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Lukács and the Marxist ›Living Art‹

1. Idealism and Materialism in Young Lukács: ›The Ruling Ideas of the Ruling Class‹

On 11 November 1958, T. W. Adorno published a thirty-page essay entitled *Extorted Reconciliation* (*Erpresste Versöhnung*) on Lukács' 1957 *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (*Gegenwartsbedeutung des Kritischen Realismus*), which was later published again in *Notes to Literature* (*Noten zur Literatur*). It was an ideological war essay, a brilliant albeit somehow typical intellectual product of that phase of the Cold War period which began in 1955 with the remilitarization of West Germany as a new NATO Member and the politically symmetric creation of the Warsaw Pact. In addition to that, the previously unpublished *The Essay as Form* (*Der Essay als Form*), opening Adorno's *Notes to Literature*, is also about Lukács. It discusses Lukács' juvenile and indeed extraordinary book, *Soul and Form* (*Die Seele und die Formen*). Adorno's ›compte rendu‹ makes us understand Lukács' huge relevance both as a philosopher and literary theorist in the late fifties. *The Essay as Form* is a kind of

This essay draws a line of continuity linking Lukács' early work to his later ›official‹ role as a communist intellectual. *Soul and Form* (*Die Seele und die Formen*) is not read as an expression of Lukács' early idealism. Rather, the book bears witness to a much more complex vision. *Soul and Form* may be read as the first surprising movement in Lukács' impending conversion to his peculiar materialism. Literature and art ceaselessly struggle for freedom and autonomy from any, either religious or political, function. Yet at the same time, there is a philosophical awareness that forms can be created, and indeed used, as cultural tools to shape both individual and collective lives.

general introduction to *Notes to Literature* through the analysis of Lukács' letter to Leo Popper, which under the title *On the Nature and Form of the Essay* (*Über Form und Wesen des Essays*) introduces *Soul and Form*, Lukács' 1911 astounding exordium as a literary theorist.

On the Nature and Form of the Essay seems to be ages away from the role of the Marxist intellectual Lukács began to assume some ten years later with his 1920 *The Theory of the Novel* (*Die Theorie des Romans*) and *History and Class Consciousness* (*Geschichte und Klassbewusstsein*). Yet, as I will try to show, *On the Nature and Form of the Essay* is not that far from its author's later political Marxist role and persona. *On the Nature and Form of the Essay*, for aught we can see, indeed has a high revolutionary potential. Published in 1911, this essay defines a kind of ideological perspective not very far from Gramsci's contributions to ›cultural hegemony‹ as a fundamental political notion first mentioned by him in October 1926 and fully developed in the 30s.¹ Of course, there are also differences. Gramsci's approach is definitely and pragmatically political, and mainly concerned with the sort of pact between the administrators of power and those being administered. The pact refers to an agreement on values and principles based on what Gramsci calls the ›exercise of power‹, grounded in cultural hegemony. Young Lukács too seems to be interested in what we may define as the power of words, the political relevance of culture and the relationship between words and the life-fashioning power of culture. In both cases, the main question seems to be the very ›form‹ of life or, in Lukács' own formulation, the destiny-shaping function of words. This essay intends to show some curious, unknown, yet powerful revolutionary provisions of spirit in *Soul and Form*, written in the Antebellum, eight years before Lukács' ›conversion‹ to Marxism in 1919.²

According to Adorno, the real reasons behind Lukács' persistent relevance in literary and philosophical studies in the late 50s, after Stalin's death, are to be looked for in *Soul and Form*. This book is indeed very far from the later Lukács, dangling, both in Stalin's time and thereafter, between Party orthodoxy on the one side and loyalty to his own ideas on the other. We have no doubt as to the relevance of Lukács' early production, which, as far as we can see, is not to be considered in any real contrast with Lukács' later production in his Moscow years, especially during the period Karl Schögl labels as the years of ›terror and dream‹.³ This title refers to Stalin's time

1 See Höbel/Gruppi: *Il concetto di egemonia in Gramsci*; Gerratana: *Stato, partito, strumenti e Istituti dell'egemonia nei »Quaderni del carcere«*; Fortini: *Saggi ed Epigrammi* (Lukács in Italia, pp. 194–222; Lukács Giovane: »L'anima e le forme« – *Introduzione*, pp. 234–273).

2 Formally announced in *Taktik und Ethik* in 1919 (collected in *Frühschriften II*).

3 Schögl: *Terror und Traum*.

culminating in the paranoid nightmare of the three Moscow trials 1936–1938 against Leon Trotsky and his supposed followers Grigory Zinovev, Karl Radek, Sergey Platonov, Nikolai Bukharin and Alexei Rykov. Against such a political and ideological backdrop, I intend to draw a line of continuity in Lukács' philosophical production. I intend to link his indeed brilliant early works to his almost official role of the communist intellectual, which Lukács prudently practiced in later years as a political art of survival during the Stalin age and afterwards, up until his death in 1971, some twenty years before the end of the Soviet regime and the Soviet Union.

