

Prisms of Realism

On the Question of Emancipation and Authority in Art (Lukács, Brecht, Adorno, Kluge)

*The motive for realism is never confirmation of reality
but protest.
Alexander Kluge¹*

“The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does a simple ‘reproduction of reality’ tell us anything about reality”, writes Bertolt Brecht in 1931. “A photograph of the Krupps factory or of the AEG yields practically nothing about these institutions. The genuine reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations, the factory say, no longer gives out these relations. Hence it is in fact ‘something to construct’, something ‘artificial’, ‘posited’. Hence in fact art is necessary.”² This often-quoted statement shows that realism, in its Marxian sense, exceeds the mere question of style: it is considered a fundamental political, philosophical and artistic attitude which not only fosters awareness of the very constitution of reality, but also constitutes a moment in the dialectics of emancipation from domination. Understanding reality as it truly is, uncovering the ideological veil that obscures the reigning underlying power structures, is considered the basis of the battle against the capitalist order and the maintenance of the status quo of oppression. What is at stake in this realism is thus the very problem of reality itself, as well as the relation between reality, artistic production and the latter’s potential to mobilise the public in order to engage in a course of political action.

But how is it possible to penetrate both conceptually and artistically into the complex constitution of a profoundly alienated reality? What kind of awareness can an artwork produce? How should the content and the form of an artwork relate to each other? Which position should the artist adopt towards the reality at stake and the spectator? From where does the artist draw the authority to outline what should be considered authentically real? And what gives him or her the authority for a call to action?

Still today, these questions concerning the political agency of art and its conceptual and practical implications have not lost their pertinence. This article aims to deploy the multiple facets of the idea of artistic realism in relation to the respective concepts of reality on which it is erased on the one hand and its intrinsic tie to the question of emancipation and authority on the other. For even if the question of the authority of the artist in relation to his or her political engagement is rarely openly addressed, it proves to be one of the key problems of realism. In order to lay out this complex problematic, I will discuss two dense historical moments which implicitly or explicitly dealt with it: the clash opposing Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, which was part of a larger debate over expressionism in the late 1930s; and Alexander Kluge’s concept of *antagonistic realism* as developed in the 1960s and 70s on the basis of both Brecht’s activist position and Theodor W. Adorno’s critique of the former notions of realism.

¹ Alexander Kluge, “The Sharpest Ideology: That Reality Appeals to its Realistic Character” (trans. David Roberts), *Alexander Kluge. Raw Materials for the Imagination*, ed. Tara Forest (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), p. 192.

² Bertolt Brecht: *Der Dreigroschenprozeß/ The Three Penny Trial* (trans. Ben Brewster), in Ben Brewster, “Shloovsky to Brecht: A Reply” in *Screen*, 15:7, (1974), p. 93.

Realism is at Stake: Lukács, Brecht and the Expressionism Debate

The problem of seizing reality critically through artistic and literary means was not only of central interest for the artists, writers and intellectuals contributing to the so-called “Expressionism debate” which arose in the left-wing journal *Das Wort* in 1937/38.³ They also considered it to be of utmost urgency. Most were directly concerned by Nazi Germany’s cultural, social and racial politics and forced into exile. Hence, they shared the conviction that it was crucial to oppose a sharp, realistic and critical perception not only to the glossy propaganda of Hitler’s regime but also to the visions of bourgeois escapism that distract the spectator or the reader from politics in order to maintain the status quo. Gottfried Benn’s⁴ drift towards fascism thus provoked fervent reactions and a reconsideration of Lukács’ earlier essay entitled “Expressionism: its Significance and Decline” (1934).⁵ In this text and his later contributions to the subject, Lukács not only claims an (albeit not fully intentional) affinity between National Socialism and expressionism due to their shared roots in mythology, subjectivism and irrationalism, but also formulates a more general critique of modernist art. According to him, the formal experimentations of expressionism and other modernist movements, by focusing unilaterally on the expression of subjective perceptions of reality, are unable to represent objective reality. They fail to articulate the dialectical forces determining history. By putting subjective experiences at their core, they align themselves with bourgeois ideology, which is happy to accommodate the current reified situation. Even though subjective mediation of the objective conditions is a necessary element in the representation of reality, the latter is necessarily distorted when the subjective part is fetishized and isolated from the very dialectics within which it is embedded. Only when an artwork is capable of representing subjective experience (the particular) in its multiples relations with the objective conditions through which they occur (the universal) can it be considered realistic. That is, only when it shows the individual as typical – as both object of the prevailing circumstances and active subject capable of transforming history – instead of remaining on the surface level of appearances.

