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# Boris Arvatov's Socialist Objects

CHRISTINA KIAER

Boris Arvatov is best known as an art historian and critic who championed the utilitarian production art of the Russian Constructivist avant-garde during the 1920s. He was notorious for his single-minded interest in production and technology, but in the essay "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" (1925), translated for the first time in this issue, he unexpectedly turns his attention to consumption and everyday life.<sup>1</sup> The essay attempts to imagine how socialism will transform the passive capitalist commodity into an active socialist object. This object, "connected like a co-worker with human practice" (126), will produce new relations of consumption, new experiences of everyday life, and new human subjects of modernity.

Today, as the promise of industrialism recedes into the past and we search out pockets of resistance to global capitalist (post)modernity, the topics of everyday life, consumption, and commodity culture have become familiar in cultural theory. But they are not usually associated with early Soviet Marxism. What makes Arvatov's theory of modernity so unusual for his time, and so strangely familiar today, is his conviction that the subject is formed as much through the process of *using* objects in everyday life as by *making* them in the sphere of production. His essay focuses on everyday life in the industrial city of the West—the city that we, to a certain extent, still inhabit, and familiar territory in twentieth-century cultural theory—because Moscow was no modern consumer metropolis in 1925. Russia's already modest industrial base had been catastrophically decimated by seven years of world war, revolution, and civil war, and was only slowly rebuilding in the 1920s. "I suppose we have a proletariat in the West and an ideology of proletarian culture in Russia," Arvatov once admitted. "We have Constructivist ideologists in Russia, and technological industry in the West. This is the real tragedy."<sup>2</sup> As we know with historical hindsight, the version of modernity

1. Boris Arvatov, "Byt i kul'tura veshchi," in *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (Moscow: 1925), pp. 75–82. Future citations from this article will be given parenthetically in the body of the text, and will refer to the page number of my English translation in this issue of *October*.

2. "Transcript of the Discussion of Comrade Stepanova's Paper 'On Constructivism,'" December 22, 1921, private archive, trans. James West in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914–1932* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 76.



*Market Street. San Francisco, 1924.*

that would develop in the Soviet Union would in fact turn out to be “tragic”: a massive but technologically primitive industrial complex accompanied by an impoverished consumer culture and everyday life. The interest of Arvatov’s essay is that he imagines a socialist form of modernity that would equal the West in technology and consumer abundance, but without the harmful effects of the commodity form. Retrieving his model of an alternative socialist modernity today will contribute, I hope, to contesting the current triumphalist claims that the demise of the Soviet Union has definitively proved the failure of the socialist idea.

Arvatov was a member of the INKhUK, the Institute of Artistic Culture established in Moscow in 1920, where Russian Constructivism was first formulated in 1921. Along with fellow INKhUK theorists Osip Brik, Boris Kushner, and Nikolai Tarabukin, he challenged the validity of easel art and promoted the “productivist” view that artists should enter directly into industry to produce formally expedient and socially useful objects. In 1923 he participated in founding the leftist literary and artistic group Lef. Throughout the 1920s, he published extensively on art history, Constructivism, and production art, as well as on literature, theater, and proletarian culture, gaining a reputation as an uncompromising hard-line productivist who subordinated artistic creativity to the needs of production.<sup>3</sup> Boris Groys has added to this reputation by singling out Arvatov as an “illustrative

3. This is the assessment offered by Christina Lodder, who has provided the fullest English-language account of Arvatov’s ideas, as well as a brief biographical sketch. See her *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

example” of the avant-garde’s totalitarian will to power, in his recent book on Stalinist culture that proclaims a damning continuity between the Constructivist avant-garde and Socialist Realism.<sup>4</sup> In this brief introductory essay I want to offer a reading of Arvatov and his socialist objects that suggests his relevance to cultural theory today, and that complicates his reputation for a totalizing technicism—even though that reputation is to a great extent well deserved.

