forms of art production. In order to transform art and society, the avant-garde artists engaged to new ways of bringing art into everyday life and urban space. As Victor Margolin (1997:1) underlines, "the artist's role was to envision the future of society, while the scientist would analyze the feasibility of visionary ideas, and the industrialist would devise administrative techniques for putting them into practice". The avant-gardes were notable for artistic-social practices. They searched for new materials, techniques, forms of expression, and new means of mass media.

Though the Russian avant-gardes around the October Revolution in 1917 (mainly, Russian Futurism, Suprematism, Constructivism) varied with their motivations in art, innovative, experimental, radical, and pioneering techniques and forms of expression; they had convergences regarding their belief in progress, technology, unity, and future.[1] The Expressionists and the Dadaists in Berlin were engaged in life during the 1910s; while the artists in De Stijl and Neoplasticism believed in the power of geometric language for the entire built environment during the 1920s (Margolin, 1997:2). Celebrating advanced technology, urban modernity, machine, speed, violence and change, the Futurists, from 1909 on, yearned for a cultural revolution destroying older forms of culture and communicate their ideas in accordance with the modern life.[2] Refusing the cultural heritage with moral rules, and destroying dictionary, syntax and measure to restore the truth, Italian Futurism was the pioneer of Russian Futurism (Markov, 1968: viii). Although born out of the

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[1] For the extensive literature on these avant-garde artists and modern art movements, please see, Herschel B. Chipp (1968), or Monoskop (2016). The varying manifestos of avant-gardes are classified as 'dissent and disorder', 'abstraction and form', 'utility and construction' (Harrison & Wood, 2003: 333-356): Dadaist Manifestos (1916-1920) are grouped in 'dissent and disorder' (Harrison &Wood, 2003:250-275). Together with Neo-Plastic Art (1915-1925), De Stijl (1918), Suprematism (1919), Realistic Manifesto (1920), UNOVIS (1920), and the Bauhaus School (1921-23), the manifesto on Constructivists of the Progressive Artists (1922-23) is related to 'abstraction and form' (Harrison &Wood, 2003:276-332). Besides, the declarations of Vladimir Tatlin (1919, 1924), Lyubov Popova (1919), Nikolai Punin (1920), Alexander Rodchenko (1920-21) and Varvara Stepanova (1922), Alexei Gan (1922), El Lissitsky and Ilya Ehrenburg (1922), and Osip Brik (1923, 1924) are grouped in 'utility and construction' (Harrison & Wood, 2003). For a more detailed discussion of these programs and manifestos, see, Lawton & Eagle (1988: 1-48). Please also see, Ulrich Conrads' seminal edited book, for further reading on the programs and manifestos on the 20th century architecture, particularly on Italian Futurism, De Stijl, the Bauhaus School, Constructivism, Neo-plasticism, and Suprematism. (1971).

[2] "Futurists' desire to express the speed, cacophony, and simultaneity of everyday life in their art as well as to extend their sensibility to typography, furniture, interiors, and even the design of cities" (Margolin, 1997: 2).

crisis of society and aimed aesthetic revolution, it owes little to Italian Futurism.[3] Rather than being manifested through a top down consistent theory, it has developed after 1910 in the form of opposing groups in St. Petersburg, in Moscow, Kiev, Tbilisi and Vladivostok; and has spread to *Hylaea* Poets, Ego-Futurists, Cubo-Futurists, *Tsentrifuga* (Centrifuge) Group (Markov, 1968). Describing the futuristic attributes of Constructivism relating to the proletariat, collectivity, and integration, Natan Altman underlines that these new forms of art had similar aesthetic concerns and technological enthusiasm that would serve for a new function in society (Altman, 1918:161-164).[4] Though these two movements allied with two ideologically opposing point of views, namely fascism in Italy and communism in Russia, they had correspondences as expressed in their manifestos (Marinetti, 1909; Gabo & Pevsner, 1920:56). During the mid-1910s, there were two antagonist tendencies in Russia: The abstract Suprematist art intended to create pure artistic feeling rather than visual depiction of objects, and to serve just for art, embracing both representation of the human spirit and objects of daily life (Malevich, 1927). Kazimir Malevich's belief in Suprematist art through a new abstract language was boldly opposed in 1915 by Vladimir Tatlin as one of the forerunners of Constructivist movement.

After the Revolution, some Russian avant-garde artists, investigating a radical art language through visual domain, engaged in revolutionary social practice by extremely diverse activities in graphic design, architecture, film, exhibition, stage design, and design for products. Among these avant-gardes, the Russian Constructivists envisioned the construction of an ideal new world with new ideology through new technology, materials, and artistic language of "new objects of use, kiosks, posters, furniture, and theater sets, for example" (Margolin, 1997:3). The artistic production of the Constructivists during the 1920s became unfortunately, a part of power strategy of the Bolshevik Regime and the instruments of political agitation and propaganda techniques (agit-props) in the Soviet Russia.5 Within this context, the agit-props supported socio-political maneuvers in the

[3] The leading members of the Russian Futurism manifested that a new technique for poetry should have been created as opposed to the symbolic poetry coined with Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc. (Burliuk, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky & Khlebnikov, 1912).
[4] Contrarily, Charlotte Douglas (1975:229) emphasizes that the similarities between Italian futurism and Russian Constructivism regarding the connection between object and its environment. The art production in both of two reflects its own existence within its space around.
[5] The word, *agit-prop*, is a combined abbreviations of *agitation* meaning an "uneasy state of mind usually over the possibility of an anticipated misfortune or trouble" (Merriam-Webster, 2019a); and *propaganda* meaning "usually disapproving ideas or statements that are often false or exaggerated and that are spread in order to help a cause, a political leader, a government, etc." (Merriam-Webster, 2019b).

Soviet Russia. Being one of the modern movements at the beginning of the century, which committed to the emancipatory potential of technological change, the Constructivists dealt with formal and political experiments for revolutionary transformation. Eventually, the aesthetic-cultural revolution, targeted before, transformed into the political-social revolution.

