

# Art in Theory

1900–1990

*An Anthology of Changing Ideas*

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Edited by Charles Harrison  
and Paul Wood

Now the globe of the bourgeois paunch exists no longer. Sweeping away the old with the revolution we cleared the field for the new structures of art at the same time. The earthquake is over. Cemented by spilt blood the USSR stands firmly.

It is time to start *big things*. *The seriousness of our attitude to ourselves is the one solid foundation for our work.*

*Futurists!*

Your services to art are great; but don't dream of living on the dividend of yesterday's revolutionary spirit. Show by your work today that your outburst is not the desperate wailing of the wounded intelligentsia, but a struggle, labouring shoulder to shoulder with all those who are straining towards the victory of the commune.

*Constructivists!*

Be on your guard against becoming just another aesthetic school. Constructivism in art also is nothing. It is a question of the very existence of art. Constructivism must become the supreme formal engineering of the whole of life. Constructivism in a performance of shepherd pastorals is nonsense. Our ideas must be developed on the basis of present-day things.

*Production artists!*

Be on your guard against becoming applied-artist handicraftsmen.

In teaching the workers learn from the worker. In dictating aesthetic orders to the factory from your studios you become simply customers.

Your school is the factory floor.

*Formalists!*

The formal method is the key to the study of art. Every flea of a rhyme must be accounted for. But avoid catching fleas in a vacuum. Only together with the sociological study of art will your work become not only interesting, but necessary.

*Students!*

Avoid giving out the chance distortions of the dilettante striving for innovation, for the 'dernier cri' of art. The innovation of the dilettante is a steamship on the legs of a chicken.

Only in craftsmanship have you the right to throw out the old.

*Everyone together!*

As you go from theory to practice remember your craftsmanship, your technical skill.

Hackwork on the part of the young who have the strength for colossal things, is even more repulsive than the hackwork of the flabby little academics.

*Master and students of 'Lef'!*

The question of our very existence is being decided. The very greatest idea will perish if we do not mould it skilfully.

The most skilful forms will remain black threads in blackest night, will evoke merely the annoyance and irritation of those who stumble over them if we do not apply them to the shaping of the present day, the day of revolution.

Lef is on guard.

*Lef is the defender for all inventors.*

Lef is on guard.

*Lef will throw off all the old fuddy-duddies, all the ultra-aesthetes, all the copiers.*

## 10 Osip Brik (1888–1945) 'The So-called 'Formal Method'

The author was a critic and theorist, closely associated with Rodchenko and Mayakovsky, and hence with Constructivism and the Left Front of the Arts. He had also been involved with the 'Opoyaz' group of formalist linguists. Linguistic Formalism had come under attack from more orthodox Marxists, as indeed had the Constructivism which emerged from the preceding, essentially formalist, avant-garde art. Here Brik seeks to establish the revolutionary credentials of such practices, turning the tables on his opponents by claiming that it is these which are truly Materialist and the more orthodox forms which are reliant upon Idealism. Originally published in *LEF*, vol. 1, Moscow 1923, pp. 213–25. The present translation is by R. Sherwood (loc. cit.).

'Opoyaz' and its so-called 'formal method' has become a bugbear to the literary pontiffs and priestling dabblers in literature. This impudent attempt to approach the poetic icons from a scientific point of view evoked a storm of indignation. A 'league of resistance to the formal method' was formed, or, to be more exact, a 'league of resistance to the removal of poetic values'.

This would not be worth mentioning, were there not several Marxists, albeit motheaten ones, among the 'resisters'. This calls for an explanation.

'Opoyaz' maintains that *there are no poets and writers – there are just poetry and writing*. Everything that a poet writes is meaningful as a part of his general work, and is totally worthless as an expression of his 'I'. If a poetic work can be comprehended as a 'human document', like an entry in a diary, it is interesting to the author, to his wife, relatives, friends and maniacs of the type who passionately seek the answer to the riddle 'was Pushkin a smoker?' – and to no one else.

*The poet is an expert in his own business*. And that is all. But to be a good expert you must know the needs of those for whom you are working, you must live one life with them. Otherwise your work won't come off and will be useless. The social role of the poet cannot be understood from an analysis of his individual qualities and habits. *A mass study of the devices of the poetic craft is necessary*, these devices to be distinguished from the estimative areas of human labour; also the laws of their historical development. Pushkin was not the founder of a school, but simply its leader. If Pushkin had never existed 'Eugene Onegin' would still have been written. And America would have been discovered without Columbus. We have no history of literature yet. There is just a history of the 'generals' of literature; 'Opoyaz' will make possible the writing of this history. The poet is an expert of the word, a word-creator, serving his own class, his own social group. What to write about is intimated to him by the consumer. *Poets do not invent themes, they take them from their surrounding milieu*. The work of the poet starts with the processing of the theme, with finding a corresponding linguistic form for it.

