

**Tektology, Russian Constructivism,
and *Man with a Movie Camera***

By

Melody A. MacKenzie
B.A., The University of Western Ontario, 2004

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We accept this thesis as conforming
to the required standard

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Abstract

The Constructivists wholeheartedly endorsed the future of Soviet socialism and they took a leading role in shaping proletarian ideology. Drawing on Bogdanov's theories of tektology and proletarian art, the Constructivists synthesized their artistic vision with the proletarian cultural movement. The Constructivists' desire to organize the collective as "worker-organizers" through "production" art was indebted to Bogdanov. In this regard, Constructivist work during the laboratory phase is paramount for understanding the role that Bogdanov's tektology played in the development of Constructivist theory. In 1929, Dziga Vertov produced *Man with a Movie Camera*, and an analysis of tektological methods used in this film reveal Vertov's ideological motivations. It is on this basis – building ideology – that tektology furnished a viable solution to the Constructivist pursuit of uniting the theoretical and the practical in their art.

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Introduction

Russian Marxist Aleksandr Bogdanov's life-work culminated in an innovative methodology that he called "tektology". In this thesis I develop a new approach to the study of Russian Constructivism by arguing that tektology impacted significantly the theory and practice of the movement. My discussion will culminate in an assessment of how the method of tektology shaped filmmaker Dziga Vertov's masterwork *The Man with a Movie Camera*.

The Russian Revolution, Civil War, and the coming to power of the Russian Communist Party transformed the lives of the existing avant-garde. One of the results of the Revolution was the call for artists to make a clean break with the past. Future members of the Russian Constructivist group were among those who advocated completely new forms of artistic creation. The critical question regarded what type of art was appropriate for a new proletarian culture in the new Communist era. The Constructivists set up workshops and laboratories and began experimenting with new modes of creation in an effort to discover the best means through which to fulfill this purpose. Aleksandr Bogdanov, in part, provided an answer to the problem of proletarian art production with the development of a universal organizing systems theory which he called tektology.¹ As an empirical science, tektology proposed to find solutions through purposeful application of its methods to "structures" whose success is determined by the ability to both *organize* and *be* organized. The methods employed by tektology were to

¹ First published in Russia in 1913, Tektology comes from the Greek root of *τασσω* "to build" and *τεχτων* "builder" and is a universal organization science formulated by Alexandr Bogdanov. An organizational philosophy, tektology is an empirical science developed to both determine and facilitate the organization of systems.

be used to systematically organize structures, and a system's "tektological" success was to be proven through experience.

Chapter One reviews the rise of "proletarian culture" and its impact on the avant-garde. In Russia, the need for a new type of art was raised by proletarian cultural-educational societies first instituted in 1917 by an organization, the "Proletkult" (Proletarian Culture movement). As an organization, Proletkult promoted the cultural education of the workers. This was accomplished in two ways: first, through the creation of schools, theatres, clubs, and workshops; and second, through the dissemination of art that represented the values of the industrial working class. The Constructivists realized that the need to educate the proletariat provided occasion for avant-garde artists to play a prominent role in this effort. As a founding member of Proletkult, Aleksandr Bogdanov provided much of the theoretical groundwork for his theory of tektology was a central aspect of the Proletkult program.

In Chapters One and Two, I trace the development of the future Russian Constructivists as they situated themselves within the different phases of Russian history – the period following the seizure of power by the Communist Party in October 1917, the expansion of the proletarian culture movement in the Civil War era (1917-1921), and the era of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1922-1929). The Constructivists aligned themselves with Proletkult as Communists; and one way the Constructivists actively supported Communism was to participate in a visionary plan to enculture the workers. While working within various Proletkult centres, the future Constructivists were exposed to Bogdanov's concept of proletarian art and tektology. As I will demonstrate, after the

proclamation of Constructivism in March 1921, Bogdanov's theory of tektology as promoted through cultural organizations such as Proletkult was adopted and put into practice by the Constructivists during their so-called "laboratory" and "production" phases in the 1920s. I also examine the synergy between Bogdanov's text *Tektology* and the Constructivists' understanding of the "tectonic" as a fundamental element of Constructivist theory. Together, "tectonic" and "tektology" identify Constructivism's ideological ambition – the creation of proletarian consciousness. These discussions are guided by two important phases in Constructivist practice: the laboratory phase and the productivist phase. The former is defined by experimental, active, and empirical constructions. The latter, based on achievements made during the laboratory phase, was inaugurated when the Constructivists entered the labour force in a bid to create practical "proletarian art" and firmly linked themselves to proletarian culture.

Chapter Three examines the role of film as a cultural medium in the Soviet state's propagation of Communism and culminates in a tektological case study of Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*. Using the methods of tektology, I investigate the various film techniques used by Vertov that enabled him to participate in the Constructivist-Bogdanovist vision of Communism and the proletarian cultural revolution.

My research into Constructivist theory and practice follows a critical thread that has not been fully explored by current scholarship.² Many have considered Bogdanov's

² This inadequacy is largely a result of the political situation in Russia where researchers have only recently been granted access to Constructivist documents and other pertinent material. This gap is amplified by the fact that Bogdanov fell out of favour because his political outlook differed from that of Soviet leaders, including Communist Party leader Vladimir Lenin. As a result, all but a few of Bogdanov's works, including *Tektology*, were heavily criticized and remained unacknowledged until the 1970s.

tektology as it relates to theorizing proletarian art,³ and research is growing on the subject of tektology; but the full impact of Bogdanov's theories of proletarian culture and tektology has yet to be considered in assessments of Constructivism. In her pioneering book *Russian Constructivism*,⁴ Christina Lodder includes a short discussion of the relationship between Constructivism and Proletkult. Lodder acknowledges the significance of Bogdanov in the development of the proletarian culture movement and its influence, via the Proletkult, on Constructivist theoretical development. She does not, however, consider the impact tektology had on Constructivist theory and practice. Charlotte Douglas also discusses Bogdanov in an art historical context, and examines his involvement in the development of the Proletkult, in particular. She touches on the connections between Constructivism and tektology but gives only a general analysis of how Bogdanov's theory and Proletkult figure in Constructivist ideological debates. Her focus is on the Projectionists, a faction of abstract artists who split from the Constructivist movement in the early 1920s and were interested in light and thermal energy. Searching for ways to scientifically ground their art, they turned to Bogdanov's theory of tektology to validate their art production as a form of organizational science.⁵ Others, such as Anđel Jaroslav and Maria Gough, note a relationship between Constructivism and Proletkult theories, but only in passing.

Since scholarly research in the areas specific to the links between tectonic and tektology is lacking, it became imperative to consult not only the principal secondary

³ Carmen Claudin-Urondo, Garlan E. Crouch, Lynn Mally, and Zenovia A. Sochor, for example, have all written of the role that Bogdanov played in Soviet proletarian culture.

⁴ Christina Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.

⁵ Charlotte Douglas. "Energetic Abstraction: Ostwald, Bogdanov, and Russian Post-Revolutionary Art." *From Energy to Information: Representation in Science and Technology, Art, and Literature*. Eds. Bruce Clarke and Linda Dalrymple Henderson. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002. 76-94. 89-94. The artist Solomon Nikritin was especially concerned with tektology and the incorporation of its methods into Projectionist art.

sources on the subject, but also the primary sources. I refer to key primary writings, with a focus on Bogdanov's works and those of the Constructivists and their allies.

Chapter One

Proletkult

Following a nation-wide general strike in September 1905, the Russian tsar, Nicholas II, created a state Duma – a parliamentary assembly governed by the tsar – in order to improve civil liberties by giving a voice to all Russians. This move toward an all-inclusive form of government appeased the general public only temporarily. Strikes and rebellions continued, and absolute rule was reinstated, creating even greater tensions between the people and the tsar. Between 1905 and 1917 those who opposed the tsar’s rule were exiled, imprisoned, and executed by the thousands. When Russia declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1914, the tsar’s regime was ill-prepared for it: the economy was strained to the breaking point, and by late 1916 the Russian war effort was in a state of crisis. The Russian Revolution of 1917 began in February when tens of thousands of Russians took to the streets over food shortages. When mass strikes were declared in Petrograd (Saint Petersburg), the tsar ordered the military to end the strike, but soldiers refused to take action against the protestors. Responding to the crisis, members of the Duma formed a Provisional Government with the intent of continuing to prosecute the war. In 1917, the efforts of the Duma were thwarted by the Bolshevik Party under the leadership of V. I. Lenin. It overthrew the Provisional Government and established a Council of People’s Commissars. This newly imposed Communist government declared it was dedicated to establishing a “proletarian dictatorship” that would eradicate capitalism and create a socialist society. At this juncture, many in the Communist Party argued that a new proletarian culture was essential for overcoming the

ideological values of the old bourgeois society.⁶ Under the leadership of Aleksandr Bogdanov the Proletkult was founded to develop a proletarian culture, free of “bourgeois” influence.

Bogdanov versus Lenin: A Political Impasse

Aleksandr Bogdanov (1873-1928) was an activist with deep roots in the Russian Communist movement. In 1904 he was elected to the Bolshevik Party shortly after the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour Party divided into “Bolshevik” and “Menshevik” factions. The “Bolsheviks” (“majority” in Russian) were led by V. I. Lenin, who believed that the party should seize power and form a socialist state in Russia, while the “Mensheviks” (“minority”) argued that a bourgeois democracy had to precede a proletarian revolution. Bogdanov disapproved of many of Lenin’s organizational tactics but nevertheless remained active in the Bolshevik faction until 1910, when disputes between the two prompted Lenin to expel him.⁷ The differences of opinion that arose between Lenin and Bogdanov centred on Marxism. Bogdanov believed that Marx’s philosophy was inadequate to the mounting of a proletarian cultural revolution. He argued that in order to build a socialist society, the proletariat must be encouraged to create their own distinct post-revolutionary culture, rooted in their cooperative class values. Garland Crouch explains: “Bogdanov’s long range aim was to evolve concrete and practical methods of gradually eliminating the distinction between

⁶ The idea of a unified proletarian culture overcoming the bourgeois capitalist society was upheld by Lenin who in 1919 wrote: “We must take the entire culture that capitalism left behind and build socialism with it. We must take all its science, technology, knowledge and art. Without these we shall be unable to build communist society.” Carmen Claudin-Urondo. *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution*. New Jersey: Harvester Press, 1977. 25.

⁷ For a more in-depth analysis of the debates that transpired between Bogdanov and Lenin see Zenovia A. Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988.

intellectual and physical labour, of bridging the gap between the organizers and executors, of developing a spirit of comradeship, collectivism, and cooperation.”⁸ Lenin, on the other hand, did not have faith that the proletariat were, on their own, capable of developing beyond a “trade-union consciousness”.⁹ Instead, he planned to strategically deploy an intellectual vanguard steeped in the cultural achievements of the past, whose responsibility was to both influence and mould the proletariat into a suitably cultured population for building socialism.¹⁰ According to Carmen Claudin-Urondo, Lenin desired “not so much the *transformation* of culture as the *acquisition* of the culture inherited from the former ruling class, bourgeois culture.”¹¹ Bogdanov disagreed with Lenin, because he believed that cultural elements of the pre-socialist era could serve the proletariat only if they were critically filtered through the precepts of a proletarian culture movement. Lenin considered Bogdanov’s theories a betrayal of Marx but, nonetheless, Bogdanov’s ideas remained influential after his expulsion from the Bolsheviks.¹²

Bogdanov thought that a cultural revolution was as critical as political and economical revolution. This emphasis on the need for a new “proletarian” culture gave art an almost unprecedented significance. Artists were charged with engendering a proletarian class consciousness through art, which became a “weapon to be used in the struggle for the building of socialism.”¹³ Lenin viewed proletarian education as a process of scientific and technological knowledge. Lenin’s “Culture as knowledge” (Claudin-

⁸ Garland E. Crouch, Jr. *The Theory and Practice Of A. A. Bogdanov's Proletcult*. Diss. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1973. 58.

⁹ From V. I. Lenin *What is to be Done?* 27, 32-33. In Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. 38.

¹⁰ Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. 27.

¹¹ Claudin-Urondo, 13.

¹² Although Bogdanov no longer participated in official Revolutionary activities his philosophies drove the development and direction of the proletarian cultural movement (Proletkult).

¹³ Christina Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. 74–75.

Urondo's formulation)¹⁴ was defined by the level of scientific and technological knowledge an individual worker demonstrated. An advanced socialized civilization, according to Lenin, could be reached only once Russia was industrialized to the same level as Western European countries. Culture as knowledge was imperative in the fulfillment of socialism. Lenin insisted on "practical and immediate solutions"¹⁵ and argued that the existing bourgeois heritage should be absorbed and improved on. In his writings, he expressed an urgent need to accelerate the development of socialism in Russia. After the Communists seized power in 1917, Lenin envisioned an elite group of bourgeois specialists enlisted to train the proletariat in capitalist methods of production, insisting bourgeois knowledge of science and technology would hasten the process of enculturation: "[w]e have no time to spend on training experts from among our Communists, because everything depends on practical work and practical results."¹⁶ In the realm of production Lenin rejected all other avenues toward enculturation:

The idea that we can build Communism with the aid of pure Communists, without the assistance of bourgeois experts, is childish ... We must set to work as a technical and cultural force so as to preserve them and to transform an uncultured and barbarian capitalist country into a cultured, Communist country.¹⁷

Lenin expected bourgeois specialists to accept "proletarian" leadership under the auspices of the Communist government. Bogdanov, however, believed that bourgeois specialists were anathema to proletarian ideology and regarded the workers as the only ones qualified to foster socialist enculturation. He did not, however, categorically dismiss the

¹⁴ Claudin-Urondo discusses and identifies three types of culture in Lenin's writings. They are: culture as civilization, culture as ideology, and culture as knowledge and they each have their own specific characteristics and purpose in the attainment of socialism. 13–25.

¹⁵ Claudin-Urondo, 35.

¹⁶ Lenin. *Collected Works*. "Speech at the 2nd Congress of the Economic Councils." December, 1918. Vol. 28. 381. Quoted in Claudin-Urondo, 29.

