Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing* (Toward the Formulation of the Question)

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1. The Thing and Proletarian Culture

The great majority of Marxists who address the problem of proletarian culture approach it on a purely ideological level, or at the very least take ideology as the point of departure for their investigations. Views on culture dominant within the Marxist sphere are characterized by a peculiar ideologism. Whenever comrades are called upon to explain social processes, including cultural ones, they begin with the production of material values. However, as soon as they attempt to explain the organizational connection between different *forms* of culture, they abandon their usual historico-materialist position.[1] Thus for them, social consciousness as a form of culture takes pride of place, while material culture is sidelined. In the most extreme case, they analyze the technical system of society only in the narrow sense of a system that forms economic relations, of a system of economic relations as society's driving force.

We will pass over the obvious fact that technology itself is not only a driving engine, but also the socio-material form in which this engine exists. We must,

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"Byt i kul'tura veshchi" was published in *Al'manakh proletkul'ta* (Moscow: 1925), pp. 75–82. The term *byt* is usually translated as "everyday life," although it can also mean simply "way or mode of life." It can convey a more negative meaning than its English counterpart: *byt* signifies everyday life in its most mundane and material aspects, as opposed to higher forms of spiritual or philosophical existence. Throughout this translation, the phrases "everyday life" or "the everyday" translate the Russian noun *byt*, and the adjective "everyday" translates the Russian adjectival form *bytovoi*. In certain instances where "everyday life" does not accurately convey the sense of the Russian *byt*, the Russian has been left in place.

1. Arvatov is specifically referring to the "Marxist comrade" Leon Trotsky. Arvatov published this article in *The Proletkul't Almanac*, in which essays by several authors explicitly rebutted Trotsky's essay "Proletarian culture and proletarian art." Published in 1923 as part of his book *Literature and Revolution*, Trotsky's essay argued that the very notion of proletarian culture is meaningless because the current "dictatorship of the proletariat" is only a short, temporary phase on the path toward an eventually classless communist society, in which a specifically "proletarian" culture will be obsolete. Arvatov responds that it is dualistic to conceive of culture as a separate (ideal) entity that can only be built once material struggles are resolved; monism dictates that culture is only ever that material culture, which can already now begin to be reorganized through the agency of the socialist "thing."

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however, decisively stress that the concept of "material culture," including all technological production, its distribution and consumption, is significantly broader than the concept of "technology," especially as it is conventionally interpreted. The material culture of a society is the universal system of Things, i.e., the socially expedient material forms created by humanity through the transformation of so-called natural forms. Material culture is both the production and consumption of material values. From the point of view of material culture, any machine represents both a technical, productive form and an everyday, consumer form. Technology as a whole is both the instrument and environment of social labor, its formal-everyday condition.

Because we are examining the phenomenon of culture, we must analyze not only technology, but the entire totality of forms that things can take.[2] Only such an examination will be complete. Social consciousness and everyday life in society are formed in the process of both material production and material consumption. It is obvious that forms of social consumption are not primary—that they are defined by production—but without directly studying them it is impossible to grasp culturally the style of a society as a whole. They immediately influence both the society's world-outlook and, more importantly, its world-feeling. A person's cultural type is created by *all* of his material surroundings, just as a society's cultural style is created by all of its material construction.

The relation of the individual and the collective to the Thing is the most fundamental and important, the most defining of the social relations. This thesis flows directly from the theory of historical materialism. If the significance of the human relation to the Thing has not been understood, or has been only partially understood as a relation to the means of production, this is because until now Marxists have known only the bourgeois world of things. This world is disorganized and divided into two sharply delimited domains, those of technical and everyday things. The latter fell completely outside of scientific consideration, as static and secondary forms. Thus the world of Things, as a world not only of material processes but of material forms as well, was not taken into account; nor, consequently, was the formal-everyday character of technology. In the minds of Marxists, then, the entire sphere of social consciousness and many aspects of social practice (e.g., social-organizational, artistic, and everyday practices) were

2. "Forms that things can take" translates "*veshchnyie formy*." The adjective *veshchnyi* is the nonstandard and little-used adjectival form of the noun *veshch*, meaning "thing," and can be translated precisely as "thing-y" or "thing-like" or more loosely as "material." But Arvatov uses this adjective throughout the essay to emphasize the concreteness of particular things over the more abstract notion of material; also, *veshchnyi* has a homely, insistently *Russian* sound to it that differentiates it from the more high-blown sound of the word *material'nyi*, imported from foreign philosophy. The word "thing" has the same expansive philosophical connotations that in English-language Marxist theory are granted to the word "object."