Let us begin by taking into consideration *Soul and Form*. Lukács' 1911 extraordinary juvenile work is not to be read simply as an expression of his early idealism. The book indeed bears witness to some other, much more complicated, ideological and political vision. In some sense, as we shall see, *Soul and Form* is the first step in Lukács' impending conversion to materialism, yet with the idea of literature and art ceaselessly struggling for freedom and autonomy from either religious or political functions. It seems to me that, in that book, there is a background idea left unexpressed. Language, words, discourse or, in short, ›forms‹ can be either implicitly or explicitly used as cultural-revolutionary tools employed in shaping new ways of thinking, a new mentality and, consequently, a new mankind with a new destiny fashioned by new ideas. These ideas are the expression of the ideological transformation of the working class into a new ›ruling class‹, according to what can be read in Marx and Engel's *The Communist Manifesto*: »What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.«⁴ In any given society, ruling ideas can only be the ideas of the ruling class. This must also mean that any class conquering power also conquers the power of re-forming the world, giving it a new shape: »The communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.«⁵

4 Marx/Engels: *The Communist Manifesto*, p. 55 (»Was beweist die Geschichte der Ideen anders, als daß die geistige Produktion sich mit der materiellen umgestaltet? Die herrschenden Ideen einer Zeit waren stets nur die Ideen der herrschenden Klasse.«, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, p. 62).

5 *Ibid.*, p. 57 (»Die kommunistische Revolution ist das radikalste Brechen mit den überlieferten Eigentumsverhältnissen; kein Wunder, daß in ihrem Entwicklungsgange am radikalsten mit den überlieferten Ideen gebrochen wird.«, *Manifest der kommunistischen Partei*, p. 64).

All this undoubtedly appears to be in contrast with Lukács' hypothesis of art ceaselessly struggling for its own liberation in the last chapter of *Aesthetics I* (*Ästhetik I. Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen*).⁶ What is at stake in this book is the independence of art from any other kind of human activity. One might say that Lukács' theoretical standpoint in 1963 was obviously distant from what he had thought some fifty years before, in 1911. It was also distant from what Lukács indeed did represent with his life-long political engagement as a Marxist intellectual. His never denied theoretical position is well known. Art is the ›Widerspiegelung‹ (reflection) of human society at a certain date, in a certain place. Art represents and, hence, fashions or gives form to man's destiny. Therefore, art must also shape and show its own struggle in order to free itself both from its own ancient link with religion and its more contemporary link with politics. Art can absolve its real task only by being unconditioned, free and true to itself. However, in materialism, loyalty to the Party does matter. Ideas are the very tools as well as the expression of a new, changing world. Ideas change the world materially, in the sense that materialism itself sees and therefore culturally shapes the world through the elaboration of a materialistic system of thought. This is the most important revolutionary tool in the shaping of a new time, a new order of things and a new human model; the model, that is, of a new humanity. Young Lukács' world to come, his communist utopia,⁷ was to be shaped by a total cultural revolution both preparing and, at the same time, accomplishing the advent of a new model of human being. This new model was meant to fashion man's destiny, hopes, and fears through what one might call the ›mirror of art‹. However, the mirror of art does not only shape the world as it was, it also shapes a new world in a new time yet to come. In its own struggle for liberation, the mirror of art reflects all human struggles for freedom. The question we are dealing with must also entail a full discussion of young Lukács' aesthetic ideology. Chez Lukács, criticism and literature are one and the same thing, as is clear in *On the Nature and Form of the Essay*. In this letter to Leo Popper, criticism and literature do converge in the idea that any kind of literary activity is ›Widerspiegelung‹ – Lukács' technical aesthetic term, naming the mirroring of social reality in a Marxist perspective. ›Widerspiegelung‹ is also one of the key notions of Lukács' later years, e.g. in his 1962/63 *Aesthetics*, in which it denotes the

6 Lukács: *Ästhetik I*, Ch. XVI, pp. 1427–1429.

7 We are referring in particular to *Taktik und Ethik*, »written before the dictatorship of the Proletariat«, as Lukács writes in note 1 of the essay, published in *Early Writings II* (*Frühschriften II*). On Lukács and utopia see Paolo Manganaro's still important introduction to the Italian translation of *Frühschriften* (*Scritti politici giovanili 1919–1968*).

mirroring of social reality from the perspective of the ›Befreiung‹ (liberation) of art. Art is and must be absolute and free from any social, utilitarian bond, which may also mean that art must struggle for its own freedom, thus unveiling in its own ›Widerspiegelung‹ of that struggle, the human ›Befreiung‹. Intellectual work – literature and criticism – hence has to deal with a kind of representation that may be, indeed must be, the ›Widerspiegelung‹ of the human struggle for ›Befreiung‹. As a matter of fact, all this has to deal strictly with the production of ideas and the way the world may be represented. The main aesthetic question revolves around the fact that these ideas of ›the ruling ideas‹ (in Marxian terms) are no less than a way of shaping the world, i.e. of shaping the audience's vision of the world. This must also imply influencing, if not, at least potentially, the very shaping of the way of thinking of the audience, and thus the shaping of their ›Weltanschauung‹, their very vision of the world. In other terms, the question may somehow entail the perception of social reality one finds, for instance, in Trotsky's revolutionary utopia based on Marx and Engels' principle clearly defined in the *Manifesto*: »The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class.« That is the fundamental notion of all political power, based primarily on cultural revolution and fashioning of mass consensus through the creation of what Gramsci called ›cultural hegemony‹, the construction of which is the first precondition for the advent of the new world.⁸ Yet, to Trotsky this seems to be a false, deceitful perspective, based on some idealistic point of view:

The Idealists and their almost deaf and blind disciples, the Russian subjectivists, thought that mind and critical reason moved the world, or, in other words, that the intelligentsia had the task of creating the new world. As a matter of fact, in history, the mind always limps after reality.⁹

In Trotsky's reasoning, as well as in every other more or less orthodox Marxist perspective, cultural change is the consequence of political change, even though, from a dialectical point of view it would be much easier to say the opposite, which is what we find again in *Literature and the October Revolution*: »The proletariat's task, after conquering power, is to get hold of the cultural apparatus formerly in the hands of industry, schools, publishers, printing industry, theaters etc. By means of that, the proletariat must find their way to culture.«¹⁰ This might seem in striking contrast to Gramsci's

8 On Gramsci and cultural hegemony see Gramsci: *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura* and also Laclau/Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*; Cerardi: *Gramsci e la costruzione dell'egemonia*; Crehan: *Gramsci*; Schinello: *Tutta la nostra intelligenza*. For Gramsci's texts see: Gramsci: *Quaderni dal carcere*; esp. index entry »Egemonia«.

9 Trotsky: *Literature and Revolution*.

10 Ibid.

point of view characterized by his idea of the absolute revolutionary necessity not of seizing the bourgeois cultural apparatus, but of building a new apparatus he calls ›cultural hegemony‹. Cultural hegemony is the proletariat's first political need from the point of view of ›Ideologiekritik‹. Cultural hegemony is the very fundament and first shaping principle in the creation of the proletarian public, collective opinion and a new collective mind in the new reality brought about by any new proletarian regime. Proletarians must find their way to culture or, better yet, to a renewal of culture, as the very condition of revolutionary success and the warranty of permanence of any revolutionary regime, which simply reverses the perspective: »The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class« must also mean that the ideas of the (new) ruling class fashion the common mind, the common perception of reality and vision of the world, which, in a way, also means that what is being fashioned is the new social world itself.

Gramsci's first revolutionary principle, the fashioning of a new cultural hegemony as a common proletarian idea of the social world, is clearly based on Marx and Engel's *Manifesto*, together with a materialistic standpoint according to which society and destinies, are shaped by the dominant ideas of the ruling class. This, in Gramsci's terms, corresponds to the re-shaping of the social world to be produced by the new revolutionary ›ruling class‹. Is this a perspective somehow to be found in Lukács? Certainly not, one ought to answer, considering the last, definitive chapter of *Aesthetics I* on the liberation of art from any subjection to religion and politics. However, as we have been trying to say, in its struggle for liberation art also quintessentially represents all human struggles for freedom.

2. Cultural Revolution: The New media and Cultural Hegemony. Idealism, Materialism and Destiny Shaping

Gramsci and Lukács met neither in Vienna nor in Moscow, where both of them lived in the period between 1922 and 1924. Of course, they knew about each another. Both lived in a risky time of great changes and both took an active part in the shaping of a new European political perspective following the October revolution. However, it is even more curious that neither of them took any notice of the technical cultural revolution going on in their modernity with the new media. Neither Gramsci nor Lukács ever realized the political importance of the new film industry or the radio. Both were under strict political state control in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, as well as in Stalin's Russia, where radio and cinema indeed were new powerful means for the creation of cultural hegemony and the shaping of what came

to be called mass mind.¹¹ The creation of Cinecittà in fascist Italy, using cinema, together with the radio as the most powerful propaganda instrument; Goebbels' cultural policy in Germany, with the ›Volksempfänger‹ or the low-cost radio set,¹² and again: the cinema, radio and visual culture in Stalin's Russia¹³ – all this tells us something important about these powerful means of mass mind control through the creation and handling of cultural hegemony and mass consensus. This may have little importance for Lukács' cultural theory as he never shows any interest in propaganda, mass media, mass information and mass consent. Astonishingly enough, Gramsci too never discusses the new media and their political importance in the creation of cultural hegemony through the minds of those whom Gramsci calls ›organic intellectuals‹, at the service of the proletariat and the revolution. In Gramsci's theory, the very place for the construction of cultural hegemony is the school. Gramsci never considers the relevance of cinema and radio in the creation, shaping, and handling of mass mind consent in the interbellum period in Stalin's Russia, in Hitler's Germany and in Mussolini's Italy. It is clear that radio and film industry were also important in the U.S. and that Hollywood's power was impressively displayed in Europe after the end of World War II, when a myriad of American films was exported to Europe.

In the introductory chapter of *Soul and Form*, we find an interesting reflection on literature and life:

All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny-relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form. This unity, this coexistence is so strong that neither element ever occurs without the other; here again a separation is possible only by way of abstraction. Therefore the separation which I am trying to accomplish here appears, in practice, merely as a shift of emphasis: poetry receives its profile and its form from destiny, and form in poetry appears always only as destiny; but in the works of the essayists form becomes destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle.¹⁴

Therefore, according to Lukács' perspective, in literature, more generally in writing, the world and its progress in time are constantly represented in the