¹⁷ Lenin. *Collected Works*. "Report of the Central Committee to the 8th Party Congress." 18 March, 1919. 4th Ed. English version. 29. 156–157. Claudin-Urondo, 32.

value of the bourgeois knowledge in building proletarian culture. Rather he argued for its *critical* absorption:

[The proletariat] must acquire this inheritance in such a manner as not to submit to the spirit of the past. ... The inheritance should not rule the heir, but be a tool in his hands. The dead should serve the living, but not restrain, not chain them.¹⁸

Proletkult: A New Vision for Educating the Masses

Bogdanov was banished three times during tsarist rule, and one of the most profound political relationships of his career was forged while in exile in Kaluga, when he met Anatolii Lunacharskii. Together, they created the theoretical foundations for the future Proletkult. In 1909 Bogdanov convened with Lunacharskii and other exiles on the Italian island of Capri to found a “High Social-Democratic School” for Russian workers steeped in Bogdanov’s “proletarian culture” precepts. Lunacharskii and Bogdanov believed that the 1905 revolution had failed because the proletariat was not culturally mature, and the school was established in order to foster “proletarian” attitudes and aspirations amongst the workers. The school – a second one was later opened in Bologna – offered Bogdanov-influenced classes in history, Marxist philosophy, and the sciences. It was during this period that the term “proletarian culture” first came into use.

Less than ten years after the opening of the Capri school and just weeks before the October 1917 seizure of power by the Communist Party, Bogdanov and Lunacharskii initiated the establishment of the mass-based proletarian culture (Proletkult) movement in Petrograd, at a meeting attended by representatives of factory committees, workers’ organizations, peasant delegates, youth organizations, and Communist Party members. Like the Italian High Social-Democratic School, Proletkult was developed because its

¹⁸ Aleksandr Bogdanov. “Proletarian Poetry.” *The Labour Monthly*. (June 1923): 357–362. 359.

founders agreed that socialism could not develop without a proletarian revolution in culture. Proletkult was established as an autonomous entity free from governmental or Communist Party influence and this continued after the Communist Party formed the government in October. Proletkult leaders deemed it important to maintain its independence because of Lenin's influence in the Party. Word of Proletkult's mandate spread quickly, in large part due to three popular publications: *Gorn* (The Furnace), *Griadushchee* (The Future), and especially (Proletarian Culture).¹⁹ Within the Proletkult movement Bogdanov's ideas quickly became preeminent, and his concept of collective and "comradely cooperation" was implemented in all Proletkult programs.²⁰ Schools, theatres, and artist's studios operated under the assumption that relationships between the instructors and the workers would not be based on authoritarian top-down knowledge transmission. This new system of instruction was a deliberate rejection of traditional, hierarchical "bourgeois" methods of teaching.

From its inception, Bogdanov was the leading theorist of Proletkult ideology. He personally directed all Moscow Proletkult centres and sat on the organization's central committee. In addition, he was an editor of its chief periodical, *Proletarskaia kultura*, and a prolific contributor to the critical section of *Griadushchee*.²¹ As a result of Bogdanov's influence, problems began to arise within the organization. As early as 1919, Lenin began to launch attacks on Bogdanov's theoretical leadership in Proletkult. At the First All-Russia Congress on Adult Education, Lenin alluded to Bogdanov's proletarian ideas as "absurd", "incongruous", "supernatural", and experimental. Both

¹⁹ Christina Lodder. "Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917–20." *Art Journal*. 52. 1 (1993): 23–33. 24.

²⁰ Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. 129.

²¹ Crouch, 103.

men publicly accused the other of adhering to “capitalist, bourgeois” standards. Lenin argued that Bogdanov was a “bourgeois intellectual” who used the proletarian class as a model upon which to test his theories, while Bogdanov reiterated that Lenin was too focused on political and economic issues to the detriment of proletarian culture. Indeed, Bogdanov went so far as to argue that Lenin sympathized with the bourgeois culture socialists opposed.²² Finally, at the end of 1920, the Communist Party Central Committee denounced Bogdanov’s role within Proletkult, claiming that he was promoting “an idealistic philosophy hostile to Marxism.”²³

Proletkult: Art for the Masses

As a cultural organization, Proletkult was invested in bringing art to the workers, and Bogdanov wrote extensively on the subject of proletarian art. Proletkult leaders agreed that Bogdanov was the foremost theorist on the subject and, in 1918, embraced the four basic tenets of his philosophy of proletarian art. These four tenets are: that art is a useful tool that can be used to organize the proletariat; that art represent the collective from the point of view of the collective; that the proletariat must not become enchanted by bourgeois art, but can use the old art as a means toward the creation of a new art; and, finally, that all new art must guide the proletariat toward a socialist ideal.²⁴

Bogdanov’s theory of the organizational capacities of artistic production was based on his organizational systems theory, “tektology.”²⁵ In 1919 Bogdanov wrote:

Art organizes social experiences by means of living images with regard both to cognition and to feelings and aspirations. Consequently, art is the

²² Crouch, 3–6.

²³ *O partiinnoi i sovetskoi pečati: Sbornik dokumentov*. Moscow: Pravda, 1954. 221. Quoted in Crouch, 5.

²⁴ A. Bogdanov. “Rezoliutsii konferentsii” *Proletarska kul’tura*. 5 (1918). 32. Crouch, 84.

²⁵ For further explanation of tektology see Chapter Two of this thesis.

most powerful weapon for organizing collective forces in a class society...²⁶

In Marxist theory, art – which is part of the superstructure – changes according to transformations that occur at the base and its modes of production. Like Marx, Bogdanov maintained that culture – and art – was a product determined by the society that produced it. But Bogdanov believed society was capable of producing art that could be self-regulatory and capable of engendering cultural homogeneity; a unified culture, in turn, could organize the society that created it in order to sustain proletarian power and the social revolution. In order to be useful in its role as an organizing force, Bogdanov emphasized, art must be “sincere” in its role as organizer.²⁷ Its organizing purpose must be transparent.

In a period of revolution, the proletariat was still discovering its own ideology. Bogdanov reasoned that in order for Russia to succeed as a socialist state, it was important for the working class to recognize and align itself with art that asserted its organizational power. Collectivity was an integral aspect of proletarian working life; it was therefore an important precondition to “proletarian” organizational art. Collective consciousness, which was a feature of socialist labour, unified the proletariat and by extension was capable of organizing it. Bogdanov often declared that collectivism should both appear in the content of the art work and be characteristic of its production. Art should represent and depict life so as to be clear and easily understood by the worker. Proletarian art should arise from materials and themes that are familiar to the worker:

Let there even be a certain amount of monotony in regularity. It has its justification in life. The worker at the factory lives in a kingdom of

²⁶ Aleksandr Bogdanov. “The Proletarian and Art.” (1918). *Russian art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*. Ed. John E. Bowlt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 176–177. 176.

²⁷ Crouch, 74–75.

regular rhythm—simple elementary rhyme. In the “steel chaos” of machines and motors, the waves of varying, but on the whole mechanically regular, rhythms are intermingled with each other; further, the continuity of smaller repetitions ...²⁸

Art that is designed to organize the proletariat “takes its themes and material from the life of the workers themselves ...”²⁹ With regards to its production, Bogdanov recommended that art be produced collectively, through comradesly cooperation. This was especially significant: the new artist’s role in the proletarian struggle was not only artistic – it was organizational. As such, all Proletkult programs and schools endeavoured to cultivate a collective consciousness by encouraging students of art to work collaboratively.

Although the role of the artist during the period following the October Revolution had changed, Bogdanov did not ignore the value, however limited, of bourgeois art. Bogdanov advised that proletarian artists study the art of the past and even proposed incorporating certain aspects of past art into socialist art. Although bourgeois art alienated the working class because of its individualistic nature, Bogdanov believed that careful consideration of this artistic legacy could provide insight into the creation of a new proletarian art. That said, he was cautious: Bogdanov warned that “[t]he artistic consciousness of the working class must be pure and clear, free of alien tinges.”³⁰

In practice, Proletkult was not consistent in its approach. Organizers could not agree on the means of forging a new culture and, according to Lynn Mally, Proletkult leaders eventually concluded that the organization’s first task was to train a proletarian vanguard that would in turn inspire new cultural development within the working class

²⁸ A. Bogdanov. “The Criticism of Proletarian Art.” *Labour Monthly*. 5 (1923): 344–356. 353–354.

²⁹ Bogdanov. “The Criticism of Proletarian Art.” 349.

³⁰ A. Bogdanov. *Proletarska kul'tura*. 3 (1918): 16. Quoted in Crouch, 74.

population.³¹ In other words, proletarian culture would initially be fostered by a proletarian elite.

Proletkult was frequently described as a “laboratory”, providing the proletariat with a class-based cultural education. Students were taught to read and write, and introduced to topics such as science, art, religion, and theory. Theatre performances, studios, and discussion were arranged to determine the best forms and methods of fostering a new proletarian culture amongst the workers. Workers had open access to literature, art, music, and political information in the spirit of collective training. Furthermore, Proletkult planners agreed that it was important for the organization to enthusiastically support factory workers’ clubs and similar factory organizations, thus assuring a solid following amongst the workers.

Production Art: The Art of Labour

Proletkultists agreed that a new direction in art was called for and that art was a tool in the proletarian arsenal; but theoreticians could not decide whose responsibility it was to lead the way. Would it be sufficient to provide artistic training for the workers, or could an artist who sympathized with a proletarian dictatorship assist in its evolution? What appears to have been unanimous was the idea that “proletarian” art must be easily understood by the proletariat.

Many Proletkult theorists, including Bogdanov, advocated for art that reflected the daily lives of the workers themselves, because it could be easily understood by the

³¹ Lynn Mally. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. 43. See also Lynn Mally. *Blueprint for a New Culture: A Social History the Proletkul't, 1917–1922*. Diss. University of California. Berkeley, 1986. 272.

workers, and hence, hasten their enculturation. Echoing Bogdanov's views on proletarian art, a worker wrote that "the proletariat needs an art that was born in the noise of the factories, the mills, and the streets, which in essence must [correspond to] the powerful art of struggle."³² It was, therefore, generally accepted that the new art would be closely linked to forms of industrial labour production. Such art was appropriately called production art. By 1920, all Proletkult centres in Moscow were devoted to production art, which was "firmly grounded in the factory, thus giving it good proletarian credentials." It also "... aimed to bring art into daily life, and thus answered the Proletkult's mandate to change the function of art in society."³³ Proletkult's endorsement of production art is significant for our discussion, because the Constructivists adopted the concept as a premise for their activities.

At its height in 1920 there were 400,000 members registered in the Proletkult and more than 300 Proletarian Culture centres across Russia. Proletkult became so large that, administratively at least, it was not able to carry out any agreed-upon program. Furthermore, questions arose concerning the nature of proletarian art. Many speculated as to whether proletarian art should be solely agitational or if it should be closely tied to themes of industrialism and labour.³⁴ Other problems surrounded the question of whether to permit "bourgeois" intellectual members.³⁵ The most significant issue, though, was the organization's status as an autonomous institution as well as its exclusive role given

³² Lodder. "Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917–20." 32.

³³ Mally. *Blueprint for a New Culture: A Social History of the Proletkul't, 1917–1922.* 269.

³⁴ Mally. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia.* xxv.

³⁵ Anatolii Lunacharskii doubted that a purely proletarian culture could be achieved unless all of its members belonged to the proletarian class. He concluded that non-proletarians could not contribute to the creation of proletarian ideology. Crouch, 113.

that there were other organizations that claimed to oversee proletarian cultural revolution – a condition called “parallelism”.³⁶

After the Bolsheviks took power, Lenin had designated Lunacharskii head of the Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). Although Proletkult declared its independence from the Communist Party, the organization thereafter enjoyed financial support from Narkompros. Narkompros comprised numerous divisions, including an Adult Education Division that administered “proletarian” cultural education. With regards to artistic culture, the Commissariat of Enlightenment encompassed the Department of Fine Arts, known as “IZO Narkompros”. In 1920, under IZO, The Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) was also established to “settle [sic] questions concerned with the science of art in all its aspects.”³⁷ In 1920, the government established a Moscow-based free state school, the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (VKhUTEMAS), to “train people in the fine arts to have a complete perception of artistic culture in the fields of painting, architecture, and sculpture.”³⁸ The aims of each of these organizations frequently overlapped. Because of a marked parallelism with these government-administered arts initiatives and the Proletkult’s controversial status vis-à-vis Lenin’s ideas, Party officials questioned the organization’s continued financial aid from the state. Lunacharskii, who remained friends with Bogdanov, intervened on Proletkult’s behalf and prevented its financial defunding several

³⁶ Mally. *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*. 34.

³⁷ Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. 79. From “Obshchii plan programmy nauchno-teoreticheskogo otdela Tsentrosektiss AKIZO Narkomprosa.” MS. Private archive, Moscow. 1.

³⁸ Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. 109.

times. Finally, in 1920, at Lenin's insistence, Proletkult lost its autonomy and became a subordinate department within Narkompros.³⁹

Revolution and the introduction of the new Communist government demanded the transformation of Russian society. The revolution initiated many debates over how to approach the advancement of a new proletarian culture. Bogdanov challenged Lenin's opinion that bourgeois culture need only be adapted in order to build socialism, and was convinced that a cultural revolution must coincide with political revolution. He was confident that proletarian culture would be shaped by art that arose out of collectivism and labour; his belief formed the theoretical foundation of Proletkult. Bogdanov, through Proletkult, promoted the organizational function of art in engendering a culturally aware proletariat. The concept of art as organizer is further explored in the next chapter, which focuses on Bogdanov's theory of tektology. A science grounded in empirical observations, tektology aimed both to describe and create organizational systems. Benefiting from the theories of Bogdanov and Proletkult, the Constructivists endeavoured to use art as a tool through which to organize the proletariat collectively. And, as I will demonstrate, they applied the organizational capabilities of tektology to their own theoretical foundations and art practice during the group's laboratory phase.

³⁹ Proletkult's budget was dramatically reduced, and it continued on a more moderate scale until the early 1930s, when all organizations not under direct party control were disbanded. Funding provided by the government became limited for two reasons: first because finances in the twenties were redirected from social organizations such as Proletkult toward strengthening the Soviet industrial infrastructure, and second because party leaders recognized the political and propagandistic significance of controlling the cultural direction of Soviet workers.