In this framework, the main argument of this study is that the Russian avant-gardes, once aimed to bring art into everyday life and urban space, became instruments in the aestheticization of politics. Though they searched for a new modern vision, their aesthetic engagement became a political instrument of power strategy for directing the masses together with the socio-political developments in the Soviet Russia. Some of the Constructivist artists, unfortunately, became a part of propaganda strategies of the power, and participated to the designs of agit-kiosks, agit-theaters, agit-planes, agit-trains and agit-steamer, as well as the urban agit-streetcars. The scope of this study focuses on the agit-prop strategies and their instruments, namely agit-theatres, agit-trains and agit-steamer, appropriated by the Bolshevik power between 1917 and 1929. Dwelling on the related literature and visual documents, this study scrutinizes the topic with a historical interpretation method. It aims to lay a ground for discussing the Russian Constructivist agit-props with particular references to the notions of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) and Jacques Rancière (1940-) in terms of aesthetics, politics, urban space and everyday life.

2. The Russian Avant-Garde, Constructivist Aesthetics and Propaganda

From 1915 on, the Russian avant-garde was marked by multiple approaches, which rooted mainly in two opposing ideas on artistic practice by Suprematist Malevich and constructivist Tatlin (Buck-Morss, 2000). As a member of *the Central Committee of the All-Russian Proletkult* (1917-1920), Aleksandr Bogdanov played a major role in the organization and propagation of Proletkult, and believed in the idea that concrete reality could be changed by the art of the new proletarian order. (Bowlt, 1988:176). Being in the forefront of the suprematist-oriented *UNOVIS group* (Affirmers of the New Art, 1920-1924), Malevich and El Lissitzky emphasized the capacity of objects to embody ideals than to perform a useful function in the post-Revolutionary Russia (Margolin, 1997:10). Contrarily, the *INKhUK* (Institute of Artistic Culture, 1920-24) was founded by the constructivist group, mainly by Rodchenko, Stepanova, Gan, and Ioanson. It was a section of *IZO Narkompros* (the Department of Visual Arts of the People's Commissariat for Education) for shaping the

course of artistic experiment (Monoskop, 2017).[6] The members were called as 'productivist' artists, who were focusing on artistic-cultural experiments in industrial environment, such as factories or plants (Gough, 2005:151-152). In 1922, Alexei Gan identified the key ideas of the emergent movement in his cutting-edge designed book, *Konstructivizm* (1922), and manifested the ideas of the industrial constructivists regarding the transition from a purist conception of a constructive art to an applied, mechanical one (Bowlt, 1988:215; Cooke, 1995:89). Gan (1922:223), describes the ideology of his time as "the revaluation of the functions of human activity, the linking of every effort with the general range of social objectives."[7] In this perspective, he designed architectural and typographical projects, movie posters, bookplates. As Gough (2005:179) boldly states, Karl Ioganson's role was transformed from *konstructor* to party agitator and production organizer when *INKhUK* was closed in 1924. The Soviet factories, a metalworking factory *Prokatchik* [Roller] for instance, were turned out a part of propaganda apparatus after the death of Lenin in 1924. Ioganson aligned himself with the Russian Communist Party that resulted in his involvement in party work or propaganda, and his party membership by carrying out numerous agitation tasks. After a couple of months, the he factory was renamed as *Krasnyi Prokatchik* [Red Roller], as "a kind of propaganda machine, which represent the wedge that the October Revolution has driven between capital and industrialization" (Gough, 2005:180).

As Susan Buck-Morss (2000:54) delineates, *VKhUTEMAS* (Higher Artistic-Technical Workshops, which replaced the State Free Art Studios in 1920) was welcoming various groups in the architecture, ceramics, metalwork, and textile faculties at Moscow; whereas, at Petrograd, *GINKhUK* (State Institute of Artistic Culture) directed by Punin and later Malevich (where Tatlin and Filonov also taught) was the meeting point of artists. "The anti-hierarchical, masterless *OBMOKhU* (Society for Young Artists, 1919) at Moscow's First Free State Art Studios, whose members specialized in posters and agitational design, working as a group without a supervisor in order to combat the artists in authority who exploit young talents" (Buck-Morss, 2000:54). It became an agit-production workshop by Narkompros (in 1920), and received commissions for literacy posters, street decorations, slogan boards, etc. They worked as a collective, signing their works with the name of the organization (as

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[6] For a detailed inquiry on the Russian Constructivists and the *INKhUK*, see Lodder (1983:78-98).
[7] Beside, Gan (1922:224) bitterly criticizes that ideology of the revolutionary proletariat assimilated the ideological and intellectual representatives of leftist art: "Laboratory work on texture and constructions—within the narrow framework of painting, sculpture, and senseless architecture unconnected with the reconstruction of the whole of the social organism—has, for them, the true specialists in artistic production, become insignificant and absurd".

did UNOVIS).[8] In 1920, the term construction was first used in *Realist Manifesto,* as the principal statement of Constructivism, written by Naum Gabo and Antony Pevsner (Herbert, 1964:103).

The Russian Constructivism had multiple formations and approaches to art in different periods.[9] It was a movement, which includes many artistic-social practices that addressed ideological construction of society and everyday life. The Russian Constructivists aimed to integrate revolutionary art practice in new proletariat culture with the new qualities of space-time in modern life experiences while they were engaging in revolutionary social practice (Margolin, 1997:3). They engaged in the production of daily objects, fabrics, clothes, and architectural space, together with the design and print of literary and visual products. Nevertheless, their urge to transform society through new forms of artistic production for a visionary future was turned out to be the power strategies of new Bolshevik regime appropriating the goals of the Russian Revolution. As John Berger (1997:37) underlines, the Russian Constructivists "believed in the profound influence that art could have on individual and social development". They imagined a new spirit of a social world ideologically associated with the communist ideology of the newly established Soviet Russia when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917. Hoping for a liberated future, they embraced the revolution and believed in uniting "art with engineering, music with painting, poetry with design, fine art with propaganda, photographs with typography, diagrams with action, the studio with the street" (Berger, 1997:38).

Around 1917, the radical and innovative Constructivist art production embraced paintings, constructions, typography, posters, the combined use of poetry and visual images, the example of ideograms, drawings of monuments, and stage designs. Just after the Russian Revolution, El Lissitzky designed factory propaganda stands, one of them was in Vitebsk (Then, 2019). Rodchenko was about using his paintings and drawings "as a means of opening up a discourse about revolutionary architecture and town planning" (Margolin, 1997:8-43). He designed a number of kiosks in constructivist aesthetic for serving as

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[8] Susan Buck-Morss also adds that "*OBMOKhU*'s well known exhibition (May 1921) in Moscow, along with numerous literacy posters and other utilitarian works, was showed in a separate room the earliest products of the First Working Group of Constructivists of *INKhUK*" (Buck-Morss, 2000:300).

