

1	<h1>The Work of Cinematic Art</h1>	<p>SÉRGIO DIAS BRANCO</p> <hr/> <p>Art as Work and Work as Art</p>
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5	<p>INTRODUCTION</p> <p>In 1924, Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov answered five questions posed by <i>Kino</i> magazine. One of them was about his attitude towards art. Vertov offered the following answer:</p>	<p><i>tween artistic and non-artistic labor.</i>¹</p>
6	<p><i>One-millionth part of the inventiveness which every man shows in his daily work in the factory, the works, in the field, that already contains an element of what people single out as so-called “art.”</i></p>	<p>In other words, the filmmaker took this opportunity to launch a small, but blunt, manifesto for the destruction of the concept of art, highlighting how such a concept leads to an elitist approach to the issue of work. In the year of Lenin’s death, Vertov thus denied that there is such a thing as a line separating the artistic from the non-artistic in the domain of work and production. He was therefore fighting against a perspective that he considered to be counter-revolutionary and idealistic.</p>
7	<p><i>The very term “art” is counter-revolutionary in essence, since it shelters a whole caste of privileged people, who imagine themselves to be not people but the miracle workers of this same “art.” Inspiration, or rather an enthusiasm for your work, is not the prerogative of these “Magi,” but also of every worker on the Volkhov Hydro-Electric Plant, every driver in his train, every turner at his lathe.</i></p>	<p>This essay develops these suggestions, adopting Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels’ critical — both materialist and dialectical — analysis of the topic of work. Capitalism reduces work to an instrumental and forced laboring activity, a means of alienation. The historical and practical transformation of the relations of production, in a process of human emancipation, turns work into a form of human realization and integral development, both productive and creative.</p>
8	<p><i>Destroying once and for all the term “art,” we should not, of course, bring it back in another form, let’s say under the sauce of “artistic labor.” It is essential that we establish definitively that there is no border be-</i></p>	
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WORK AND HUMANITY

There is a certain understanding of work that is the basis for Vertov’s words: that of an activity performed by human beings that uses their physical and intellectual capacities to transform natural resources, so that the product of that transformation meets their needs. Natural resources are the *subject of labor*. The set of physical and intellectual capacities is the *labor force*, which in capitalism becomes the basic commodity. The capitalist exploitation mechanism is that which takes the form of surplus value, the excess value produced by labor, well above the workers’ paid salaries. By using its labor force on subjects of labor, humanity produces things that it considers to have use-value, but it also produces *itself* in this process. In this sense, Engels writes:

*Labour is the source of all wealth, the political economists assert. And it really is the source — next to nature, which supplies it with the material that it converts into wealth. But it is even infinitely more than this. It is the prime basic condition for all human existence, and this to such an extent that, in a sense, we have to say that labour created man himself.*²

Engels’ hypothesis is that human beings become aware of themselves, of their faculties, through work and its transformative dimensions. At the same time, their use of the products resulting from work — as well as their interaction with them — change what they are as beings. This change becomes noticeable if we consider the ways in which the relations of production and the economic structure complexify and are reflected into social institutions with a cultural and ideological

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character. In view of this, work condenses the materialist and dialectical development of humans. It is a human factor—that is, a factor of humanity as a process of becoming. When they work, human beings *work themselves*, which means that work has an anthropological trait and integrates a creative-projective power into the sphere of the workforce. Marx makes reference to this aspect in this passage from *Capital* :

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman’s will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more

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*close his attention is forced to be.*³

The goods that result from work are a true creation, of objects and their value, through a process of transformation of nature. For this reason, work activity is still in the natural sphere, insofar as it is linked to the development of human nature, which is neither given nor immutable as metaphysics often tends to claim. At this point, it makes sense to clearly distinguish *work* from *labor*. This distinction will be relevant in the next step of this essay and is related to the difference between the two words in English, “work” and “labor,” mentioned by Engels in a footnote in the fourth edition of *Capital*. According to Engels, these two terms describe two opposite historical aspects of human work. The first “creates use-values and is qualitatively determined,” and also “creates value and is only measured quantitatively.”⁴ The second expression describes a type of work that capitalist production relations necessarily make alienated and is associated primarily with wage labor. In other words, work is labor from which its alienating characteristics have been excised. At the end of the previous quote, Marx points out the dialectical tension related to this difference — the idea being that the workers’ enthusiasm about nature and the ways in which they carry out their work is *directly* related to the enjoyment of the interplay between their own physical and mental forces.