Because the core of reality does not lie on the surface level of appearances, but in the dialectic between appearance and essence – i.e. the multiple subject-object-mediations that constitute it – neither subjectivist expressions nor objectivist depictions (naturalism) could ever seize the quintessence of the real in its totality.

Realistic art, in contrast, is able to capture reality as a totality that it is, because it represents it comprehensively, sensually and intelligibly at once. While modernist techniques such as montage or interior monologue, based on instantaneity and fragmentation, reflect the false consciousness of capitalism in an uncritical way, realist art for Lukács, such as Balzac’s great novels, penetrate into the very essence of reality.⁶ For Lukács, realism is the name of an artistic mediation of the broader process of emancipation in line with Marx’s theory and prognosis. By representing

³ The most comprehensive collection of the debate has been published in German: Hans-Jürgen Schmitt (ed.), *Die Expressionismusdebatte. Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*, (Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1978); in English translation, a concise selection is available in Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Perry Anderson et. al. (London, Verso books, 1980).

⁴ Gottfried Benn (1886-1956) was a German poet and doctor.

⁵ Georg Lukács, in: “Expressionism: its Significance and Decline”, *Essays on Realism*, ed. Rodney Livingstone and David Fernbach (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980), 76-113

⁶ see Lukács, “Realism in the Balance”, *Aesthetics and Politics*, *op.cit.*, p. 28-59

the entirety of the relevant dialectical forces constitutive of this reality, the realist artwork contributes to the awakening of consciousness of the objective course of history. Consequently, an artwork draws its authority from the accuracy of its position towards the reality it mediates.

This idea of reality as totality and of realism as its comprehensive reflection has been harshly criticized by other participants in the debate, namely by Ernst Bloch and Bertolt Brecht. “But what if Lukács's reality – a coherent, infinitely mediated totality – is not so objective after all?” writes Bloch. “What if authentic reality is also discontinuity?”⁷ If the reality at stake is not conceivable as a comprehensive totality because it has been itself transformed by capitalism and modernity to the point that it has become fundamentally fragmented and antagonistic in itself, realistic art aiming to represent it as such would necessarily be not only inadequate, but also contaminated. An artwork adopting older, formerly established forms only because those have been authentically realistic in their times cannot but produce an illusionary and thus ideological image of the current socio-political situation. According to Bloch and Brecht, Lukács' resort to those canonical forms only shows his authoritarian and unworldly relation to art and the political actuality of his time. For the question of form could never be answered once and for all, but has to be asked every time anew and invented in relation to the specific content and the particular reality into which it intervenes. “Realist writing can only be distinguished from non-realist writing by being confronted with the very reality it deals with”, writes Brecht.⁸ This reality is to be understood through thought that stems from experience and praxis rather than through the distant perspective of elitist, theoretical conceptualization. Therefore the artist should seek out contact with the oppressed and involve them in the artistic process through experimental practices, which, instead of serving as a timeless model, are intimately linked to their very actuality and adapted to contemporary forms of perception. Hence, form and content are not to be thought of separately (a unique form being suitable for the transmission of any critical content), but always in their specific relation to each other depending on the reality at stake. For Brecht, it is thus not only the very concept of reality that has to be reconsidered and adapted to recent developments, but also the question of its relation to art.