[9] For instance, the movement is elaborated in three phases as 'formalist' in the abstractions of the laboratory period, 'functionalist' in the programmatic orientation of its productivist platform to the utilitarian object, and 'failed' aspects in the fulfillment of its ambition to enter production (Gough, 2005).

dynamic information and publicity centers in the line of new ideology (Figure 1).[10] He also experimented in the possibilities of Constructivist visual language against the exigencies of design projects until the artists and designers were called on in 1929 to represent the regime and to serve the state more directly than they had been before (Margolin, 1997:163-214). With the belief in the function of art production in everyday life, constructivist posters were also produced in constructivist aesthetic.
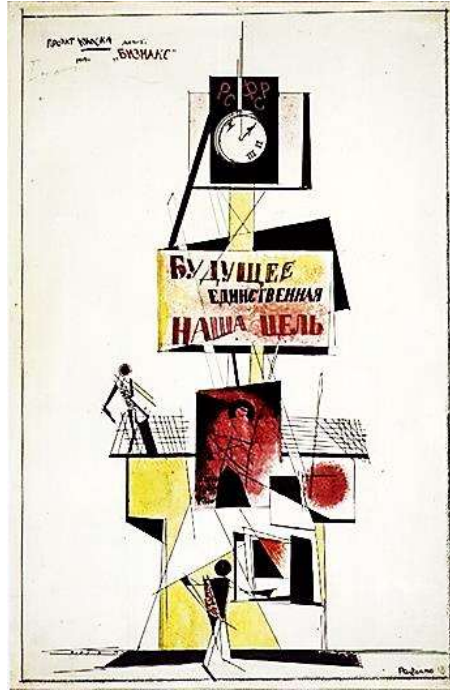
Figure 1. Rodchenko, *Design for a Kiosk* "The Future – Our Only Goal", 1919, Black and colored ink on paper, The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

Tatlin, criticizing the traditional idea of the monument and the Plan for Monumental Propaganda, designed *the Monument to the Third International* (1920). "In providing a social dimension to his process of construction, Tatlin evolved a pioneering and a vigorously new work, distinctly communist in its commitment" (Milner, 1984:160). As being a radical synthesis of architecture, painting, and sculpture, the monument that has allied with the mass culture technology was a kind of multimedia agitation center to provide mass communication and agitation (Clark, 1997:80) (Figure 2). It would embrace a futurist emphasis on perpetual motion, the new media communication technologies of wireless telegraphy, radio broadcasting, and film (Gough, 2014:13). Opposing Tatlin's tower

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[10] Then, his work in various fields of design during the New Economic Policy in the Soviet Union reveals his declaration on putting an end to painting (Margolin, 1997:80-121).

as a kind of 'machine romanticism', Gabo was also occupied with a project for a radio station as a synthesis of painting, sculpture and architecture (MoMA, 1948:18) (Figure 3).


Figure 2. Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, 1920, Black and white photograph.

Figure 3. Gabo, *Project for a radio station*, 1919-1920, pen and ink.

As Gruber (2010) accentuates, the transition from the mere form experiment of the non-objective to functional aesthetics from 1922 was marked by Gustav Klutsis's more than thirty drafts of kiosks, agit platforms, and loudspeaker stands (Figure 4). The intention was to combine the simplicity, economy, expediency of these multi-functional utilitarian designs

with the lucidity of their construction. In his designs, the evident aesthetic concern was to combine the daring forms and basic colors of Constructivism -red, white and black- with the emphatic imagery of the world of machines. These light-weighted, portable, mobile, economic, modular and simple geometric structures aimed to manifest both avant-garde and the modern city life. They were also fulfilling the requirements of the modern media technology in urban communication and information sphere via loudspeakers transmitting radio messages, screen films presenting literature and spreading information on revolution, and projection screen that would soon be the symbols of all Constructivist presentations (Gruber, 2010:126). With artistic and monumental qualities in urban space, these new mass communication vehicles in everyday life became alternative to museums. Transforming the traditional definitions of both visual art production and museums, these new techniques and vehicles were redefining the new proletarian museum, and manifesting the constructivist aesthetic.[11]
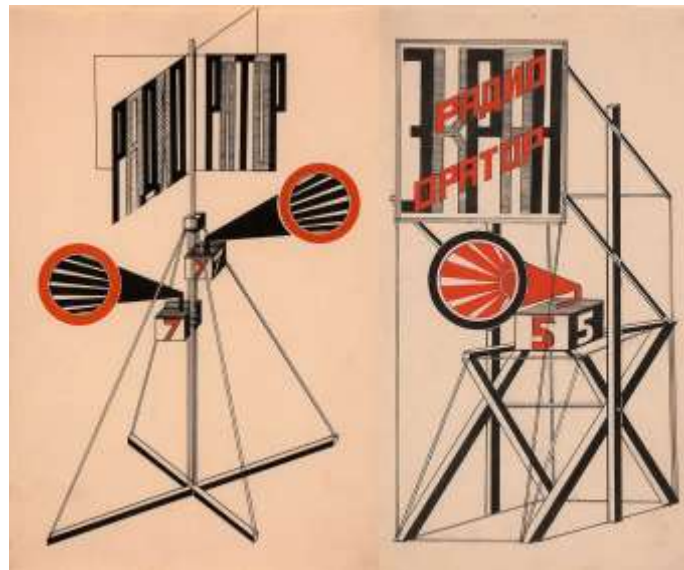
Figure 4. Klutsis, *Design for loudspeaker no.7 and no.5*, 1922, Pencil, ink and gouache on paper, Costakis Collection.

As 70% of citizens were illiterate after the Revolution, art production served to inform and educate the factory workers and peasants all over the country. In this respect, book designs, cinema and political propaganda posters produced whether in photomontage technique, or with brightly colored, simple geometric forms. For instance, Anton Lavinsky's

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[11] Museums were always one of the targets of avant-garde artists, such as Cézanne, the Italian Futurists, Malevich, Mayakovsky, etc. For further elaboration on this topic, please see, Ali Artun's book, *Sanatın İktidarı, 1917 Devrimi, Avangard Sanat ve Müzecilik [Power of Art. Revolution in 1917, Avant-garde Art and Museology _Translation by author(s)]* (Artun, 2015:113-139).

sketch for *The Hut with a Reading Room* (1925) manifests that designed for reading classes, this hut was accompanied with two loudspeakers, meteorological instruments, a clock, a wind mast, an indicator of the countries of the world, an antenna and a flag that awaken the curiosity of peasants passing by (Figure 5). The dominant color was red that both make this hut visible and distinguishable from a far and emphasizing its revolutionary purpose. Interior was also designed for education and propagation by means of a cinema screen, a portrait of Lenin, a shop window, a library rack with display cases for novelties, a bookcase, a cabinet for textbooks, notebooks, books, a legal reference desk, a desk with writing instruments, showcases, charts and loudspeaker, etc. (Then, 2019).