- 11 On Gramsci, cultural hegemony and mass-mind control, see Filippini: *Using Gramsci*.
- 12 On cinema in Nazi Germany see Traub: *Der Film als politisches Machtmittel*; Albrecht: *Nationalsozialistische Filmpolitik*; Spiker: *Film und Kapital*.
- 13 Kenez: *The Birth of the Propaganda State*; Taylor: *Film Propaganda*; Piretto: *Gli occhi di Stalin*.
- 14 Lukács: *Soul and Form*, p. 23, emphasis in the original (»Jedes Schreiben stellt die Welt im Symbol einer Schicksalsbeziehung dar; das Problem des Schicksals bestimmt überall das Problem der Form. Diese Einheit, diese Koexistenz ist so stark, daß das eine Element nie ohne das andere auftritt und eine Trennung ist auch hier nur in der Abstraktion möglich. Die Scheidung also, die ich hier zu vollziehen versuche, scheint praktisch nur ein Unterschied der Betonung zu sein: die Dichtung enthält vom Schicksal ihr Profil, ihre Form, die Form erscheint dort immer nur als Schicksal; in den Schriften der Essayisten wird die Form zum Schicksal, zum schicksalschaffenden Prinzip.«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 30).

symbolic terms of some destiny-shaping effect, with the problem of destiny determining the problem of form or vice-versa – with form determining destiny, and destiny being shaped by ideas and ideas and words consequently affecting and shaping practical life. However, this is not what one finds in Lukács' theoretical approach. To Lukács, literature, art, be it as it may, are the social world's ›Widerspiegelung‹.¹⁵ Literature is no tool to be used in order to change the world; literature, and art, simply reflect the world. To Lukács, this is the warranty of art's purity and an indispensable feature in keeping art clean or, so to speak, keeping it free, from any worldly trade, aim or influence. However, *On the Nature and Form of the Essay* seems to postulate some kind of unavoidable symmetric destiny effect. If destiny is strictly linked to form in literature and literature is a destiny-shaping activity, then literature and art in general must be life-fashioning activities. The shape of life – the life-form, determined by words and ideas, – is indeed the very basic principle in the creation of either common consent or common dissent, as the very fundament of what Gramsci calls cultural hegemony.¹⁶ Lukács never really faces this kind of problem. His position is very clearly defined once for all in the chapter on cinema in *Aesthetics I*, where he discusses and strongly disagrees with Benjamin's idea of the vanishing of the ›aura‹ of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction.¹⁷ The destiny of the ›aura‹ is obviously linked to the conditions of fruition of the work of art and, thus, to the technology of its diffusion in late modernity or virtually endless post-modernity. The vanishing of the ›aura‹ is due to what we may call the virtually endless multiplication of the original ›Kunstwerk‹ (work of art), the uniqueness of which is hence being erased. Of course, especially in late modernity, ›entre deux guerres‹, the question of ›aura‹ is strictly linked to the discussion of cultural hegemony as the key question about the creation of consensus as the necessary precondition for the creation and administration of political power. Lukács simply avoids any discussion of this point. He is not interested in the political use of art works or, better still, he is against any political use of art works.

- 15 The notion of ›Widerspiegelung‹ to be found in Engels, not in Marx, must come from Lenin (Lenin: *Materialismus und Empiriokritizismus*, pp. 56–57, 164–165, 171–173, 182–184, 201–202, 288–289). See also Holz: *Dialektik und Widerspiegelung*; see also Rockmore: *Lukács fra Marx e marxismo*.
- 16 On Gramsci's idea of hegemony see Gruppi: *Il concetto di egemonia in Gramsci*; Fiori: *Gramsci, Togliatti, Stalin*; Cerardi: *Gramsci e la costruzione dell'egemonia*. On Gramsci and Lukács, see Alessandrini: *La rivoluzione estetica di Antonio Gramsci e György Lukács*.
- 17 Lukács: *Ästhetik I*. On ›aura‹ see: Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk in Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*.

The constantly given concurrence of form and destiny in literature – according to Lukács in his epistula to Leo Popper – necessarily entails that neither can ever occur without the other. Here again, in Lukács' perspective, a separation between them is only possible by way of abstraction:

Therefore the separation I am trying to accomplish here appears, in practice, merely as a shift of emphasis; poetry receives its profile and its form from destiny, and form in poetry always appears only as destiny; yet, in a writer's work, the essay form becomes destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle. This difference means the following: destiny lifts things up outside the world of things, accentuating the essential ones and eliminating the inessential; but form sets limits around a substance which otherwise would dissolve like air in the All. In other words, destiny comes from the same source as everything else, it is a thing among things, whereas form – seen as something finished, i.e. from the outside – defines the limits of the immaterial. Because the destiny which orders things is flesh of their flesh and blood of their blood, destiny is not to be found in the writings of the essayist. For destiny, once stripped of its uniqueness and accidental development in time, is just as airy and immaterial as all the rest of the incorporeal matter of these writings, and is no more capable of giving them form than they themselves possess any natural inclination or possibility of condensing themselves into form.¹⁸

It seems to me that this statement contains every either conscious or unconscious implication of Lukács' complex literary perspective. The ›destiny‹ in question here does not refer to any lived life; it refers instead to life's form in literature and, thus, to the literary shaping of destiny either in poetry, for instance, or in critical writing. However, in poetry, i.e. in verse writing, as Lukács has it in his letter to Leo Popper, destiny is form, and form is the end, nay, it is the aim itself of poetry, which also means it is poetry's destiny, that is to say poetry's definitive destiny-figure. Thus conversely, in Lukács, form must become destiny and form, indeed, must be the destiny-creating principle. This, in a way, would also seem to precisely define the scope, and clear-cut borderlines of both literature and literary science, as well as the nature of their connection with the living world being thus given its form.