Rather than sticking to the idea of art as representation, which considers the spectator or reader as a passive, contemplative receiver of transmitted content, art should address its public as actively involved in the process of the development of consciousness and emancipation. Therefore, Brecht conceives his epic theatre, in opposition to Aristotelian principles, as a critical form based on the *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement-effect), aiming to render impossible both empathic identification with the characters and absorptive immersion in the story.⁹ By revealing the artificial character of the artwork at any moment, spectators are made to position themselves in relation to it from a distance. Gestures and circumstances commonly taken for granted are shown in a defamiliarized manner, dragging them out of their obviousness, uncovering their contingent character and thus demonstrating that the transformation of the given situation is indeed possible. Brecht's plays aim to raise the spectators' awareness of their alienation (*Entfremdung*) and to sharpen their faculty of judgment. Brecht understands realism in art as an attitude, both political

⁷ Bloch, “Discussing Expressionism”, *Aesthetics and Politics*, op.cit., p.22

⁸ Brecht “Breadth and Variety of the Realist Mode of Writing”, *Brecht on Art and Politics*, ed. Steve Giles and Tom Kuhn, (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2003), p. 221 220-227

⁹ see for example *Brecht on Theatre. The development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett, New York, Hill and Wang, 1961. The *Verfremdungseffekt* is here translated as “alienation-effect”.

and analytical, which intends to intervene in the socio-political situation: it is fully engaged in the process of emancipation through the mobilization of its public. Its authority lies in the cause it is committed to, in the conviction shared by the public and the artist that the power structures have to be overthrown.

Autonomy vs. Commitment: Adorno's Critique

Lukács and Brecht's positions on realism, however different their respective perspectives may be, have a common basis in the conviction that reality should be shown in its dynamics in order to raise the spectator's or reader's awareness of the socio-political situation. According to both Lukács and Brecht, the agency of an artwork lies in its ability to mobilize its spectators by transmitting, more or less directly, a meaning that emanates from the adequate, dialectical presentation of reality. Be it through the reflexive representation of the underlying forces generating the dialectics of the historical process, or by enhancing the experience of an estrangement-effect, the aim of realistic art is that of an intentional transmission of a specific, albeit complex and dialectical political content.

Adorno, in contrast, claims that "[a]ny artwork that supposes it is in possession of its content is plainly naïve in its rationalism".¹⁰ According to Adorno, by subscribing to a specific cause and submitting the artwork to its goals, both Lukács and Brecht miss the very constitution of an artwork. Lukács by considering it a mere medium of knowledge (e.g. a potential propaedeutic to science) and thus ignoring the dialectical interpenetration of form and content and the subversive force of an artistic practice¹¹; Brecht by his didactic tone which obstructs authentic artistic experience by anticipating a specific message in a way that is authoritarian.¹²

The problem of committed art as expounded by Adorno is precisely the fact that it commits itself to a determined purpose that is alien to the sphere of art, thereby foregrounding the artist's intention and approximating the work to propaganda (as socialist realist artworks or products designed for the culture industry). Rather than orienting an artwork towards an intended meaning, the artist should follow her material's injunctions in order to deploy its own truth-content. The artwork itself is able to "resist by its form alone the curse of the world",¹³ for its politics does not lie in an imposed message, but in its very constitution, which is simultaneously autonomous (independent of societal means and resistant to instrumentality) and *fait social* (both mediation and part of reality). Through art, that which the administered reality excludes or oppresses – the non-identical – comes into its own. Herein lies its utopian potential and its negative relation to reality. "Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or 'from a particular perspective' but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art's own autonomous status."¹⁴ Adorno would certainly not adopt the term realism for what he understands to be authentic art, but he fully recognizes art's potential to mediate reality aesthetically, or more precisely, that which it oppresses and conceals.

¹⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 1997), p.37.

¹¹ see Adorno, "Reconciliation under Durness", *Aesthetics and Politics*, *op.cit.*, p.162-163.

¹² see for example Adorno, *Aesthetic theory*, *op.cit.*, p. 329.

¹³ Adorno, "Commitment", *Aesthetics and Politics*, *op.cit.*, p. 180.

¹⁴ Adorno, "Reconciliation under Durness", *op.cit.*, p.162.

Hence, art is indeed a political and philosophical affair with regard to reality. But it loses its force when it is instrumentalized by a particular cause, even when this cause is universal emancipation. For instrumentality is that which vitiates the reality that the artwork seeks to resist. In other words, an artwork can never be reduced to a manifest meaning, because the way in which its form and content interrelate is fundamentally different from discursive logic. Its emancipatory agency lies in the particular experience of an artwork as both independent of the societal context of delusion [*Verblendungszusammenhang*] and coercion, and yet intimately related to it. Hence its authority lies neither in the artist's integrity nor in a presumed message, but in its very constitution.