This leads us to the topic of alienation — the denial of this enthusiasm and enjoyment.

WORK AND ALIENATION

Work creates wealth because it creates value. Marx bases the theory of value on work and distinguishes between two types of value: *use value* and *exchange value*. What defines the use values of a thing is its usefulness — these values “become a reality only by use or consumption: they also constitute the substance of all wealth, whatever may be the social form of that wealth.”⁵ There are useful things for us that are not the product of human work, such as the air we breathe. There are also useful things that, being a product of human work, are not commodities, because they are either produced for the enjoyment of those who produced them or are not socially exchanged.⁶ A commodity is characterized by the dialectical unit *use value-exchange value*, being transferred through an exchange and having a use value for those who acquire it, which then gives a *social* character to the use value. That is to say, the formation of value from work depends on use—a fruit of useless work makes work equally useless, says Marx.⁷

Use value is, therefore, associated with the qualities of a product that meet certain human needs. Exchange value is, in turn, linked to quantity, currently taking the form of money. Furthermore, “Human labor power in motion, or human labour, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object.”⁸ We can, however, ask the question: *what use value can a work of art*

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like a film have and what human needs does it respond to? It responds to the historically situated needs of, for example, fulfilling the imagination, educating the senses, finding new perspectives, recording memory, expressing experiences, and writing into reality another reality, both in the sphere of creation and in the realm of appreciation.

The process of answering this question leads us to the double face of work, which we can directly relate to art. As we have seen, work is not just the creation of objects that satisfy human needs, but also the art of human beings making use of their reflective and creative powers. This second facet of work is inseparable from the first, because, as we saw in Engels, work is also a means of human self-awareness. Extending this idea, we can conclude that humans only truly transform natural resources when they are aware of this transformation—immediately aware of the ways in which they affirm, apply, and develop their capabilities in this process. Such human consciousness springs from the knowledge and perception of transformative activity and its integration into *humanness*. Work and art materialize and shape objects, but they also materialize and shape human subjectivity within the framework of the social materiality of human life. As Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez summarizes:

Marx and Engels thus conceive of a society in which artistic creation is neither the activity that concentrates exclusively on exceptionally gifted individuals, nor is it an exclusive and unique activity. It is, on the one hand, a society of humans-artists in that not only art, but work itself, is the expression of the creative nature of humanity. Human work, as a total manifesta-

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*tion of the essential forces of human beings, already contains an aesthetic possibility that art fully realizes. Every human being, therefore, in communist society, will be a creator, that is, an artist.*⁹

This Marxist perspective on work contrasts with the one that Sean Sayers calls *hedonistic* and *instrumental*, which sees human beings as seeking only what gives them pleasure and, at the same time, understand work as a burdensome task that they unwittingly complete.¹⁰ This conception motivates the following speculation by the Scottish philosopher David Hume in his writing on the principles of morals:

*Let us suppose that nature has bestowed on the human race such a profuse abundance of all external conveniences, that, without any uncertainty in the event, without any care or industry on our part, every individual finds himself fully provided with whatever his most voracious appetites can want, or luxurious imagination wish or desire [...].*¹¹

This is indeed an idealistic vision, which assumes that human beings are outside nature and history, unalterable, waiting only for the adjustment between themselves and the world. It is a point of view that is, in itself, an effect of bourgeois ideology that opposes work to satisfaction and manual to intellectual activity. Marx disputes this position and instead details the awkward human experience of labor as a specific historical condition of the

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capitalist system, which means that such a condition is neither perpetual nor unchanging. Marx’s analysis is based on the fact of alienation, of which estrangement is an integral part.¹²