His biography is a textbook case of Bolshevik zeal. It includes a history of radical political activity dating back to his teenage years, and frontline military service in the Red Army during the Civil War. Of Russian nationality, Boris Ignat’evich Arvatov was born in Kiev, the son of a lawyer. He graduated from the gymnasium in Riga, and from the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics of Petrograd University. He was a member of the Socialist Revolutionary party before 1917, joining a socialist youth group already in 1911. He became a member of the Communist Party in February of 1920, and served on the Polish Front of the Civil War as a commissar in the Red Army until he was demobilized in March 1921. He served in the army’s revolutionary soviet (*revsovet*). Beginning in 1918 he served as academic secretary in Proletkul’t (from *proletarskaia kul’tura* or “proletarian culture”), the mass working-class organization established immediately after the October Revolution in 1917 to promote the formation of an ideologically pure form of proletarian culture. On the personal questionnaire that he filled out in 1922 at the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, where he was a member—the source of much of the forgoing information—he put down his social origins as “intelligentsia” and his profession as “art critic—Marxist.”<sup>5</sup> The questionnaire asked him about his theoretical/Marxist preparation, to which he replied that it was “total.” He was twenty-six years old.

His was the ideal pedigree for a Bolshevik cultural worker: an educated intellectual who had repudiated his class status at a young age and committed himself both intellectually and bodily to revolutionary Marxism. These kinds of Bolsheviks were esteemed, at least in the early twenties, almost as much as Bolsheviks with authentic working-class origins. But this predictable biography was soon turned on its head, as was its power to predict or explain his writing. A half year after he so confidently demonstrated his exemplary pedigree on the questionnaire, in the summer of 1923, he was diagnosed with severe nervous illness—the result of shell shock suffered during the war. He spent the rest of his life in psychiatric sanatoriums.<sup>6</sup> The disease did not affect his mental capacity;

4. Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

5. See the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), fond 941, op. 10, ed. khr. 23.

6. The information that his psychiatric illness stemmed from shell shock is taken from Lodder’s biographical sketch. Arvatov’s initial hospitalization for “severe nervous illness” in 1923 was reported in *Lef* no. 3 (June–July 1923), pp. 40–40a. The journal published two letters written to newspaper editors to protest the mean-spirited portrayal of Arvatov by the poet Dem’ian Bednyi, who published a ditty critical of *Lef* in *Rabochaia Gazeta* (Workers’ Newspaper) in which he referred to “Arvatov, carted off to the crazy house.” A letter written to the National Commissariat of Health on Arvatov’s behalf in

he continued to publish regularly until 1930, and continued his historical and theoretical studies until his death in 1940. Most of his important works, including his best-known book, *Art and Production* (1926),<sup>7</sup> were all published after his incarceration. So it is up for grabs whether his uncompromising productivist views are more conditioned by his Party allegiance and Proletkul't experience, or by his uniquely desperate perspective, writing from inside a mental hospital while socialism was being built on the outside. But the sincerity of, or motives behind, his commitment to socialism are not, in my view, to be doubted, given the extremity of the obstacles he faced in order to express his views on proletarian art and culture to the public.

Although integral to his theory of production art, the article "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing" does not mention art at all. Its overarching thesis is that production is a source of human creativity that, when liberated from the oppressive labor and class conditions of capitalism and re-imagined in socialist culture, "will directly form all aspects of human activity" (121). On the face of things, it must be said, this thesis seems to have much in common with the production- and technology-oriented rhetoric of some of the more extreme early Soviet cultural workers. Aleksei Gastev, for example, promoted the Taylorist-derived "scientific organization of labor" at the factory workbench as a model for all areas of human activity under socialism. But Arvatov did not imagine an everyday life (*byt*) purely invaded and colonized by production, but a more complex interpenetration of the two. The Russian term *byt* has a more gritty, material association than the English "everyday life"; Arvatov writes that the material forms of *byt* constitute the skeletal forms of *bytie*, or spiritually-meaningful existence (*ibid.*). He invokes here a structuring dualism of Russian culture, in which *bytie*—associated with the spiritual, the literary, and the transcendent—is always in danger of being dragged down by the mute, material, and tradition-bound realm of *byt*.<sup>8</sup> But he insists that this dualism is only a historical artifact of class division in the capitalist system, in which "the concept of the everyday was formed in opposition to the concept of labor, just as the concept of consumer activity was formed in opposition to that of productive activity" (*ibid.*). Arvatov's idiosyncratic proposal is that proletarian culture has to break down these historical dualisms

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1935, from his friends Sergei Eisenstein, Sergei Tret'iakov, Viktor Shklovskii, Osip and Lili Brik, and Nikolai Aseev, states that Arvatov was diagnosed with schizophrenia in 1923. Such a severe diagnosis seems incompatible, however, with Arvatov's continued lucid intellectual output; perhaps in the tense atmosphere of the mid-1930s leading up to the Terror, "schizophrenia" functioned as a sort of cover term for mental illness. They were petitioning that Arvatov not be transferred from his sanatorium near Moscow to another one in the provincial town of Riazan'. See RGALI, fond 1923, op. 1, ed. khr. 1579.