Figure 5. Lavinsky, sketch for *Design proposal for The Hut with a Reading Room*, 1925, Pencil, ink and gouache on paper.

Also the artists working for the agit-prop trains and agit-steamer explained graphically and verbally what was happening and what was necessary. By travelling around the country, they carried out "entirely original experiments with exhibition techniques, the planning by artists of public celebrations such as the formalized re-enactment in October 1918 of the Revolution in from of the Winter Palace" (Berger, 1997:38). In fact, here, the revolution was envisioned in two senses: The first is Cultural Revolution for a society

transformed by means of the artistic productions. The second is social revolution for the ideal of communism aiming to reconstruct both country and the whole world in accordance with the socialist utopia. Therefore, as Kemenov (1947:494-495) delineates, "(…) art received the right to participate in the building up life not as ordered by the rich patrons of the arts, but in accordance with the nation-wide state socialist plan (the construction of new and the reconstruction of old cities, architecture, sculpture, frescoes, easel painting applied to large public projects – the subway, the Volga Canal, the Palace of Soviets, etc.)". Thus, art reconfigured itself for embracing mass audience, a wide public comprised of the millions of people of all nationalities and walks of life (Kemenov, 1947:495). From 1914 to 1920, as Dondero (1949:496) claims, art was used as a weapon of the Russian Revolution to destroy the former bourgeois-landlord structure of the old tsarist Russia for building up a socialist society. Indeed, most of the artists became soldiers of the revolution against any government or system other than communism. Actually, they paved the way for changing the aesthetic understanding, the role of artist, and the function of art. As Artun (2015:79-84) states, the Constructivists shifted the focus to the new mechanical production techniques; as the new mode of art production replaced the traditional emphasis of art on composition with construction. The question, as Olson and Chanin highlights, was "should art serve the revolution through techniques of construction devoted to popular activities, or was the essence of art speculative and spiritual?" (MoMA, 1948:18). In pursuit of this question, the Russian Constructivists searched for new forms of art production that were not limited to literary or visual domain, but expanded also architectural and urban space.

3. Agitation and Propaganda Techniques

Robert Wilde (2020) underlines that the Civil War began between the socialist Bolshevik government and a number of rebel armies after the October Revolution of 1917; and the devastation of all opposition lasted until 1922, though the war was over by 1920. Ranging from the right-wing faction in the army to the hardcore anti-Bolsheviks, the opposition to the Bolsheviks was known as the Whites (as rooted in the old Tsarist and monarchical regime) in contrast to the Bolsheviks' Red Army.[12] In 1918, the Bolsheviks gained power after the chaos on the outskirts of the Russian Empire, which resulted in their

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[12] "There were also the *Greens*. These were forces fighting, not for the reds of the whites, but after their own goals, like national independence; neither the *Reds* nor the *Whites* recognized breakaway regions - or for food and booty. There were also the *Blacks*, the Anarchists" (Wilde, 2020). The symbolic values of these colors were also used in many Constructivist art productions, regardless of their technique.

independence; and after the loss of almost whole periphery of Russia to the Bolsheviks by localized military revolts (Wilde, 2020). Kevin Brown (2013) states that as the revolution was carried out by a small Bolshevik group opposing the larger part of the people, the leading Bolsheviks instituted agitation and propaganda techniques at a governmental level. Thus, the Soviet Communist Party established the Department of Agitation and Propaganda in 1920 to facilitate the communist ideology of the revolution (Brown, 2013:5).[13] This department worked for disseminating their ideology to all parts of the country. On the one hand, the Suprematist abstract drawings were applied on urban agit-streetcars (Figure 6). On the other hand, they collaborated with some Constructivist artists, who intended to juxtapose artistic, ideological, and social constructions of a new world, and to create new utilitarian art that organize the masses through mass production.[14] Appropriating agit-prop techniques in their artwork, the mainstream political ideology of regime penetrated into all artistic productions (Clark, 1997: 85). For mobilizing the masses, the Bolsheviks used a number of agit-prop techniques in kiosk designs, posters, agit-prop street theatres, mass spectacles (Then, 2019). Movies, books, newspapers, and posters, with their entertaining and educating functions, were utilized in designs and spaces as agit-prop instruments (Kenez, 1985:19-118; Taylor, 1971:562-574; Then, 2019). According to their propaganda strategies, the regime used agit-kiosks, agit-theaters, agit-planes, agit-trains and agit-steamer, as well as urban agit-streetcars.
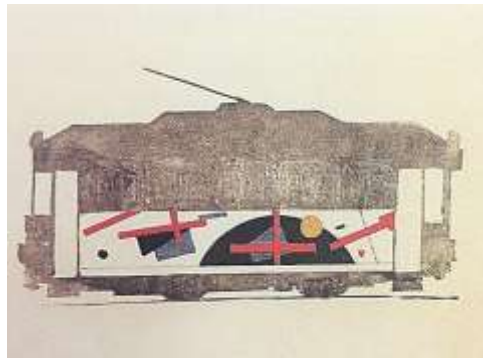
Figure 6. *Suprematist streetcar paintings,* 1920, Colored sketches, Nina Kogan.

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[13] "Despite the fact that the poets and artists of the Russian avant-garde were more enthusiastic in welcoming the Communist Revolution and more willing to serve the young Soviet state than any other group" (Markov, 1968: vii). Thus, "art became a medium for propaganda, picturing and admiring the imaginary wonders, benefits, and happiness of existence under the socialized state" (Dondero, 1949: 497).

[14] Along with Brik, Rodchenko, and other futurist and productivist artists of Constructivism, Tret'iakov was a member of the Left Front of the Arts (LEF) and published the corresponding journal *Lef* (1923-25) and its reincarnation, Novyi Lef (1927-28). "These journals renewed "Constructivism's productivist platform by reorienting it away from industrial production and toward the inauguration of collective modes of distribution and consumption, the invention of documentary, reportage, or 'factographic' practices involving technologies of mechanical reproduction" (Gough, 2005:193).