However, not only in the years of the first mass-media revolution, in 1920s and 1930s, but also in a broader time perspective, the literary, artistic

18 Lukács: *Soul and Form*, p. 23 (»Und dieser Unterschied bedeutet folgendes: das Schicksal hebt Dinge aus der Welt der Dinge hervor, betont die gewichtigen und scheidet die unwesentlichen aus; die Formen aber umgrenzen einen Stoff, der sich sonst luftartig im All auflösen würde. Das Schicksal kommt also von dort, woher alles andere kommt, als Ding unter die Dinge, während die Form – als etwas Fertiges angesehen, von außen also – dem Wesensfremden die Grenzen bestimmt. Weil das Schicksal, das die Dinge ordnet, Fleisch von ihrem Fleisch und Blut aus ihrem Blute ist, darum gibt es kein Schicksal in den Schriften der Essayisten. Denn das Schicksal, seiner Einmaligkeit und Zufälligkeit entblößt, ist gerade so luftig immateriell, wie jeder andere körperlose Stoff dieser Schriften; kann ihnen also gerade so wenig eine Form geben, wie sie selbst jeder natürlichen Neigung und Möglichkeit einer Verdichtung zur Form entbehren.«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, pp. 30–31).

form/shape-creating principle being evoked seems to have some broader political application, as the power to shape society in the time to come. Indeed, this is the very principle on which the construction of cultural hegemony and mass-consent is based, offering the intellectual, the artist, a wide, and indeed pragmatic application field. Clearly enough, Lukács' perspective may be easily turned upside-down to say that art and literature – by giving form to destiny in a literary sense, as it were – can also shape and give form to human lives, behaviours, ways of thinking, expectations, wishes, hopes, fears and, yes, opinions. They are, of course, just words, yet they do concretely shape fictional destinies and, thus, also offer themselves as potential life-fashioning cultural patterns. This is the main question when one discusses cultural hegemony as the *conditio sine qua non* and very fundament of any political regime.

3. The Revolutionary Living Art

All this may seem close enough to the kind of revolutionary utopia such as the mass expectational perspective we find in Trotsky's writings. What takes its utopian shape in Trotsky's writings is the human spirit; the very fulfilment of the materialist revolution is a deep spiritual change in the human mind. It is a trans-evaluation of all values and a radical renewal of human identity through total self-awareness. This is what we can read in *The Art of the Revolution*, in the conclusion of which we find the idea or the dream of a new revolutionary kind of *ars vivendi*. It is a revolutionary ›*téchne tou biou*‹ exactly focused on *επιμέλεια εαυτού* (as in Plato's *Alcibiades I*), yet a new kind of ›*cura sui*‹, self-discipline through which any human subject can fully master him/herself, thus becoming a new kind of superman/woman. This is not to be understood in the Nietzschean sense of the triumph of some kind of bourgeois individualism. One might rather say that it is the triumph of Marxian collectivism as the final achievement of total self-consciousness. »Man«, Trotsky writes in the chapter »Revolutionary and Socialist Art« of his *Literature and Revolution*, »will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, [...] to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a superman«. Hence, through Lukács and Trotsky, we find ourselves captured in Gramsci's reasoning on cultural hegemony to be interpreted as the shaping tool of the new revolutionary human being. Cultural hegemony may be defined as the whole of notions and ideas to be taught and spread in a given society in order to define and control value systems, as well as ethic, social and political principles. Cultural hegemony

is both an ideological construct and a mental discipline to be learned, exercised and used in order to fashion a new human model. This is the base of a new society, with new, both personal and collective expectations, grounded in life-construction as the shaping of life-form; the shaping, that is, of both personal and collective destinies.

The revolution must change the idea of the world; ideas must change the world. This is to be done materially, in the sense that materialism shapes the new world culturally, and all this through the elaboration of a materialistic system of thought, to be considered as the most important revolutionary tool, fashioning a new time, a new order of things and a new collective model of human being; the model of a new humanity. This reasoning about ideas of the world, destiny and form as the very destiny-creating principle is also what we consider Lukács' aesthetic, literary path to the formulation of the relationship between the world of ideas and the world to be shaped materially by a total cultural revolution. This is inscribed in Lukács' early insistence on intellectual guidance in his juvenile essays on the revolution and the revolutionary role of intellectuals in *Early Writings II: On the Question of Organization of the Intellectuals (Frühschriften II: Zur Organisationsfrage der Intellektuellen)*.¹⁹ As a matter of fact, almost the entire book is comprised of essays on the revolutionary function of ›intellectual workers‹. The question we are dealing with entails a full discussion on Lukács' totalizing idea that criticism and literature are two modes of the same intellectual activity. They must be more than mere ›Widerspiegelung‹: Lukács' aesthetic principium primum, and sole definition of any literary product, according to which literature is the reflection, the mirroring of social reality. In *On Nature and Form of the Essay*, both literature and criticism are not only forms mirroring forms, but can also create forms, re-forming the world, and differently fashioning new destinies.