7. Boris Arvatov, *Iskusstvo i Proizvodstvo. Sbornik Statei* (Moscow: Proletkul't, 1926). This is his only major text to be translated into other languages (German and Italian). See *Kunst und Produktion* (Munich: C. Hanser, 1972) and *Arte, produzione e rivoluzione proletaria*, ed. Hans Gunther and Karla Hielscher (Rimini and Firenze: Guaraldi, 1973).

8. For an insightful account of the concept of *byt* in Russian culture, see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

Advertisement for Merton-Air cap. 1924.



through the active agency of *socialist things*: “The resolution of this historical problem can proceed only from the forms of material *byt*” (ibid.).

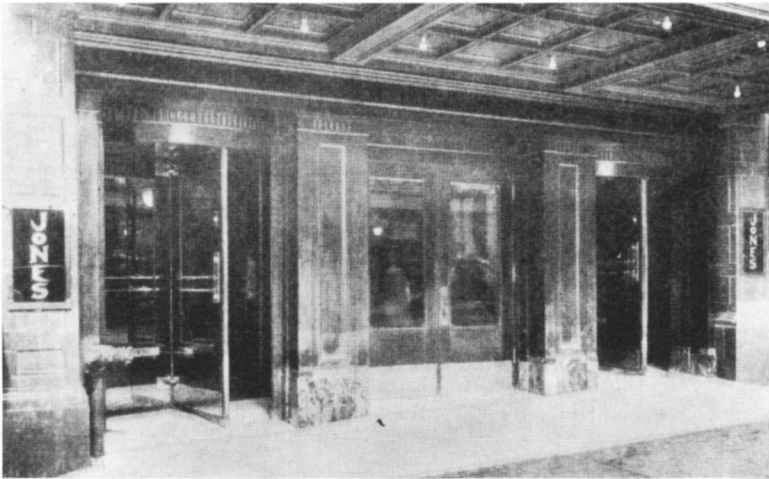
Arvatov’s insistence on the transformative potential of everyday life is unique among early Soviet theorists of culture, who, he claims, are only interested in production. His (unnamed) fellow Marxists have only understood the fundamental Marxian concept of objectification—the self-realization of the human subject through the object—in relation to the technical things that exist in the realm of production. (This is Marx’s *homo faber*, realizing himself through the product of his labor at the factory workbench.) Marxists ignored the entire world of everyday things—or in other words, the entire world of everyday consumption—neglecting to analyze it as a site for the realization of human consciousness through the object. In contrast, Arvatov states in a key passage that even the most mundane, low-tech everyday objects engender culture: “The ability to pick up a cigarette-case, to smoke a cigarette, to put on an overcoat, to wear a cap, to open a door, all these ‘trivialities’ acquire their qualification, their not unimportant ‘culture’” (126). As the forms of such simple, everyday objects of consumption begin to approach the more advanced technical forms that already exist in the objects of production that have entered everyday life, they will become “better qualified” as active agents of socialist culture. Arvatov was most drawn, predictably, to the high-tech “productive” objects, in which the object’s function and its modern materials (glass, steel, concrete) were no longer hidden by decoration and “spoke for themselves” (ibid.)—he was, after all, a theorist of one of the most radically



modernist avant-gardes of the twentieth century. But his attention to the cigarette-case and cap (objects of consumption) as well as to the skyscraper and revolving door (objects of production) signals that he does not envision simply a one-way passage from the sphere of production into the sphere of everyday life. Breaking down the dualism between the two spheres will entail a two-way relay, since interaction with objects in everyday life leads to cultural skills that can contribute to all of culture, including production. The two realms involving objects of production and objects of consumption, if united in everyday experience, could act as material agents for uniting the dualistically riven social consciousness of human actors. The result would be a “monist” proletarian material culture characterized by a “monism of Things” (127).<sup>9</sup>