Since "thing" in this text designates both the category to which Arvatov has elevated the notion of the object and its particular instances, the use of the upper- and lowercase *T* is adopted when necessary in order to indicate differentiation. Ed.

cut off from the world of Things and suspended in midair. The connection of things to production was considered too distant and superstructural, while the actual unmediated relation between them that was embodied in material forms of productive consumption and pure consumption was disregarded or never noticed.

The construction of proletarian culture, that is, of a culture consciously organized by the working class, requires the elimination of that rupture between Things and people that characterized bourgeois society. This construction presupposes, in addition, the establishment of a single methodological point of view that understands the entire world of things as the material form-creating basis of culture. Proletarian society will not know this dualism of things either in practice or in consciousness. To the contrary, this society will be ideologically imbued with the deepest sense of Things. However, insofar as these general theses remain silent as to their concrete realization, they must be critically compared with those forms of material culture already worked out by humanity. Knowing the types of existing relations between people and things, knowing the sociohistorical substratum of these relations, we will be able to foresee, even if only in their essentials, the developmental tendencies of proletarian material culture.

The significance of such foresight is enormous. The material forms of culture, precisely *as* forms, that is, as detached skeletal formations, represent an extraordinarily conservative force known as the everyday [*byt*]. Understanding the developing tendencies of material *byt* means being able to direct them, to transform them systematically, i.e., to turn *byt* from a conservative force into a progressive one. And this in turn guarantees the progressive reformation of two other areas of *byt*: the social and the ideological.

Everyday life [*byt*] consists of the fixed, skeletal forms of existence [*bytie*].[3] The transformation of everyday-life-creation [*bytotvorchestvo*], in which changes in *byt* will move in organic, constant, and flexible step with changes in *bytie,* will lead, in effect, to the liquidation of the everyday as a specific sphere of social life—so long as the process of dissolving class barriers continues. This makes perfect sense: the concept of the everyday was formed in opposition to the concept of labor, just as the concept of consumer activity was formed in opposition to that of productive activity, and the concept of social stasis was formed in opposition to the concept of social dynamism. Such divisions were possible only on the basis of the class-technical differentiation that characterized the capitalist system, with its administrative top brass standing above production. In proletarian society, and even more in socialist society, where production will directly form all aspects of human activity, the static everyday life of consumption will become impossible. Furthering this evolution is the real task of the builders of proletarian culture. The resolution of this historical problem can proceed only from the forms of material *byt.*

3. *Bytie* means "existence" in the sense of philosophically or spiritually meaningful existence, and is diametrically opposed, in Russian culture, to the everyday material life signified by *byt.*

The present notes try to shed light on several questions of everyday life in relation to questions of the culture of the Thing, from the perspective of precisely these urgent needs of proletarian cultural construction.

2. The Thing in the Hands of the Bourgeoisie

In this section we will attempt to give a cursory analysis of the bourgeoisie's culture of things as it was formed in the middle of the previous century and still continues to a great extent to exist to this day, when it coexists with new cultural formations.

Private ownership of the instruments and means of production gave rise to private and domestic *byt.* It led, however, not only to the establishment of class difference, but also to maximum isolation of the system of production, as a machine-collective system, from the system of consumption, as a system of individual appropriation. Between them lay the area of distribution—90 percent of which functioned as the spontaneously organized market. Consequently, both the world of things and the world of people were isolated and differentiated.