Only by recognizing its enigmatic character can one defy another kind of realism: the dominating reality principle, or the "overvalued realism" (*überwertiger Realismus*)¹⁵ omnipresent in the mass media and ruling over political and positivist discourses, which forces people to accept the status quo by soliciting the public to "be realistic". By its autonomous existence, art defies this kind of realism, which obscures the fact that understanding reality as factual, rational and steady, itself constitutes the dominant objectivist ideology that legitimates domination.

Antagonistic realism: Kluge

Alexander Kluge, author, lawyer, filmmaker, and Adorno's close friend and disciple, finally reconsidered the notion of realism in the 1960s and 1970s, in opposition to this omnipresent precept of "being realistic". Alongside Adorno, he criticized the pervasive instrumentality of rational thinking based on the subordination of phenomena to defined identities. This not only confined people to consent with that which is stated in its name, but also facilitated behaviour which appeared reasonable in a given situation: "With logic, I could just as well become concentration camp-supervisor as chief strategist in the Pentagon. But my diaphragm cannot lead me there. My eyes and ears do not lead me there."¹⁶

His concept of "antagonistic realism" aims not only to reveal the political and ethical implications of the hegemonic claim of the reality principle, but also to oppose a more comprehensive, emancipatory view of human reality through his films and writings. Like Adorno, he criticized rationalization from above which ignored what didn't fit into its schema. But, more optimistic than Adorno, Kluge believes in a genuinely human force capable of resisting and undermining the reigning realism of facts. Feelings, sensations, intuitions, physical reactions and wishes are persistent forces that stem from perceptual experience, spontaneously countering the unbearable elements of factual reality. However, in our administrated, capitalist societies, numerous strategies are employed so as to impede genuine subjective experience by subordinating it to the rules of rationality or neglecting their relevance, or by manipulating it (e.g. by confining the sphere of the senses to the products of the culture industry and thus exploiting emotional needs for capitalist interests). Therefore in order to activate the senses and to liberate their insurgent potential, sensual impulses must be released from their ideological packaging. Instead of focussing on isolated sentimental or lofty moments that appeal to strong, absorbing

¹⁵ see Theodor W. Adorno, "Erziehung-Wozu?", *Theodor W. Adorno. Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, ed. Gerd Kadelbach (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 105-119 (translation by the author)

¹⁶ Alexander Kluge, "Interview mit Ulrich Gregor (1976)", *In Gefahr und größter Not bringt der Mittelweg den Tod*, ed. Christian Schulte, (Berlin: Vorwerk, 1999), p. 214. (translation by the author)

feelings (as many Hollywood productions do, not only through plot, but also by using visual and musical effects in order to emphasize the intended affective impact), Kluge entangles emotional moments with the political context in which they occur and interweaves them with events from the past and utopian visions of the future. Rather than smoothing the narrative and constructing a continuous storyline (as Lukács might have wanted), the frictions and conflicting logics of reality are kept as vividly as they are in reality itself.

In this respect, Kluge multiplies the *Zusammenhänge* (translatable as both, contexts or interrelations/connections) through which the senses are stimulated by editing together heterogeneous elements such as imaginary episodes with archival material – fragments from newsreels or photographs with paintings, fictional characters with real situations, animated scenes and intertitles, etc. – in the form of constellations, that is without subordinating one to another and by keeping antagonisms alive. In his films, the spectator is neither confronted with an obvious, unilateral narration with a clear direction, nor with a purely documentary or purely fictional setting, but always with an amalgamation of multiple temporalities, logics and perspectives.

Artists Under the Big Top: Perplexed (1968), for example, begins with archival footage showing Hitler during the “day of German art” in 1939, while playing the Beatles song *Yesterday* in Spanish. The film follows the likable but eccentric Leni Peickert in her futile quest to build a reform circus, which finally leads her to change the sector and dabble in television. She is ultimately fired after an attempt to sabotage the program. Her story, told without pathos, is constantly loosely linked to heterogeneous elements from silent films, illustrations of ancient spectacles and photographs, classical music and diverse literary quotations.