After the Revolution, theater was evolved into agit-prop theater, though as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle. With its ability to evoke intense emotional response from the audience and to communicate directly to the masses, they became the most effective form of propaganda (Brown, 2013:6). In spite of difficulties of the Civil War, a number of agit-prop shock brigades organized street festivals, mass-action public theater plays and art events, which will create a flamboyant celebration atmosphere to maintain the revolutionary spirit among people (Clark, 1997:78). As Tehranchian (1982:39-40) focuses on, the agit-theater was developed by amateur theater groups for promoting the revolutionary government, propagating its ideas, and supporting the Red Army spirit through performances. They were also confirmed by Lenin stating that all citizens were theatre workers, and might be used to serve for the revolution. Thus, the groups established to inform people started to make Bolshevik propaganda in urban spaces, including parks, streets, workers' clubs, factories and barracks (Tehranchian, 1982:203). The Agit-prop theaters, mainly the *Soviet Living Newspaper Theater* and the T*heater of Revolutionary Satire* were established in 1920 for agitation and propaganda by the Russian Telegraph Agency (*ROSTA*). The first was dramatizing the latest news about the revolution in the clubs of Red Army to factory workers, or villagers. They were informing citizens, 70% of which were illiterate (Brown, 2013:5) (Figure 7-8). The latter was also aspired to inform the public by presenting musicals, songs and short sketches of satire art.[15]

Figure 7. *Blue Blouse Performance at a Club of Karl Liebknecht*, 1924, Black and white photograph.

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[15] During the Civil War, the group accompanied the *Red Army*, organizing demonstrations by agit-trains, and realizing propaganda performances by the agit-steamer called *Red Star* (Tehranchian, 1982:58).

Figure 8. *Performance of the Blue Blouse actors in Moscow Park of Culture*, 1929, Black and white photograph.

Kevin Brown (2013:6) states that "agit-prop theater, unlike other forms of propaganda, was able to communicate directly to the masses. (…)They rejected the conventions of aesthetic drama, the established modes of presenting a story to an audience. They eschewed makeup, elaborate costumes, sets, stages, rigorous training programs, and sometimes even scripts." For easily be understood by the majority, the content of the play should have been highly visual. In order to keep attention of the audience, actors were constantly involving them with different improvised scenes or physical activities (Brown, 2013:6). At the early agit-performances, the spaces having some insufficiencies were transformed into instantaneous stage installations. They had the power to turn factories or apartment blocks into public spaces (Mally, 2003:326). Indicating the character of new Soviet amateur theater, these quickly and temporal performances were organized for manifesting the new vision of both their time and the regime (Mally, 2000:47-80). Becoming more common in many places, agit-theaters transformed urban spaces for reflecting the political ideology of the period.

On the state propaganda of communism, similar agit-prop techniques were used in kiosk designs, posters and agit-prop theatres. As Toby Clark (1997:74-75) brings forth, words and images were utilized in propagating ideologies in messages through art produced by industrial methods, which were used as tools for directing masses within the mass culture. As a part of mass communication, words to stimulate aural sense, and images produced by photomontage techniques for visual appeal were used in posters. (Buck-Morss, 2000:137). Merging the abstract graphic language of Russian avant-gardes with the social and utilitarian concerns, the Constructivist posters gave rapidly the messages and ideas (Figure 9). Colors in these visual arts were referring to differing ideological positions in

Russia (Wilde, 2020). As also music and voice had indispensable role in mass propaganda meetings; agit-theater became like a great tribune for the masses (Lunacharsky, 1920:192). As the new media technologies were integrated into these performances, they also changed the theatres. With the help of new technology, e.g. megaphones or loudspeakers, voices transformed into electrical waves. These tools used in agitation and propaganda meetings or designs, becoming symbols of the power, state, regime and ideology. The visual and aural sensations of the mostly illiterate population were simultaneously agitated for dissemination and propagation.

Figure 9. Rodchenko, *Books (Please)! In all branches of knowledge*, 1924, poster, photomontage, Frye Museum Collection.

From 1920 on, mass spectacles, as comprehensive and planned demonstrations, were another agit-prop techniques carried out by mobile theater groups (Erstad, 1996:212). Performed by nearly 2 thousand people, including professionals, amateurs, workers, peasants and soldiers, these performances were representing the solidarity of collective working class. As they were held in the streets with nearly 50 thousand audiences, a large part of urban space was transforming into a theater scene. The most well-known mass performances are *The Storming of the Winter Palace*, *The World Commune* and *The Mystery of Liberated Labour* (Figure 10-13). "Mass spectacles would embody the collective spirit of that class, replaying the drama of its historical path, and projecting its mission into the future. Much the same thing could be said about the Bolshevik cultural program in general" (Von Geldern, 1998:125). They changed the definitions of theater, performer, audience, spectacle, and stage. They transformed also both the urban space and the everyday life through art.

Figure 10. *The Storming of the Winter Palace by the insurgents,* 1920, Black and white photograph.

Figure 11. *Red Platform in the Storming of the Winter Palace*, 1920, Black and white photograph.

Figure 12. *Stage in mass performance at Toward a World Commune in Petrograd Stock Exchange Building*, 1920, Black and white photograph.

Figure 13. *Mass performance The Mystery of Liberated Labour in Petrograd*, 1920, Black and white photograph.

Reflecting on the meaning of spectacle, Buck-Morss (2000:157-159) defines these mass performances as carnivals. Being a part of the powerful visual culture, these agit-prop performances, like cinema, had great symbolic meaning, in which the power of state was represented. One of their purposes was blurring the boundaries between social classes, as in other carnivalesque activities, and constructing social life. Rhythms, sounds and fragmented scenes at these performances had the potential to agitate the people for questioning and re-defining their social roles in a united world of communism (Buck-Morss, 2000:157-159). By these mass street activities, the streets turned into a stage for opera. As Gray (2000:221) expresses, a group of artists had the chance to realize their vision in practical terms on urban scale. They were voluntarily included to arrange the celebrations for the First of May and the anniversary of October Revolution in many cities, such as Kiev, Vitebsk, Moscow, and Petrograd. In Petrograd, for instance, Altman designed a decoration for the great square in front of the Winter Palace, for which the buildings around the square were camouflaged in Cubist and Futurist constructions. In 1920, Altman, Punin, Bogoslavskaya, and their friends staged a re-enactment of the storming of the Winter Palace. With a similar motivation, 'heroic-revolutionary' impromptu plays on a smaller urban scale were also organized all around the country. For instance, Mayakovsky's factory siren symphonies accompanied the designed sets by Tatlin, Annenkov and Meyerhold (Gray, 2000:222). Hence, the new vision of the Bolshevik Revolution would be propagated in every part of the country, including the rural areas. For carrying messages to people in the periphery of the Soviet Union, the department benefited means of transport, such as agit-trains and agit-steamers, which were decorated with revolutionary themes laden with cultural modernization, social agitation and political propaganda functions. "In keeping with