4. Re-presentation and ›Widerspiegelung‹

In a Marxist orthodox perspective, involving the working class first of all, ›Widerspiegelung‹ as the aesthetic principium primum must entail not only the imitation but, somehow, also the shaping or the cultural re-shaping of the world's image, the material reshaping of the world in the minds and expectations of people and, thus, also in social reality. Yet, in Lukács' 1962 *Aesthetik I*, the function of all arts is not and cannot be any re-shaping of the

19 Lukács: *Zur Organisationsfrage der Intellektuellen*; Lukács: *Zur Frage des Bildungsarbeit*.

world, together with time and life. The function of art is what Lukács calls ›Widerspiegelung‹, which is his aesthetic key-word, primarily referring, or so it would seem, not to any provocation of any change in the future, but to the realistic mirroring of social reality in the present. This would imply that literature, art and culture cannot play any primary revolutionary role in social change. However, we know that intellectual work, literature, criticism and political writing has to deal with a certain kind of representation that may turn out not to be only the mirroring or ›Widerspiegelung‹ of reality, but also a contribution to the world's transformation. Which is to say that Lukács' ›Widerspiegelung‹ may also refer to a changing society, with the aesthetic reflection considered not only as the re-presentation of the actual present world, but also as the evocation of the future being longed for and planned to be shaped and built as history. Hence, ›Widerspiegelung‹ might refer exactly to the fashioning of destiny through what Lukács calls ›form‹. As a matter of fact, this is in strict connection with the production of ideas and also connected to the way the world may be or is to be represented. Representation is the very form of the memory of the past conceived both as the preparation of the present world and the paradoxical reminiscent representation of *historia futura*. From this perspective, dominant ideas are nothing other than a way of shaping every collective vision of the world, which must also somehow imply the intention of influencing or directly shaping the way of thinking. In other words, the question posed may somehow entail the vision of the world one can find in Trotsky's revolutionary utopia. This somewhat out-of-tune Nietzschean suggestion is the utopian seal through which the revolutionary project bringing about the revolutionary transmutation of the human being is the full achievement of what we may call the Marxist revolutionary ›living art‹.

Be it as it may, Trotsky's oddly idealistic architecture of utopia is based on the fundamental idea that the human world has always been shaped by images, words and ideas. This recalls Antonio Gramsci's all-involving formulation of the necessity of the construction of cultural hegemony as the main and basic re-foundation revolutionary principle, without which no power can establish itself. In a Marxian sense, the basic social struggle is not a struggle for freedom – it is the struggle for power, with proletarian power necessarily replacing bourgeois power and proletarian cultural hegemony replacing bourgeois hegemony. This is clearly shown in Stalin's use of propaganda as the main instrument of the creation of consensus. Art, literature and the printing industry were involved in the creation of the new world and the early mass-media new age, with the radio and film industry used as new political tools in the fashioning of mass consensus in

fascist Italy, Nazi Germany as well as in Stalin's Soviet Union. A last powerful example to be mentioned is the invasion of American films in Europe after World War II.²⁰ Consent-creating tools were, and still are, important in any kind of regime; yet, almost none of the important intellectuals in Europe ›entre-deux guerres‹ seem to have been fully aware of this. Not even Gramsci seems to have ever fully realized the new political importance of those he calls *organic* intellectuals in the early mass-media age. He never seems to have fully realized the all-permeating role to be played by the new media, and by what in the early media-modernity the Russians called the intelligentsia. To Gramsci, in any case, we owe the sociological, and political definition of organic intellectuals²¹ as a category of subjects working in the fields of communication and education (schools, newspapers, the press, radio, theatre, cinema as the new mass-consensus-creating tools, as well as television, and later, of course, in our present, the new reality-creation nature of the Internet, as the very technical base of any given power).

5. Cultural Hegemony, Propaganda, Autonomy: Form as Destiny

Men of power in the interbellum period, such as Stalin for instance, but also Hitler, Mussolini, Churchill, Roosevelt had wide-open eyes. They saw the political importance of propaganda and knew the huge power of the new media, as shown by Stalin's attention to radio and film and the importance of cinema and the radio in fascist Italy and in Hitler's Germany.²² Stalin was also well aware of the importance of writers as is shown by what happened to Bulgakov, who experienced tremendous difficulties with the regime and wanted to expatriate, when, on 18 April 1930, he received the famous phone-call from Stalin and consequently decided to stay.²³

For the title of his book *Engineers of the Soul* (*Ingenieurs van de Ziel*), Frank Westerman takes Stalin's cultural label-sentence pronounced at a meeting of intellectuals at Gorky's place, on 26 October 1932, during Stalin's cruel repression of the Kulaki's protest in Ukraine, coinciding with the 1936–1938 Moscow trials against Trotskyists. There were writers such as Mikhail Alexandrovich Sholokhov (*Quietly Flows the Don*, 1925–32), Alexander Fadeev (*Defeat 1927; The Last of the Udegel*, 1927) and Fyodor

20 Merziger: *Americanised, Europeanised or Nationalized*.

21 Gramsci: *Quaderni del carcere*, Vol. III, pp. 1550–1551.

22 Gerd: *Nationalistische Filmpolitik*; Spiker: *Film und Kapital*; Argentieri: *Locchio del regime*; Brunetta: *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*; Taylor: *Film Propaganda*.

