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**ALEXANDER BOGDANOV'S IDEAS IN THEORY AND  
PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE OF RUSSIAN AVAN-GARDE**

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*Abstract*

Scientific thought served as an inspiration and example for the avant-garde artists. With an enthusiasm for scientific discovery of the world, they accepted an idea of equal rights of art and science in process of cognition. But after the revolution in Russia, the idea of new creation pressed out the idea of investigation. The theoretical impulse of pre-revolutionary avant-garde in revealing structures of artistic experience and creation of new systems in art might provide for theoretical closeness to ideas of new organisational science. Bogdanov's concern of art as a harmoniously organised unity of elements of life experience coincided with the creative exploration of artistic formal structures. Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Matushin, Stenberg, El Lisitsky took leading positions in newborn educational establishments and societies, and "Proletkult" schools accepted many principles of the avant-garde. Construction was thought to deal with the most economical and purposeful way of modeling, based upon a certain measure, discovered by artist. Articles and educational programmes of early constructivists' practice took statements of new organisational science as a theoretical basis. Nicholas Punin in his essay on Tatlin's Tower of Third International suggests the tower to be the first example of implementing organisational principles in art, a single entity of idea, structure, function, and material. For the proletariat as social class modernism with its artistic revelations was already the past day, the scientific and artistic method was understood in their unity, and artistic technique (and technology) had to become a foundation for the truly new art of the nearest future.

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## 1. Introduction

Influence of monism and energetic theory in the 1900-1910-s educated society and the artistic circles reflected an interest in philosophical comprehension of scientific discoveries and technical progress as well as to a status of philosophy itself. Bogdanov (1912) in his "Philosophy of Living Experience" (p. 271) announced the appearance of new science to replace philosophy and equip mankind with "practical formulas" for solving every problem of world being.

Artists and theorists of Russian avant-garde groups were interested in new scientific ideas and philosophical theories of monism, energetism, empiriocriticism. Their aspiration to a truly new art often implied a philosophic or scientific-like method as a foundation for their artistic creation (Adaskina, 1993, p. 25). New science and new art – as one of the lectures by Nicholai Kulbin was entitled in 1914. The connection of the new philosophical ideas, world outlook, and new art was obvious. Understanding of art as a system (structures) of intentionally organised elements evolving from the simple ones to the most complicated came as a result of analytical experience. The terminology of art included such basic terms as element, structure, energy, static, dynamic, harmony, dissonance. As Olga Rosanova explained, only the cubism and futurism could be regarded the sources of new art: they put forward the principles of dynamism, volume and balance in painting, principles of weight and weightlessness, linear and planimetric move, rhythm as regulation for spatial division, texture, colour relationship and many others (as cited in Harrison & Wood, 1992, p. 202).

Analytical investigation of artistic experience, searches of its elements, and their correlation might explain an interest in organisational science in pre-revolutionary years. Leaders of pre-revolutionary avant-garde art (K. Malevich, P. Filonov, M. Matushin) turned to philosophical discourse in description and elucidation of their systems and methods (Ershov, 2018; Grinëv, 2017; Serkova et al., 2017). Transition to abstract art and the creation of artistic systems like suprematism marked an artistic pursuit to render a new model of the universe. Influence of Bogdanov's ideas reflected not only in theoretic principles of artists, but united wider circles of critics, art historians, and theorists, who wanted to use a methodology, different from the traditional one, to interpret coming to a new age of art and to ground their current pedagogical experience. The theoretical impulse of pre-revolutionary avant-garde in revealing structures of artistic experience and creation of new systems in art might provide for theoretical closeness to ideas of new organisational science in the post-revolutionary period.

## 2. Problem Statement

Alexander Bogdanov's philosophy was rather popular among the artists and art critics of the 1910-1920-s but we rarely meet direct reference to his works in their writings. Leading researches of avant-garde highly appraise his role in a history of modernistic trends and even associates his political removal with the dawn of avant-garde movement in Russian art (Chehonadskih, 2018; Douglas, 2015). It is interesting to trace how philosopher's ideas were spread and was there any difference between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary understanding of experience organisation and its role for creativity. It is also important to consider how the ideas of a gathering of a man and life-building were treated before and after the revolution. Bogdanov's understanding of art influenced the theoretical and pedagogical

literature of the 1920-s. Pedagogical principles of leaders of avant-garde demonstrated acceptance of his ideas concerning organised experience, collective labour, nature of creativity, life-building, and others. But if their suitability for laboratory practice was not questioned, concerns of the essence of art and its ultimate goals were strongly marked by the individuality of artists' outlook and differentiated vision of art in the future.