the Bolshevik habit of employing technology as a means of underscoring their modern ideas, coupled with the need to get their ideas and information out from their power base in the urban centers, trains were dedicated to the task of transporting pamphlets and trained agitators to the countryside" (Erstad, 1996:143). Both conveying ideology to all parts of the country, and gathering information about local conditions, the agit-trains and steamer helped the masses to adapt the new aesthetic and ideological language.

The first agit-train (Military-mobile Train for Front Literature named V. I. Lenin) was departed from Moscow in 1918 (Figure 14). As Erstad (1996:143) pinpoints, the train was painted with Cubist and Futurist designs. These abstract decorations, as an artistic experiment, on the exterior surfaces of the train were superseded by rolling agitation posters with themes reiterating the popular slogans of the day, and then repainted with realistic pictures, including slogans and proverbs (Erstad, 1996:147). Erstad (1996:145) states that that train was equipped with editing, publishing, transmitting, exhibiting spaces, as well as a literature warehouse, wagons for books and cinema. These wagons were accessible to the citizens. Technical apparatus, such as internal telephone system and a wireless radio, and wagons, used as a canteen and a stage, a chess room and a party room, were also included in the proceeding trains (Figure 15).[16] The most avant-garde paintings, posters, or other visual works of art were exhibited in these trains (Figure 16). For the agit-trains, a network of stations called *agitpunkty* was identified in strategic regions. The stations and local institutions were transformed by putting up agitation posters of agit-trains. Besides, the open public spaces of stations were converted into open-air meeting places for agitation speeches to local people (Figure 17); cinemas for film screenings (Figure 18); and stages for theatrical performances or concerts (Figure 19). Agit-trains and agit-stations, as being a part of temporal and mobile agit-prop spaces, had visual and spatial significances.

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[16] The proceeding trains were called *October Revolution, Krasnyi Vostok, Sovetskii Kavkaz, Krasnyi Kazak*. The agit-steamer was called *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Erstad, 1996).
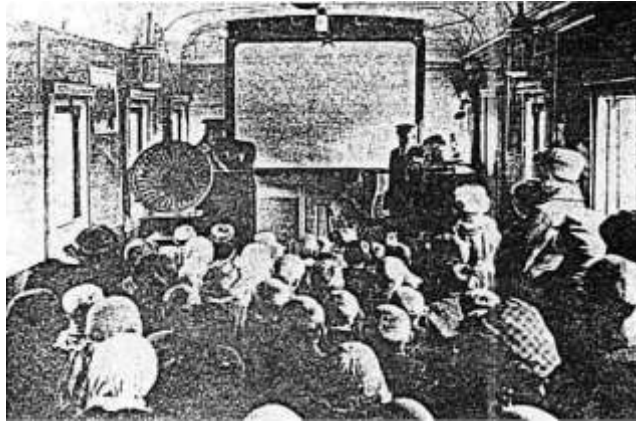
Figure 14. *Cinema car of agit-train 'V.I. Lenin No. 1*, (n.d.), Still from the film *Conquerors of the Sun,*
Anna Baumgart.
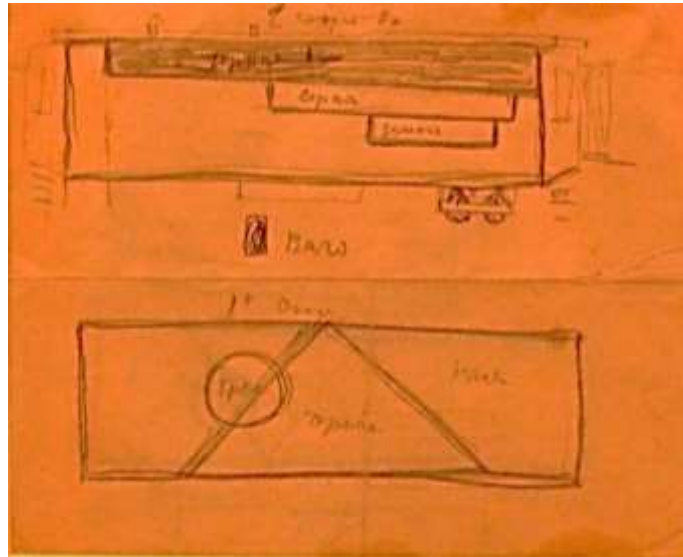
Figure 15. Malevich, *Drawing for agit-train*, ca. 1920, Pencil on paper,
State Museum of Contemporary Art Costakis Collection.

Figure 16. Dziga Vertov, *Kinonedelia No. 17*, 1918, Still Courtesy of Danish Film Institute and
Austrian Film Museum.

Figure 17. *Lenin Agit-train No.1, Interior of Movie-theatre car*, (n.d.), Black and white photograph.


Figure 18. *Agit-prop train at a station*, (n.d.), Black and white photograph.

Figure 19. *Exhibition car on agit-train*, (n.d.), Still from the film Conquerors of the Sun by Anna Baumgart.