The primary obstacle to a monist material culture is the social form of the commodity fetish, a form which, in my reading, Arvatov’s theory proposes to rework in a novel way. For while he might seem to be claiming that a well-qualified productive object can automatically engender socialist culture, his critique of the contemporary bourgeoisie’s inability to act with the modern world of things (124) indicates that the *commodity relation* prevents these things from transforming consciousness. The commodity form, grounded in exchange value, serves both to isolate production from consumption and to promote private-property relations to things. Bourgeois culture entails the “maximum isolation of the system of production, as a machine-collective system, from the system of consumption, as a

9. Arvatov’s concept of “monism” derives from Georgii Plekhanov, the “father of Russian Marxism.” Monism critiques the dualisms in bourgeois philosophy between matter and spirit, materialism and idealism. The two spheres of economy and psychology are inseparable: they “represent two sides of one and the same phenomenon of the ‘production of life’ of men.” See Plekhanov, *The Development of the Monist View of History*, trans. Andrew Rothstein, in *Selected Philosophical Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), pp. 615–16. Arvatov applies Plekhanov’s monism *literally*, not just to materialism in the sense of the economy, but to actual things.



*The Jones Store. Kansas City, Missouri, 1925.*

system of individual appropriation" (122). The bourgeois (apparently both Russian and Western, in his account) has no direct physical contact with the technological creativity of things in production. His interaction with things is limited to his narrow, private-property form of *byt*, which takes form in the spaces of private apartments and offices. According to Arvatov, the commodity nature of bourgeois *byt* makes it into a passive sphere of experience that is diametrically opposed to the active creation associated with production: the thing in bourgeois material culture exists "outside its creative genesis" and therefore as "something completed, fixed, static, and, consequently, dead" (ibid.).

Arvatov's emphasis on the *passivity* of the commodity constitutes a novel reworking of Marx's theory of the commodity. Marx states that the commodity fetish "reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers."<sup>10</sup> This renders the human producers passive, while exchange value confers on commodities the role of active agents of social relations. Arvatov, however, emphasizes how the commodity form renders the *objects* passive—uncreative, fixed, dead. They may serve as substitutes for relations between producers, but this is an inherently static and formal function, governed by the spontaneous forces of the market: "The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism's physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie" (124). This negative list of qualities lacking in commodities enumerates, of course, precisely the desirable qualities of the socialist object. By imagining an object that is *differently* animated from the commodity fetish—animated in socially productive terms by virtue of its material form and its use value, rather than by virtue of its exchange value—Arvatov attempts to return a kind of social agency to the fetish.

Only socialist revolution can potentially eliminate the commodity fetish. It had not yet succeeded in doing so in the U.S.S.R., which in 1925 was operating under the semi-capitalist and market-based New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921–28).<sup>11</sup> But certain conditions that lessen the power of the commodity fetish already exist in embryo, Arvatov contends, in the everyday life of the technical intelligentsia of the industrial city in far-away America.<sup>12</sup> In his vivid imagination

10. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (New York: Vintage, 1977), p. 165. Arvatov cites this passage in his discussion of the aesthetics of easel art in his book *Art and Classes*. See *Iskusstvo i klassy* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1923), p. 52.

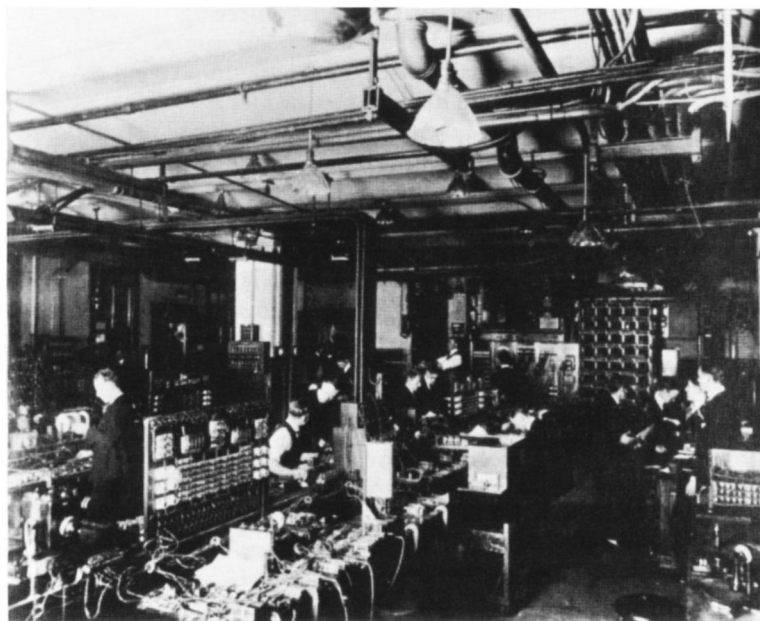
11. On the socialist object in relation to capitalist commodity desire under NEP, see my "Rodchenko in Paris," *October 75* (Winter 1996), pp. 3–35.

