An Early Staging of Media.
Gustav Klutsis's Loudspeaker Stands

Klemens Gruber

Vienna University (Austria)

E-mail: klemens.gruber@univie.ac.at

Abstract. Gustav Klutsis's "radio-orators," "agit platforms," and "loudspeaker stands" from 1922–23 are more than the multimedial objects they seem to be at first sight. They build a stage for the new media film and radio. The utilitarian design of the platforms combines loudspeaker and projection screen. But in contrast to Constructivist stage design, as we know it from the Russian theatre of those days, the beauty of these stands goes far beyond a mere glorification of machines, which still remained "a workbench" for actors. The Constructivist Klutsis insists on revealing the construction mode of the platforms: "laying bare the device" is the Constructivist credo. Furthermore, the so-called "radio-orators" not only show how they are made, but demonstrate the inherent mediatic energies of their apparatuses: a media environment on stage which takes over all human cognitive abilities – replacing man completely. The mise-en-scène of the apparatus thus produces media self-reflexivity. The essay shows that Klutsis's staging of the media is an early intermedial attempt which, in its elementary aesthetics and epistemological exuberance, makes no difference between past, presence, and future.

> *"Fantastic work. Looking for new media.*
> *Surface. Space. Construction."*
> Gustav Klutsis[1]

The historical avant-garde's world of pictures comprises a series of drafts that evade all reassurances of an advanced enjoyment of art. Their attraction defies the museum cult of beauty, work, and value as it resists the self-understanding of an entertainment industry making use of the avant-garde's inventions in a fragmented and bonsaized version. We are talking about the more than thirty drafts of "kiosks," "agit platforms," and "loudspeaker stands" by Gustav Klutsis from 1922.[2]

---

[1] *Autobiography,* manuscript from the 1930s in the archives of Klutsis's wife Valentina Kulagina, quoted after Rakitin 1980, 60.

[2] An earlier and extended version of this text was published in German as "Bastardisierungen und ein 'Kollektivbrötler:' Die Lautsprechertribünen von Gustav Klucis und Walter Benjamins Kritik der Apparate durch das epische Theater." (Gruber 2005). The present article was translated by Wolfgang Astelbauer.

The Animals of the Avant-Garde

These light-footed, sharp-edged, and sometimes prickly stands strike us as close relatives of the fabulous beasts, equally threatening and armed to the teeth, that have been passed on to us in Mikhail Larionov's costume sketches for *Histoires naturelles* and Fernand Léger's designs for *La Création du monde* [Fig. 1.]. Klutsis's stands are instruments for the circulation of signs, though, transmitters and receivers all in one, terminals, as we would say today, relay stations of revolution: the wings have been replaced by projection screens, the feelers and horns by antennae, the claws by jagged, bundled rays.

Since it is only the voice that makes Larionov's mechanical insect move, as the painter notes, the loudspeaker stands only come into operation by being used. Neither frozen as media sculptures, which are closed in themselves like classical sculptures, nor mere installations[3] or monuments, the loudspeaker stands are entirely functional. [Fig. 2.]

Klutsis's projects mark the completion of the transition from the mere form experiment of the non-objective to functional aesthetics. Their fundamental features – simplicity, economy, expediency – correspond with the lucidity of their construction and their multiple functionality. They combine the daring forms and colours of Constructivism with the emphatic imagery of the world of machines. Made of light wood, collapsible, and mobile, they fulfil the requirements of the urban information sphere. The colouring is mostly confined to red, white, and black – the basic colours of Constructivism. The extremely simple geometric structures of light and – a decisive factor in a situation of general shortage – easy-to-come-by materials are kept in balance by wires so that the construction exists only thanks to the mutual tension of forces. In a kind of modular solution, it combines with the latest technological components: the loudspeaker and the projection screen – future trademarks of all Constructivist presentations.