Workers are removed from themselves as producers because the means and subjects of labor do not belong to them. They are separated from the crystallization of their labor, they are opposed to the fruit of their activity, which in the capitalist system is taken away from them to become strange and independent. They are distanced from the act of production through routine, the intense rhythm of production, the disconnected division of labor, low level of professional qualification, and the reduction of the labor force to a commodity — to wages as exchange value. Finally, they are alienated from the other workers, with whom they compete instead of cooperating. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx calls work a vital human activity, to such a great extent that alienated work leads to an “*estrangement of man from man.*”¹³

The solution becomes evident for Marx. Only through the revolutionary transformation of the relations of production can the *dispossessed* labor disappear to make way for another experience of *work*. Hence the need for the private ownership of the means of production to be abolished. This would result in the reestablishment of

the connection between workers and the means, subject, product of work, and their workforce; therefore with nature, therefore with themselves, carrying out that which their historical-political conscience dictates and their material-historical situation allows. Historically situating this change prevents one from thinking of this reconnection as a kind of move back or a withdrawal, a return to the past. To make this connection again, on the contrary, involves the establishment of a new stage in human history. Work then becomes production, workers become producers, affirming their productive and creative powers, and fulfilling themselves at and through work. Art is a transparent example of this, even when it emerges within the capitalist system, because, as the Marxist philosopher José Barata-Moura contends, “it represents a direct and proper expression of human creativity in the world.”¹⁴ The same thinker summarizes that “artistic expression, in the colorful panoptic of its developments and in the varied panoply of its instantiations, constitutes an integral element of the human work of realities, in the sense of printing in them an enriching seal of humanity.”¹⁵

CONCLUSION: ART AND WORK

In art as work we can find work as art, which is the liberation of work from the domain of necessity, from the forced activity in order to survive, as it exists in capitalism. In this regard, it is worth mentioning Marx’s following words from the third book in *Capital*:

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*Freedom in this field can only consist in socialised man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.*¹⁶

We may be tempted to see work in the field of art as an exception, something that has to be dealt with separately given the labor and economic relationships that support it. However, this approach is an ideological consequence of capitalism that obscures this kind of work as an example as well as an alternative in the prevailing system of production relations. It is an example because it demonstrates how the workforce is devalued in capitalism and how art loses its social function in order to fulfill a limited role of refinement or entertainment. This is related to the strong ideological component that art often has and consequently to the critical possibilities it can open, with relative autonomy in a context dominated by bourgeois ideology. It is in this sense that it may be seen as an alternative, given that art is an activity in which, due to its own characteristics of production and reception, estrangement from humanity and alienation are less present. Through art, human beings can look at themselves not only as a product of history, but above all as mak-

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ers of history—as part of the interrelationships that situate them and allow them to situate themselves in the social whole.¹⁷

Álvaro Cunhal calls attention to the way in which social life influences and is reflected in the work of art. Artists may refuse or deny social influences, but they cannot avoid them:

*The influence and reflexes of social life on artistic creation may or may not depend on the artist's will. In any case, they are an objective reality. They stem from the fact that the human being lives in society and that the artist, as a human being, is under permanent external influences, namely social ones.*¹⁸

Like Marx before him, Cunhal does not isolate phenomena. He does not examine them in a deterministic or mechanistic way, as the vulgar materialists criticised by Lenin did,¹⁹ but dialectically. Works of art appear within the web of social relations, at a certain historical moment, and so they are also marked by class conflict both in their origin and in their different interpretations and appropriations.

Vertov's bombastic words reassert the revolution and its popular component. Cunhal says that art history recognizes the works of great artists and, at times, recovers and appreciates the works of others that have been disregarded, omitted, or erased from historical accounts. But, "it is also in it-

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self an affirmation of the artistic creativity of and the contribution of creativity of peoples for the creativity of artists and for the art heritage of humanity.”²⁰ This is a critical issue due to the antagonism that is often laid down by liberal thinking between the singular and the common, singularity and community, the individual and the collective. What Vertov suggests in his answer is a dialectical approach to this question. Similarly, Barata-Moura argues that singularity only emerges as such “in an interactive community framework of relationalities” and adds that, in fact, “[w]hat characterizes the current metaphysical dichotomizations, of an irreducible ‘atomism’ contrasted with the abstract dissolution in the ‘mass,’ is precisely, from a philosophical point of view, a disconcerting absence of dialectics.”²¹