12. I offer a brief explanation of the term "technical intelligentsia" [*tekhnicheskaiia intelligentsiia*] in note 4 accompanying my translation of the essay. The members of the *artistic* intelligentsia in Arvatov's Lef circle, by stressing their role as technicians (of texts or art objects), attempted to identify themselves with the *technical* intelligentsia—the one group of the bourgeoisie recognized as useful to the Bolshevik state. On the complex history of the Russian intelligentsia's relation to the Western technical intelligentsia and to Bolshevism in the context of the avant-garde, see Hubertus Gassner, "The Constructivists: Modernism on the Way to Modernization," in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915–1932* (New York: The Guggenheim Museum, 1992), p. 306.





*Detail of advertisement for Armstrong's  
Linoleum. 1925.*



*Western Electric engineering department  
laboratory. New York, 1920.*

from inside the walls of a provincial Russian mental hospital, the American city boasts an “everyday life of enormous offices, department stores, factory laboratories, research institutes, and so on” (125) as well as “the collectivization of transport and . . . heating, lighting, plumbing” (ibid.), narrowing private *byt* to a minimum. While the reactionary financial bourgeoisie continues, obviously, to live its commodified everyday life of private consumption, Arvatov imagines that the everyday life of the technical intelligentsia has been completely penetrated by the collectivizing forces originating in production. His romanticizing of the members of this mythical technical intelligentsia suggests that he identifies with them. Like them, he is of bourgeois origins and has a technical education (he was trained, we recall, as a mathematician). As a Marxist, he consciously rejects the commodity, while he argues that the technical intelligentsia in the West is *structurally* less affected by the commodity form. The technical intelligentsia is in the unique position of organizing the advanced technological things of industry through its work, without forming an ownership attachment to those things, because it is only “a group of hired organizers” (125–26). It lives “in a world of things that it organizes but does not possess, things that condition its labor” (125). Arvatov focuses on the technical intelligentsia rather than the proletariat, we can surmise, precisely because in this organizational sense it is more advanced than the proletariat, which under oppressive capitalist labor conditions has no opportunity to organize its means of production. (And by acknowledging this, Arvatov refuses, in this instance at least, to romanticize the proletariat.) The technical intelligentsia's temporary and contingent relation to objects at work, in the sphere of production, is echoed in their relation to objects of the urban everyday life of the street, communication and transport (he names streetcars, telephones, and the railroad), as well as to the technologically reconfigured domestic *byt* affected by systemic plumbing, electricity, and so on.

The less commodified everyday life of the Western technical intelligentsia leads it to demand new values of activity and flexibility for objects—values that will eventually, under socialism, become the values of socialist objects. In contrast to the display or status value of bourgeois objects, or the stationary, decorative forms that correspond to the constant, sustained contact with things implied by the ownership relation of private *byt* (here Arvatov no doubt has in mind the weighty furniture and endless draperies and coverings of the bourgeois home), the new criteria of value are “convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene, and so on—in a word, everything that they call the adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling for the needs of social practice” (126).<sup>13</sup> Portable and flexible, ready to be assembled or disassembled

13. The phrase “suitability in terms of positioning and assembling” (*ustanovochno-montazhnaia prispoboblennost'*) uses two key terms from the Constructivist lexicon, *ustanovka* (positioning) and *montazh* (montage, literally assembling or fitting). For a lucid analysis of *ustanovka*, see Maria Gough, “Switched On: Notes on Radio, Automata and the Bright Red Star,” in *Building the Collective: Soviet Graphic Design, 1917–1937*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

on short notice, these objects respond *formally* to the newly collectivized everyday life of the technical intelligentsia, in which the borders between everyday life and production are fluid, and objects circulate between them. This breakdown of the segregated realm of *byt* enables not only new material creativity but also—especially if imagined in Russia—new social creativity in the potential freedom from the binding forms of traditional workers' *byt*. In his 1923 book *Questions of Everyday Life*, Leon Trotsky had called attention to the stifling conservatism of Russian workers' *byt*, including age-old patterns of sexual inequality and drunkenness.<sup>14</sup> In Arvatov's monist logic, the transformation of everyday life through material reorganization would necessarily entail a transformation of its oppressive social forms.