The purpose of this utilitarian design lies in transmitting radio messages, screening films, presenting literature, spreading information in the cause of the revolution. The apparatus does not yet take second place to the message. The canvases that are to replace those of painting tower above the entire scenery in accordance with the special place assigned to film as an instrument of cognition in avant-garde practice. Loudspeakers are part of the modern cityscape as well as of avant-garde life. And fantastic qualities are attributed to the radio, which had

---

[3] "In addition, the word 'installation' was not really fashionable in German since it was used for sanitary facilities," Nam June Paik noted ironically. See Stoos and Kellein 1991, 58.

just been invented for communicating with men-of-war off the coast: "The problem of celebrating the communion of humanity's one soul, one daily spiritual wave that washes over the entire country every twenty-four hours, saturating it with a flood of scientific and artistic news – that problem has been solved by Radio using lightning as its tool" (Khlebnikov 1985, 156). [Fig. 3.]

The Rejected Subject

Thus, these light, colourful constructions equipped with modern media technology attract our attention and strike us as strange at the same time. Although their names are unambiguous, they are based on a contradictory conception.

They resemble reversed illustrations for Walter Benjamin's notes on the stage of the epic theatre.[4] His thesis concerning "the theatre on the public platform" maintains that the stage no longer offers the public "'the planks that signify the world' (in other words, a magic circle), but a convenient public exhibition area." And he continues in the first version of his study *What is Epic Theatre* from 1930–31: "The forms of epic theatre correspond to the new technical forms – cinema and radio. Epic theatre corresponds to the modern level of technology." (Benjamin 2003, 2, 6)

Klutsis's constructions result from a similar, yet – as we see – opposite thought. He builds a stage for the medium, presents the loudspeaker as an exhibit, and combines it with a projection screen. This bastardization makes the presence of man on the stage superfluous and confronts us with a certain attitude concerning the relationship between man and machine: a staging of the apparatus, which replaces man – while the technology itself becomes capable of speaking. However, by calling the arrangement "Radio Orator" Klutsis animates, anthropomorphizes it. In addition, the loudspeakers and platforms of certain designs render the constructions extremely anthropomorphic, making them appear like living stands whose outlines resemble dynamic human figures.[5] Thus, the replacement of man by an apparatus endows the latter with traces of human features. [Fig. 4.]

The rejection of the subject in Klutsis's designs is radical. The staging of the apparatus erases the human body as an entity that provides meaning, or simply as something beautiful, as part of an intelligent creature and social being. The simultaneous anthropomorphization of the loudspeaker stands alleviates the loss of physical presence, of the immediate relationship between the speaker/narrator/

---

[4] Even if Benjamin did not see any of these designs during his visit to Moscow in 1926/27, he might have come upon some works by Klutsis who designed numerous magazine and book covers as well as programme folders and booklets.

[5] The anthropomorphous traits are especially prominent in the designs for loudspeaker stand #2. [Fig. 4.]

performer and the public. The memory of an immediateness that does not come about any more since the apparatuses' interference is reified in it in an attractive manner. The apparatus not only ensures the transmission of information, but represents something manlike, something human.

On the loudspeaker stands, the systematic absence of man is even enhanced by the structure's anthropomorphization, although the latter only results from the former. At the same time, the constructions indulge in the transfer of human qualities into the machinery's interior. The relationship to machines, however, is not yet merely instrumental, but still playful: taking things apart, analytical and self-reflective.

An Elementary Solution

The outstanding beauty of these stands, of which only two could be realized by Klutsis,[6] certainly lies in the fact that their construction is made visible, in the transparency of their building method, their exhibit character. And in the complete absence of the human body, the occupation of the dais by the media which clear the entire platform, the entire stage, remove everything, leaving only the installed loudspeaker and the projection screen: a pure apparatus.

Finally, the beauty of the stands derives above all from their simplicity, which is not only the achievement of an extraordinary stylistic and formal intelligence, but obeys a very old elementary functional principle[7] which we come upon in historical illustrations depicting commedia dell'arte stages, fair theatres, and similar motifs: the simplest form of stage is made of planks put on two sawhorses. An archaic, elegant, mobile solution, which is at least four hundred years old – but surely much older. [Figs. 5–6.]