### **3. Research Questions**

Bogdanov's ideas on art as part of organisational theory and their development in the first years of cultural revolution. Ideas of philosophical monism and their contribution to art theory and transition to abstract art.

Disperse of Bogdanov's ideas in the articles and pedagogical literature of 1918-1920ies. Theoretical issues and their relation to avant-garde artistic and teaching practice in course of new art search.

Reflection of his ideas in theoretical works on art.

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The study is aimed to define the most influential philosophical ideas by Alexander Bogdanov which interacted with fine arts creativity and teaching of the avant-garde leaders and to reveal the mechanism of this interaction. It is also important to trace a chronology of this interaction and pay attention to changes that it underwent in the first post-revolutionary years.

### **5. Research Methods**

The articles, essays, manifestos, and theoretical notes by the artists of the Russian avant-garde art and art-critics were used as the material for the study. Special emphasis was placed on the materials of the first revolutionary years, including programmes for the newly founded educational establishments, for lectures and practical artistic work by Kandinsky, Malevich, Punin, Ioffe, Ginsburg. Though in most of these writings we do not find the direct references or citations from philosopher's works, it is possible to reconstruct the circle of sources of information, knowledge, and inspiration for the authors. Study of the texts written by artists and critics and philosophical and popular science authors written and published within ten years make it possible to find parallel or similar ideas and trace philosophical and natural sciences impact in the origin of the art systems and principles. Bogdanov's vision of art in "Tektology" and articles of the Proletcult period was developed in the late 1920-s by art theorists, who continued to apply his concepts to different kinds of art, art history, and methods of teaching.

### **6. Findings**

According to Bogdanov, art like science serves for gathering and organising of human experience, and art organises experience with the help of living images. Artistic creativity possesses its methods of organising perception and feelings. The nature of artistic creation is the same as the scientific or

administrative or physical one which is based upon the monistic idea of labour and creation, where elements of spiritual and physical effort are integrally linked. There are no insurmountable barriers between different types of creativity, as well as between labour and creativity. Artistic talent like scientific genius belongs to an individual, but creativity is a social function based upon the collective will and collective labour. One could see several important conclusions or effects of those statements. The social essence of art makes it necessary to define a professional image of the artist and general features of its work, which was first of all experimental laboratory work to achieve valuable goals and results that should belong to everyone, like scientific discoveries. If before the revolution it was important to find an approval to the idea of art as a method of world investigation and obtaining knowledge, in the first years of the Soviet state idea of life-building and collectivism gained prominence. What kind of experience does art organises? The social experience of collective life, first of all. When Bogdanov stated the necessity of art for industrial workers, he noticed, that art educates and forms the social human relationship to the world and other people (Bogdanov, 1990, p. 203). Art of architecture (and for that time mainly constructivism) provided a good illustration for these concerns, with emotional influence (coming from the material object) reached by organisation of utilitarian parts in process of construction (Ginzburg, 1927, p. 160).

Bogdanov (2004a) paid special attention to social and professional role and status of an engineer, representative of "technical intelligentsia". For him, it was the principal structural link in organisational system of industry, the one who had to provide the connection between science, technology, and industrial production. He described the transition from individual engineering work to collaboration in the laboratory or the main unit of collective intellectual efforts (Bogdanov, 1912, pp. 171-172). As the difference between types of creativity is not essential, engineers now had to become an example for other groups of creative workers, including artists. «Creation of all kinds (technological, socioeconomic, everyday, scientific, artistic) represents a variety of different forms of labour, and similarly consists of organising or disorganising human activity" (Bogdanov, 1924, p. 192). Organisational method changes the character of labour and creativity, so everyone would gradually adjust to the new principles and conditions of collective work. Labour was understood as an organisational process uniting both cognitive and physical activity.