Chapter Two

Tektology, Tectonic, and the Laboratory Phase

Tektology is “philosophy as action.”⁴⁰ In this chapter I will elaborate on this tenet by first defining Bogdanov’s general organizational systems theory. I will then discuss the significance of tektology as applied to the task of engendering a collective consciousness – and of creating a proletarian culture. The Constructivists developed theories imbued both with Bogdanov’s formulation of tektology and the organizational potential of creative production. It is in this regard that the Constructivists brought tektology into active service. In the early 1920s, Constructivists Karl Ioganson and Aleksandr Rodchenko were among the first to recognize art as capable of building socialism. To corroborate this I analyze a selection of work by Ioganson and Rodchenko’s three-dimensional structures, drawing on the methodology of tektological analysis.

Tektology

Aleksandr Bogdanov’s theory of tektology was an organizational system. In this theory all phenomena represent differing levels of organized or unorganized systems. Each phenomenon, or system, is dynamically linked to, and interacts with, experience. The implication is that Bogdanov’s theory is an empirical science – experience is the key to the success of a system’s level of organization. The first two volumes of *Tektology*, published in 1913, present a method to be applied toward the unification of the specialized sciences – physiology, biology, psychology, sociology, to name a few. In

⁴⁰ Rafael E. Bello. “The Systems Approach – A. Bogdanov and L. von Bertalanffy.” *Studies in Soviet Thought*. 30 (1985). 131–147. 134.

Tektology Bogdanov argued that each of these sciences could be linked by their “structural similarities.”⁴¹ Evaluating these similarities, he claimed that all spheres of life – as long as they are “systems”, and as long as they exhibit a relationship to experience – can be understood using the methods proposed in *Tektology*.

A tektological analysis eliminates multiplication and approaches the study of experience under one unified theory. The goal of tektology as a method is its universal applicability. This is the reason so many terms used in *Tektology* are borrowed from specialized sciences, including “crisis”, “egression”, “selection”, and “dynamic equilibrium”. For Bogdanov, the unification of the sciences and their study was related to the desire to accelerate progress towards socialism. In this respect, the reader of *Tektology* is made aware of the urgency that Bogdanov attaches to the dissemination of its methods:

Special effort has been made to clearly demonstrate the practical applicability, the actual usefulness and importance of this science by means of particular familiar illustrations. This is its fortunate feature: from its very beginning, Tektology is able to go beyond the field of abstract cognition and assume an active role in life.⁴²

Moreover, Bogdanov recognized the role that tektology and its deployment could play with regards to the development of a homogenous proletarian collective. The desire to unite the sciences provides an example of collaborative effort. The concept of engendering collectivity was integral to the development of a socialist society.

The primacy of tektology relies on its ability to organize. As an organizing science, tektology seeks to establish laws and methods that enable and maintain organization through the examination of the various relationships that exist within a

⁴¹ Douglas, 79.

⁴² Preface to the First Edition of Part One. Alexander Bogdanov. *Tektology*. Ed. Peter Dudley. Hull, United Kingdom: Centre for Systems Studies Press, 1996.

system. Bogdanov described a system as a combination of elements. Each element demonstrates a functional role in determining the degree of “organizedness” or “disorganizedness” of the system. In other words, each element within the system is itself either organized or de-organized: in this way it builds – or organizes – the system. The active role of the elements as builders of a system gives tektology its name, which translates from Greek as “the theory of construction.”⁴³ The specific manner in which elements interact with each other describes the organizedness of the system, and the methods outlined in *Tektology* are applied to the analysis of these elements. The desired outcome of tektology is always organizedness – that which describes the quality of organization: the reverse is also true – that which is disorganized characterizes disorganizedness.

“Organized”, however, is a relative term when applied to systems. To use an example from Bogdanov’s *Tektology*: an ordinary person views plasmodium merely as slime, but a biologist sees it as an organized “colony of living cells with nuclei, [with] complex reproduction, nutrition and respiration functions.”⁴⁴ In the case of a work of art, its ability to organize is usually determined by the organizer and those it proposes to organize – that is, the artist and the prospective audience. Indeed, Bogdanov warned that the study of a system must be “both from the point of view of the relationships among all its parts and the relationship between it as a whole and its environment, i.e., all external systems.”⁴⁵

What role do Bogdanov and, more specifically, tektology play in Constructivism?

⁴³ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 63.

⁴⁴ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 85.

⁴⁵ From A. Bogdanov. *Ocerki Vseobscej Organizacionnoj Nauki* [Essays in the Universal Organizational Science.], Samara, 1921. 300–301. Quoted in George Gorelik. “Bogdanov’s *Tektology*: Its Nature, Development and Influence.” *Studies in Soviet Thought*. 26 (1983): 39–157. 40.

Aleksei Gan, Constructivism's chief theoretician, proposed that art be replaced with "artistic labour" in acknowledgment of Bogdanov's valuing of labour and collectivity. The Constructivists hoped to reach the working masses through a new type of skilled, yet creative, "work" and believed they were in a position to develop a new proletarian-led society. The Constructivist alliance to the Communist movement and the desire to secure a dictatorship of the proletariat manifested in the Bogdanovist-derived designation of art as a valuable and useful tool for organizing proletarian consciousness.

As a theoretical model, tektology was developed to be applied to all systems of human experience, and Constructivists adopted it in a bid to engender proletarian culture through art. Bogdanov was convinced that art could effectively create a collective consciousness. He saw art as the "organization of ideas" which corresponded to the "organization of things."⁴⁶ Ideas are inextricably linked to the concept of knowledge and Bogdanov's desire to educate the proletariat through the dissemination of class ideology.⁴⁷ Constructivism's initial phase of art production, later referred to as its "laboratory" phase, was concerned with investigations of organizational formations using a variety of modes and materials of production. Tektology provides us with an investigative tool through which to analyse the organizational successes of Constructivist laboratory work. The similarity in terminology used by Bogdanov and the Constructivists indicates the Constructivists were seeking solutions through a methodical application of elements within structures where success is determined by the object's ability to both *organize* and *be* organized. The tektological methods of the Constructivists are used to systematically organize structures.

⁴⁶ Bogdanov. "The Criticism of Proletarian Art." 344.

⁴⁷ At this time, Soviet society was considered to be in a transitory period from capitalism toward socialism. As such ideology was connected to the concept of labour – particularly that of collective labour.

From the founding of the movement in March 1921, members of the Constructivist group worked closely with Proletkult, and many links already existed between the two groups. Among leading Constructivist theorists, both Nikolai Tarabukin and Boris Arvatov (a member of the Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences, where Bogdanov taught) were teachers at Moscow Proletkult centres, and it is possible the Proletkult first turned to tektology-influenced production art, in part, at Arvatov's urging.⁴⁸ Osip Brik and Vladimir Mayakovsky, who together launched LEF (Left Front of the Arts), also enthusiastically advocated for LEF ties to both the Constructivists and Proletkult. Mayakovsky would later collaborate with Aleksandr Rodchenko, who was arguably the foremost Constructivist artist. In addition, in 1923, Rodchenko and his wife and fellow-artist Varvara Stepanova worked for LEF publications and Stepanova was an editorial staff member.⁴⁹ It is not surprising then, that the Constructivists developed similar values and tenets to those of Bogdanov and Proletkult. In fact, many core members of the Constructivist group, notably Rodchenko, Stepanova, and Gan, used the term "tectonic" in their literature. Direct evidence of Constructivism's support of Bogdanov's "social-organizational" role for art is found in Gan's seminal text *Constructivism* (1922). Gan examined Bogdanov's *The Science of Social Consciousness* (1914) which explores models of organizational systems as well as "Marx's theory of social ideologies, demonstrating that ideas had not a passive-reflective, but an active-

⁴⁸ Mally. *Blueprint for a New Culture: A Social History of the Proletkul't, 1917–1922*. Mally notes that Arvatov, who was a major participant in Proletkult matters, argued at a 1922 Proletkult central committee meeting for the implementation of Production art throughout the organization's centres. 269–270.

⁴⁹ Aleksandr M. Rodchenko and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future Is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 35.

organizational function in society.”⁵⁰ These organizational and ideological systems later became the foundations for tektology and were signalled by Gan as capable of eliciting change in Soviet art production.⁵¹ Gan wrote: “[art’s] form, social meaning, means and tasks change [*sic*] in connection with changes in technological resources, economic, social and political systems, and the organizational conditions of human society.”⁵² He then advocated Bogdanov’s theories as a model by which “to bring art into the service of the proletarian revolution.”⁵³

Tectonic and Tektology

Gan designated the three principal elements of Constructivism as “construction”, “*faktura*”, and the “tectonic”.⁵⁴ In late 1921, Stepanova delivered a lecture at INKhUK titled “Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism” which throws further light on this matter.⁵⁵ Stepanova described the state of current Constructivist theory and practice, and her understanding of the “tectonic” and its role in Constructivist art. First

⁵⁰ John Biggart. “The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov.” *Bogdanov and His Work: A Guide to the Published and Unpublished Works of Alexander A. Bogdanov (Malinovsky) 1873–1928*. Eds. Biggart, John, Georgii Gloveli, and Avraham Yassour. Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1998. 3–39. 13.

⁵¹ John Biggart describes Bogdanov’s *The Science of Social Consciousness* as an “early philosophical” work in which “Bogdanov had anticipated his later *General Science of Organization* (1913–1922).” Biggart. “The Rehabilitation of Bogdanov.” 13.

⁵² Aleksei Gan. *Konstruktivizm*. Milan: Edizioni Dello Scorpione, 1977. 29. (Sarah Rutley and Irina Gavrilova, translators. “Konstruktivizm.” unpublished, Victoria, 2008.) Throughout this thesis I refer to various translations of Gan’s *Constructivism*. Several excerpts exist in translation – Gan’s booklet has yet to be published in full in English – and I rely on several translations throughout this thesis, which I refer to as *Constructivism*. However, wherever possible I refer to translations completed by my translators Sarah Rutley and Irina Gavrilova which I cite as *Konstruktivizm*.

⁵³ Gan. *Konstruktivizm*. 26.

⁵⁴ John Bowlt. Ed. *Russian art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902-1934*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 215–216. Bowlt notes the significance of Gan’s publication as affecting, or at the very least coinciding with, the Constructivist move into production art, while cautioning against the overall significance of Gan’s essay in Constructivist studies. While its impact may or may not be exaggerated I feel strongly that as it pertains to the current discussion Gan’s theory, and those similar to it, are central to questions regarding the link between tektology and the tectonic.

⁵⁵ Varvara Stepanova. “Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism.” (1921). Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 174–178. 177.

and foremost, that which is tectonic is an *active* element of production. She described the tectonic as having the unique ability to solve tasks, and as guiding the Constructivists' *dynamic* experiments. A tectonic construction changes to another tectonic form once a new element is either introduced or removed. Tectonic is active and dynamic. "Tectonics, as a principle, is the result of experience. ... [I]t is dictated by production, since material is improved, experience and knowledge accumulate and produce new conditions and new ways of formulating the task."⁵⁶ Like tectology, the tectonic is an empirical element of the design of a given structure, and each structure is evaluated through experience. In *Constructivism*, Gan wrote that the "tectonic" is "formed on the one the one hand from the properties of communism itself, and on the other, from the expedient usage of industrial material."⁵⁷ It is this later aspect regarding the "use of materials" that Stepanova clarified in arguing for the dynamic and empirical nature of the tectonic. Gan noted that the term is also used to "describe volcanic eruptions spewing forth from the earth's core. That is, it is a synonym for the organicity of that which emerges from the inherent essence [of a given material]."⁵⁸ Organicity is fluid and dynamic, ever-moving and ever-changing, because it arises from empirical experience.

By way of tectonics, then, the Constructivists devised ways to contribute to proletarian culture, guided by Bogdanovist-Marxist principles. As Gan put it:

Dialectical materialism serves for constructivism as a compass, which points the way, and to the given future goals. The method of dialectical materialism exposes an unexplored realm, in the sense of projection, discovery and design of new forms of material structures. This abstraction does not separate it from empirical reality. The legs of constructivism

⁵⁶ Stepanova. "Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism." 177–178.

⁵⁷ Gan. *Konstruktivizm*. 61.

⁵⁸ A. Gan. "O programme i plane rabot gruppy konstruktivistov." 99–100. Quoted in Maria Gough. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 72.

confidently walk the earth, as with all of its plans, to that time, there, in communism.⁵⁹

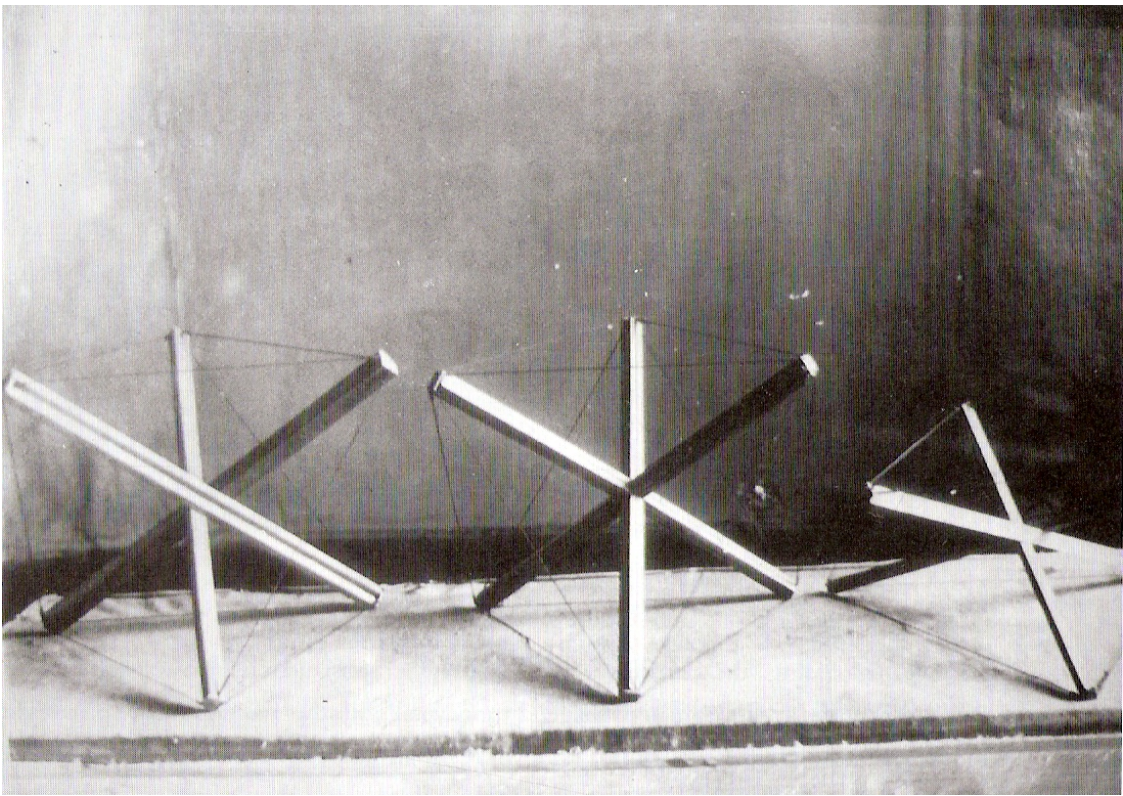
Tectonic analysis is experimental because it actively and dynamically solves problems. The task is to discover which materials – based on surface texture (*faktura*) and specific assembly (construction) – best resolve a problem. Constructivism’s laboratory phase was tektological because experimental work was perceived as labour and conducted by collectives in workshops. Efficient experimentation with new materials contributed to industrial, scientific, and technical advancements in the new Communist society. And lessons learned from these experiments contributed to practical activity.