Arvatov's conviction that the potential for social transformation contained in the everyday can best be tapped by *organizing* it sets him apart from later twentieth-century theorists of everyday life under advanced capitalist consumerism, who turned to everyday life in order to identify possible sources of resistance to power. For Henri Lefebvre, for example, the everyday might offer social spaces that are not entirely colonized by the capitalist ideology of technicism and total organization—what he called the “bureaucratic society of controlled consumption.”<sup>15</sup> Michel de Certeau shared Arvatov's interest in the *consumer*, but de Certeau searched out resistant consumers who practice the art of “making do” (*bricolage*) in oppositional relation to modern institutions of power.<sup>16</sup> For Arvatov, on the other hand, the everyday is an arena of human self-realization in modernity that must be mobilized for the formation of a (technological) socialist culture, not imagined as a site of resistance to it. He notes approvingly that the newly organized *byt* of the technical intelligentsia is engendering a newly evolved psyche: “The new world of Things . . . gave rise to a new image of a person as a psycho-physiological individual” (*ibid.*).

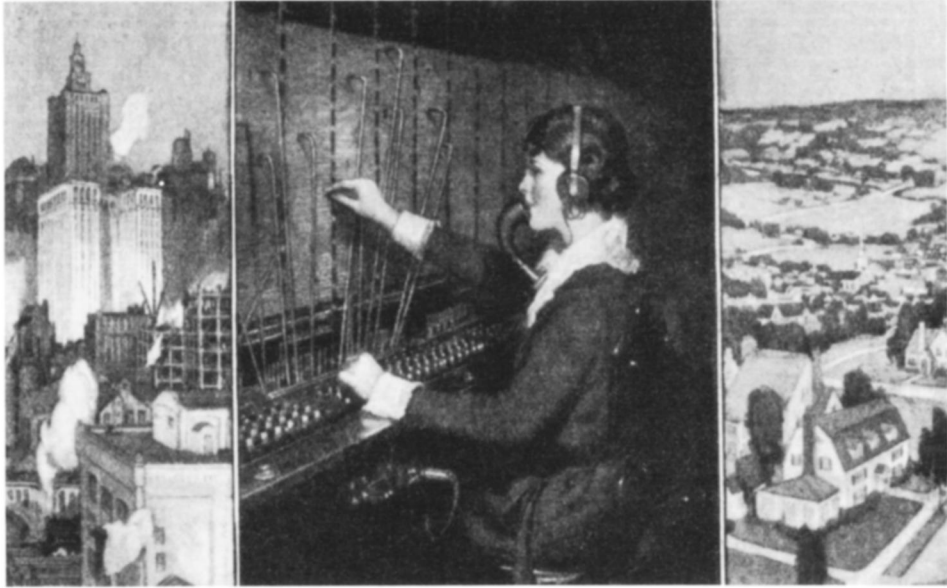
Arvatov's vision of a new “psycho-physiological individual” formed through modernist technological things might raise an ominous, antihumanist specter for post-Stalinist readers. But in his defense, I would like to point to the ways in which his belief in the imaginative potential of technology bears a surprising structural resemblance to the “materialist philosophy of history” formulated by Walter Benjamin—a thinker certainly acknowledged as humanist, philosophical, and antitotalitarian. Arvatov's theory of the socialist object attempts to redeem in practical terms the utopian myth of social harmony—a Marxist-humanist myth—for the proletarian culture of the future. For Arvatov, the revolution in the consciousness of the technical intelligentsia engendered by the industrial forms

14. See Lev Trotskii, *Voprosy byta* (Moscow: Krasnaia Nov', 1923), translated as Leon Trotsky, *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science* (New York: Monad Press, 1973).

15. See Henri Lefebvre, *Everyday Life in the Modern World*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch (New Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1984 [1971]).

16. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

Detail of advertisement for the Bell System.  
1925.



themselves was a sign that socialism was already coming into being under capitalism. These forms would not be sufficient in themselves as the basis for a socialist culture, as Arvatov noted; the full realization of their potential “is conceivable only under socialism” (127). “Under socialism” is shorthand that might, in longhand, sound like Benjamin’s articulation of the same idea, namely that in order for the creative forms of technology to bring about a socialist culture, they must “redeem the past” in the form of the “ur-historical” promise of harmonious relations between human beings and nature that has run through all historical epochs. Susan Buck-Morss offers a memorable gloss of this idea in her study of Benjamin’s unfinished *Arcades Project*: “the ur-utopian themes are to be rediscovered not merely symbolically, as aesthetic ornamentation, but actually, in matter’s most modern configurations. . . . The paradox is that precisely by giving up nostalgic mimicking of the past and paying strict attention to the new nature, the ur-images are reanimated.”<sup>17</sup>

Arvatov’s version of the ur-promise of the past emerges in his history of art. In the precapitalist era, he wrote in a 1922 text, the artist was simply the most qualified of craftsmen, a material inventor and innovator who made things to satisfy the functional demands of *byt*. Under capitalist industrialization, however, the artist feared that mass machine production would make him obsolete. He ceased

17. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. 146.

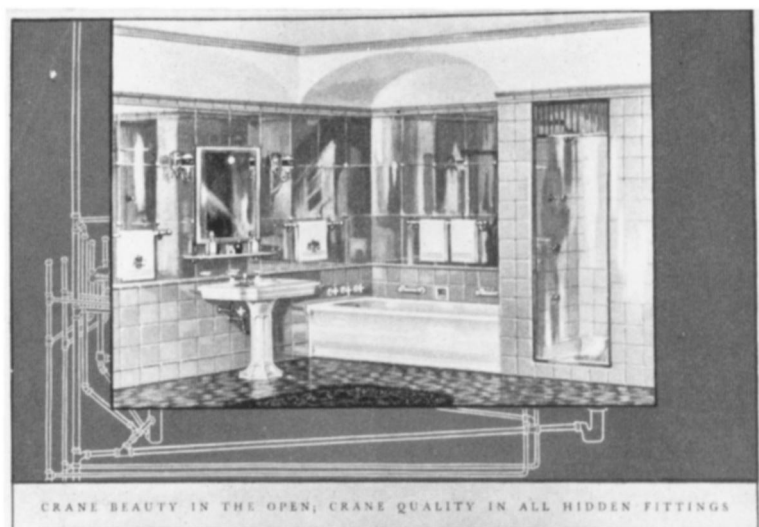
producing at an advanced technical level and retreated into reactionary craft labor, making only luxury objects. Before the artist turned to the luxury trade, he had “organized material *byt* . . . the kind of *byt* that emerged from constant social-laboring relations and the forms of which submitted to and were verified *by social needs*.”<sup>18</sup> In this harmonious vision, the artist/craftsman produced technically appropriate things that could respond to the social needs of the everyday life of his historical moment, because they were not mediated by the market, nor were they subject to capitalist exploitation or to the dualistic separation of production from consumption. This is not merely a nostalgic myth; it becomes a progressive one precisely through Arvatov’s insistence that it must be materially and structurally redeemed, under socialism, through the socialist object. In other words, the myth calls not for a return to craft art, but for a return to socially harmonious structures of making and using the object. This return will only redeem the promise of the past if it is made visible *in the material forms of the present*.

The age-old philosophical wish for harmony between human beings and nature emerges with full force at the very end of “Everyday Life.” Despite his extravagant praise for the Western technical intelligentsia, Arvatov states that it could never become “an integral organizer of the world of things” due to its class origins, which made it inherently individualistic and thus incapable of understanding production as “a giant system of collaboration between humanity and the spontaneous forces of nature” (*ibid.*). This was an understanding that in the end, presumably, was only available to the laboring proletariat itself (and, he adds opportunely, to “certain of the best representatives” of the technical intelligentsia). Again, I want to point out that Arvatov’s invocation of nature not only reiterates a hackneyed socialist myth (stemming from Engels’s “cosmological” philosophy of nature), but provides a new, unexpected source for explaining the activity or animation of the socialist-object-as-co-worker: the organic, “living force” of nature. In the industrial city, Arvatov says, everything that is natural in the object has disappeared: “Its dynamic-laboring structure and its living force are never simultaneously present; thus both become ‘soulless’” (128). Only under socialism will the object be animated by the living force of nature; socialism must foster the forms of technology that unite nature with production and with everyday life. As an example he names electricity, a form of pure nature that through technology “penetrates society and becomes *byt*” (*ibid.*).