While the artists of old days used to be "magicians, illusionists, visioners or prophets"(as Tretyakov (2006) wrote developing Bogdanov's ideas in 1923), artist of the nearest future would be a real participant in the creation (construction) of life. Using Bogdanov's concepts theorists and critics discussed the problem of art and its function. Tretyakov rejected both the subconscious origin of art and "illustrative", "naturalistic" realism and relied upon organisational method, based upon consciousness and constructive-inventive mind. Talent is not rejected but transferred from individual subconsciousness to socially conscious creativity. It is such a successful coincidence that in the technical sphere gives birth to invention. El Lisitsky and Ilya Erenburg in an editorial of "Veshch" ("Thing") magazine mentioned that artists should become a companion of the scholar, the engineer, the workers (as cited in Harrison & Wood, 1992, p. 320). And vice versa, every professional should be an artist of his labour.

### **6.1. Bogdanov's ideas for avant-garde theory and laboratory work**

One of the first persons to start the implementation of Bogdanov's theory of proletarian art was art critic N. Punin. In his lectures for the drawing teachers read in Petrograd in summer 1919 he described three universal principles of cultural growth: 1) science – one must approach the work by studying and analyzing it through scientific methodology; 2) organization – a new factor on which the conception of culture is founded. One must create cohesion and reciprocity between the person and individual groups of people so that relations between them will be organized; 3) the economy of energy and the mechanization of creative forces (Bowl, 1976, p. 175). Both in Bogdanov's (1980) works and in articles and pedagogical works of art theorists, words technic, architecture, mechanism, machine were often given wide social and philosophic meaning. The architecture was taken as the best example for purposeful basic structure: "any product of spiritual creation – scientific theory, piece of poetry, the system of legal and moral norms – has got the architecture of its own, disjointed unity of parts, fulfilling various functions and mutually complementing each other" (p. 78). And backward understanding of architecture as part of fine arts was marked by the influence of organizational theory: "...within the period of constructivism we understand architecture as organization, invention, life-building" (Ginzburg 1927, p. 160).

Laboratory and experiment in art were accepted as the chief method of practical work. Malevich, Kandinsky, Tatlin, Matushin, Stenberg, El Lisitsky took leading positions in newborn educational establishments and societies and "Proletkult" schools accepted many principles of avant-garde (Douglas, 2002; 2015). A unique experience of laboratory method was presented by UNOVIS group, leaded and inspired by K. Malevich, where propaedeutic, projective, and practical activity was combined to create total synthetic art, involving polygraphy, visual propaganda, social media, street theatre, festive town decoration, and architecture of future. It is worth mentioning that the works of art (draft projects, drawings, sketches, texts), even having definite authors-members of the group, were not signed – they were marked by a special black square stamp (Harrison & Wood, 1992).

As for Bogdanov's tastes in art, he was not an advocate of modernism trends, thinking that necessary elements of form proletarian artists could derive from romanticism or classics, but not from the recent trends of irrelevant bourgeois art. There is no special analysis of modernistic visual art in his works. He envisaged the use of technologies and the development of new kinds of art interconnected in synthetic unity.

However, existed parallels between his philosophy and theoretical concerns of avant-garde related to the most fundamental problems of art and its role. Bogdanov's concern of art as a harmoniously organised unity of elements of life experience gave way to formal search in visual arts and literature. But there was another important demand –how to ensure that the unity created in this way may serve as a means of organisation for a certain community" (Bogdanov, 1924; 2004b). The first steps in the creation of proletarian art were made under the guidance of avant-garde artists and theorists (Kandinsky, Punin), who were prone to start pre-history of new art from Cezanne, Picasso, and futurism (Terekhina & Zimenkov, 1999). Abstract subjectless art was considered to be a necessary start for new creation because of abstraction as a procedure that allowed for escaping from already known ready images. Consequently, pre-revolutionary avant-garde could help new artists to perform tasks put forward by Proletkult and even fulfil socially useful tasks in course of collective creative work. Constructivism proved to be the most

influential trend – it was proclaimed a method not only of artistic expression but also an important means of "the principle of economy" application in the sphere of culture (Harrison & Woods, 1992, p. 310). Construction was thought to deal with the most economical and purposeful way of modeling, based upon a certain measure, discovered by artist. Articles and educational programmes of early constructivists' practice took statements of new organisational science as a theoretical base.

