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Hagener, M.

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Introduction: Avant-garde Culture and Technological Transformations

*Die technischen Revolutionen – das sind die Bruchstellen
der Kunstentwicklung, an denen die Tendenzen je und je,
freiliegend sozusagen, zum Vorschein kommen.
In jeder neuen technischen Revolution wird die Tendenz
aus einem sehr verborgenen Element der Kunst wie von selber
zum manifesten. Und damit wären wir dann endlich beim Film.
Walter Benjamin (1927)¹*

What are the relationships between technological developments, aesthetic innovations and socio-political transformations? If one follows Walter Benjamin – and who is not inclined to do so? – then the technological breaking points, the moments of extreme transformation are bringing the political and social issues of art to the fore. It is at times of intense change that the most urgent issues become most clearly visible, but the development is technological before it trickles through into the culture at large: »...die wichtigen, elementaren Fortschritte der Kunst sind weder neuer Inhalt noch neue Form – die Revolution der Technik geht beiden voran.«² Yet, the specific employment of technology in art is neither a given nor determined by the technology itself. The use of technology is the result of a complex process of discussion, negotiation, subjugation, resistance and appropriation. Technology, culture and society cannot be considered apart – this important insight will guide me through an examination of the relationship between these three interlocking concerns.

This thesis is concerned with the European cinematic avant-garde, its dynamics and networks, its discourses and practices, its self-understanding during the period between 1919 and 1939 and its subsequent historiography. My approach to this avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s is inspired by Walter Benjamin, yet my own position is, at least partly, determined by my own historical situatedness which diverges from Benjamin's own contemporary observer-status. When Andreas Huyssen re-evaluated the canonical avant-garde of the interwar period from the vantage point of the postmodern in the 1980s he argued that

conformism would eventually overpower the tradition of avantgardism, both in advanced capitalist societies and, more recently, in East European societies as well. [...] In most academic criticism the avantgarde has been ossified into an elite enterprise beyond politics and beyond everyday life, though their transformation was once a central project of the historical avantgarde.³

Introduction

Since Huyssen wrote this text the situation has changed considerably as the bipolarity of Cold War politics has made way for a new post-Wall complexity, but the concentration on aesthetic features of the avant-garde at the expense of its transformative energies in political, social and cultural issues has persisted. From the vantage point 15 years after 1989 I believe that it is possible to cast a glance back at the avant-garde of the first decades of the Twentieth Century which has ever since been thoroughly canonised as historical.⁴ By adapting a perspective that might be loosely called »post-ideological« the avant-garde will look considerably different and this change of focus will hopefully yield interesting results. Specifically, I want to address how the avant-garde associated with film and the cinema engaged with everyday life, mainstream institutions such as government agencies or the electrical industry and technical innovations such as sound, what political objectives can be gleaned from their activities, and what strategic alliances they adopted. For the most part I will focus on ephemeral instances such as exhibitions and screenings, discussions and teaching, financing and commissions, networking and self-promotion not as a context for the films, but as an integral part of what the avant-garde conceived as their project of transforming life and art by breaking down the barriers conventionally separating them, while not obscuring their differences. In a move comparable to the Hegelian gesture of sublation (»Aufhebung«), the aim of this study is to understand the totality of avant-garde activities in the field of cinema as a series of discourses, by examining the paradoxical temporal, topological and geographical construction of this avant-garde in relation to European interwar society and to a major change in media technology – the coming of sound. The aim is to reconsider the coming of sound in European cinema from the perspective of the avant-garde and of industry, which will, I hope, not only encourage scholars to take another look at this particular chapter of film history, but help re-assess more generally the role of the avant-garde in this (and perhaps other) modern media transformations.

¹ Walter Benjamin: »Erwiderung an Oscar A.H. Schmitz«. In: W.B.: *Gesammelte Schriften. II.2*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1977: 751-755, here 752. [»The technical revolutions are the sutures of artistic development where the tendencies become visible, exposed so to say. In each new technical revolution the tendency turns from a hidden element of art as if on its own into a manifest element. And there we are finally with film.«, my trans.]

² *Ibid.*, 753. [»...the most important, elementary progresses of art are neither new content nor new form – the revolution of technology precedes both.«, my trans.]

³ Andreas Huyssen: »The Hidden Dialectic: Avantgarde – Technology – Mass Culture«. In: A.H.: *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1986: 3-15, here 3.

⁴ The term »historical avant-garde« for the movements of Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism has been coined by Peter Bürger in his seminal study *Theorie der Avantgarde*. Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp 1974. (engl.: *Theory of the Avant-garde*. Manchester: Manchester University Press 1984).