Tektology in Cold Structures and Hanging Constructions

To illustrate tektology’s importance for Constructivist practice in the early 1920s, we can consider three-dimensional works produced by Karl Ioganson and Aleksandr Rodchenko. Ioganson, a co-signatory of the “First Working Group of Constructivists” manifesto (1922), produced three-dimensional constructions that he called “cold structures” [Fig. 1]. Ioganson adhered to the concept of artist-inventor, especially during Constructivism’s “laboratory” phase, when he was most prolifically building these constructions. I am positing that Ioganson the inventor was “experimenting” with different materials and, through empirical research, demonstrating that the Constructivist was a valuable part of the collective. In sum, Constructivists’ ideological aims are made transparent through the application of tektology. To make the point more clear, I will

⁵⁹ Gan. *Konstruktivizm*. 55.

Fig. 1



Karl Ioganson. Cold structures (spatial constructions). 1920-21. Wood, metal, and wire.

present an abridged tektological analysis of Ioganson's cold structures.⁶⁰

Consider the following statement regarding three of Ioganson's cold structures:

The triad demonstrates not only Ioganson's pursuit of cold – or rigid – structure, but also his search for a universally applicable constructive system involving the least possible material expenditure: minimum outlay for maximum return. With such an economy of expenditure, Ioganson demonstrates that rigidity is not dependent on the presence of rigid joints, but can be produced through tensile stress. In the name of structural economy, therefore, Ioganson foregrounds the deployment of wire cable as an integral *structural* member of the construction, rather than as more simply the means of its assembly.⁶¹

Maria Gough's analysis of Ioganson's work suggests an undeniably clear link between the methods of Ioganson's work and the methods of tektology. A tektological analysis allows us to deconstruct the structure while revealing the tectonic nature of “laboratory” Constructivism.

Tektology determines the organizedness of a system, and in the case of Ioganson's cold structures the system consists of the materials of which it is composed (wood, wire cables, metal plates) and the external forces that act upon it (Ioganson, gravity). Once specific elements of a system have been determined, tektology identifies the manner in which separate parts have been joined (“conjugation”). Successfully conjugated parts are organized: an organized cold structure is rigid and harmonious while a de-organized structure is yielding and degenerative. The “regulative mechanisms” of tektology which examine the issue of a system's stability are derived from Bogdanov's “method of conservative selection”. Selection refers to a conscious decision on the part of the organizer regarding choice of materials. Appropriate selection is an important

⁶⁰ These analyses of Ioganson and Rodchenko's sculptures precede a more in-depth, and conclusive discussion in Chapter Four of this thesis where I examine these same tektological methods, in addition to others, in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*.

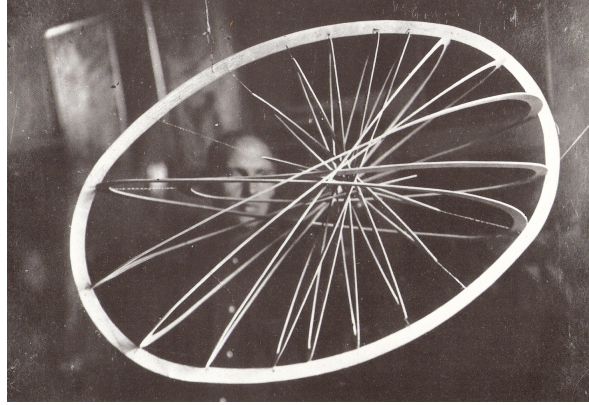
⁶¹ Gough. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. 82.

stage in the development of a system because poorly selected materials will advance the possibility of its decay. The organizer – in this case, Ioganson – must ascertain which elements he will use to construct a system as well as which elements will support his organizing objectives. Accurate selection recalls Ioganson’s determination to exercise the “least possible material expenditure”. It also indicates Constructivist support for industrialism. Ioganson selected innovative industrial materials for his work. Thus, he signaled his organizational capabilities as an artist. Finally, and most significantly, we come to the tektological element of “dynamic equilibrium”, the balances and counter-balances within a structure. The aspect of “tensile stress”, which exists in equilibrium, denotes perfect organization only if all parts exist within perfect tension, signifying an economy of materials. In sum, the cold structures were “laboratory” exercises in tektological methodology.

During Constructivism’s laboratory phase Rodchenko also began work on three-dimensional constructions which could be taken apart and reassembled “experimentally, in order to confront the constructor with the law of the efficacy of forms used and of their proper combination, and to demonstrate universalism, that from equal forms one can construct all kinds of constructions of different systems, types and applications.”⁶² These constructions were also guided by tektological methodology. According to Bogdanov every human endeavour is either organized or de-organized. Rodchenko’s desired “universalism” and “proper combination” of elements imply a system that is organized and relies on what are tektologically either similar or symmetrical conjugations (joined elements). These wooden sculptures – experiments in geometric patterns of concentric

⁶² Aleksander N. Lavrent’yev. “The Future is Our Only Goal.” Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future Is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 9–21. 13.

Fig. 2



▲ A. Rodchenko. Hanging spatial construction.
Plywood. 1920-1921.



▲ A. Rodchenko. Standing before collapsed hanging
spatial constructions. Photograph taken by Mikhail
Kaufman. 1922.

and uniform shapes – could either be assembled to form a three-dimensional hanging construction or be collapsed into a flat plane [Fig. 2]. A hanging construction that is organized exists in structural equilibrium and the desired conjugations in this case are symmetrical conjugations. Symmetry and its effect on equilibrium determines the organizedness of Rodchenko's hanging systems. The specific type of material – wood in this case – forms a rigid structure which permits equilibrium. Rodchenko observed that “every system of construction requires the specific use of its own material”⁶³ and in hanging constructions the result is an organized system. Rodchenko, in his experiments in early sculptural constructions, sought to devise – or invent – ways of achieving perfectly organized forms that he would employ in future work to propagate socially important messages. His laboratory constructions demonstrate the tektological process through which he and the Constructivists familiarized themselves with, and improved upon, new modes of construction.

Taken as a whole, the empirical examination of tektological elements in Constructivism signals “production” art as the end goal. The laboratory period of learning and experimentation with various materials and methods gave the Constructivist the ability to “apply his objective knowledge as a master of forms and structures”⁶⁴ in the future work of production art and the creation of objects in a factory setting. As Gan wrote:

In order to pick out from our midst the Marxist-qualified practices and theories of constructivism, it is imperative to introduce the work into a

⁶³ Hubertus Gassner. *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915–1932*. Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1992. 312.

⁶⁴ Stepanova. “Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism.” 175.

definitive system, to build the disciplines, through which we would traverse all experimental labour processes of constructivism.⁶⁵

And:

Left artists traveled a fruitful journey of successful and unsuccessful experiments, discoveries, and defeats. The second decade of the 20th century saw their innovative efforts. Among these, by strict analysis, one may establish vague but nonetheless persistent tendencies towards production principles.⁶⁶

Arvatov likewise emphasized the organic evolution from one task to the other when he wrote about the new goal of art in production:

... to subordinate the industrial process—and at the same time the process of artistic design—to the collective’s socially conscious and free will....Integralness and organization are the premises of industrial art, purposefulness is its law. ... From the organizational engineer to the organizational worker—this is the path of social development in general and of art in particular.⁶⁷

It is under these conditions that the maturing Constructivists applied Bogdanov’s tektological methods to production within a factory context. Constructivism progressed from experiment (knowledge) into production (practical/organizational activity) where an artistic system’s tektological success would be proven by experience on the factory floor.

Gan’s endorsement of Bogdanovist-Marxist theory propelled the Constructivists into material experimentation in order to find practical solutions to the question of how to foster proletarian culture. Active and dynamic, the Constructivist object was shaped by tektology. I have established that elements of cold structures and hanging constructions were experiments that are tektologically organized: and, as objects, they uphold an organizational potential. In the following chapter I discuss this potential as advanced by

⁶⁵ Gan. *Konstruktivizm*. 55.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Boris Arvatov. “The proletarian and Leftist Art (1922).” *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde Theory and Criticism 1902–1934*. Ed. John E. Bowlt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 225–230. 230.

the Constructivists during the “production” phase. In this next period of Constructivist production, artists turned from laboratory experimentation and embarked on ambitious design programs that substantiated the notion of active and dynamic organization in tektology. The implication of this new form of art is that the Constructivist – now “artist-organizer” – firmly embodied the proletariat and acted on its behalf.

Chapter Three

Russian Constructivism, Production Art, and Bogdanov’s “Artist-Organizer”

The Constructivists implicitly endorsed the advancement of production art, and in this regard Osip Brik, who was to become a preeminent Constructivist theorist, was particularly partisan. Following Bogdanov, the Constructivists were passionate about their roles as creators of a completely new and uniquely proletarian art. They sought to refashion themselves as “artist-proletarians”. While Proletkult leaders debated whether the organization should artistically train workers or enlist artists to reveal the path towards the creation of proletarian art, Brik argued that the enculturation of the proletariat should fall to artist-proletarians, because they “unite [*sic*] a creative gift with a proletarian consciousness into a single whole.”⁶⁸ Brik would later privilege the Constructivists as the embodiment of proletarian creativity and argued the Constructivists were uniquely capable of creating a new proletarian art. The Constructivists referred to themselves as “artist-workers”, “artist-constructors”, “artist-engineers”, and “artist-proletarians” to underline this idea.

Bogdanov’s Worker-Organizer/Artist-Organizer

Bogdanov saw all of life, including art, as having organizational capacities. He believed that the success of the revolution and the realization of socialism were dependent on the worker’s ability to organize his or her own socialist culture. Imperative

⁶⁸ O. Brik. “Khudozhnik-proletarii” *Iskusstvo kommuno*. 4 (December 15, 1918): 1. Quoted in Lodder. “Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917–20.” 29–30.

to socialism, according to Bogdanov, was the worker's ability to work in a collective. Thus, labour became an important aspect of proletarian organization. Working in a collective, the individual worker was required to yield to the collective will and assume the role of subordinator (organizer) or subordinate (worker) according to the task at hand. The exact responsibility of a worker was determined in collaboration with other members of the collective, thereby eliminating the need for authority in the labour force.⁶⁹ The Bogdanovist worker was a "worker-organizer".

In terms of art, Bogdanov did not make a distinction between creation and labour.⁷⁰ He advocated an art that drew its themes and experiences – the act of creation – from the collective and argued that only this type of art could play a positive role in the organization of proletarian culture:

The spirit of this art is collectivism of labour: it assimilates and reflects the world from the viewpoint of the labour collective, it expresses the relevance of its feelings, of its fighting spirit, and of its creative will.⁷¹

In his 1923 essay "Proletarian Poetry", Bogdanov discussed the proletarian artist as worker-organizer, citing the poetry of Alexei Gastev:

And now, at eight in the morning, the whistles sound for a million men.
A million workers seize the hammers at the same moment.
Our first blows thunder in accord.
What is that the whistles sing?
It is the morning hymn to unity.⁷²

Here, Gastev linked labour and collaboration with artistic expression. Reading this poem, the worker presumably would recognize the organizing power of the collective, and his or her proletarian consciousness would be enhanced. Proletkult, under

⁶⁹ Bogdanov. "The Proletarian and Art." 179.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Bogdanov. "The Proletarian and Art." 177.

⁷² A. Gastev. "Whistles." The poem, in its entirety can be found in Bogdanov. "Proletarian Poetry." 359.

Bogdanov's theoretical direction, promoted the concept of the creative worker-organizer by calling for the "merging of the artist and the worker."⁷³ Proletkult advocated for solid relationships between factories and Proletkult art centres, and as a result many Proletkult centres operated adjacent to factories in the worker's clubs.⁷⁴ Moreover, as was the case with the collective nature of work in the factory, artists in Proletkult's studios and classrooms were encouraged to work collaboratively and authoritarian instruction was condemned.

The Constructivist Artist-Organizer and Production Art

The conception of the worker-organizer as it relates to Bogdanov's theory of art and labour has its counterpart in the notion of the "constructivist". As a group, the Constructivists were obsessed with creating objects that would organize the "new Soviet consumer in a particular collective direction."⁷⁵ The organizational potential of the Constructivist (art) object entered the group's debates after the formation of the First Working Group of Constructivists in 1921. In 1921 Varvara Stepanova delivered a lecture at VKhUTEMAS where she announced the organizing function of the new Constructivists artist. The artist must participate in an "analysis of the new consciousness in art ...", at which point he or she would recognize that "[a]rt is an organizing beginning, a stimulus to activity." "Art," she emphasized "takes an active part in the organization of life, as creator of material wealth."⁷⁶ In the same year Rodchenko wrote:

⁷³ "kul'turno-prosvetitel'nye zadachi Proletkul'ta: Glavnye metody i formy raboty." TsGALI, f. 1230, op.1, d. 144, l. 180–87. In Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. 134.

⁷⁴ Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*. 130–31.