As a part of agit-prop propaganda strategies, a steamer was also put into service. As Erstad (1996:165) indicates, the agit-trains were operating in the Western regions; whereas, the agit-steamer reached the Eastern and Southern parts of Moscow, along the Volga River to the Caspian Sea. A former river boat was painted in colorful, fantastic, and attractive propaganda images, and named as the *Red Star* (Figure 20-21). This steamer had a radio station, a printing space, an exhibition space, and a cinema auditorium for 900 people (Figure 22). It helped the Department of Agitation and Propaganda to arrange 202 meetings with 305000 people during its three months service (Erstad, 1996:166). In this though-spreading naval vessel, the actors were using the interior spaces for foreign audiences.
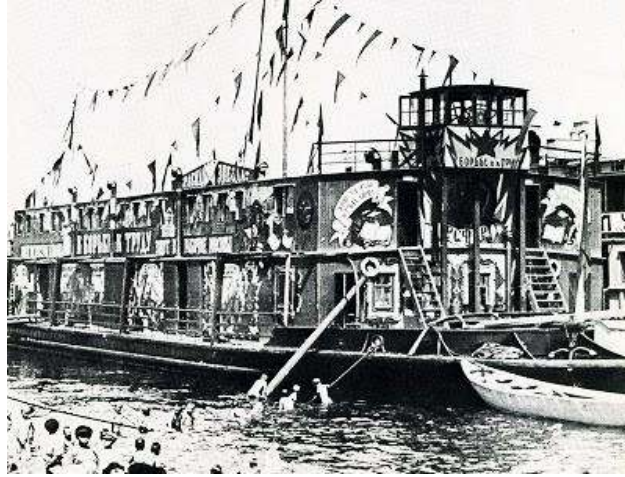
Figure 20. *The famous agit-steamer Red Star with theatre on board*, 1919-1921, Black and white photograph.

Figure 21. Saratov, *Agit-prop steamer "The Red Star"*, 1920, Black and white photograph.

Figure 22. *Agit-steamer with a theatre on board*, (n.d.), Black and white photograph.

As Erstad (1996) focused on, 1891 meetings with 2752000 people were conducted through 20 journeys to different parts of the country by agit-trains and steamer. During these trips, more than 3 million pieces of literature, including newspapers and leaflets were distributed; 1962 cinema shows and 106 concerts were realized (Erstad, 1996:146). Both agit-trains and steamer were theatrically equipped with technical apparatus and paintings. With paintings, as the graphic depictions of current events, government policies and the new regime's dispersal of literature and education, a culture was reflected. Thus, visual medium, varied according to the region visited, served as a kind of information for an illiterate populace on newspaper through these mobile vehicles (Erstad, 1996:180). The aim was to attract and agitate the peasants with their cultural symbols, and so to propagate the new Communist ideology. For this purpose, the agit-trains were transforming the train-stations into spaces of the new vision; while the masses were informed about the Revolution. Similarly, the new ideas of the regime were sweeping along Russia by the agit-steamer.

4. Re-Reading Agit-Props through Aesthetics and Politics

The Russian agitation and propaganda techniques (agit-props), integrated politics and aesthetics, and operated as a strategy of the power to educate workers and peasants by introducing the new socialist vision at the beginning of the 1920s. The experimental agit-theatres and the state-driven mass street performances for re-enacting the moments of revolution re-defined the traditional theatre together with its fundamental constituents - play, director, actor, text, performance, audience, and stage. Even the ordinary man in the street, for instance, took part as an improvised actor. The amateur theater groups collaborated with people from all parts of the society. They enabled the masses to be active participators in these urban performances. This new form of theatre transformed both theatre stages and different urban spaces, within which theatre stages were constructed in

real-scale. In this way, the streets were turned into spontaneous stages existing within everyday life. The performers, professional filmmakers and journalists were travelling in the agit-trains for the communication between urban and rural. They were called agitators, spreading new ideas to the rural areas. Yet, the travelers in these agit-trains were not only these agitators, but also the new visions of Modernism, Communism, and Constructivism. (Figure 23). The main idea behind these propaganda tools was to make each citizen realize the new technology, communist ideology and constructivist aesthetic (Artun, 2009:99). The newspapers, books, posters and movies in agit-trains and steamer helped the masses to relocate themselves together with the new communist state, and the peasants to familiarize the modern life and technology.[17] In this way, modernization and urban conditions were first introduced to and then redefined the peasant world, their way of thinking and living, of which peasants could see through these documentary films. These films blurred the traditional threshold between actors and audiences.

Figure 23. RSFSR, Literary-Instructional Train of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee, *Our Train*, 1920, photomontage in a newspaper.

Walter Benjamin, almost two decades later in Nazi Germany, brought another dimension to the artist-art production relation together with class struggle. He argues in *Author as Producer* that a writer (or artist or composer or photographer or intellectual),

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[17] For instance, the peasantry life and modern urban life came together in documentary movies of Dziga Vertov, who was very passionate about a form of mobile cinema with the latest technology available (Heftberger, 2015).

who acknowledges his or her lack of effective control over the means of cultural production under capital, then invents new strategies –progressive technologies of making—by which to regain that control (Benjamin, 1934). The reconfigured work of the author is the work on products and the means of production. In other words, his products must be works with organizing function, and their organizational usefulness must not be devoted to their propaganda value (Benjamin, 1934:89). Thus, he implies that "the author as producer will overturn those pivotal dichotomies of bourgeois aesthetic experience founded on the division of labor, such as producer and consumer, performer and spectator, writer and reader, individual and collective" (Gough, 2014:193). In this point, Benjamin praises the progressiveness of Brechtian theater, distracts and shocks audience with a theatrically awkward moment exposing the shortcomings of modern life (Benjamin, 1936), which reminds the Russian agit- street theaters just after the Revolution.

Benjamin was supremely optimistic about the progressive techniques of Russia and the use of productive apparatus that relates with progressively changing techniques of production (photomontage, photography etc.). Montage was the cutting-edge technique mostly used in the agit-prop posters and films. As it juxtaposes and unifies different layers in a particular space-time section; it helped to represent the zeitgeist together with the people in everyday life. As Erstad (1996:177) delineates, the movies were so unsophisticated that the illiterate people could understand the ideology simply.[18] The brand-new technology of the inspirational media in agit-props performed in twofold function: First, as a mirror for the masses; and as an apparatus of the power. As Buck-Morss (2000:159) underlines, the masses were both observing and being observed. While agit-trains were bringing up-to-date new and ideas, they also collected information about the ordinary men at the back of beyond. Agitation and propaganda techniques through the utilized apparatus and the appropriated art productions had enormous impact on the masses for recognizing their own power. Thus, new techniques of mass production changed the meanings and functions of art work and artist as well.