23 See Chudakowa: *Michail Bulgakov. Cronaca di una vita*, Chapter ›Stalin benefattore‹.

Gladkov (*Cement*, 1925), all of them close enough to the Party's (i.e. Stalin's) official point of view, with the obvious absence of other politically out-of-tune writers and poets such as Boris Pasternak, Mikhail Bulgakov, Osip Mandelstam, Anna Achmatova. On that occasion Stalin is reported to have said: »Our tanks are useless if the souls of those driving them are made of clay. This is why I say that the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks [...], and I raise my glass to you writers, because you are the engineers of the soul.«²⁴ In Lukács' *Aesthetic I*, one, not surprisingly, finds in Chapter X, paragraph VI, dedicated to *The Struggle for Art's Liberation* (*Der Befreiungskampf der Kunst*), a long analytical passage on Stalin's 1932 toast at Gorky's place. It is an important passage in which Lukács' theoretical standpoint of the absolute nature of art is defined once for all, together with other standpoints of Lukács' indeed surprising definition of Stalin's ideological aesthetic perspective as ›bürgerlich‹ (in Lukács' own term). Stalin's whole idea of art, according to Lukács, is utilitarian since all art is to be used mechanically in order to modify the human soul and better the way it serves – from Stalin's perspective – practical, social and political ends. Quite consequently, Lukács writes that art is being deprived of its universality and its plurisignification.²⁵ Indeed, one might object that Lukács' idea of literary, cultural, ideological criticism as limitless, universal, multilateral and absolutely free might also sound as a sort of common-place idea in a bourgeois system of values. Thus, paragraph III of Chapter 10 (part VI of the discussion on mimesis) – at the end of the first volume of Lukács' *Aesthetics*, clearly prepares the conclusion of the whole work in Chapter XVI of the second volume: *The Struggle for Art's Liberation*.²⁶ In that chapter, Lukács' reasoning on the relationship between art and religion is based entirely on the aesthetically all-including idea of ›Widerspiegelung‹. Thus, in Lukács' conclusive discussion on the liberation of art, still in connection with *Soul and Form*, the all-connecting threads and passe-partout concepts of his reasoning are brought together.

6. Destiny, Form and Living Art

In *Soul and Form*, there is a recurrent mention of *ars vivendi*, the Platonic *τέχνη του βίου*, life-craft, proceeding from *επιμέλεια εαυτού* or *cura sui*, self-care, also known in Foucault as ›soin de soi‹, the teaching of which is the aim

24 Ibid., p. 34.

25 Lukács: *Ästhetik I*, p. 803.

26 *Der Befreiungskampf der Kunst* (ibid., Vol. 2: *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* 2, pp. 675–872).

of any philosophy. The subject's self-fashioning through self-government is the *conditio sine qua non* for the government of others. One may indeed say that the real subject of Lukács' book is what Foucault much later calls the technology of the self or self-government, the only means by which can one learn how to rule the others.²⁷ This is the real hidden, perhaps somehow unknowing subject of *Soul and Form*. This is also our main concern here since the question we are discussing is exactly the power of words on life or the way in which words can affect life and become, so to speak, flesh:

Life is nothing, work is all. Life is mere accident; work is necessity itself. [...] To some, one direction is the goal, the other the danger; one is the compass, the other the desert; one the work, the other the life. Between Life and Work a deadly struggle is being fought for a victory joining the two opposing camps [...].²⁸

In Chapter III, *The Foundering of Form against Life* (on Søren Kierkegaard and Regine Olsen), we find a formidable incipit, involving the value of form in life, and thus the life-shaping ›aesthetic‹ question of destiny:

What is the life-value of a gesture? Or, to put it another way, what is the value of form in life, the life-creating, life-enhancing value of form? A gesture is nothing more than a movement which clearly expresses something unambiguous. Form is the only way of expressing the absolute in life.²⁹

On Novalis and romanticism we find the most precise reference to life-craft: »The Romantic art of living was poetry as action; they transformed the deepest and most inward laws of poetic art into imperatives from life.«³⁰

Destiny, as it were, is what extracts things from their thingness by accentuating their essential traits while eliminating the inessential. Destiny thus becomes form, and form sets limits around a substance which would otherwise dissolve. Destiny is the agency shaping time (life) and addressing time (life) to an end. Therefore, form or the artistic principle must also shape

27 All this obviously enough recalls Michel Foucault's long research on *ἐπιμέλεια εαυτού* in *Le gouvernement des vivants, L'herméneutique du sujet, Le gouvernement de soi et des autres, Le souci de soi*.

28 Lukács: *Soul and Form*, p. 44 (»Das Leben ist nichts, das Werk ist alles, das Leben ist lauter Zufall und das Werk ist die Notwendigkeit selbst. [...] Für solche Menschen bildet die eine Richtung das Ziel und die andere die Gefahr, die eine den Kompaß, die andere die Wildnis, die eine das Werk, die andere das Leben. Und Kampf auf Leben und Tod wütet zwischen beiden um den Sieg [...].«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, pp. 48–49).

29 Ibid. (»Der Lebenswert einer Geste. Anders gesagt: der Wert der Form im Leben, der lebensschaffende, lebenssteigernde Wert der Formen. Die Geste ist nur jene Bewegung, die das Eindeutige klar ausdrückt, die Form der einzige Weg des Absoluten im Leben.«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 56).