Studying poetry means studying the laws of this linguistic processing. *The history of poetry is the history of the development of the devices of linguistic fashioning.* Why poets have taken this or that actual theme, and not others, is explained by their belonging to this or that social group, and has no connection with their poetic work. This is important for the poet's biography, but the history of poetry is not a book of 'Lives of the Saints', and must not be like one.

Why poets used certain devices, and not others, in the processing of themes, what causes the appearance of a new device, how an old one dies off – this is the subject for the most thorough research of scientific poetics. 'Opoyaz' marks off its work from the work of adjacent scientific disciplines not in order to go 'out of this world' but in order to establish and expand a series of the most vital problems of man's literary activity in the neatest way possible.

'Opoyaz' studies the laws of poetic production. Who will dare prevent it doing so?

What does 'Opoyaz' contribute to the proletarian construction of culture?

- 1 A scientific system instead of a chaotic accumulation of facts and personal opinions.
- 2 A social evaluation of creative people instead of an idolatrous interpretation of the 'language of the gods'.
- 3 A knowledge of the laws of production instead of a 'mystical' penetration into the 'secrets' of creation.

*'Opoyaz' is the best educator for the young proletarian writers.*

The 'prolet-poets' are still afflicted with the thirst for 'self-revelation'. They constantly tear themselves away from their class. They do not want to be simply 'prolet-poets'. They look for 'cosmic', 'planetary' or 'deep' themes. They think that in his theme the poet must leap out of his milieu, that only then will he reveal himself and create – the 'eternal'.

'Opoyaz' will show them that everything great has been created in answer to questions of the day, that the 'eternal' today was then a topic of the time, and that the great poet does not reveal himself, but simply carries out the social command.

*'Opoyaz' will help its comrade prolet-poets to overcome the traditions of bourgeois literature, by scientifically proving its moribundity and counter-revolutionism.*

'Opoyaz' will come to the aid of proletarian creation not with hazy little chats about the 'proletarian spirit' and 'communist consciousness', but with the exact technical meanings of the devices of contemporary poetic creation. *'Opoyaz' is the grave-digger of poetic idealistics.* It is useless to fight it. And all the more so for Marxists.

## 11 Osip Brik (1888–1945) 'From Picture to Calico-Print'

Brik embraced the ethos of 'art into production'. He accordingly condemned easel-art as archaic and moreover irrevocably marked by bourgeois individualism. In its place he

advocated photography, photomontage, and the use of reproducible screen (i.e. 'calico') printing. To this extent Brik's essay in particular, and indeed the Constructivist-Productivist avant-garde in general, stand as precursors for the later preconceptions of Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936) (see IVD6). Originally published in *LEF*, no. 6, Moscow, 1924, pp. 30–1, 34. The present translation is by R. Sherwood (loc. cit.).

The propaganda of production art is now crowned with success.

It is becoming obvious that art culture is not totally covered by objects for exhibitions and museums, that, in particular, painting is not 'pictures', but the entire aggregate of the pictorial designing of life.

The calico-print is just the same sort of product of art culture as the picture, and there is no foundation for drawing any sort of dividing line between the two.

Moreover, the belief is growing that the picture is dying, that it is inextricably bound to the forms of the capitalist system, to its cultural ideology, and that the calico-print is now moving into the centre of creative attention, – that calico, and work on it, are now the peaks of art work.

This is a fact. Our cultural creative work is now entirely purpose-orientated. We do not think up for ourselves any cultural work that does not pursue some definite practical aim. The concepts of 'pure science', 'pure art', and 'self-valuable truths and beauties' are foreign to us. We are practitioners, – and in this lies the distinguishing feature of our cultural consciousness.

The easel-art picture can find no place in such a consciousness. For its strength and significance lie in its non-utilitarianism, in the fact that it serves no other purpose than that of pleasing, of 'delighting the eye'.

All attempts to turn an easel-painting into an agit-picture are fruitless. Not because no talented artist could be found to do it, but because it is unthinkable in its very essence.

The easel painting is intended for a prolonged existence, to last for years and even centuries. But what agit-theme could last for such a time? What agit-picture would not be obsolete within a month? And if the theme of the agit-picture were obsolete, what would there be left in it?

A theme of short-lived effect must not be dealt with by devices intended for a lengthy existence. A one-day object must not be built to last centuries.

This is why the agit-picture cannot bear comparison with the agit-poster, this is why there are no good agit-pictures.

The 'pure' easel-artists have exercised good judgement in refusing to work on agit-themes. They realize that this way the easel-painting will perish, that it loses its basic values – its 'timeless', 'non-utilitarian' significance, and that the poster will outdo it. They are therefore making desperate attacks to save it by another method: – to impress on one and all that the easel-painting is, in its purely formal sense, a huge cultural fact, that without it any art culture is unthinkable.

They maintain that if no easel-paintings are made, then art culture will perish, that the creative 'freedom' which is apparent in the making of these easel-paintings must not be extinguished for a single second otherwise art will end.