In his seminal work, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin states that the mechanical reproduction techniques transformed the work of art and resulted in the loss of its aura, i.e. its uniqueness or singularity (Benjamin, 1936). The

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[18] The titles of the movies for children and the youth were *The Fisherman and the Little Fish*, *Festival of the Communist Youth*, *For the Red Banner*. Some other movies for adults were *The Saviors of the Homeland*, *The Victory of May*, *Eyes are Opened*, *Proletarians of the World, Unite!* (Erstad, 1996:177).

meaning of art has changed as it became much more accessible to the public by mass production. By the loss of its aura, art gained entirely new functions regarding its values of display, accessibility and reproducibility (Benjamin, 1936:39-42). For Benjamin (1936:32), "the representation of human beings by means of an apparatus has made possible a highly productive use of the human being's self-alienation". He elucidates it as follows: "Once the distinction between the compact (that is, petty-bourgeois) mass and the class-conscious, proletarian mass has been clearly made, its operational significance is also clear." Debating on the communist tacticians, he underlines the direct relation between the ambiguous concept of the masses, and the German revolutionary press, and the German proletariat, he underlines that Fascism has made excellent use of this -whether it understood them or not- and "realizes that the more compact the masses it mobilizes, the better the chance that the counterrevolutionary instincts of the petty bourgeoisie will determine their reactions" (Benjamin, 1936:50-51). Therefore, he boldly states that "the aestheticizing of politics is practiced by fascism; whereas, communism replies by politicizing art" (Benjamin, 1936:42). As opposed to the *fascist* type of *aestheticized politics*, he states, the *communist* response of *politicized aesthetics* brought about a collective interplay of the mass arts and politics.

Re-reading from this perspective, most of the Russian Constructivists could not escape the instrumentalization of art by politics; although agit-prop art productions were recognized as the most meaningful political art form for the society during that period. In one respect, the Russian art through agit-props became more accessible to the masses and it helped to bring aesthetics into everyday life; the agit-props in different urban spaces brought forth ordinary people equal to the artists. However, the Constructivist artistic practices were not independent and used as a tool to disseminate the ideology in the Soviet Russia (Groys, 2014).The agit-props utilizing art were appropriated for the sake of politics by the ideological superstructure; they turned out to be a political tool for mobilizing the masses. Even though the developments in the Soviet Russia emerged due to the idea of *politicization of aesthetics*, it evolved into the idea of *aestheticizing politics*. The Constructivist ideas in the Soviet Russia along with the art-liberalization move were allied with the *politicized aesthetics*.

As Concoran (2010) also delineates, Jacques Rancière's conceptualization for the *aesthetic dimension of politics* distinguishes from the Benjaminian notion, the appropriation

of aesthetics to the forms of authoritarian power, and the concept of *aestheticization of politics* in the era of the masses production. Rancière (2004:12-13) argues that *aesthetics of politics* is a *politics of aesthetics*; as politics is the struggle of an unrecognized party for equal recognition in the established. He declares that artists reflected the common political belief or ideology; while art defines what is visible or not in a common space, provided with a common language, etc. Dwelling on the relation between art and politics regarding urban space and everyday life, he also states that art is political in the way it affects time, space and subjects (Rancière, 2004). In other words, art not only produces works in aesthetic and political language, but also creates a new structure of society by shaping the mechanism of sensibility within it. In this point of view, aesthetic-political practices reveal the potential of creating novel everyday life experiences in societies; as they eliminate the distinction between daily life, art and politics. Therefore, he brings forth the relation between autonomy, and new strategies for breeding hopes for changing life and reforming our experience (Rancière, 2010). The paradox of art is that art is art to the extent that it is no art; whereas, it has its own *metapolitics*, its own way of "proposing to politics rearrangements of its space, of reconfiguring art as a political issue, or of asserting itself as true politics" (Concoran, 2010:18-19).

The objective of Russian Constructivist artists, as Rancière underlines, was to construct the surface of an egalitarian equivalence of art and life (Rancière, 2010:116). In this point of view, the Russian agit-props were a part of the mechanism in the way of creating a new vision corresponding both to the aesthetic regime of the Russian avant-garde and to the political regime of the Bolsheviks. By the alliance between revolutionary artists and politics, the agit-props were managed to shape space, time, and society with a new vision by being integrated into daily life. He delineates that "the Revolution was not merely *formal* and *political*; it was a *human* revolution, as an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm" (Rancière, 2004:120). He argues that this is the reason that the Marxist vanguard and the artistic avant-garde converged in the 1920s, since each side was attached to the same programme: The construction of new forms of life in which the self-suppression of politics matched the self-suppression of art (Rancière, 2004:120). As he delineates, the context is initially in "(…)the interface created between different *mediums* - in the connections forged between poems and their typography or their illustrations, between the theatre and its set designers or poster designers, between decorative objects and poems"; while this *newness* is links "the artist who abolishes figurative representation to the

revolutionary who invents a new form of life" (Rancière, 2004:16). This interface is political in that it revokes the twofold politics inherent in the logic of representation (Rancière, 2004:16). In accordance with Rancière's ideas, the Russian Constructivists helped the regime for conducting the aesthetic and cultural modernity of their time; as they used different strategies to construct the visibility of the revolution. Thus, the alliance of the Bolsheviks with the Russian Constructivists resulted in the agit-props, which were corresponding to the new visions of the aesthetic avant-garde and politic regime, and were intended to bring art into everyday life.

5. Conclusion

The Bolshevik Revolution in the Soviet Russia was not only political in the way that included merely class struggle; it was also emerged as a socio-cultural rupture that aimed, with their aesthetic alliance to the Constructivism, to transform the masses and their everyday life. The agit-props, realized under the command of the Bolshevik Regime, aimed to change the ideological structure together with the societal transformation through the aesthetics. In this sense, on the one hand, the Russian Constructivist agit-props were appropriated as strategies or manipulations directed by the regime in order to reconstruct the new vision of the regime. On the other hand, their aesthetic language corresponded to the avant-garde forms of art production brought art it into life, and changed the traditional forms of art, its meaning and relation to the society, everyday life, and space.

The Bolshevik regime utilized aesthetically-laden and yet politically-driven agit-prop techniques. Although the aim of the Russian avant-garde practices was to bring art into everyday life; the Russian Constructivists collaborated with the regime and moved into their authoritarian framework. Within this framework, both the artists and the public were parts of this mechanism for the aestheticization of politics. The political and artistic expressions of the agit-props manifest that art, urban spaces, and the everyday life were aestheticized by the politics. The power strategies of the state together with the progressive techniques of the time overwhelmed the naivety for engagement to progressive change, and the belief in art for a better society. Yet, after almost a century later, the Constructivist agit-props are still breathtaking and thought-provoking in terms of their aesthetic impression offered to the ordinary man while aestheticizing the political ideology through the everyday life in urban space.

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