30 *Soul and Form*, p. 66 (»Die Lebenskunst der Romantik ist eine zur Tat gewordene Poesie; aus dem innerlichsten und tiefsten Gesetzen der Dichtkunst wurden hier die Imperative des Lebens.«, *Die Seele und die Formen*, p. 107).

history as a struggle for some determined social good or to some end on the base of another principle: power, freedom, justice, and/or, strategically, the affirmation of a group, or a class of subjects. Clearly enough Lukács, in this perspective, may seem to assume an idealistic point of view, and, indeed, idealism in Lukács is a permanent intellectual temptation. The question of ›form‹ in the works of such an important Marxist theorist as Lukács must involve the political question of propaganda and ideology as the tools to be used in order to shape social reality politically. As we can read in the *Communist Manifesto*, the »ruling ideas in all ages have always been the ideas of the ruling class«. Stalin was undoubtedly in line with Marx and Engel's *Manifesto*, in which the revolutionary relevance of ideas and culture are clearly affirmed. The leading ideas of any given age are the ideas of the ruling class and the ruling class, of course, in the *Manifesto*, must be the proletariat, i.e. the working class. This is also why writers must be the ›engineers of the human soul‹, and art – somehow unexpectedly – must be or become what we may define a life-prescription activity, i.e. an orthodox, ›revolutionary‹, exemplary communist activity.

What is being evoked here is the dream of a new life being shaped by the collective ideas of the new revolutionary ruling class. In what Gramsci calls the proletarian cultural hegemony, writers must become ›organic‹ intellectuals. As such they are to be entrusted with the function of shaping new revolutionary souls and destinies. Therefore, literature, literary criticism and all performing arts, cinema and the radio are meant to become revolutionary tools to be used in order to shape a different human reality and a new time of a new both individual and collective life.

Lukács' 1911 *Soul and Form* is grounded in two basic concepts, ›form‹ and ›destiny‹, or destiny as the very form of experience. It is the same kind of idea we also find in reading Leon Trotsky's Chapter VI on proletarian culture and art in *Literature and Revolution*, a series of articles published in 1913–14. In this book, we find the idea that the task of new proletarian culture is the shaping, in literature, of a new political struggle and, indeed, of a new revolutionary living art. The conclusion of Chapter VIII of *Literature and Revolution* is focused exactly on ›the art of the revolution‹ and the establishment of a socialist state and a new socialist way of life. In Trotsky's description of the transformation of man according to the new socialist living art, for example, we seem to find something similar to what Plotinus described as the sculpture of the self.³¹ The question we are dealing with is the transformation of ›téchne tou biou‹ into ›téchne

31 *Enneades*, I, 6.9.

politiké‹ (ars politica). From Plato’s point of view in *Alcibiades I*, ›téchne politiké‹ (the art of politics) is one and the same thing with ›téchne tou biou‹ (life-craft).

The question of either literary or political discourse form shaping life and destiny is the subject of *On the Nature and Form of the Essay* apropos literature as a destiny-shaping activity. Form, as Lukács writes, is destiny – and destiny, as the very form of any given life, can be shaped either by external given conditions, or by man’s will. Yet form is primarily defined either by words or images as sensible collective memory traces. The preservation and interpretation of those traces is part of the task intellectuals, poets and artists are entrusted with in view of the fashioning influence their version of the past and present can have on the collective future. As we know, Lukács did not share that idea. He would probably also disagree with Gramsci’s idea of ›organic‹ intellectuals and artists as builders of cultural-hegemony consensus apparatuses as the very necessary foundation both for the preparation and stabilization of the revolution, even though in young Lukács’ *Early Writings II* (*Frühschriften II*), the revolutionary role of the intellectual is a kind of ›fil rouge‹ knitting together all the reasoning of the book.

Despite the fact that Lukács and Gramsci met neither in Vienna in the early twenties nor later in Moscow, Lukács’ early concern for the role and function of the intellectual recalls Gramsci’s own concern for the guiding role of the intellectual in the workers’ movement. Of course, this was a subject à l’ordre du jour in the early revolutionary days, as shown, for instance, by Sylvia Pankhurst’s article *Education of the masses*, probably first published in »Workers Dreadnought«, and re-printed as a »Dreadnought Pamphlet« in 1918. Form – in young Lukács – is destiny and destiny is the very form of any given life. Human destiny is not simply what happens; destiny refers to both the personal and the collective meaning of what happens. This is part of the task intellectuals are entrusted with in view of the shaping influence their version of the past can have on the collective future. Thus, intellectuals – Stalin’s ›engineers of the soul‹ – can also be described as the ›shapers‹ of collective class identities. In *Early Writings II*, the introductory question is about the guiding political role of ›intellectual workers‹ deciding the practical direction to be taken by the workers’ movement. Gramsci probably had no opportunity to read Lukács’ contributions, which, however, can show us that the problem being posed was already being discussed in the early revolutionary period. Gramsci’s discourse on the role of the ›organic‹ intellectual, after all, faces the same questions posed by young Lukács in *Soul and Form* on what we may define the socio-political architecture and nature and political function of intellectual and artistic work re-fashioning

of the world through words, and, in *Early Writings II*, on intellectual guidance and political organization, shaping collective destiny,³² lest we forget...

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32 On Lukács, Gramsci and the Frankfurt School, see Kilminster: *Praxis and Method*.

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