Arvatov’s fascination with this cybernetic vision of human beings organically connected through electrical pulses (or through sound waves transmitted by radio or through hot air, water, and sewage circulating in mass systems of heating and plumbing) may sound either frighteningly totalizing or totally implausible, depending on one’s attitude toward this kind of utopian imagining. This organic human connection was never realized in socialist terms by the systems he names

18. Boris Arvatov, “Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo,” *Gorn*, no. 2 (7) (1922), p. 107, emphasis in original. This essay appeared essentially unchanged as the first section of *Iskusstvo i klassy* and in slightly different form again in 1926 in *Iskusstvo i proizvodstvo*.





*Detail of advertisement for Crane plumbing fixtures. 1925.*

(in fact, they have tended to promote the isolation of people in their private homes), but it is being realized today in the Internet—a proto-socialist object if there ever was one. As with the technological objects of the Western industrial city of the 1920s, the Internet has the *potential* to promote a future socialist culture—as its supporters on the left are claiming today.

I have emphasized the genuinely humanist or utopian moments in Arvatov's essay, not because they are necessarily the most interesting ones, but in order to counter the various critiques that have been made of Constructivism as technicist or even totalitarian.<sup>19</sup> My defense of Arvatov places me on one side of a complex ethical question that divides scholars of the Soviet avant-garde today. Roughly put, many Russians cannot dissociate the avant-garde from its collaboration with the violent Bolshevik state. Many Westerners, on the other hand, are more willing to imagine a genuine socialist sincerity in the avant-garde that did not consciously or willingly participate in the violent aspects of the regime.<sup>20</sup> There is no way for me

19. The critique that Constructivist technicism led, intentionally or not, to preparing the subject for the modernizing discipline demanded by the state (capitalist or Soviet) has been made in different ways by Manfredo Tafuri, "U.S.S.R.-Berlin, 1922: From Populism to 'Constructivist International'," in *Architecture, Criticism, Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1985) and Gassner, "The Constructivists." Boris Groys has extended the critique to Constructivist *intentions*: "Under Stalin the dream of the avant-garde was in fact fulfilled and the life of society was organized in monolithic artistic forms, though of course not those that the avant-garde itself had favored" (Groys, *Total Art*, p. 9).

20. See Boris Groys, "On the Ethics of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* 81, no. 5 (May 1993), pp. 110–13. Contemporary Russian critics who choose to write about the avant-garde in spite of



or any Western scholar to respond satisfactorily to Boris Groys's statement that "one of the requirements for full appreciation of [avant-garde] art was the viewer's recognition of the real possibility of being shot."<sup>21</sup> By rendering response impossible, this statement enacts its own rhetorical violence on intellectual dialogue.

The translation of Arvatov's "Everyday Life" piece will help, I hope, to put Russian Constructivism in a different perspective: to highlight its interest in the formation of the subject in everyday life and consumption; to demonstrate that it imagined a future socialist version of modernity that would develop in dialogue with Western modernity, including commodity culture; to dis-align it from total identification with Gastev's Taylorism; and to suggest that it is philosophically highly *dis*-continuous with Stalinist culture. I am an apologist for Arvatov's socialist imagination even though I also confess that I wouldn't relish the idea of living my everyday life in his monist material culture. Its organization and technicism and even, or perhaps especially, its radical collectivism sound alienating to what he would call, rightly, my bourgeois imagination.

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their dislike for its collaboration with Soviet power, Groys says, tend to play down its politics and describe its artistic practice in purely formal terms. Elena Sidorina, who has written by far the most comprehensive and instructive analysis of Arvatov to date, does not play down his Marxist politics, but her argument does in my view reduce the radical implications of his concept of the socialist thing. Through a series of selective quotes, she aims to show that he actually conceived of the thing as a semi-otic sign, to be perceived visually and aesthetically, rather than as a material object to be produced and used in everyday life. This recuperates the Constructivist object for modernist art, but lessens its impact as an object meant to participate in the politics of everyday life. See her *Skvoz' ves' dvadtsatyi vek: khudozhestvenno-proektnye kontseptsii russkogo avangarda* (Moscow: Russkii Mir, 1994).

21. Groys, "Ethics," p. 113.