⁷⁵ Christina Kiaer. "Rodchenko in Paris." *October*. 75 (1996): 3–35. 20–21.

⁷⁶ Varvara Stepanova. "Program Seminar: 'The Basis of the New Consciousness in Art'." Delivered at VKhUTEMAS, Cézanne Club where she was director. 1921. Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F.

CONSTRUCTION is the organizing of elements...

....

...CONSTRUCTION is the modern demand for the ORGANIZATION and utilitarian exploitation of *material*...

...The MAN who has organized his life, his work and himself is the MODERN ARTIST...⁷⁷

Constructivist artists were proclaiming themselves artistic organizers in the Soviet economy. The “object” constructed in the crucible of industry and conceived of in collaboration with other artists would be mass-produced and permeate Soviet society. Constructivists envisioned the production of objects that served the collective interest, such as furnishings for a workers’ club, by encouraging comradely relationships between workers.

In order to give their creations credence in Bogdanovist terms, Constructivists called for the complete abandonment of old art forms and focused their efforts on useful objects inspired by labour, technology, and science. The creator was no longer an artist, but a “constructor”, “technician”, “engineer”, or “co-worker” concretely aligning him or herself to the proletarian movement. The Constructivist was, in fact, a worker-organizer. And, in keeping with the organizing purpose of proletarian art in Bogdanov’s scheme, Constructivist theorist Arvatov designated Constructivist-produced objects as “co-worker”, signalling ideological content in the process of production and the product itself. In 1918, the future Constructivist theorist Brik proclaimed:

The artist-proletarian is distinguished from the bourgeois artist not by the fact that he creates for a new client, or by the fact that he comes from a different social class, but by his attitude towards himself and his art. The

Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 147–148. 147.

⁷⁷ Aleksandr Rodchenko. “SLOGANS: (The Discipline of CONSTRUCTION, leader RODCHENKO). 1921. Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 158. 158.

bourgeois artist considered creation his personal affair, the artist-proletarian knows that his talent belongs to the collective. The bourgeois artist creates in order to reveal this “I”, the artist-proletariat creates in order to carry out socially important work.⁷⁸

When Brik later joined the Constructivists he incorporated this Bogdanovist ideology into the Constructivist vision. The Constructivists single-mindedly assigned themselves the role of building the Communist society in solidarity with the proletarian class. Just as Bogdanov urged a merger between the individual and society so as to serve the interests of the collective, so the Constructivists would serve the new socialist culture.

In her lecture delivered at the close of 1921 on “Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism”, Stepanova stated “it is impossible to be organically fused with the epoch if you do not take in to account and feel its pulsing – and the pulse of our day and age is action and change.” She also reminded her audience that “the fundamental distinguishing feature of the modern epoch is temporality and transience...”⁷⁹ Like Bogdanov, the Constructivists argued that art must adapt to the views and lives of the proletariat. In April 1921, just a few months before Stepanova presented her paper, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP). The Communist administration regarded NEP as a necessary step to strengthen Russia’s economic base in order to support a socialist society. Under NEP all major industry remained under state control, while peasants were given property ownership and economic rights to their surplus produce. The new system, while partly capitalist in principle, was designed to be temporary and to allow, in future, for entirely socialist modes of production and distribution.

⁷⁸ O[sip] Brik. “Khudozhnik-proletarii.” [Artist Proletarian]. *Iskusstvo kommuny*. No. 4. December 1918. 1. Quoted in Lodder. “Art of the Commune: Politics and Art in Soviet Journals, 1917–20.” 29–30.

⁷⁹ Varvara Stepanova. “Constructivism: The General Theory of Constructivism.” 177.

Under NEP, issues of technology, material consumption, production, and exchange found their way into Constructivist theory.⁸⁰ Constructivists became increasingly aware of manufacturing conditions. In discussions with his fellow Constructivists, Gan declared the group's intent as "the Communist expression of material structures."⁸¹ Stepanova reiterated this when she wrote that Constructivist art was "a discipline of the material design of the future culture..."⁸² Constructivism was indelibly linked to socialism, and under the somewhat capitalist conditions of NEP, Constructivist artists attempted to organize the working class by bridging the gap between commodity, producer, and consumer.

At the beginning of the movement, the Constructivists debated about how to unite theory with practice. Many discussions took place during the laboratory phase concerning what type of art Constructivists would create. When theoreticians Gan, Arvatov, and Brik joined the movement a shift gradually took place. Toward the end of 1921 and into 1922 the desire to leave the "laboratory" for "production" came to the fore. In 1923, in an article published in *LEF*, Brik called for the final rejection of easel art and declared: "[o]nly those artists who have understood once and for all that work associated with production is not just one art among others but the only possible art-form, only they are in a position to find a solution to the problems of contemporary art."⁸³ One of the concerns that dominated Constructivist discussion during the laboratory phase was the

⁸⁰ Kiaer, 5–7.

⁸¹ Aleksei Gan. "O programme i plane rabot Gruppy konstruktivistov." Presented March 28. Quoted in Maria Gough. "In the Laboratory of Constructivism." *October*. 84 (1998): 90–117. 69.

⁸² V. Stepanova. "A Conversation with V. F. Stepanova." Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 204–205. 204.

⁸³ Osip Brik. "From Easel-Painting to the Printed Fabric." (1923). *LEF*. Quoted in Angela Völker. "Is the Future a Goal?" Rodchenko, Aleksandr M. and Varvara F. Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 23–31. 25.

role of the artwork as a concept and an aesthetic object. The move into production art occurred once a general consensus was established that aesthetics – and art as had been practiced before the revolution – should be replaced with practical, technologically-inspired productions.

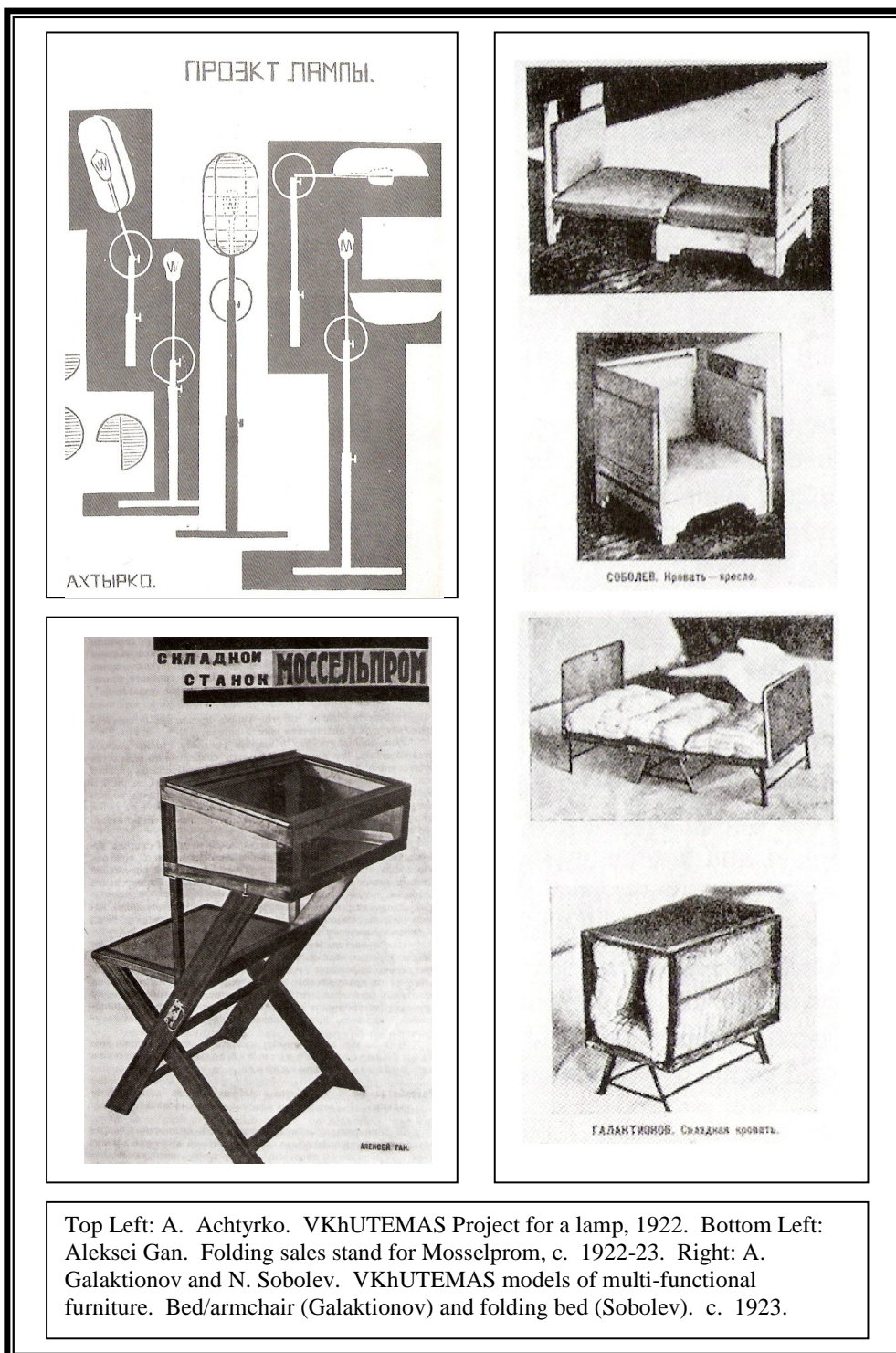
Constructivists then began to question *how* to enter into production art. They were still faced with the task of uniting theory with practice. In a paper titled “The Role of the Engineer in Production”, Kushner proposed that the artist enter directly into the factory as “engineer-organizer”⁸⁴, thus fulfilling two tasks – supporting the collective through labour and introducing culture into its consciousness. In addition, by entering the work force, Constructivists could achieve what Bogdanov hoped proletarian art would become: an organization-influenced art created by and representative of the proletarian collective.

Kushner admitted, however that the Constructivists did not have sufficient training to enter into industrial production.⁸⁵ As an alternative to entering the work force, Rodchenko and others began teaching at VKhUTEMAS. In 1920, Rodchenko founded an introductory course in VKhUTEMAS’ painting department. Two years later, in the spring of 1922, he took over the metalwork faculty and introduced the concept of production art to his students. In these metalwork sessions Rodchenko had his students design furniture and small accessories with the aim of organizing the proletariat through the object [Fig. 3]. Constructivists also turned to fashion design, theatre, and graphic production. Projects that did not go into production because they were too technological-

⁸⁴ Boris Kushner. “Rol’ inzhenera v proizvodstve.” Part 2. MS, private archive, Moscow. Quoted in Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. 101.

⁸⁵ Boris Kushner. “Organizatory proivdstva.” Gough. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. 105.

Fig. 3



ly advanced or complicated include architectural designs [Fig. 4]. In the production and distribution of their utilitarian designs, Constructivists saw themselves as participating in the everyday lives of the workers, organizing and directly contributing to proletarian culture.

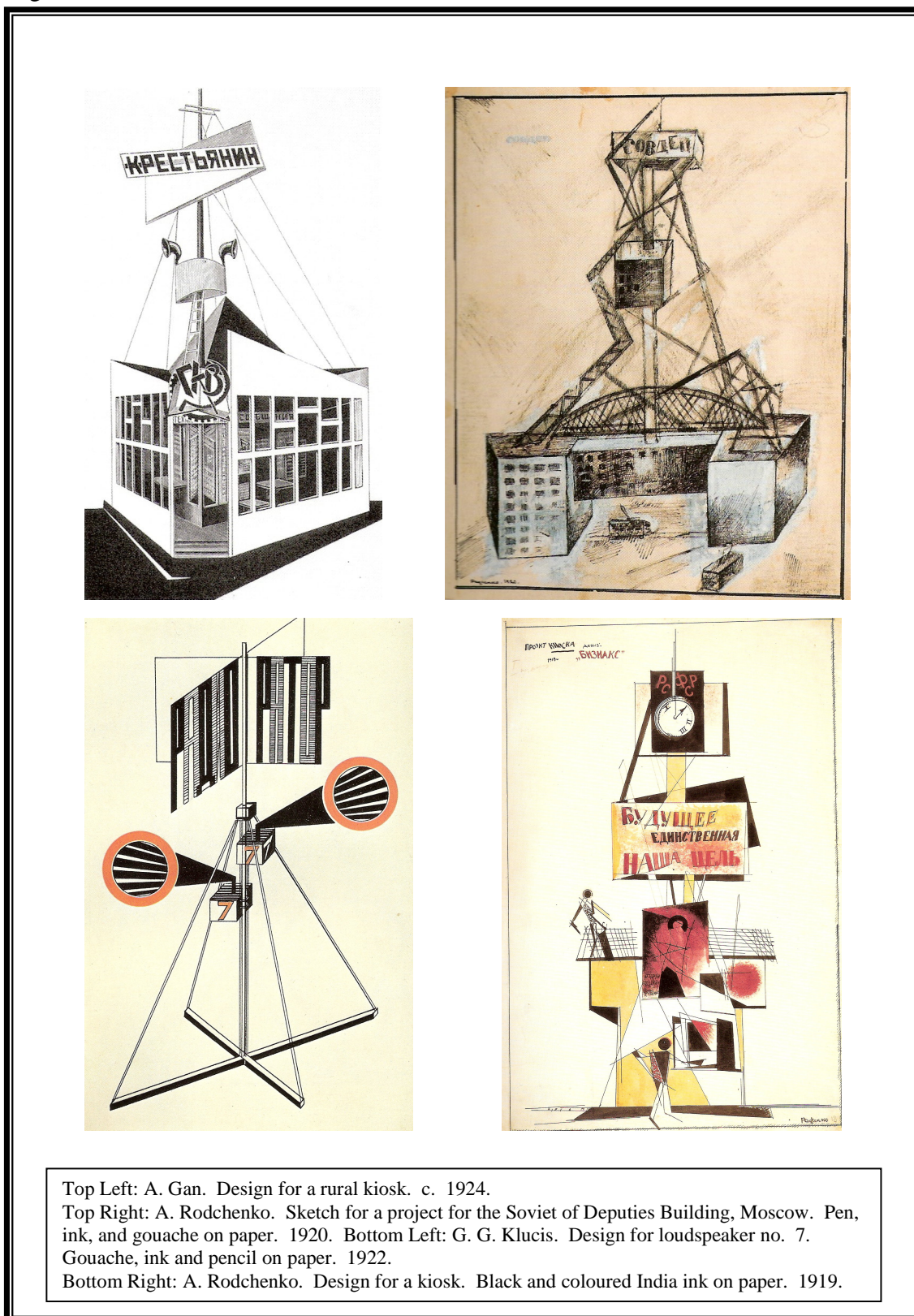
Constructivist “production art” entered the arena of proletarian collective labour between the years 1923 and 1925, when Stepanova began working at the First State Textile Factory. During this same period she was teaching alongside Rodchenko at VKhUTEMAS, in the textile department and at the Academy of Social Education. With a strong background in textile design, she saw twenty of her patterns go into production at the Textile Factory. Stepanova believed that fashion and textile design served a special purpose in the cultural enlightenment of the proletariat. Her textile patterns and fashion designs were motivated by the concept of the new man or woman as a productive member of the future socialist culture. Angela Völker explains that the Constructivist sought the

... unity of art and life not just through reforms in the artistic, political and economic spheres and through new power-structures. A new type of human being, for whom the artist served as a model was to emerge.⁸⁶

The new man and woman were no longer individuals: they were collectivist proletarians. As such, they deserved clothing designs that suited their new role in society. Stepanova’s patterns, therefore, were simple, geometric, repetitive, and unadorned in terms of distinguishing features [Fig. 5]. This was deliberate, for she envisioned fashions that did not set the wearer apart from the collective, and her focus on workers’ clothing as well as uniforms for sports’ teams reflected this [Fig. 6]. In an article written in 1928,

⁸⁶ Völker, 26.