Staging the Medium

There is a deliberate epistemological effect that adds to the dimension of functionality. In order to complete the development of his prototype of a new communication vehicle, which we may describe as an intermedial stand today, all

---

[6] At least one of these constructions with an antenna and a searchlight was mounted on top of the building where the delegates lived, in the centre of Moscow, during the Fourth Congress of the Communist International (1922). Another was built for the exhibition presented on the occasion of the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in 1925. See Oginskaja 1981, 26; Lodder 1990, 104; Gaßner and Nachtigäller 1991, 38 and 113.

[7] It thus comes as no surprise that Klutsis created stage sets for the Ochtenski Workers Theatre when he studied in Petrograd.

Klutsis had to do was mounting a screen and loudspeakers on the platform. In this prototype, the will to create technical inventions combines with the Constructivist avant-garde's continuous search for ways to exploit technical innovations both aesthetically and epistemologically: the stand equipped with media is energy centre, communication terminal, and cognitive instrument all in one.[8]

Yet only the staging of these innovations, the exhibitional character of their arrangement, creates the media consciousness Gustav Klutsis's loudspeaker stands, radio orators, and kiosks convey. They hint at how they are made, reveal their method of construction, and, above all, the particular character of their equipment.

The projection screen is ready to serve the art of light, which has taken the place of panel painting, ready to show its moving images – "the film has replaced God completely," Jean Epstein once said. François Albera has shown that the cinema plays a twofold role for Klutsis: it is a place with projection screens above the stands, and it is a formal model in the layout of its axes, angles, and perspectives (cf. Albera 1994, 59).

Loudspeakers, which were also regarded as the newest achievement in the media world of the twenties, join the film, which leaves the cinema with its projection screen in a closed room to take a dominant place on stands with screens rising above them. Klutsis's loudspeakers show the media's genesis: the megaphone in its transformation to the loudspeaker which did not yet exist as such technically, and the new medium of the radio – the engineer Vladimir Šuchov's[9] radio tower had just been completed "within the shortest time" in Moscow in 1922, and weather forecasts and a stock exchange service had begun to be transmitted from the Eiffel Tower in Paris only two years earlier.

Projection surface and loudspeaker, one presenting the other, occupy the century-old dais: the loudspeakers of Klutsis's radio orators not only anticipate their own invention, but already hint ahead at the sound film emerging toward the end of the decade. The projection surface provides pictures accompanying the voice of the speaker or projects larger-than-life letters which condense to captions of the everyday world. At the same time, the separation of the media relates to the various senses they address – and can address individually thanks to the technological inventions.

The exhibition of the medium can be understood in terms of intermediality today: the staging of the medium shows it in its relational functionality and epistemological dimension. Thus, a reflection on media is initiated. [Figs. 7–8.]

---

[8] See the famous study by Annette Michelson 1972.

[9] "I also saw the enormous Moscow radio transmitter, whose shape is different from any other I have seen." (Benjamin 1985, 112.)

References

Albera, François. 1994. Destruction de la forme et transparence au cinéma et dans les arts plastiques. *Les Cahiers du Musée National d'Art Moderne* no. 48: "Complicités," été: 49–63.

Benjamin, Walter. 1985 [1927]. *Moscow Diary* (January 29, 1927), ed. Gary Smith. Special issue *October* 35. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Benjamin, Walter. 2003 [1930/31]. What is Epic Theatre? [First version] In *Understanding Brecht,* intr. Stanley Mitchell, trans. Anna Bostock, 1–14. London and New York: Verso.

Gaßner, Hubertus and Roland Nachtigäller, eds. 1991. *Gustav Klucis. Retrospektive*. Stuttgart: Hatje.