The bourgeoisie, especially in the last period of financial capitalism, had no direct physical contact with the production of material values. It seemed to have contact only with those forms that things take when they make up the sphere of consumption—primarily of pure consumption and partly of so-called productive consumption. The cultural character of the bourgeoisie was in this regard thus entirely defined by the role and function played in its life by: (1) the thing on the market, and (2) the thing in private everyday life. In addition, it is easy to demonstrate that the former was of commanding significance, if only because under capitalism the private everyday life of the city, the everyday life of pure consumption, is thoroughly permeated by the everyday life of the market and is entirely dependent on it.

The bourgeois deals with the Thing first and foremost in its guise as a commodity, as a bought and sold object. The commodity relation to it is fostered among the bourgeoisie not only in its domestic practices, but in all its materio-social surroundings. The capitalist city street is one in which things are bought and sold; it is a street of stores and commodity display-windows, and of prices, the secret origins of which are hidden from the consciousness of the consumer. Here the Thing becomes an abstract category, it appears in the capacity of an a-material exchange value—and where merchants and industrialists are concerned, as a naked and thus abstract means of accumulation.

The commodity nature of bourgeois material *byt* constitutes the fundamental basis for its relation to the thing. The Thing as an a-material category, as a category of pure consumption, the Thing outside its creative genesis, outside its material dynamics, outside its social process of production, the Thing as something completed, fixed, static, and, consequently, dead—this is what characterizes bourgeois material culture.

The bourgeois acquires the Thing from outside, from the unfamiliar and thus, to him, indifferent world of productive reality. For the bourgeois the Thing exists only to the extent that he can extract profit from it or use it to organize his everyday life. This determines his methods of forming his material *byt.* "A richly appointed apartment"; "humble surroundings"; "sparsely decorated"; "expensively furnished"—these are the typical everyday conceptions, formulated in casual speech, that have developed among the bourgeoisie. But there is a more important, even fundamental, characteristic of the bourgeois *byt* of things: private property, the private-property relation to the world of Things. For the bourgeois there exist "my" things and "someone else's" things. "My" things appear primarily not only as material blessings, but also as social-ideological categories.

In a society of constant competitive struggle and individualism, each individual member of this society utilizes all his resources to secure his position in society, and these resources are primarily material. The Thing now becomes the means for both purely personal and class-demonstrating affectation. It enters the structure of everyday ceremony as its main basis, as its core. "A chic outfit"; "a luxurious living room"; "a magnificent carriage"; and so on and on—these are the turns of phrase of the bourgeois ceremonial of things. It is shaped by a cult of the value, rarity, and antiquity of materials and objective forms, by the effect of an external material shell, that is, through everything that is capable of clearly demonstrating the socio-economic power of the individual bourgeois or of the bourgeois collective (the city, the government, the capitalist enterprise, and so on).

In all of this the objective social meaning of the Thing, its utilitarian-technical purpose and its productive qualification, are definitively lost. The Thing takes on a double meaning—both as material form and as ideological form. The idealism of Things as a private, but socially and psychologically dominant, relation to the world is the characteristic mark of bourgeois idealism in general.

Such a relation to the Thing would be impossible if the bourgeoisie entered into active, creative contact with the world of Things. But in order for this to happen, the bourgeoisie would have to cease existing as the exploitative-parasitical class. For the class in which everyday life takes form in private apartments, private offices, or so-called "bureaucratic" spaces, there is no room for thing-creating [*veshchetvorchestvo*]. There Things are realized, and can only be realized, as independent, clichéd, finished objects, defined and fixed, once and for all. Because private everyday life is formed individually, its forms are both unavoidably random and anarchic, and, at the same time, finished, unchangeable.

Indeed.

Acquiring things ready-made, acquiring them to the extent that he is capable of commanding them economically, the bourgeois thereupon arranges them in his everyday life according to established traditions and established tastes, varying all of this to the extent of his individual capabilities. For him a thing is nothing

but necessary material furnishing or a form of display. He does not know how to act with the world of Things. Our bourgeois is either a mental worker, or an organizer of people—and most often an organizer of the stock-exchange, not of production. Having once set up, let us say, an apartment, he then no longer comes into active contact with the things in it. This completes the staging of his material *byt*. This is particularly noticeable in the everyday life of the intelligentsia. If the average bourgeois manages to be just barely practically organized, the member of the intelligentsia is to a great extent a helpless and maladjusted creature when it comes to things. He accepts his furnishings just as they are offered to him, or he simply ignores them.