Fig. 4



Top Left: A. Gan. Design for a rural kiosk. c. 1924.

Top Right: A. Rodchenko. Sketch for a project for the Soviet of Deputies Building, Moscow. Pen, ink, and gouache on paper. 1920.

Bottom Left: G. G. Klucis. Design for loudspeaker no. 7. Gouache, ink and pencil on paper. 1922.

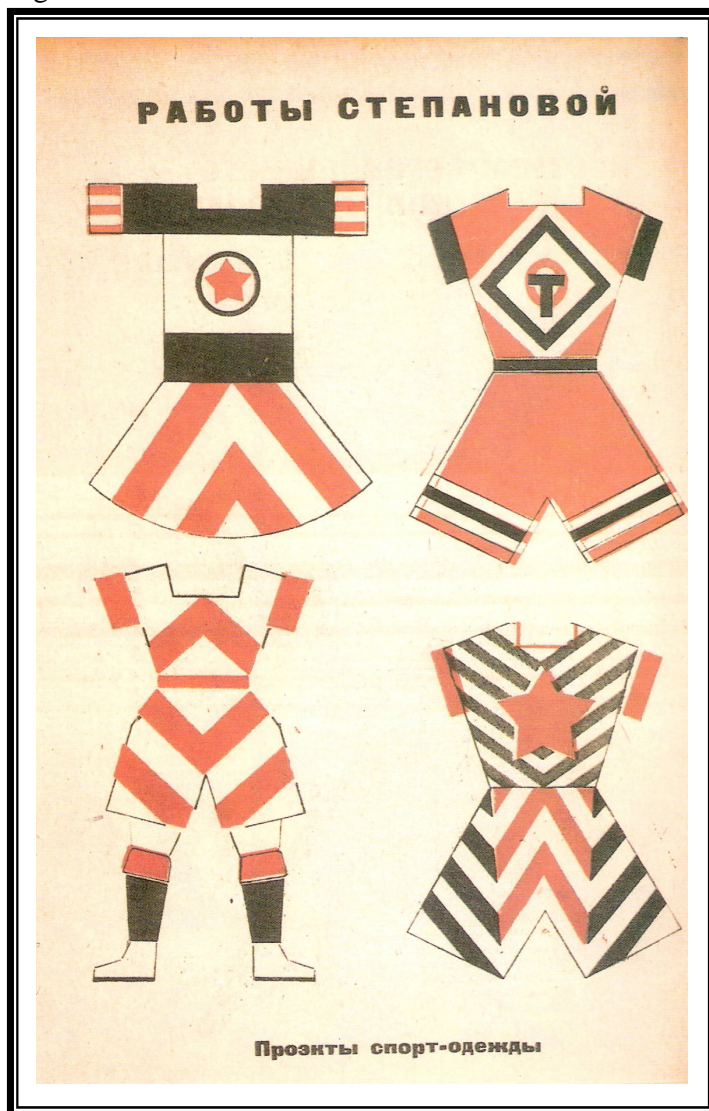
Bottom Right: A. Rodchenko. Design for a kiosk. Black and coloured India ink on paper. 1919.

Fig. 5



◀ V. Stepanova. Textile design. Pencil, ink, and gouache on paper. c. 1924.

Fig. 6



▶ V. Stepanova. Designs for sports' clothing. 1923.

Прокты спорт-одежды

Stepanova wrote that the role of a Constructivist working in a textile factory was “negligible, compared for example with the artist-designer in an automobile factory.”⁸⁷ Despite Stepanova’s pessimistic view of her position in the textile factory, few other Constructivists achieved the same level of accomplishment as she. She thrived in a collective and collaborative environment where art was fused with labour. In fact, the year following Stepanova’s statement, the Tret’yakov Gallery presented her with the ‘Soviet Textiles for Everyday Life’ award to acknowledge her successes in fashion design.

In 1925 Rodchenko traveled to Paris for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, where he exhibited his “Workers’ Club” as part of the Russian pavilion. The workers’ club was intended as a social gathering place: it offered a reading area, a library, and a section for playing chess [Fig. 7]. As a Constructivist product, the club was designed for the leisurely pursuits of the collective. The club’s elements exemplified the Constructivist desire to organize the working class, who both laboured and relaxed together. The uniformity of the desks and chairs eliminated individualizing features. Components of the club building such as a podium, bookshelves, chess area, and tables could be modified to accommodate a variety of participants and activities within the space [Fig. 8]. This utilitarian adaptability facilitated the self-organization of the everyday lives of the proletariat.

In addition to interior design, Rodchenko devised ads and slogans for products such as spices, cigarettes, cookies, light bulbs, and candy [Fig. 9 and Fig. 10]. Slogans

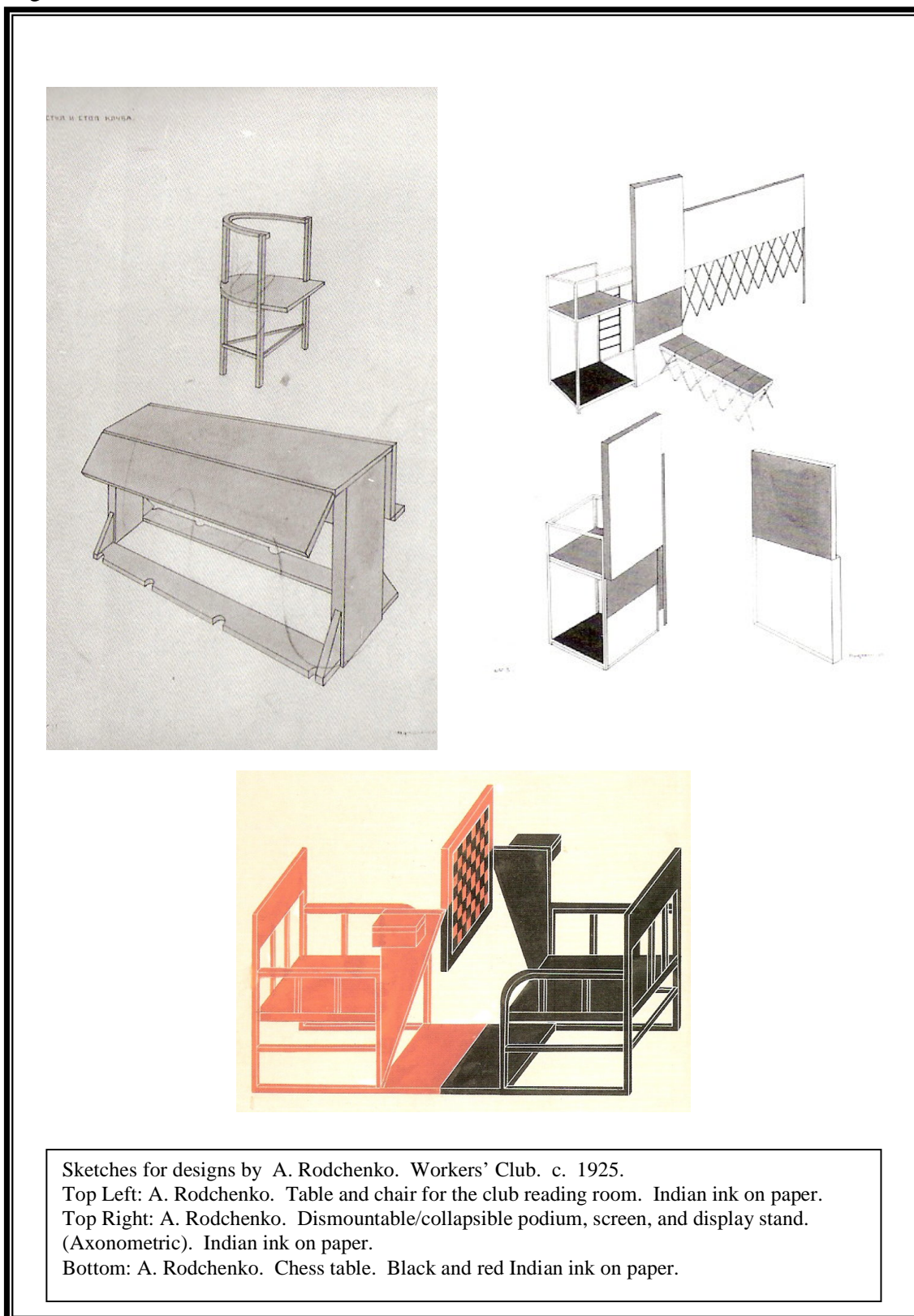
⁸⁷ Varvara Stepanova. “Tasks of the Artist in Textile Production.” (1928). Rodchenko and Stepanova. *The Future is Our Only Goal*. Ed. Peter Noever. New York: Prestel-Verlag, 1991. 190–193. 190.

Fig. 7



Top and Bottom: A. Rodchenko. Installation photograph of Workers' Club for the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts. Paris. 1925.

Fig. 8



Sketches for designs by A. Rodchenko. Workers' Club. c. 1925.

Top Left: A. Rodchenko. Table and chair for the club reading room. Indian ink on paper.

Top Right: A. Rodchenko. Dismountable/collapsible podium, screen, and display stand. (Axonometric). Indian ink on paper.

Bottom: A. Rodchenko. Chess table. Black and red Indian ink on paper.

Fig. 9

ВЕРХНИЕ ТОРГОВЫЕ РЯДЫ

**ВСЕ ЧТО
ТРЕБУЕТ
СЕРДЦЕ
ТЕЛО ИЛИ
ВСЕ ЧТО**

ГУМ

ЧЕЛОВЕКА

ГУМ

ПРЕДОСТАВЛЯЕТ

ГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫМ УНИВЕРСАЛЬНЫМ МАГАЗИНЫ

ДЕПОЗИТ НА ИМЕНЕ ГОСУДАРСТВА
ПРОИЗВОДИТЕЛЬ

A. Rodchenko. Advertisement for GUM. All that the heart requires..., 1923.

Fig. 10

**ДАЙТЕ СОЛНЦЕ!
НОЧЬЮ!**

**ГДЕ
НАЙДЕШЬ
ЕГО?**

**КУПИ
В ГУМЕ!**

**ОСЛЕПИТЕЛЬНО
И ДЕШЕВО**

▲ A. Rodchenko.
Advertisement for
GUM. 1923.
Give sunshine at
Night!
Where will you find
it?
Buy at GUM!
Dazzling and cheap

Я ЕМ ПЕЧЕНЬЕ
ФАБРИКИ **КРАСНЫЙ ОКТЯБРЬ**
БЫВШ **ЭИНЕМ**

◀ A. Rodchenko.
Einem cookies,
Advertisement for Red
October factory. 1923.
I eat cookies
From the Red October
Factory, formerly
Einem.
I don't buy
Anywhere except at
Mosselprom

▼ A. Rodchenko.
Ira cigarette
Advertisement for
Mosselprom. 1923.
All that remains
of the world.
Ira cigarettes.
Nowhere but
Mosselprom

НАМИ ОСТАВЛЯЮТСЯ
ОТ СТАРОГО МИРА
ТОЛЬКО ПАПИРОСЫ

ИРА

**НИГДЕ КРОМЕ
КАК В МОССЕЛЬПРОМЕ**

like “Nowhere but Mosselprom”, “I don’t buy anywhere except at Mosselprom” and “Everything that the heart, body, or mind requires—everything for the person is available at GUM”, encouraged Russians to shop at state-owned department stores. Advertisement designs permitted the Constructivists to become actively involved in organizing the everyday consumer lives of the proletariat through the marketing of “socialist” commodities.

Constructivist theoreticians deemed Constructivism the only artistic movement able to ideologically represent the rising proletariat. Proclaiming themselves as “artist-workers” and “artist-proletarians”, the Constructivists worked under conditions of collective artistic “labour”. Approaching the new task of engendering a cultural consciousness, the Constructivist “artist-worker” was synonymous with Bogdanov’s “worker-organizer” who united creativity with labour. Creating objects under collectivist, comradely conditions, the artist-worker/worker-organizer served the cultural interests of the proletariat through the design of mass-produced (art) objects intended for proletarian consumption. In the next chapter, I will examine the application of these principles in film, focusing on Dziga Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929).