## **6.2. Constructivism as the implementation of organisational principles**

The art and activities of Vladimir Tatlin demonstrate relationship of pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary avant-garde. Tatlin was one of the most meaningful personages of revolutionary events in art and founder of constructivism in its pure aesthetical status based upon artistic experiments with materials and textures in search of dynamic relationships. Corner counter-reliefs by Tatlin were free from any function, though there were "nothing occasional nothing voluntary" (Strigalev, 1994, p. 30). After the revolution Tatlin shared an understanding of constructivism as the method of life-building, creating a new environment for a new man. Punin in his essay on Tatlin's Tower of Third International suggests the tower to be the first example of implementing organisational principles in art, a single entity of idea, structure, function, and material. This article contains a theoretical look at the first steps of new art in terms of organisational theory: "...utility of form is nothing other than the organisation of its content. Forms devoid of practical significance...are simply forms which are not organised" (Harrison & Woods, 1992, p. 312). Researchers of Tatlin's art kept asking a question of why had he joined proletariat life-building labour with collectivism and utilitarianism, and neglecting of the individual. Strigalev appraised it as a self-sacrifice of the artist, his long-term experiment of self-subordinating himself to the needs of the common purpose (Strigalev, 1994, p. 30). Grois (1993) wrote about probably the most honest choice between "machine sincerity" of coming society and the idealism of traditional art (p. 370).

The fact the dadaists proclaimed Tatlin's art "machine art" is usually treated as a mistake. It was a distinct mark of the avant-garde mind of that time to correlate art with technological progress and to view the machine in general as invented law of dynamism. Understanding of the technical by the artists of avant-garde varied and was not expressed in one formula. The machine as a given algorithm of movement and realization of inner law could be treated in a philosophical, physical, social, biological way, in a symbolic, mystical, or purely artistic way. Tatlin's work with forms and construction was characterized by a human scale opposed to the tyranny of forms, produced by technics itself without artists participants (Strigalev, 1994, p. 36). Thinking about Tatlin's designs of the tower and the airplane Grois (1993) called them "non-functional machines". Even more neglective was K.Malevich, who considered technical progress to be a danger for humanity and convergence of engineer and artist to be a serious setback for the latter (Grois, 1993, pp. 366-367).

However, it was constructivism that was announced a universal method of life-building and a tool to apply principles of economy in the sphere of culture. Within the short period of discussion on compositional principles in art, constructivism thought to be the most efficient "economic", and purposeful organization of elements. In the course of the social revolution, constructivism acquired the meaning of the major new trend in art and the status of an artistically expressed philosophy of life

building. It also became a leading pedagogical principle in the new educational institutions in the early Soviet period (Ginzburg, 1927).

The social meaning of constructivism was facing the future and had grown from the idea of a new human, who would be able to embrace scientific, technical, social experience in harmonious unity with the help of new labour organisation based upon natural organic skill to be a part of a whole. Bogdanov believed this process (of collective creativity) develop naturally concerning right purposes and justice in the economic relationship. And the principle task now was to grow a new human to conquer the force of nature, learn science, use technic in course of harmoniously organised labour, the one who had to become a natural collectivist – an organic part of the collective. Constructivism based upon laboratory experimental methods helps to develop an empirical perception of material, to learn different qualities and textures, their physical features which are not possible to do with the help of vision only. But the vision also could be trained and widened. Widened consciousness of material plus widened possibilities of vision together lead to the creation of technological aesthetics of new material culture. Perspectives of constructivism included the practical fusion of artistic and technical engineering creativity in course of the building of new material culture.