Another fictive character symptomatic for Kluge’s conception of art is Gabi Teichert, who appears in Kluge’s contribution to *Germany in Autumn* (1978) and returns as a protagonist of *The Female Patriot* (1979). Her aim as a history teacher is to find a better history to tell. So she digs for archaeological evidence and intervenes in a (real) political congress of the German social democratic party in 1977. Her utopian aspirations for a “better” history lead her, experimentally, to very different situations linked with the consideration of the past – her own and that of Germany. One is the serious discussions with actual politicians on the subject of education, thus deflecting the common course of argumentation.

Kluge’s concept of “antagonistic realism” rests on the dialectical relation between realist rigidity or the harshness of the factual reality and the antirealist affective interactions with it. He agrees with Adorno on the restricting effect of content-based messages (which, ultimately, align themselves with the dominant identity-thinking). But he also agrees with Brecht on the necessity of enhancing an active perception of the public so as to release its emancipatory potential. Hence, instead of imposing, authoritatively, a preconceived meaning, Kluge considers his hybrid films to be an artistic contribution to a larger political project: the production of an oppositional public sphere beyond the dominating bourgeois public sphere as promoted by capitalist society and its ideological discourse. “Film is not an affair of the authors, but a dialogue between the spectator and the author.”¹⁷ This is only possible when “what the author’s work process has added or omitted” becomes recognizable in the film.¹⁸ The “film in the spectator’s head” – composed by the encounter of the film with the spectator’s own associations, interpretations and memories – is as

¹⁷ Kluge, “Interview mit Ulrich Gregor (1976)”, *op.cit.*, p. 200 (translation by the author).

¹⁸ Kluge, „Debate on Documentary Film: Conversation with Klaus Eder, 1980, *Raw Material for the Imagination*, *op.cit.*, p.204.

constitutive for the artwork as the director's contribution. Not only because it is the viewers' associations, imaginations and projections which activate the film through the experience, but also because reality, that which appears through both the film and its receptive response, is only meaningful when it can be disputed. Film, then, is meant to be a collective experience, which does not predetermine its reception, but aims to enhance trust in one's faculty to think, perceive and sense.

For Kluge, art contributes to emancipation by providing a space that is both beyond the administered societal context and related to it in many complex ways. Rather than localizing this space outside reality, he brings it back into its very core. His films are small islands supposed to subvert the reigning logical principles and to transform it from below by sharpening the senses. This emancipation cannot but function without paternalistic guidance, by dissipating any authoritarian attempt to influence the public's attitude towards a given reality. The questions raised by Kluge follow up those that were asked by the participants of the "expressionism debate": how is it possible to disturb the dominating vision of reality so as to interrupt common sense and open up critical perspectives? How is artistic practice able to intervene as its own autonomous force into the socio-political sphere, without transforming into propaganda or ideology? His answers put the question of authority in their centre. In order to emancipate the spectator, the latter's own senses are to be sharpened in order to reinforce the latter's capacity to break through the straightjacket of the dominating principles.

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Abstract:

In a Marxian sense, artistic realism is considered as a fundamental political, philosophical and artistic attitude. Its aim is to reveal the underlying power structures of the socio-political reality, and thereby to contribute, through the raise of awareness, to the very process of emancipation from domination. But from where does an artist draw the authority to determine an adequate position towards reality? How should an artwork be addressed to its spectators? How should form and content relate to each other and to the reality at stake, and in which way is a critical perception able to trigger mobilization? Those questions have been discussed intensely in the so-called *expressionism debate*, namely by Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht. This article deploys their respective arguments, as well as a second fecund theorization: Alexander Kluge's concept of *antagonistic realism*, which not only develops Brecht's position further, but also takes into account Theodor W. Adorno's critique of engaged art.

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Stefanie Baumann is currently a post-doctoral research fellow at AELAB/IFILNOVA (New University of Lisbon). She obtained her PhD in philosophy in 2013, worked with the artist Esther Shalev-Gerz as personal assistant from 2005 to 2010, and collaborated frequently with artists such as Marie Voignier and Mounira Al Solh. She taught philosophy and aesthetics at University Paris VIII, Ashkal Alwan (Beirut), ALBA/University of Balamand (Beirut) and the Maumaus Study Program (Lisbon).

Keywords:

Keywords: realism, authority, expressionism debate, emancipation, critique, Theodor W. Adorno, Alexander Kluge