Chapter Four

Tektology in film Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*

Soviet Film: An Agitational Medium

Motion pictures were first introduced to Russian audiences in 1896. Though film was viewed as a threat by the tsarist regime, its popularity grew rapidly over the next ten years, and by 1907 Russian filmmakers began to produce the country's first feature films. Lenin valued film "as a successful propaganda medium", and he believed that "cinema would have to entertain its audiences as well as persuade them", hence his suggestion of a ratio between propaganda and entertainment films, later known as the "Lenin proportions".⁸⁸ Bogdanov's key government collaborator, Anatolii Lunacharskii, shared these views. Lunacharskii believed that film, because of its wide reach and immense popularity, possessed the unique ability to serve as a powerful agitational medium. In fact, while running the Educational Ministry in the 1920s Lunacharskii participated in film production by co-writing several films. The advent of film technology was immensely popular with Soviet viewers. This growth was especially noticeable in the 1920s, when studios and cinematic publications erupted across the nation.⁸⁹ From the early 1920s, much of Russian film production fell under the state-centralized control Goskino (later named "Sovkino"). Genres included thrillers, adventures, science fiction, musicals, comedy, and melodramas, all of which were popular with audiences. These popular genres often told revolutionary stories; however, many related events that sympathized with pre-revolutionary ideals.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ Richard Taylor, Nancy Wood, Julian Graffy, Dina Iordanova. Eds. *The BFI Companion to Eastern European and Russian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2000. 144.

⁸⁹ Taylor, 203.

⁹⁰ Taylor, 82. Films, for instance, by director Vladimir Gardin sometimes exemplified this tendency.

Another type of film produced at this time was avant-garde cinema. Films of this genre featured an abundance of machine symbolism and montage work – and typically adhered to the genre of documentary, sometimes with an element of acted scenes and at other times without. The Constructivist Dziga Vertov was a leading figure in this milieu. He made extensive use of the cinematic technique montage popularized in Russia by another cinematic legend, Lev Kuleshov. Montage – a method of delivering symbolic statements – refers to the cutting and displacing of film footage in order to ascribe new meanings, compositions, and/or rhythms to the footage in question.

Russian Constructivism and Film: Participants in an Active Struggle

Dziga Vertov was born Denis A. Kaufman in 1896 in Poland. He studied psycho-neurology in Petrograd but became involved in film shortly after the revolution. By 1918 he was producing newsreel films, and in the following year he founded Cine-Eye, a group whose focus was on reality-based documentary film footage of Soviet life “caught unawares” and imaginatively reassembled through montage. As a Constructivist, Vertov and his followers denounced traditional, bourgeois art, claiming that scripted or acted film supported bourgeois tastes and served to “entertain the masses ... to divert the workers’ attention from their basic aim: the struggle against their masters.”⁹¹ In 1922 Gan hailed Vertov and Cine-Eye for “stepp[ing] out onto the real path of cinema, which must and is obliged to capture daily life and know how to present it in an organized way on the screen.”⁹² In 1923, The Council of Three, a Constructivist cinematic group led by

⁹¹ Dziga Vertov. “Provisional Instructions to Kino-Eye Groups.” (1926). *The European Cinema Reader*. Ed. Catherine Fowler. New York: Routledge, 2002. 34–38. 34.

⁹² Aleksei Gan. “The Tenth Kino-Pravda.” *Kino-fot*, no. 4. 1922. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*. Ed. Yuri Tsivian. Le Giornale del Cinema Muto. 2004. 55–56. 55.

Vertov, likewise proposed to assemble “visual events deciphered by the camera, bits of real energy ... joined through intervals into a tectonic whole by the great craft of montage.”⁹³ In other words, following the tektological precepts of Constructivism through their discipline as filmmakers they would use cinematic techniques as a means to create *organized* film in the service of *organizing* society. Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) best encapsulates his tektological technique. The film takes shape using new cinematic techniques and is unscripted, with footage drawn explicitly from “real life” scenes that are dependent upon “proletarian” experience.

Additional Truths: Scholarly Analysis of Vertov

An analysis of Vertov and *Man with a Movie Camera* is incomplete without a brief discussion of how his work has been considered to date. A fundamental similarity in the research of most scholars is the idea that Vertov’s preoccupation was proletarian class struggle. All seem, more or less, to agree that Vertov wished to participate directly in this struggle and impart whatever knowledge and organizational skills he was capable of generating through the medium of film. His method, however, is contested. Lucy Fischer, for instance, focuses on the manner in which Vertov ensured that his viewers were aware they were watching a film. *Man with a Movie Camera* opens with footage of an empty movie theatre which gradually fills with an eager audience; and then the “real” movie begins. The movie that the filmed audience is about to watch is the same movie that we the viewers are in the act of observing. Vertov did not invite his audience to escape from the realities of their everyday lives: instead he wished to “subvert the power

⁹³ Dziga Vertov. “The Council of Three 1923.” *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984. 14–21. 18.

of the cinematic illusion.”⁹⁴ He achieved further awareness in his audience by showing scenes of the filming and editing processes: the camera and the act of filming reveal certain truths regarding the proletarian revolution which he urged his audience to accept.

Basic truths and revelations are also discussed by Malcolm Turvey, who reflects on the point that Vertov assigned human morphological attributes to the camera while emphasizing the differences between the ability of the human biological eye to see versus the superiority of the mechanical “eye” of the camera lens. Turvey, however, points out the absurdities associated with Vertov’s transference of mimetic qualities to the camera. Vertov insisted that the machine’s capacities are inherently better than human perception while ignoring the fact that the camera was invented by human hands. Turvey argues from a Marxist perspective that the camera is “disguised as a magical property of the commodity itself.”⁹⁵ In Vertov’s hands the camera became a fetishized object, a metaphor for the super-human, capable of leading Russia into the era of socialism because of the didactic nature of the footage that it captured.

Anna Lawton, a film historian specializing in Russian film, looks at the linguistic parallels of rhyme in the visuals in *Man with a Movie Camera*. She examines the juxtapositions and paradoxes used by Vertov in his selection of subject matter, arguing that he sought to reveal “semantic relationships by means of rhythmic patterning.”⁹⁶ An example that Lawton provides involves the footage of cameraman Mikhail Kaufman, who is shown in the act of filming miners. Both the cameraman and the miners are

⁹⁴ Lucy Fischer. “*Enthusiasm: From Kino-Eye to Radio-Eye.*” *Film Quarterly*. 31. 2 (1977): 25–34. 28.

⁹⁵ Malcolm Turvey. “Can the Camera See? Mimesis in ‘Man with a Movie Camera.’” *October*. 89 (1999): 25–50. 33.

⁹⁶ Anna Lawton. “Rhythmic Montage in the Films of Dziga Vertov: A Poetic Use of the Language of Cinema.” *Pacific Coast Philology*. 13 (1978): 44–50. 49.

executing tasks, and this is how Vertov aligned himself with the workers, struggling and contributing to achieve a goal. In this way Vertov conveyed social meaning to his viewers through visual alternations and transitions of rhythmic and repetitive patterns.

Annette Michelson suggests that Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* utilizes and redefines Eisenstein's theory of "intellectual cinema" or "intellectual montage" by introducing and stimulating the formation of a conscious self.⁹⁷ Vertov used techniques such as reverse motion and linguistic elements of simile and rhyme, each of which reveal the most fundamental elements of life. Michelson argues that Vertov deliberately chose subject matter that embodies both Constructivist and Marxist ideals. With this in mind, I will now examine Vertov's film as a tektological creation.

Tektology and Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera*

The first task of tektology is to discover which elements compose a particular system. In the case of *Man with a Movie Camera*, I consider the film – in its completed version – as the system. The elements of this system invariably include the camera, the subject, the editor, and the cameraperson – in general all those involved in the creation of the film – and, finally, each frame of the film. The frame as an element can be further distilled into properties – for example intertitles, stills, and montage. All of these elements can be divided into two categories: those which are an intrinsic part of the film (the frame and its properties) and those that operate externally from the film (the subject and its creators). However, because of the nature of film as a device that captures its

⁹⁷ Annette Michelson. "The Man with the Movie Camera: From Magician to Epistemologist." *Art Forum*. 10. 7 (Mar 1972): 60–82. 64.

external environment on film, the creators and subjects must also be considered as another possible property of the frame in the form of *subject matter*.

Tektology's first section on "formative mechanisms" concerns the joining of the separate elements of a system. The process of joining, or connecting, is called conjugation. This process marks the beginning of the transformation of a system into either an organized or deorganized system: "Conjugation comprises co-operation, as well as any other social intercourse, e.g. conversation, the integration of notions into ideas, [or] the meeting of images."⁹⁸ In the practice of conjugation the elements being joined must each possess a common aspect, for instance, a common purpose. It is imperative that a common aspect exists – otherwise the conjugation will experience "losses" to the detriment of the entire system.

For example, while editing a film it would not be prudent to join a strip of film to a strip of newspaper. The product of this connection would not successfully be projected onto a screen, both because the resulting stress placed on the newspaper would cause it to tear and because there would be a noticeable gap in the series of projected images. In film, the logical conjugation is the linking of film strips to other film strips, as expounded in the following quotation by Vertov: "I've managed to arrange them in an order that is pleasing and to construct ... a film-phrase ..."⁹⁹ The joining of elements that result in a "phrase" that is "pleasing", or in harmony, is thus the first step toward the creation of an organized system.

The example of the conjugation of two filmstrips is organized, for the two elements being joined are tektologically "symmetrical" – that is, they are nearly exactly

⁹⁸ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 112.

⁹⁹ Vertov. "The Council of Three 1923." 17.

alike. This is also called uniform conjunction. There are, however, three additional forms of conjugation, as described by Bogdanov, that result in an organized system: “ununiform” (or asymmetrical) conjunctions as well as those that exhibit “associations by similarity” and those that exhibit “association by contrasts”. In describing conjunctions that are asymmetrical, the technique of montage is an appropriate example. The two elements being conjugated as montage are asymmetrical because they are not exactly identical: the images (subject matter) captured on the frames of each film differ from one another. A successful conjugation, however, is achieved because they possess a common aspect – the characteristic of being *film material* as such. Montage, as Vertov employed it, was frequently a deliberate assembly of two images juxtaposed to one another: for example, a super-human-sized Mikhail Kaufman superimposed on and recording a mass of people on the city streets [Fig. 11]. The outcome of these asymmetrical combinations often made a significant ideological point. In the Kaufman example, the viewer understands the potential of the role of the camera operator as he captures the movement of the city-dwelling masses. Through montage, Vertov, expected to reveal and organize the visible world – the world in which his prospective audience lived and worked.¹⁰⁰

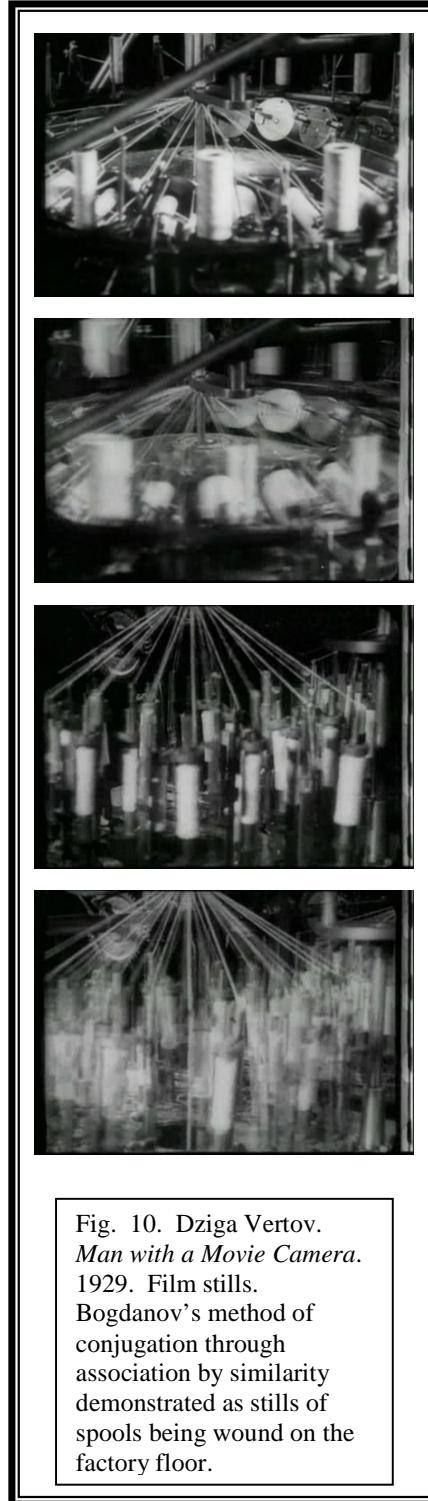
The remaining types of conjugation are those that are processes through association by similarity as well as association by contrast. Association by similarity may simply concern the connection of images/subjects that are related by a common theme. In *Man with a Movie Camera* a series of shots depicting the movement of machinery provides a good example [Fig. 12]. In an article titled “Provisional Instructions to Cinema-Eye Groups”, Vertov discussed his desire to maintain sequences,

¹⁰⁰ Vlada Petrić. *Constructivism-in-Film: The Man with the Movie Camera a Cinematic Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 4.

Fig. 11



Fig. 12



notably those with machinery, as the “coordinate[ion] [of] similar elements.”¹⁰¹ Mechanization symbolized industrial development toward Communism. In the instance of properly organized conjugation through association by similarity, the ability of “an associative principle to convey an ideological message”¹⁰² is thus achieved.

If connections are made through associations by contrast, according to Bogdanov “one lacks precisely what the other is especially developed in.”¹⁰³ *Man with a Movie Camera* is divided into two more or less equal segments. The first half of the film is dedicated to scenes of city life, factory work, and other daily chores. The second half is devoted to scenes of leisure activities, sports, and entertainment. The segments describing work are marked by a deficiency in leisurely activities. The contrast is clearer in the second half, since the scenes representing leisure recollect previous scenes of work through the very absence of labour-related subject matter.

In *Tektology* Bogdanov explained that connections must frequently be altered in a particular way so that an organized conjugation can take place:

All problems of practice, cognition, and artistic creative work amount to the task of organizing some or other of the available elements or complexes into more complex groups which correspond to certain purposes. The simplest type of solving such problems is precisely the establishment of ...connections between the elements ... which are being joined together.¹⁰⁴

Altering the connections within a system involves the method of ingression that, in film, often implies the physical act of connecting pieces of filmstrip. In *Man with a Movie Camera* there are two ingressions that enter into the connection of links. The organizer

¹⁰¹ Dziga Vertov. “Provisional Instructions to Cinema-Eye Groups.” (1926). In Dziga Vertov and Kevin O’Brian. “The Factory of Facts and Other Writings.” *October*. 7 (1978): 109–128. 118.