### **6.3. Development of Bogdanov ideas in the theory of art**

Among them one of the consistent followers of Bogdanov was Ioffe (2006), who wrote "Culture and Style" on the theory of visual arts. The history of this work partly reminds one of "Tektology". After labeling as "vulgar sociologism" and years of oblivion it attracted interest again in connection with cultural and semiotic studies. Ioffe considered doubtful use of historical materialism as a method for art history as the new art does not grow inside the old art. Art is an activity, actual social practice. He formulated main functions for the different epochs: medieval art – decoration of life, capitalism – cognition of life, for industrial proletariat it is building of life. «Historical perspective like perspective in painting dies together with a visionary approach to the world; interest to the living things and actions presses out explanatory outlook, reflection, and its shapes... One should add himself to the active forces of culture as an active functioning force thus consciously changing culture and lead it to the chosen goals" (Ioffe, 2006, p. 78). (Similar idea about the individual role in collective labour was expressed by Tatlin, when he invented his "acting unit") (Harrison & Wood, 1992, p. 309) and by A.Vesnin, who wrote about objects of contemporary art as about active force entering life to organise consciousness of human being (as cited in Railing, 1995, p. 194). Ioffe (2010) explained the essence of constructivism as the art of the industrial epoch where the artist performs the function of the creator of the material world. Artistic study of forms and textures, experimenting, and laboratory work enriches the abilities of perception of visual and non-visual qualities of the material.

However, Ioffe (2006) did not think the heritage of the past useless and lost forever. He entrusted to historians and archeologists (like Bogdanov to art critics) an important task of actualisation of the past, attaching actual meaning to the elements of gone cultures. Humanities had to be guided by natural science, which he characterised as "actual weapons of culture". Only natural sciences managed to free themselves from the dictatorship of chronological outlook, from the burdern of time and place. They excluded the point of observer's location from the system of a phenomenon, thus making its inner structure dominating (Ioffe, 2006, pp. 63-64, 77). Ioffe was one of the first authors (or the first) in Russia

to write about culture not as about linear evolutionary process but as about complex of differently directed forces, and about the birth of new forms of culture as a result of restructuring and combination of elements and forces (Ioffe, 2006, p. 67). Bogdanov's concept of cultural heritage included estimation of the art of the past with the help of organisational science, which was important concerning the cultural policy of the soviet state. The necessary mediating function he entrusted to the critics their work of not less meaning than the art itself, moreover, critics should somehow influence creativity by their ideas to help the artist. Artist as a representative of artistic intelligentsia, is inclined to individualism, however, the critic is always ready to reveal his connection with the social meaning of artistic work (Bogdanov, 1924, p. 174).

## 7. Conclusion

It is possible to point out three periods of influence Bogdanov's ideas on avant-garde art and its pedagogical writings. First is pre-revolutionary time, when Bogdanov's concepts were spread amongst the scientific and artistic community with the interest in Ostwald and Mach theories as a background, and in a wider context of artists' involvement into discussing of discoveries in physics, chemistry, biology. Bogdanov's philosophy influenced the outlook of artistic intelligence seeking an understanding of new art as a means of learning of reality with scientific-like methods – analytic, reduction, abstraction, energetism. Analytic method lost its topicality when the time of action came and the artist had to become an active unit of cultural constructivism. The second period was connected with the implementing of his ideas of life-building and educating a new human in course of practical work (Proletcult) during the first post-revolutionary years. According to Bogdanov, for the proletariat as social class modernism with its artistic revelations was already the past day, the scientific and artistic method was understood in their unity, and artistic technique (and technology) would become a foundation of the new art of the nearest future. The period of practical participation of avant-garde artists in the life-building project turned out to be not long. Collective productive art was more a social utopia. Though Matushin, Malevich, Filonov, Rodchenko, Tatlin continued to work and teach, all of them individually faced struggle against formalism and the process of introducing social realism. And the third, characterized by the developing of his ideas in creating the theory of art and culture within the 1920s-1930s, and also by the survival of his ideas in the theory of constructivism architecture and groups of projectionists, believed in the endless progress of artistic practices based upon new kinds of energy and its transformation, and directly connected with romantic of scientific and engineering thought in sphere of acoustic, light rays, dynamics of colour, space, new ways of sound and vision transmission. Bogdanov's position concerning art theory was to keep on studying social and psychological routes of art, using the collective effort of specialists in different fields of science and though he protested against direct political propaganda in art, he was not going to sacrifice its actual content that might influence human spirit and mood in favor of sophisticated avant-garde experiments. Synthetic art, photo, and cinema attracted him because of technological background connection with scientific progress, social scape, and thus the possibility to associate this new art with a new period of culture.



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