It is no accident that Vertov mentions the Volkhov hydroelectric power station, which was in the process of being completed when he gave his reply. It was to be inaugurated in December 1926. And it was the achievement of a people, the result of the joint effort of many workers to build a fundamental piece for the industrial and economic development of Russia and the USSR. Vertov, Sergei M. Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and other Soviet filmmakers, always valued the contribution of those who worked with them, never forgetting the collective feature of film production.

Inseparable from this important appreciation of human cooperation is the political and historical awareness that Vertov’s answer reveals about the need to articulate, in concert, *art as work* and *work as art*. None of them would be the filmmakers they were, regarding their artistic work as a complex form of tangled imaginative, transformative, emancipatory, individual as well as collective practices, without the October 1917 Revolution and the socialist theoretical contributions to art more generally.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Dziga Vertov, “An Answer to Five Questions”, in *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties*, ed. Yuri Tsivian, trans. Julian Graffy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 94.
- 2 Friedrich Engels, “The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man” [1876], trans. Clemens Dutt, *Marxist Internet Archive*, 1996, par. 1, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1876/part-played-labour/index.htm> . Accessed 2 Sept 2020.
- 3 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I [1867], trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels (Marxists Internet Archive, 2015), 127, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf> . Accessed 2 Sept. 2020.
- 4 Marx, *Capital*, vol. I, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 138, n. 16.
- 5 Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, 27.

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6 See Engels's addition to the text in *ibid.*, 30.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*, 35.

9. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, *Las ideas estéticas de Marx* (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno Editores, 2005), 284 (trans. mine).

10 See Sean Sayers, "Why Work?: Marx and Human Nature", *Science & Society* 69, no. 4 (2005): 607-9.

11 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, in *Enquiries* [1751], ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894), 183.

12 On the distinction between alienation (*Enttäusserung*) and estrangement (*Entfremdung*), see Jesus Ranieri, *A Câmara Escura: Alienação e Estranhamento em Marx* [*The Dark Chamber: Alienation and Estrangement in Marx*] (Sao Paulo: Boitempo, 2001).

13 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* [1932], trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1959), 1st ms., XXIV, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/labour.htm>. Accessed 2 Sept. 2020.

14 José Barata-Moura, "Sobre a Reflexão de Álvaro Cunhal em Torno da Arte. Um Alinhamento de Notas" ["On Álvaro Cunhal's Reflection Around Art. An Alignment of Notes"], in *Três Ensaios em Torno do Pensamento Político e Estético de Álvaro Cunhal* [*Three Essays Around Álvaro Cunhal's Political and Aesthetic Thinking*] (Lisbon: Edições "Avante!", 2014), 95 (trans. mine).

15 *Ibid.*, 96 (trans. mine).

16 Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Econo-*

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my, vol. III [1894], ed. Friedrich Engels, trans. Institute of Marxism-Leninism, USSR (New York: International Publishers, 1894), pt. VII, ch. 48, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894-c3/ch48.htm>. Accessed 2 Sept. 2020.

17 See Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* [1939-41], trans. Martin Nicolaus (Marxists Internet Archive, 2015), 529, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/grundrisse.pdf>. Accessed 2 Sept. 2020.

18 Álvaro Cunhal, *A Arte, o Artista e a Sociedade* [*Art, the Artist and Society*], 2nd ed. (Lisbon: Editorial Caminho, 1998), 25 (trans. mine).

19 See V. I. Lenin, *Materialism and Empirio-criticism: Critical Comments on a Reactionary Philosophy* [1909], trans. Abraham Fineberg (Marxists Internet Archive, 2014), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1908/mec>. Accessed 2 Sept. 2020.

20 Cunhal, *A Arte, o Artista e a Sociedade*, 116 (trans. mine).

21 Barata-Moura, "Sobre a Reflexão de Álvaro Cunhal em Torno da Arte", 111.



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