The alienation of consumption from production radically affects the Thing-relation in the sense that this relation becomes deeply subjective, ideological, and taste-determined. This leads to two interrelated phenomena: style-ism and fashion. Both these phenomena are rooted in the absence of a productive, collective approach to the world of things, and in the need to proceed from purely formal, individual criteria for appraising or choosing things. Aesthetic anarchy and aesthetic imitative conservatism hold sway in bourgeois society and to a great extent determine its material-everyday structure. It stands to reason that the main cause of this is the technology of private-property production. This technology, limited by the framework of individual capital or middle-sized shareholding capital (the mode of production in most countries even to this day), manufactures things for individual consumption, i.e., things not connected to each other, separated, Thing-commodities. Production works for the market and therefore cannot take into account the *concrete* particularities of consumption and proceed from them; it is forced, in the construction of things, to proceed from existing patterns of a purely formal order, to imitate them. The result is the complete and utter conservatism and stasis of forms.

The organization of Things in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie does not go beyond the rearrangement of things, beyond the distribution of ready-made objects in space (furniture is the most characteristic model). Thus the Thing's form does not change, but remains once and forever exactly the same. Its function also remains exactly the same. The Thing's immobility, its inactivity, the absence in it of any element of instrumentality—all these create a relation to it in which its qualified productive side is perceived either from the point of view of a naked form (the criteria of aesthetics or taste: "beautiful" or "ugly" things), or from the point of view of its resistance to the influence of its surroundings (the thing's so-called durability). The Thing thus takes on the character of something that is passive by its very nature. The Thing as the fulfillment of the organism's physical capacity for labor, as a force for social labor, as an instrument and as a co-worker, does not exist in the everyday life of the bourgeoisie. It is not for nothing that this is the everyday life of pure consumption, or the everyday life that merely surrounds work, formative of its condition but with no practical connection to it (the scholar's room, the administrator's office, and so on).

3. The Thing in the Industrial City

The latest stage of capitalism, in its most developed form, is to be found in America. Generally described, therefore, with reference to that popular buzzword "americanism," this form of capitalism is characterized above all by the grandiose productive collectivization of society. It encompasses a significant section of the bourgeoisie and has created a special and extraordinarily numerous subgroup known as the technical intelligentsia.[4]

Following the collectivization of production in industry, the next area subjected to collectivization was that of productive consumption (all forms of communication, distribution, et cetera). The area of organizational activity (administrative apparatuses, scientific-experimental institutions, and so on) was collectivized at the same time, and only after that—a few elements of private *byt.*

The newest capitalist city presents itself as a series of interconnected thing-systems that are centrally managed to a greater or lesser degree. So long as the financial bourgeoisie continues to rule in this city, it preserves all the typical urban characteristics delineated in the preceding chapter of its history, despite the materio-cultural revolution already unfolding. But this revolution has already fully affected the technical intelligentsia. Thanks to the collectivization of its labor, the technical intelligentsia has now replaced its former everyday life with a new type, the everyday life of enormous offices, department stores, factory laboratories, research institutes, and so on. Its relation to the world is now formed not in a private apartment, but in the collective sphere, the sphere connected with material production. Furthermore, the collectivization of transport and of many of the material functions of city life (heating, lighting, plumbing, architectural building) led to the sphere of private everyday life being narrowed to the minimum and reformed under the influence of progressive technology.