¹⁰² Petrić, 17.

¹⁰³ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 123.

¹⁰⁴ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 127.

(the editor) and the tools that he or she uses in the act of linking elements [Fig. 13]. The efforts performed by the editor in this attempt at co-ordination between elements were always “directed towards a common goal.”¹⁰⁵ Here, the common goal is the conscientious development – through editing – of an organized system that is described by Vertov as the act of “bring[ing] clarity into the worker’s awareness of the phenomena concerning him and surrounding him.”¹⁰⁶

The maintenance of a system defines the second type of tektological methodology – “regulative mechanisms”. Related, though not exclusively, to the function of editing is the method of conservative selection. Selection, with regards to the maintenance of an organized system, is a vital component in its stability and prevents the destruction of any given system. During the process of selection the organizer always has in mind which material will best correspond to his or her goals. The selection of appropriate materials for *Man with a Movie Camera* reflects Vertov’s ability to convey a message that communicated his responsibility in transforming proletarian consciousness. “From one person I take the hands, the strongest and most dexterous; from another I take the legs, the swiftest and most shapely; from a third, the most beautiful and expressive head – and through montage I create new, perfect man.”¹⁰⁷ The concept of a new perfect man is the definition of the man who recognizes both his duty as a worker as well as the importance of this labour in the creation of a socialist regime. The importance of coherent selection is reiterated by Vertov’s brother and cameraperson, Mikhail Kaufman, who said, “it was extremely important to piece facts together and to unite everything in a single thrust.”¹⁰⁸

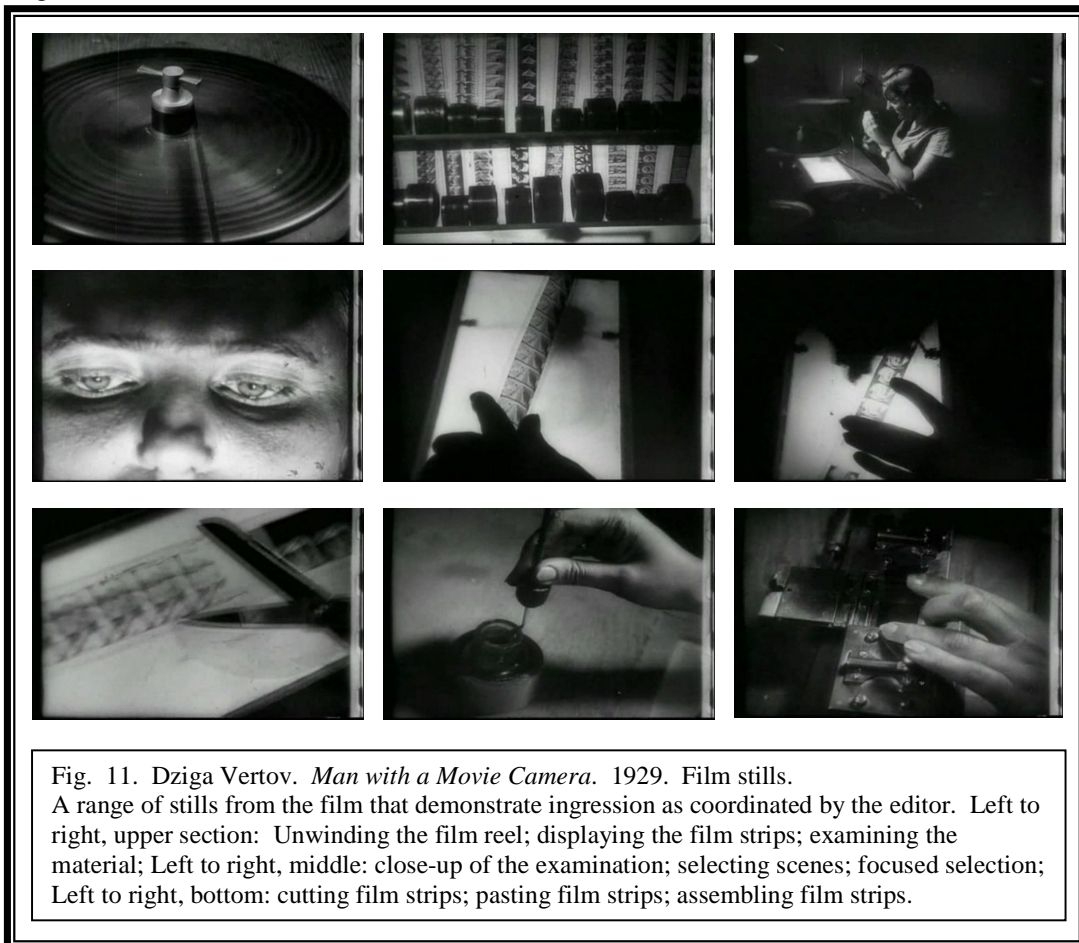
¹⁰⁵ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 171.

¹⁰⁶ Vertov. “Provisional Instructions to Cinema-Eye Groups.” 120.

¹⁰⁷ Vertov. “The Council of Three 1923.” 17.

¹⁰⁸ Mikhail Kaufman. “An Interview with Mikhail Kaufman.” *October*. 17 (1996): 54–76. 62.

Fig. 13



The moment of selection, however, is not limited to the process of editing: it is equally relevant throughout the process of filming. Vertov identified this process as “editing during filming”. This practice recognizes the selection of material, people, and location that will become the subject of the film, the importance of which is emphasized in the following quotation:

If one films everything the eye has seen, the result, of course, will be a jumble. If one skillfully edits what’s been photographed, the result will be clearer. If one scraps bothersome waste it will be better still. One obtains an organized memo of the ordinary eye’s impressions.¹⁰⁹

The act of selection implies the retention of material, but equally significant in this process is the act of negative selection. Negative selection refers to the material that is discarded at the risk of contradicting the common purpose of all selected elements. For instance, the disposal of elements that represented a bourgeois concept rather than the superiority of a proletarian concept was necessary to maintain the organization of the film. “We ... understand that it’s pointless to mix scraps of achievements: the little ones will immediately perish from overcrowding and disorder.”¹¹⁰ Both types of selection play an integral part in the preservation of a homogenous system.

An important aspect of tektological practice is the notion of equilibrium. Equilibrium becomes critical when activities within a system are reduced. Growth is preferred because a larger system is far more able to adapt and organize itself: it has more experiences (elements) from which to draw upon than a smaller, less stable one which has fewer coordinated elements. The level of equilibrium achieved by a system is entirely dependent on the suitability of both positive and negative selection. *Dynamic* equilibrium occurs when “changes are counter-balanced by equal and opposite

¹⁰⁹ Vertov. “The Council of Three 1923.” 18–19.

¹¹⁰ Vertov. “The Council of Three 1923.” 20.

changes.”¹¹¹ Dynamic equilibrium correlates with the concept of visual dynamism. This effect is achieved in Vertov’s film when scenes of still photography are juxtaposed with cinematographic scenes [Fig. 14] or “by intercutting abstract shots (including black or transparent frames) within otherwise representational segments of the film.”¹¹² The choices determined in the process of selection are key to maintaining proper structural equilibrium.

It is perhaps easier to understand equilibrium when the rule of concentrated action is introduced into the methods of “regulative mechanisms”. As mentioned above, a structure is more stable the larger it grows: it is equally dependent on appropriate positive and negative selection. The rule of concentrated action is “achieved by the uniform distribution”¹¹³ of successful conjugations. Organization does not necessarily equate to perfection; consequently, when there are unsuccessful conjugations, equilibrium is achieved through the rule of concentrated action. For example, Vertov believed that intertitles in *Man with a Movie Camera* could potentially weaken its organizedness; his audience was not always literate and the text could detract from his or her ability to understand the message of the film. Accordingly, he viewed intertitles as potentially unsuccessful conjugations. In earlier films, however, he determined that the inclusion of intertitles was unavoidable. To avoid complete distraction, Vertov placed short intertitles throughout these earlier films in a uniformly distributed manner. If concentrated action is applied throughout the system, and if the system is large enough, it is able to organize itself.

¹¹¹ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 188.

¹¹² Petrić, 5.

¹¹³ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 235.

Fig. 14



The “law of relative resistances” or the “law of the leasts” works in conjunction with the methods of equilibrium. This law states that even if there is appropriate selection that results in balanced equilibrium, the system’s stability (organizedness) is “determined by its lowest partial stability.”¹¹⁴ Essentially, this means that the system is only as strong as its weakest link. The law of relative resistances relates to the strength of each part (element) and its relationship to the whole system. Since the objective of *Man with a Movie Camera* is to show the collective reality of the work and life of the proletariat, it must do so as clearly and as efficiently as possible. The exclusion of intertitles from *Man with a Movie Camera* was intended to avoid confusing an uneducated audience. In this case Vertov adhered to the law of relative resistances by eliminating the potential of the “weakest link”. The elimination of intertitles has thus strengthened the film as a whole “by establishing a clear visual link between the subjects, [which has] significantly weakened the importance of intertitles; in so doing we have brought the movie screen closer to the uneducated viewers, which is particularly important at present.”¹¹⁵ Otherwise, the inclusion of intertitles in film can only communicate what the least literate member of the audience can understand.

Though the typical Soviet moviegoer of the 1920s preferred to be entertained than to sit through visually challenging or experimental film, box office figures for *Man with a Movie Camera* show that it was popular. Many modern-day scholars overlook the significance of the film’s financial success.¹¹⁶ Two separate accounts from April 1929 report that the film was shown at two movie theatre houses in Moscow and that ticket

¹¹⁴ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 218.

¹¹⁵ Dziga Vertov. “On the Significance of Nonacted Cinema.” (1923). *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Ed. Annette Michelson. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. 35–39. 36.

¹¹⁶ Richard Taylor, for instance, reports that Vertov’s avant-garde films were not widely distributed nor widely seen and virtually discounts other evidence of the film’s financial success. 256.

sales were either average or better over the course of a week. Regarding this success, Vertov concluded that “these figures would seem to provide evidence of a great victory for our cinema: they reveal the heightened cultural demands of our viewers.”¹¹⁷ This after all, was the desired effect. While the film may not have been distributed to all Soviet cinema houses, it did reach a sizeable portion of the proletariat: it was not a sensation but neither was it a failure. Many critics and workers of that period asserted that Vertov’s ideological mandate was not well presented, while others understood the film as a revelation of the basic truths of the proletarian struggle. Those who promoted the latter interpretation valued the film for its ability to disseminate class ideology in the service of the Communist State apparatus. A tektological analysis of Vertov’s film, however, demonstrates he was promoting the ideology of the Proletkult. This film was a Constructivist product, suffused with Bogdanovist ideological content. And, given its popularity, it is perhaps one of the most effective expressions of tektological precepts the Constructivist movement produced.

¹¹⁷ Dziga Vertov. “So What is the Matter?! Once Again, About *Man with a Movie Camera*.” *Kino*. 23 April 1929. *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*. Ed. Yuri Tsivian. Le Giornale del Cinema Muto. 2004. 350–351. 350.

Conclusion

Bogdanov's *Tektology* was integral to his proletarian cultural revolution.¹¹⁸

Bogdanov wrote in *Tektology*:

The principles of works of art are agreement and harmony, and therefore organization. Art ... organized human images, feelings and emotions ... organization of ideas and the organization of things are inseparable.¹¹⁹

Similarly, in "The Criticism of Proletarian Art" he wrote, "All creative work ... leads to organized, harmonized, enduring forms only by way of *regulation* ..."¹²⁰ Tektology is a science that actively organizes and unites experience. The same could be said of Constructivism. The movement set up experimental laboratories and then later moved into production art in order to organize proletarian experiences.

The implication that Bogdanov's theories influenced Constructivist production has been neglected by current scholarship. Christina Lodder, arguably the most recognized scholar in Constructivist theory and practice, wrote: "[t]o Bogdanov, creative art was merely another form of labour and as such should use everyday, theoretical and practical techniques...he considered the role of art to be the organisation of social experience."¹²¹ She speculates that "[t]his equation between technology and communist ideology was a dominant feature of one section of Proletkul't, and it may have influenced the Constructivists."¹²² She describes Bogdanov's role in the founding of Proletkult and also the relationship between the Constructivists and Proletkult, but nowhere is there

¹¹⁸ For further elaboration on Bogdanov's role in the creation of the proletarian revolution see Sochor. *Revolution and Culture: The Bogdanov-Lenin Controversy*.

¹¹⁹ Bogdanov. *Tektology*. 3.

¹²⁰ Bogdanov. "The Criticism of Proletarian Art." 344.

¹²¹ Lodder. *Russian Constructivism*. 75.

¹²² Ibid.

mention of Bogdanov's *Tektology*, nor is this theory credited with having any impact on Constructivist theory and practice.

My research follows a surge of interest in Constructivist and Russian studies since the collapse of Soviet Russia in 1991. *Glasnost* policies introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s heralded a period of freedom of information and, for the first time since the revolution, scholars were given archival access to facets of Russian history previously unavailable. Maria Gough's text was published during this period and is seminal for my study because it emphasizes the importance of the role of the Constructivist as "inventor" and the production of practical work. She seems to suggest, however, that Constructivist theory stems from a negotiation between Gan's inventive lexicon¹²³ and an expression of Communism; and I have drawn on her work, but shifted the focus to the Proletkult and Bogdanov.

In terms of Soviet studies, Lynn Mally, Zenovia Sochor, Carmen Claudin-Urondo, and Garland Crouch have thoroughly researched Bogdanov and the early Soviet cultural and political arenas, but neither art nor the Constructivists figure appreciably in their work. In sum, there is a palpable gap in Constructivist studies that this thesis has addressed. In consultation with the work of the aforementioned scholars of both Soviet cultural studies and Constructivist studies, I have argued in this thesis that Constructivist theory was heavily influenced by Bogdanov. Drawing on Bogdanov's theory of proletarian art, the Constructivists synthesized their artistic vision with that of the proletarian cultural movement. The Constructivists' desire to organize the collective as "worker-organizers" through production art was indebted to Bogdanov. It is on this basis – building ideology – that the tektological/tectonic method was adopted as a viable

¹²³ Gough. *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. 68.

solution in the Constructivist pursuit of uniting the theoretical and the practical in their art.

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