Gruber, Klemens. 2005. Bastardisierungen und ein 'Kollektivbrötler': Die Lautsprechertribünen von Gustav Klucis und Walter Benjamins Kritik der Apparate durch das epische Theater. In *Walter Benjamins Medientheorie*, ed. Christian Schulte, 235–261. Konstanz: UVK.

Khlebnikov, Velimir. 1985 [1921]. The Radio of the Future. In *Selected Writings of The Russian Futurian,* ed. Charlotte Douglas, 155–159. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lodder, Christina. 1990. Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s. In *Art into Life. Russian Constructivism 1914–1932*. New York: Rizzoli.

Michelson, Annette. 1972. From Magician to Epistemologist. Vertov's The Man with a Movie Camera. *Artforum* vol. 10 no. 7 (March): 60–72; now in Gruber, Klemens, ed. 1996. *Dziga Vertov zum 100. Geburtstag, Maske und Kothurn* vol. 42 no. 1: 54–74.

Oginskaja, Larissa. 1981. *Gustav Klucis*. Moskau: Sovetskij chudošnik.

Rakitin, Vasilii. 1980. Gustav Klucis: Between the Non-Objective World and World Revolution. In *The Avant-Garde in Russia 1910–1930: New Perspectives,* eds. Stephanie Barron and Maurice Tuchman, 60–63. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Stoos, Toni and Thomas Kellein, eds. 1991. *Nam June Paik, Video Time – Video Space*. Ostfildern: Cantz.

List of Figures

Figure 1. Fernand Léger, costume sketch for a beetle in *La Création du monde*, 1923. (© VBK, Wien 2010, Austria, courtesy of Dansmuseet, Stockholm.)

Figure 2. Mikhail Larionov, *Le Grillon,* sketch of a mechanical costume for *Histoires naturelles*, 1917–1919. (In: Lesák, Barbara. 1993. *Russische Theaterkunst 1910 – 1936. Bühnenbild- und Kostümentwürfe, Bühnenmodelle und Theaterphotographie aus der Sammlung des Österreichischen Theatermuseums.* Wien: Böhlau, p. 35. With permission from the Österreichische Theatermuseum.)

Figure 3. Gustav Klutsis: Radio Orator, Draft for loudspeaker stand 8a, 1922. (In: Klucis, Gustav. 1981. *Retrospektive*, eds. Hubertus Gaßner and Roland Nachtigäller. Ostfildern: Hatje, Fig. 88.)

Figure 4. Gustav Klutsis: design for loudspeaker stand 2, 1922. (In: Klucis, Gustav. 1981. *Retrospektive*, eds. Hubertus Gaßner and Roland Nachtigäller. Ostfildern: Hatje, Fig. 75.)
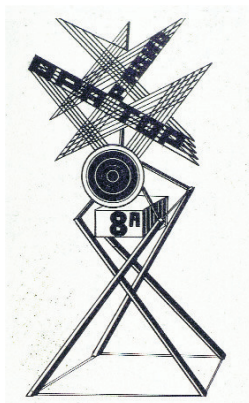
Figure 5. *Radio Orator, Screen*, design for loudspeaker stand 5, 1922. (In: Klucis, Gustav. 1981. *Retrospektive*, eds. Hubertus Gaßner and Roland Nachtigäller. Ostfildern: Hatje, Fig. 86.)

Figure 6. „*Charlatans and actors in Commedia dell'arte costumes and masks.*" Watercolour in the family register of Adam von Eck, 1592 – 1594. (In: Archive of the National Museum, Prague, Sig. B.c.24.)

Figure 7. Gustav Klutsis, design for loudspeaker stand 7, 1922. (In: Klucis, Gustav. 1981. *Retrospektive*, eds. Hubertus Gaßner and Roland Nachtigäller. Ostfildern: Hatje, Fig. 87.)

Figure 8. Nam June Paik, *Cage*, 1990. (In: *Video-Time, Video Space*. 1991. Exhibition catalogue, Kunsthalle Basel, p. 107.)