Living in a world of things that it organizes but does not possess, things that condition its labor, the technical intelligentsia gradually lost its former private-property relation to them. Here, valuing the thing as an exchange or display category was simply no longer possible. Valuing a thing from the perspective of its passive capacity of resistance (durability, operation, utilization) also became less prevalent. This was because the technical intelligentsia, as a group of hired

4. In Russia, the term "intelligentsia" originally described the Westernized educated elite that emerged in the nineteenth century. It was less a coherent class than a self-styled political identity of critical resistance to the autocratic regime. By the twentieth century, however, "intelligentsia" usually referred simply to the educated sector of the bourgeoisie. The Bolsheviks were ideologically anti-bourgeois, but they recognized the need for preserving the technical skills of the bourgeois engineers, scientists, and administrators who were needed for the practical tasks of building socialism. By referring to this same group of people in America as the "technical intelligentsia," Arvatov offers them social legitimation in Soviet terms: their technical skills partially exonerate them for their bourgeois class status. The closest contemporary English term for this group would have been "technocrats"—a term that in 1920s America did not have the same pejorative connotations that it has today. The more literal term "technical intelligentsia" is maintained in this translation, however, to avoid those present connotations, and because the English "technocrat" sounds too close to the despised "bureaucrat" (*biurokrat*), a favorite term of censure in early Bolshevik culture.

organizers, did not have constant contact with the concrete things with which and around which it worked. This was even more true of things in the everyday life of the street and in the sphere of communication (the streetcar, telephone, railroad, and so on).

Other criteria of value now took pride of place: convenience, portability, comfort, flexibility, expedience, hygiene, and so on—in a word, everything that they call the adaptability of the thing, its suitability in terms of positioning and assembling [*ustanovochno-montazhnaia prisposoblennost'*] for the needs of social practice.

The basis of this evolution was, of course, the evolution of technology with its principle of standardization and normalization. The technical intelligentsia was the very social motor of this evolution, guiding it into everyday life. Little by little, this technical intelligentsia was becoming an organizer of ideas, people, and things, transferring the skills it had acquired from the sphere of production to the sphere of consumption, from collective *byt* to private *byt*. Knowledge of the Thing and the ability to command it now became active, cultivated on public transportation, at the factory, in the technical laboratory, in the large-scale administrative institution. This knowledge extended to the minutest elements of material culture.

The ability to pick up a cigarette-case, to smoke a cigarette, to put on an overcoat, to wear a cap, to open a door, all these "trivialities" acquire their qualification, their not unimportant "culture," which finds its meaning in the maximization of economy and precision, in maximum cohesion with the thing and its purpose.

In the city of skyscrapers, of underground and overground metropolitan transit, of mechanized material connections between things, where a thousand transmission apparatuses replace labor—in such a city the inability to manage the thing would mean the total impossibility of existence. The new world of Things, which gave rise to a new image of a person as a psycho-physiological individual, dictated forms of gesticulation, movement, and activity. It created a particular regimen of physical culture. The psyche also evolved, becoming more and more thinglike in its associative structure. The purely formal, immaterial, stylized perception of Things disappeared as the latest industry revolutionized the forms that objects could take, laying bare their constructive essence.

Glass, steel, concrete, artificial materials, and so on were no longer covered over with a "decorative" casing, but spoke for themselves. The mechanism of a thing, the connection between the elements of a thing and its purpose, were now transparent, compelling people practically, and thus also psychologically, to reckon with them, and only with them. Form as a ready-made pattern could no longer be considered here. Coordination with form ceded its place to coordination with a thing's function and its methods of construction. The thing was dynamized. Collapsible furniture, moving sidewalks, revolving doors, escalators, automat restaurants, reversible outfits, and so on constituted a new stage in the evolution of material culture. The Thing became something functional and active, connected like a co-worker with human practice. Mechanization + dynamization led to the

machine-ization of the thing, to its transformation into a working instrument. The Thing of consumer *byt*, once fundamentally distinct from the thing in production, from the factory machine, once static and dead, has now, through the methods of its construction and through its function, subordinated itself to the productive thing.

Thus the material forms of production, as much as the collectivization of society, created a monism of Things that organized the material forms of consumption in its own image, monistically. Conversely, the electro-technical centralization of production led to the elimination from factory shops not only of engines, but of a significant number of driving gears; that is to say, the increasing complication of the thing in everyday life unfolded parallel to its simplification in industry. Both instances resulted from the collectivization of the material apparatuses of society, their mutual rapprochement, their real and methodological unification. Not only did production methods begin to penetrate everyday life, but production itself was evolving toward making the productive process more comfortable from the point of view of the working conditions of labor, i.e., toward infusing it with everyday life [*obytit' ego*]. The appearance and crystallization of these two tendencies are far from being fulfilled; for now we can observe this development only in embryo. Its full realization is conceivable only under socialism.

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Although it was the bearer of the high culture of the Thing, the technical intelligentsia was precluded by its class origins from becoming an integral organizer of the world of things. Limited by its individualism, the technical intelligentsia was connected to production only through some aspects of its activity. It was therefore capable neither of valuing the objective essence of production, nor, what is more, of similarly valuing the material forms of everyday life. Production as a giant system of collaboration between humanity and the spontaneous forces of nature; production as a collective instrument for the transformation and overcoming of nature; production as the defining, commanding form of the organization of social activity, directed toward the victorious conquest and mastery of the powerful and indefinitely expanding energies of the material sphere—production in this its actual role did not exist for the technical intelligentsia as a whole (excepting certain of its best representatives). In this way, production was becoming something isolated from nature; moreover, the entire system of material *byt* and consumer production was becoming even more isolated.

The concept of "americanism" includes both a positive side—"Thing-ness"—and a negative one—alienation from nature. The contemporary industrial city, with its everyday isolating of nature from the place of production, and the place of production from the place of organizing activity—this city that is completely, to the last inch, fettered by matter that has been transformed by humanity until the last faint resemblance to its spontaneous source has disappeared—creates a

relation to the Thing as if to a self-sufficient form that is retired within itself. Its dynamic-laboring structure and its living force are never simultaneously present; thus both become "soulless." This leads to capitalism's characteristic thirst for nature as if for something that, in contrast to the thing, seems to be alive, or, conversely, to its aversion to nature and to the fetishizing of things that are putatively, outside of any relation to nature, valuable in themselves (the so-called technicism from which many excessively zealous worshippers of americanism suffer).

It is already possible, however, to point to a number of new formations in technology and in everyday life that are leading toward the liquidation of the rupture between the material energies of society and nature. These are first and foremost electricity and the radio, technical systems in which the productive process is realized in the work of directly connected, spontaneous activities organized by human labor. Here, for the first time, producing and consuming forms of energy are applied in the same way; nature in its pure form penetrates society and becomes *byt*. A similar process can be seen in the sites of raw materials that are gradually acquiring new everyday environments as their localities are settled and transformed on the basis of high "cultured" forms. Finally, the steady penetration into the city of vegetation systematically managed by human hands testifies to exactly the same, as yet embryonic, progress.

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If the final stage of capitalism—with its rabidly intensifying competitive struggle and constant feverish haste—is a stage of high dynamism, then we must bear in mind that we are dealing primarily with the dynamism of human motion. The economics of the market forces people to become dynamized, but this dynamism is deeply individualistic, and therefore anarchic, the dynamism of separate, battling personalities.

The task of the proletariat is to create a systematically regulated dynamism of things. To turn the thing into an instrument, to universalize the process that is already apparent in our time (a curious example: house-instruments),[5] means providing society with a maximum economizing of its energy, and maximum organizing possibilities. Only when the productive forces of humanity begin to be operated by mechanics, electrical fitters, machinists, drivers, and conductors will the dominion of Things—as instruments directly connected to both the people and the forces of nature that operate them—begin.

5. "House-instruments" translates *doma-orudiia*. The term seems to refer to the functionalist notion of the house as an extension of the body, as a tool or implement of production, being developed in Constructivist architecture of the 1920s; "social condensers" and "*dom-kommuna*" (house-communes) are discussed in the writings of Moisei Ginzburg. The term could also be a reference to Le Corbusier's "house as a machine for living in" or his "mass-production houses"; this would be in keeping with the article's focus on modernity in the West.